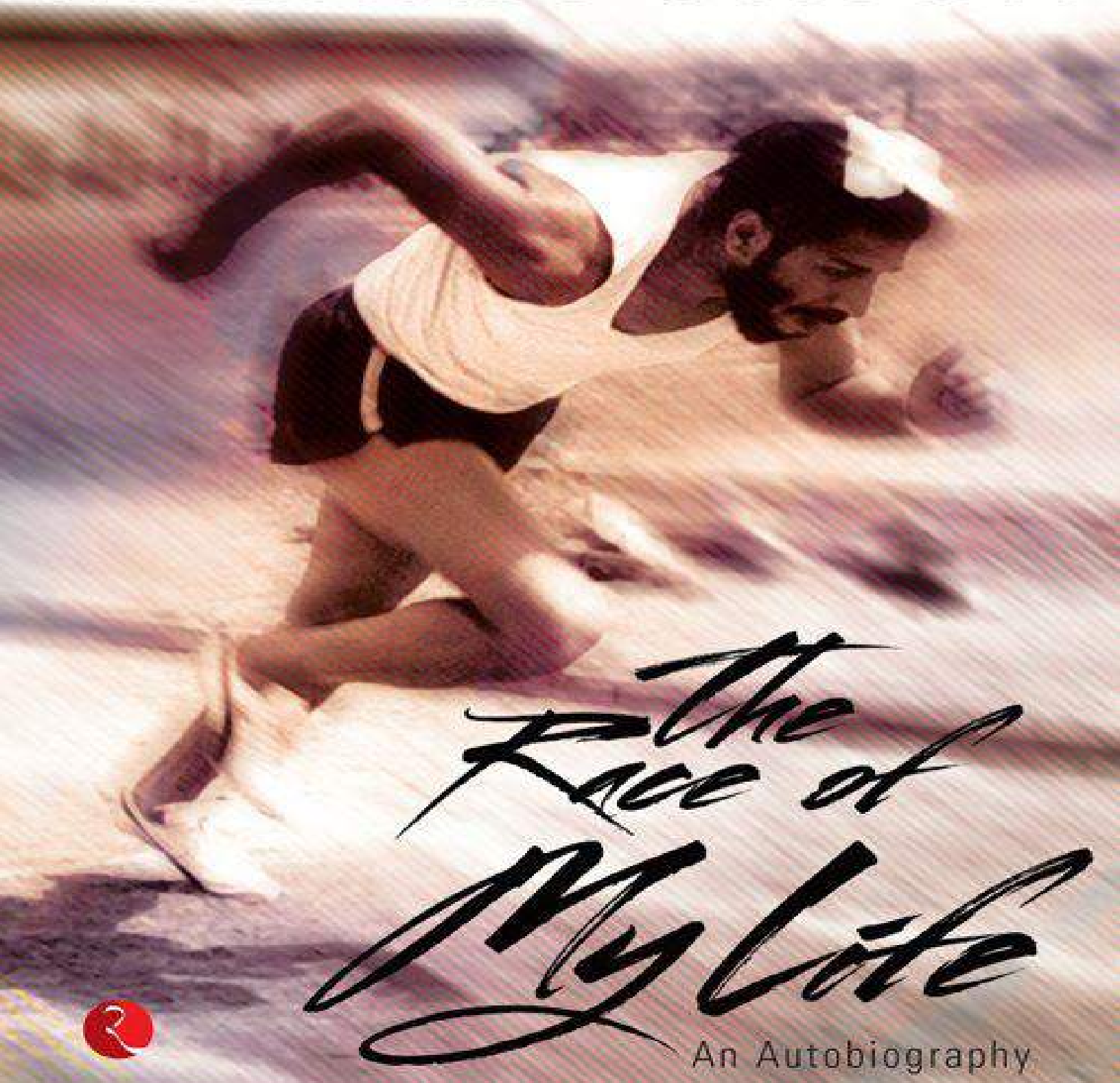
MILKHA SINGH



The Race of My Life

An Autobiography

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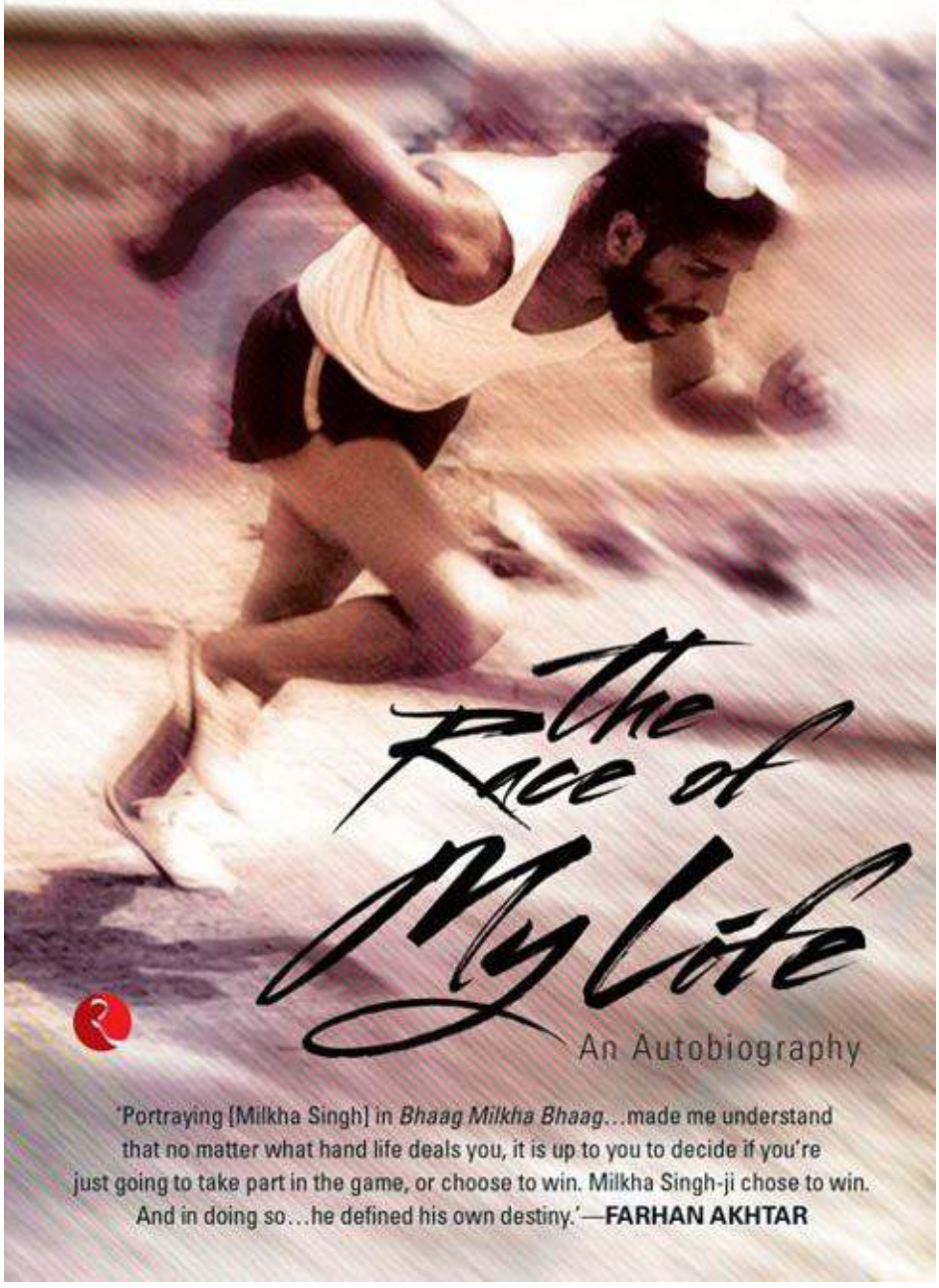

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The Race of My Life

Born in 1932 in undivided India, Milkha Singh is arguably one of India's most iconic male athletes. All through his professional career, his mantra for success has been regular practice, hard work, self-discipline, dedication and the determination to perform to the best of his abilities. Although he stopped participating in competitive events in the early 1960s, he has dedicated his life to sports.

Milkha Singh has always been a romantic at heart, and he is today a contented husband, a proud father and an indulgent grandfather. The Farhan Akhtar starrer —*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* is a biographical film that depicts his early life and career.

