

# A MOTHER'S HOPE

By Elena Koshy

**F**or this mother, the essence of truly joyous Mother's Day lies in the hope of reuniting with her daughter, who was tragically taken away.

I've no idea what to expect when I meet M. Indira Gandhi for the first time. As her smiling face fills my Zoom screen, her easy laughter breaks any tension I might have had. "Please, no more crying pictures of me!" she teases, before breaking into infectious laughter.

She has a point of course. Indira's story had captivated the nation, her anguish palpable in every photograph and news report. The sudden conversion of her ex-husband to Islam on March 11, 2009, had thrust the then-kindergarten teacher into a legal battle for the custody of her three children, testing her strength and resolve in ways she never imagined.

Her journey was more than just a personal struggle; it became a symbol of the complex intersection of religion, law, and family dynamics in Malaysia. Malaysians from all walks of life followed her case closely, recognising the broader implications it had for religious freedom and parental rights in the country.

The ordeal she faced was beyond comprehension. On March 31 of that same year, her estranged husband had launched a brutal assault on Indira, her mother and sister. He snatched their 11-month-old child

from the arms of his terrified 12-year-old eldest daughter before disappearing without a trace.

He returned later to their marital home, seizing the children's birth certificates, which he would use to unilaterally convert them. He was granted custody of the children by the syariah court the following month.

On the 1st anniversary of Prasana's abduction, a glimmer of hope emerged as the Ipoh High Court granted Indira full custody of her three children. In 2013, the same court ruled the unilateral conversions of her children unconstitutional, marking another significant victory. Yet, her journey was far from over.

In 2015, the Court of Appeal ruled against Indira, saying the syariah court has sole jurisdiction to decide the religious status of her three children unilaterally converted to Islam by their muallaf father. Undeterred by setbacks, the fiery woman refused to give up. Finally, in 2018, the Federal Court unanimously declared the conversions unlawful, cementing her relentless fight for justice.

At every turn, Indira stood her ground and persisted in her fight. In the face of both small victories and monumental triumphs, as well as in times of crushing defeat, she didn't back down. "I'm her mother," she explains, her



M. Indira Gandhi





*Indira with her beloved mother*



*Indira presently works as a tutor*

voice cracking a little as she refers to her youngest daughter whom she hasn't seen since 2009. "I'll never stop fighting for her."

Recognising her tenacity, the United States Embassy honoured the mother-of-three as one of its international women of courage in 2018. This accolade celebrated her courageous legal battle against the unilateral conversion of her three children and her relentless efforts to reunite with Prasana.

But her struggle isn't over by a long shot. It's been 15 years, and the pain of not seeing Prasana grow up still weighs heavily on her. Indira says quietly: "Prasana turned 16 last month. Since she was taken from me, I've not got a clue or news about how she's doing." Mother's Day every year continues to hold a different meaning for the 49-year-old. "It's never a complete Mother's Day for me," she states matter-of-factly. "Fortunately, I have my two older children by my side. But there's always that lingering emptiness."

Despite discussing the pain of losing her child, Indira comes across as more pragmatic than sentimental. It's surprising, but she simply shrugs her shoulders, explaining that she must be strong. "I had to raise my two children on my own," she says, adding: "I must summon strength to persist in the fight for Prasana. There's no time for self-pity. I must keep moving forward."

### EARLY YEARS

She resides in Ipoh, Perak, where life unfolds at a tranquil pace – a setting she cherishes. It's her hometown, after all. "I'm an Ipoh girl!" she proudly declares, her smile lighting up her face. She shares that she's the youngest of four sisters and that her father worked as a labourer while her mother was a homemaker. "We weren't wealthy but we managed," she reminisces, adding: "I mean, raising four children back then was much simpler and more affordable than it is today." A chuckle escapes her lips as she

continues: "My late father used to tease us, claiming he lost most of his hair from raising four girls! Being the youngest, I was closest to him."

While her eldest sister attended a Tamil school, Indira and her other two siblings went to SK Tarcisian Convent. "He was determined to give us all a proper education. I think my father did a very good job in raising us. My siblings are all doing well and settled down. It was just my life that took a different direction."

She smiles wistfully. Indira wanted to be a teacher, but that ambition faded when she met and married her childhood sweetheart. "I got to know him after completing my Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia. We dated for a while and then we got married when I turned 21." The couple eventually relocated to Johor where they established their home. Four years later, Indira received the heart-breaking news of her father's passing at the age of 75. "I was devastated," she shares, adding: "I never got to see him for the last time. I could only attend his funeral."

Life seemed to spiral further downhill from there. When she was pregnant with Prasana, her marriage began to falter. "It was hard to come to terms with the fact that my marriage was breaking down. We had so much issues to deal with," she admits, continuing: "It was a love marriage, so I found it difficult to confide in my family about what I was going through. Moreover, I'd known him since I was young. He was my first love."

A shadow passes through her face. "Growing up in the Indian community, you're expected to just deal with things," she says, adding: "It's very much about keeping up appearances and worrying about what the community will think or say, rather than doing what's right for you." Her mother and siblings eventually found out about her marital troubles when



*Karan Dinish Tevi Darnisy and their mother  
M. Indira Gandhi*



they were there to support her during her labour, and she delivered her daughter while her husband was conspicuously absent. After her daughter was born, he only saw his child once.

