

FLASH NEWS

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## COIMBATORE

» Coimbatore » Jillian Haslam: A life less ordinary

Indrani Thakurata

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Jillian Haslam's life has all the ingredients of a Bollywood potboiler. A philanthropist and an inspirational speaker living in the UK, she has worked her way up in life. Her rags to riches story is heartbreaking but inspirational. Born to British parents who were unable to leave India after Independence, Haslam grew up in shockingly cruel circumstances. As the fifth of 12 siblings, several of who died of malnutrition, she lived with her family in a slum in Kidderpore and off charity until she managed to leave the city at the age of 17 for Delhi.

After working in the Capital for a few years, Haslam got selected by Bank of America, where her projects for corporate charity earned her accolades and eventually a passage to England, where she now lives with her husband and two of her sisters. For someone who was living off charity is now a millionaire, in a position to do charity. She works as a trustee for Remedia, a non-profit organization in India that seeks to provide support for, and the betterment of, people. We speak to this extraordinary life—about her past, present and her future. Read on.



### What motivated you to share your story with the world?

"Staying quiet in the world helps nobody – Maxine Carr." For me it was actually heart breaking to have to leave India knowing that there was so much sadness that I knew I could fix if only I was willing to try. In order to do that, I needed the experience, the education and the money and therefore I had to leave in order to work very hard to strengthen my own position and to go back and help those who were in desperate need. I know what it is not to have, to live facing starvation, poverty and death every single day but I also know that one needs several tools in order to try and help. From where I see it, those tools are money, an education and motivation. I learned very soon that people all over the world who have faced adversity, trauma, hardship and suffering share their stories and help people with the strength they need to carry on. I have met several of these people in person and I knew then that I was capable of doing a lot more for my own people as well as for many around the world, if only I added my own story to the equation, and so I did and was in shock to see the overwhelming response by way of the number of books that were sold and the gratitude that poured out of people's hearts just for wanting to help to ease some of the pain that millions face today.

### You have faced extraordinary adversity in life, you have seen death, poverty and yet you talk about it with great positivity. How do you avoid the bitterness from coming through?

For three reasons (1) My parents always told us that while God had given us very many gifts, the main gift that he has given us is the power of choice and therefore, when something this terrible happens, we are left with the choice of being bitter, angry and possibly revengeful. We can allow these negative emotions to consume us or we can choose as Christians to forgive, to love and to be grateful for the good that has happened to us. These choices can lead us to success or destruction and thankfully, given my upbringing, I was able to make the right choice (2) We grew up as you well know in abject poverty, destitution and shockingly gruelling circumstances. However, it would not be as easy for me to have been answering your questions today or being in a position to help so many if it wasn't for the poorest of the poor who saved our lives and cared for us when we had no one to turn to. These people had nothing to give and yet they gave it all. From where I see it, it is very easy to be grateful to these exceptional people and to give back instead of being bitter (3) A person I shall admire forever is Mahatma Gandhi. I try and live by his teachings – he said, that we should try and be the light that we wish to see in others and therefore, if I want to inspire many other little girls and boys not to forget their pasts and to understand that there is always someone is suffering much more than they are and that putting their own negative emotions aside help them as well as others, I've got to be that light first in order to lead the way for others to follow. It's these beliefs that help me to carry on.

### Describe Calcutta of those times from the Kolkata today. Do you see a stark contrast,not just in physical appearance but social and emotional appearance?

I didn't live in Central Kolkata and my father hardly ever allowed us to visit there. We were therefore confined to boarding school or to our little room in Kidderpore. I go back there every single year even to the place under the steps where I lived as a tiny little girl. From what I see, the warmth, the care and the bond that existed so many years ago, still exists today. When I walk into a Chinese salon, I hear the Chinese girls speaking in Bengali and the Bengali girls speaking in Chinese. People celebrate all festivals, many still have that respect for elders which is something that is totally forgotten in the Western world. Friendships there are stronger than friendships formed on this side of the planet and even though the city is still in a lot of pain on several fronts i.e. population, poverty, tremendous hardship and struggle, you can't help feel that as much as pain does hurt, it also heals, it also binds and it also teaches us lessons that make us some of the strongest people on the planet (I have experienced this first hand and very proud to say to people across the globe that I am from Kolkata and I am proud to be Indian.

### A British who lived in Kolkata and later migrated to UK. Do you feel that we are becoming more close as human beings now? Are we more suspicious of each other, xenophobic?

I was never British. My parents had British ancestry since their parents were born in Britain and served in India at the time of the British Raj. However, given that I have British blood and I am an Indian by virtue of my birth, this subject is always open to debate from many a source but since it's my life and my life only, I choose to be Indian. What saddens me is the fact that many authentic Indians don't want to accept their nationality and at many levels are ashamed of who they are. I see this as very distressing and I see it on very many levels too – some can't wait to obtain British passports only to say that they have never visited India in their lives and would love to see that country, not mentioning that they were born and bred there, many suffer with identity problems and the need to fit in and therefore change their names, cut their hair and try their very best to even change their accents. Some work hard to make it to the top only to be on British television etc. advising the NHS and other government bodies on how this country (the UK) can improve their health system, their strategies, their economy but not for a moment to they care as to how many little hearts need healthcare in India? How many are suffering due to a lack of education there? how valuable would their advice and education be if they were to come together and help to free India from poverty and other issues that face our country today? Sadly, the British took a lot as my father always admitted but so are a fellow Indians and this is even harder to come to terms with.

### Could you talk about the charity in Kolkata and Delhi

It has always been my greatest passion to help those in desperate need. I have never really wanted anything more from life and I'm very grateful to have the opportunity to be running five charities under the umbrella of Rmedia Trust. I have five teams working 24/7 for street children (we have five study centres in Uttara para) and the children are thriving there; we have three massive food banks in Park Circus, Picnic Gardens and Behala for the aged and the severely disabled; we have a team that helps the youth with soft skill trainings, speaking and other employment skills, empowerment and employment; we have a disabled team that takes care of children suffering with major disabilities i.e. thalassemia, blindness, autism, cerebral palsy etc. and we have an Inspiring Women's team who work with girls between the ages of 6 to 20 teaching them martial arts (karate) and educating them in order to help empower them as well as protect them.

### A final message to all those who see you as a role model. How should one make a life worthy of living,despite hardships of great magnitude

Never forget your past and the future will never forget you is my greatest belief!! It's when one forgets who they were, where they came from and who got them to where they are, is when they become blind to finding true happiness. While persistence has been my greatest strength and has helped me to commit and recommit to my goals, in my estimate, we have all got to tap into our inner strengths and to try and develop these strengths as best we can. In my case, this strength has come not just from my family or my teachers or matrons but from the fact that I have never forgotten who I was, where I came from and who got me to where I am today. It is that thread of gratitude that has helped to shape my character, my beliefs and ultimately my success.

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