

Milkha Singh



I had a sleepless night. There were a thousand thoughts running through my head. I was nervous as well as excited. I would be interviewing my role model — Milkha Singh — tomorrow. I had burnt the midnight oil researching and following his career.



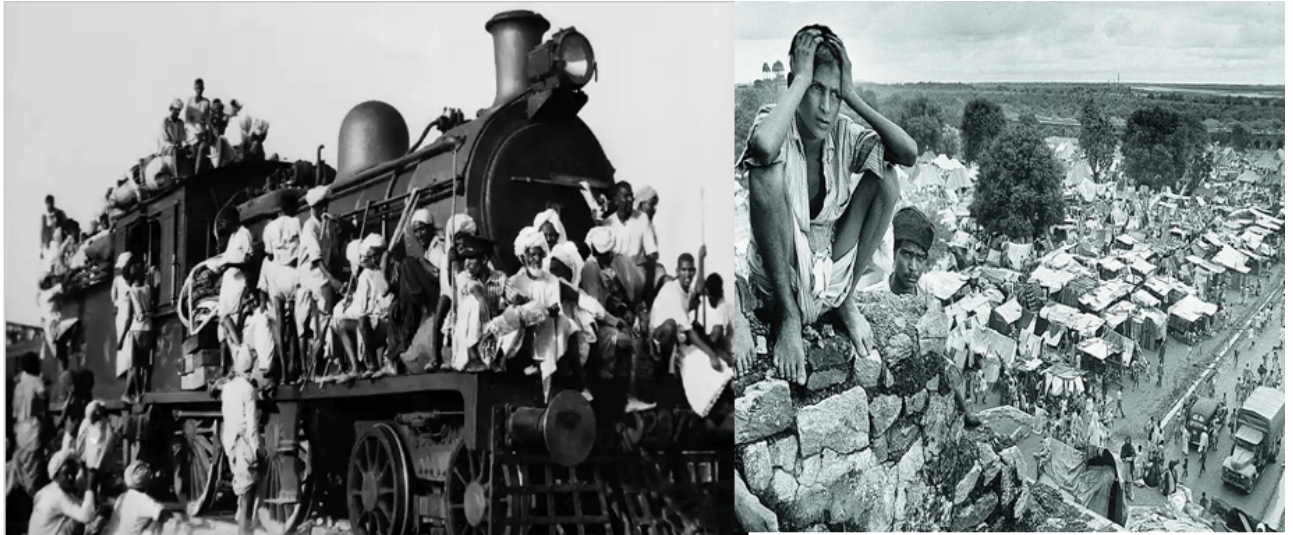
The next morning when I 'met him for the interview, his warm smile instantly put me at ease. After a casual conversation, I asked my first question, "The name Milkha Singh is synonymous with exceptional running. What made you run so fast?"



He reminisced about his school days when he had to walk ten kilometres, across burning sands, and to wade through two canals with his books balanced on his head to reach his school. The blazing sun made walking difficult, forcing him to find green patch of grass to cool his feet.



The first test of his running abilities was during the Partition of India. Punjab, where he lived was divided between India and Pakistan. His family was on the other side of the border and faced persecution.



After witnessing his family being massacred, he first ran to the jungle. Then he boarded a Delhi-bound train. In Delhi he lived in refugee camps.