The Race of My Life

An Autobiography

Milkha Singh
with
Sonia Sanwalka

RUPA

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Mita de apni hasti ko agar koi martaba chahe,
ki dana khak may mil kar gul-e-gulzar hota hai

Contents

Foreword

The past four years have been the most exciting, traumatic and enlightening years of my life, as it was during this period that the idea of making a movie on Milkha Singh, the iconic athlete, was born, bred and executed.

For some the name ‘Milkha Singh’ evokes a faint memory from the pages of history. However, what most people will remember is that Milkha Singh, hailed as the Flying Sikh, was the famous 400-metre champion, who infamously lost the ultimate race of his life—the 1960 Rome Olympics.

My journey into his life through the film, *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, made me understand how devastating this loss was for him. However, Milkha Singh’s extraordinary resilience made him step out of the darkness of failure and find redemption.

But his catharsis was not easy, for Milkha had to face his inner demons and deepest fears to come through as a winner, in life.

Milkha Singh saw it all…a bloody Partition, a lost childhood, homelessness, petty crime, and victories hard won—and easily lost. And yet, even after witnessing so much horror and despondency, his will to live every precious moment of life to the fullest is what legends are made off. His life to me is *satrangi*, a rainbow of many vibrant colours.

For me, Milkha Singh’s life paints an intricate image of human trials and tribulations, one which evocatively illustrates that true victory lies in racing with one’s troubles, not in running away from them… *aapni mushkilon se bhago nahin, unkey saath daud lagao.*

I think God chose me as a medium to take Milkha Singh’s story to the world, in order to remind ourselves that there is a Milkha Singh in each one of us.

For me he was...is…and always will be an inspiration.

Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra
Mumbai
June 2013

Introduction

It is really difficult to be objective when you have a father as decorated as mine. His legendary deeds on the track have inspired a nation, and I surely have benefited the most because of my proximity to him.

By the time I grew up and became aware of things, he was done with his athletics career. That will always be a regret because I have never seen him run in an event. But I have felt his influence as an amazing human being every moment of my life.

Things are an lot easier for kids in our country who want to take up sports as a profession now, but when I was in my teenage years, not many parents would have taken kindly to their child's dream of becoming a professional sportsman. But not my father. I think the greatest gift he has given me, apart from his genes, is not knowing the meaning of the word 'impossible', and his never-say-die attitude, is the wonderful support and guidance in helping me chart my own life and career.

He did have dreams of me becoming an Indian Administrative Services officer. But when I professed that I wanted to pursue a career in golf, the only thing he told me was that I have to be the very best in the business. I do have to thank my dad for the life that I have. If not for his love of golf after giving up running, I would have never followed him to the Chandigarh Golf Club and subsequently fallen in love with the sport.

I don't think he expects perfection from me. But what he surely insists on is the pursuit of perfection. From very early on, he instilled some life-changing values in me, including total dedication, discipline and determination. Those have helped me achieve whatever I have managed so far in my career.

We have shared a beautiful relationship. I must mention a couple of things about him. Given his involvement with sports, he had a very busy life when we were growing up, but Dad always made sure he had time for my mother and us kids. I think the pain of losing most of his family very early on in his life made him cherish what he had much more. And thanks to him and my mother, we are a very close-knit family.

Also, even though he was a strict disciplinarian, he always treated me like a friend. He has always been there to listen to me, and pass me nuggets of great wisdom that he acquired throughout his life. In fact, I have had the first drink of my life with my father and not with my teenage friends. That was the kind of freedom he gave me.

I am glad that Rupa Publications India are publishing his autobiography. His journey has been truly amazing and I hope it will motivate the readers as much as it has motivated me.

Let me leave you with one thing that my dad always says: you can achieve anything in life. It just depends on how desperate you are to achieve it.