### PAINFUL SEPARATION

"In my mind, I wondered how I was enduring this pain. I had two other children to raise. Initially, I had no intention of separating from my husband," she recalls, reflecting on those tumultuous times. Their disparities were glaring, particularly his mounting debts and unchecked spending habits. Indira reveals that her husband believed conversion could resolve his financial woes, a notion she vehemently opposed. "My father raised me as a Hindu, and I wanted to remain one. Besides, he wanted to convert for all the wrong reasons," she asserts.

Things reached a breaking point when Prasana was just a week away from celebrating her first birthday. He assaulted Indira, and when her mother and sisters rushed to her side to intervene, he assaulted them too. Then, he seized the 11-month-old baby and fled on his motorbike, disappearing without a trace. "My eldest girl was very traumatised. For the longest time, she believed that Prasana was taken because of her. She blamed herself," says Indira softly. "It took a long time for her to come to terms with her sister's abduction."

In the midst of the legal battles, Indira focused on picking up the pieces and raising her children. "My priority will always be my children," she says resolutely. She did everything possible to maximise time with her daughter and son. Adding, she reveals: "I became a tutor and even transported children to school to make ends meet. There was no one else to help us. They had no contact at all with their father. I've never stopped them from contacting him, but it is he who refuses to have anything to do with them."

They did face financial constraints. "It wasn't a very comfortable life. But it was sufficient for us. We had each other," she admits. Today, her daughter Tevy Darsini is thriving as a business analyst, while her son Karan Dinish is pursuing a degree in law. "I'm incredibly proud of them," she remarks, beaming with pride. Eyes twinkling, she shares that she and Tevy share a special bond. "We're the best of friends," she says fondly. "I confide everything in her!" Yet, there's that missing piece to their complete happiness.

### HOLDING ON TO HOPE

"We try to be practical and not dwell on our loss. Instead, as a family, we talk about it openly and we talk about Prasana," she shares. "We don't know if we'll ever see her again, but my eldest daughter tells me she wants to take care of Prasana if she ever comes back to us."

Leaning forward, she emphasises: "Don't get me wrong. This isn't about religion. It's all about my daughter. I just want to see her and know that she's safe. I want her to understand that I'm her biological mother and that I've never stopped fighting for her, thinking about her and loving her."

Her voice shakes audibly as she reflects: "Even if she passed by me today, I wouldn't know because I may not be able to recognise her. That's the hardest thing to imagine about your own daughter. Imagine being in the same space with her and not knowing." She has no intention of uprooting Prasana from her life now that she's been away for so many years. "All I want is to see her and know that she's safe and loved," she expresses with heartfelt sincerity.

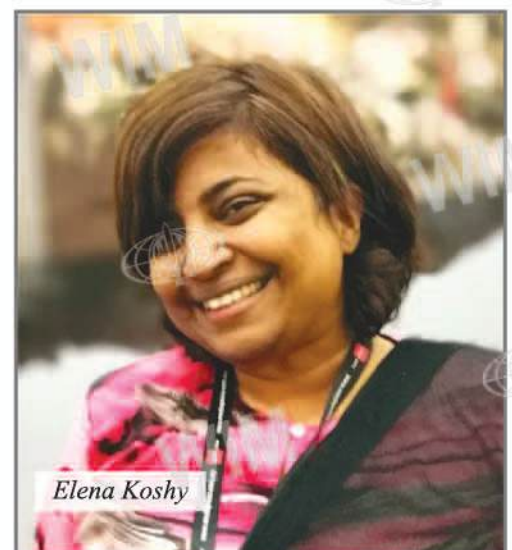
I ask if she has a message for her daughter. For the first time, Indira breaks down in tears. She takes some time to compose herself before replying: "I have a lot... a lot... to talk to her. Fifteen years have passed and there's much to say. But maybe I'll start with asking her... 'Are you happy?'" Wiping her eyes, she continues: "Is she happy being with her father? Is she comfortable? I really don't know what to ask. I don't know if I'd feel differently towards her. I really don't know..." Her voice trails off and she grows quiet.

What she does know is that she's never stopped hoping that they'll be reunited again. "It's all I pray for. I'm praying that Prasana will know about her birth mother and siblings. I want her to know that our home isn't the same without her," she says quietly. Indira flashes a slight smile at me. "I did tell you I didn't want a crying picture of myself and here I am doing just that," she remarks dryly.

Beneath all the softness, there's an undeniable steeliness that can be seen. It's a testament to the unwavering love of a mother who will stop at nothing to protect and fight for her children, no matter the obstacles in her path. Witnessing her resilience, I'm reminded of the immense strength and fierce devotion that mothers possess. It's that indomitable essence that carries her through countless court appearances and the long, lonely nights when she yearns for the child she never got to raise.

For Indira, that journey will not conclude until she's reunited with Prasana. As long as that moment eludes her, Mother's Day will always bear the ache of her youngest child's absence. Yet, she's come to realise that love doesn't diminish with time or distance; it remains a constant, steadfast guiding light. And with hope, she prays that this light will one day illuminate the path for her daughter's eventual return home. ■

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