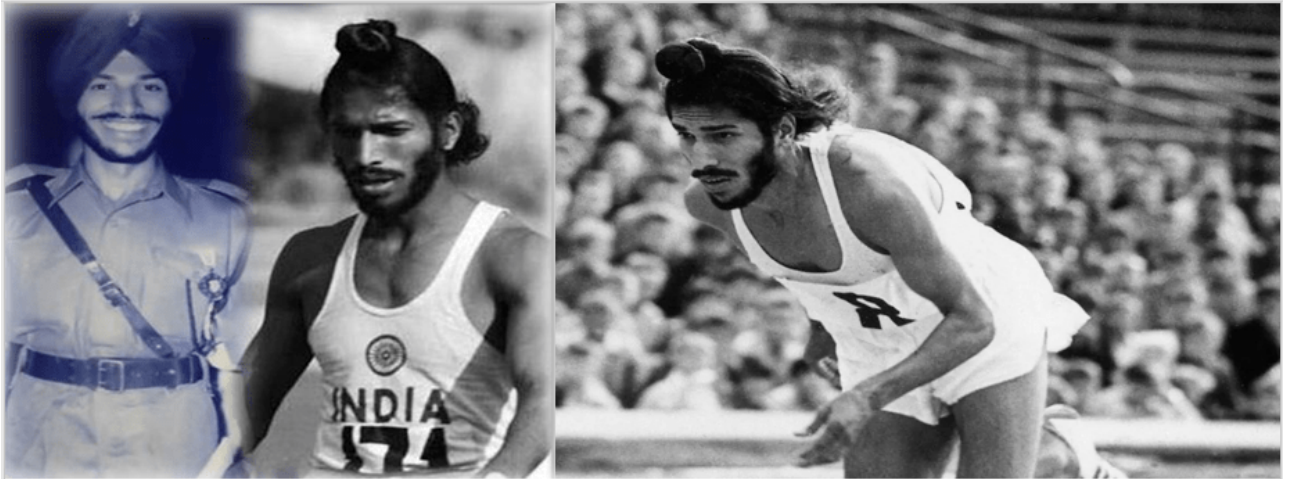
Every day he would go to the railway station with a flickering hope that a family member would alight from the train. Imagine his joy when he saw his sister!



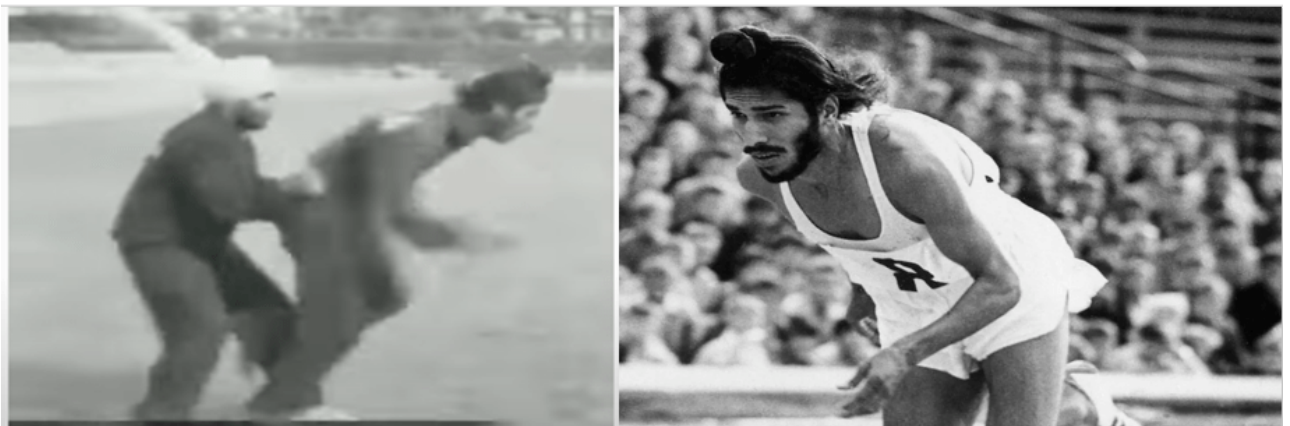
"What motivated you to join the army?" I asked. He recounted that the food supplies were limited in refugee camps and human survival instincts were at their peak.



He got involved in petty thefts and was briefly imprisoned in Tihar Jail for travelling ticketless on a train. His sister mortgaged her jewellery to release him. He had lost all hopes of a better future and at one point contemplated becoming a dacoit.



This alarmed his brother, Malkhan, who motivated him to try his luck in the army. After three unsuccessful attempts, Milkha finally got selected. He was stationed at the Army's Electrical Mechanical Engineering Centre in Secunderabad



Milkha's talent and passion for running was spotted in the army. His inspiration was his coach, Havaladar Gurdev Singh. Training included running on the hills against passing trains and along riversides. The training at times got so intense, that Milkha did not stop until he collapsed from exhaustion.



"Which was the first international race that you participated in?" I prompted. The memories of the 1956 Melbourne Olympics Games rushed back. He had participated in the 200 metres and 400 metres races. He was inexperienced; therefore, he could not qualify for the finals.



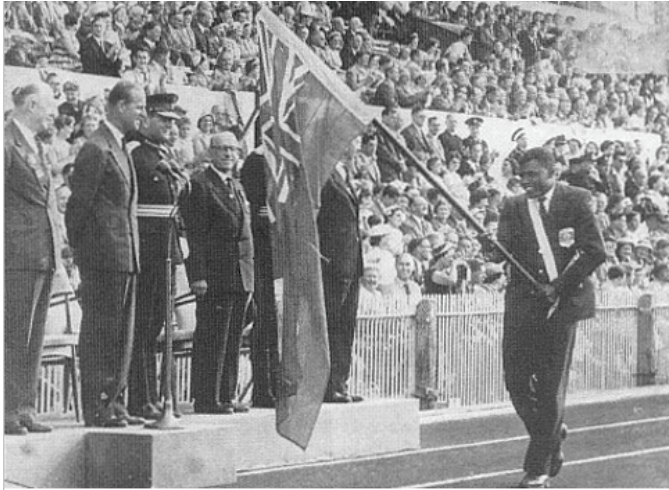
However, he had the privilege of meeting Charles Jenkins, the 400 metres champion, who gave him insights on effective training methods. In the 1958 Asian Games, he won both the 200 metres and the 400 metres races, becoming Asia's best athlete.



In 1958, he also won a gold medal at the Commonwealth Games held in Cardiff. It was a delight to the spectators to watch a young village boy with no formal training amidst world class athletes win the race



"You also set a world record at the Common Wealth Games in Cardiff. How did you fee knowing what you had achieved?" I asked in awe. He confessed that he wanted to run a little more and scream.



Interestingly, he finished the race in 46.16 seconds, becoming the first gold medallist from independent India. It was his honour to receive the medal from the Queen of England.



"You finished fourth in the 400 metres race in the Rome Olympics, 1960 even though you were leading for most of the race. What went wrong?" I asked. The nation had high hopes for Milkha Singh knowing that he had won 77 races out of 80 he had participated in so far.



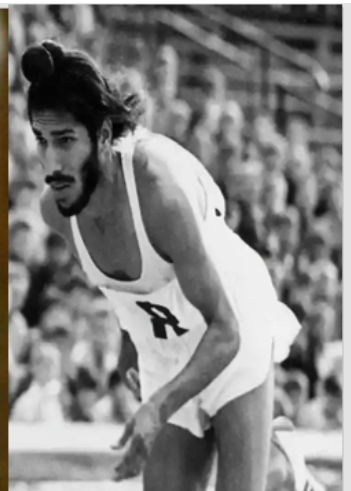
It was a done deal. His plan was to run fast but steadily. He ran so fast that he thought he would trip and fall which made him slow down. Just 250 metres away from the finishing line, he glanced back at other competitors, which cost him his gold. It was a bad habit which he wishes he never had.



"What is your success mantra for budding athletes? I asked. "Take no short cuts!" he said promptly. It took him 12 years of utter dedication and practice before he participated in his first Olympics. Nowadays, athletes want to get famous quickly.



In doing so, they resort to performance-enhancing drugs. They need to realize that this behaviour would not only shatter their dream of achieving great heights in international games but would also destroy their stamina and health.



Then I asked him about the story behind the nickname 'Flying Sikh'. He proudly recalled the epic race at the Indo-Pak Meet in 1960 in Lahore between the ace sprinter from Pakistan, Abdul Khaliq, and him.



The spectators didn't see Milkha Singh run that day; they saw him fly! He clocked 20.7 seconds setting a new world record. As General Ayub Khan awarded the competitors their medals, Milkha received the nickname that would stick with him for the rest of his life.



Milkha Singh was awarded the Padma Shri in 1958. He donated his medals and trophies to the nation. They were displayed at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in New Delhi and later moved to a sports museum in Patiala.



He is content with his achievements and the love that he gets from the nation. This is Milkha Singh; a reflection of hard-work, dedication and humility.