Jeev Milkha Singh
May 2013

Prologue

When I reflect upon my life, I can clearly see how my passion for running has dominated my life. The images that flash through my mind are those of me running…running…running…

- sprinting from one shady patch to another to escape the blistering heat of the sun on my journey to school
- fleeing the massacre on that fearsome night when most of my family was slaughtered
- racing trains for fun
- outrunning the police when I was caught stealing in Shahdara
- leaving everyone behind in my first race as an army jawan so that I could get an extra glass of milk
- surging past my competitors in Tokyo when I was declared Asia's Best Athlete
- Running in Pakistan and being hailed as 'The Flying Sikh'

Each of these moments brings back bittersweet memories as they represent the different stages of my life, a life that has been kept afloat by my intense determination to triumph in my chosen vocation.

1

Life in Undivided India

I came into this world on a cold dark night, under a thatched roof, in the small village of Gobindpura, tehsil Kot Addu in Muzzafargarh district, now in Pakistan. Till today, I do not know the exact date or time of my birth. Such details were of little consequence in those days. What mattered most to simple rural communities like ours was the present, not the past or the future, just the ebb and flow of our daily lives. However, as I grew older I realized how necessary it was to have a date of birth and so, for official reasons, it has now been recorded on my passport as 20 November 1932.

We were a large but contented family. My father, Sampuran Singh, was a small-time farmer, with a piece of land that provided the family with food and the cattle with fodder. My mother, Chawali Kaur, was a simple woman, who was devoted to her husband and children. I can still conjure up memories of her sitting at the chakki, grinding wheat to make rotis to feed us. My brothers, Amir, Daulat and Makhan, and sisters, Makhani, Hoondi and Isher, were older than me, while Gobind was the youngest. Amir, the eldest among us eight siblings, was fifteen years older than me.

In those days children were married off at a very young age, and our family was no different. My father had married off all my three sisters and two of my older brothers. Amir and Daulat lived nearby with their wives and children. Among my sisters, only Makhani lived in Gobindpura. Hoondi's home was in a village some 60 kilometres away, while Isher lived far away in Hyderabad, Sind. Isher was my favourite sister, and I would really look forward to her visits back home, especially since she would always bring me the sweets I loved—it was a huge treat.

We lived in a basic, two-roomed mud house—one room was shelter for the cattle and storeroom for the fodder, while the other was our living quarters. During the day, my brothers worked in the fields with Father, tilling the land, sowing seeds and harvesting crops. Gobind and I, being the youngest, were allowed to spend the day playing with the other village lads. At dusk, we would return home and the entire family would gather around our mother who would lovingly feed us with piping hot rotis with generous dollops of ghee.

Father, though illiterate himself, was a strong advocate of the benefits of a good education, but money was always a hindrance. He was determined that his sons study so that they could improve their status in life. However, when my older brother Makhan Singh ran away from home to enlist in the army, without completing his schooling, he was deeply disappointed. I was seven or eight years old at the time. This was in the late 1930s, as war clouds were gathering over Europe. I remember coming home from the village school one day and hearing my mother weeping and wailing as if her heart was breaking, and wondered what tragedy had occurred to make her so distressed. It was then that we heard the shattering news. Although my mother had all her other children around her, she could not cope with the news of Makhan's departure.

With Makhan having dashed my father's hopes of educating his sons, I became the focus of Father's ambitions. The school I was going to was in a village nearby, where classes were held out in the open under a tree. Most of my classmates were from neighbouring villages, and we would all sit on mats on the ground around our teacher, Maulvi Ghulam Mohammad, who taught us arithmetic and Urdu. He was a stern man, and at times, when we had not done our homework or were being inattentive, he would rap us on the knuckles with a twig broken from a neem tree; it stung like a whip. I remember the flat wooden takhat (board), that I would carry with me, and the wooden pen that I would dip into a pot of ink to write my lessons in Urdu. I was completely uninterested in studying, and felt that it was something I could do without. All through the school day I would impatiently wait for the moment when the bell would ring, signalling the end of classes. I was a free bird once again and would rush off home to play with my friends.

Makhan's departure had started taking a toll on Mother's health and she cried all the time. Mother feared that Makhan, like other young men, would be conscripted and sent off to fight an unknown enemy and never return. We were all aware that beyond the narrow boundaries of our village, the spreading flames of the Second World War were threatening us all. Those were innocent days, people were superstitious and the wider world frightened them. Scary tales that *ladai lagi hai aur log mare ja rahe* (the war is on and people are dying) had

reached us, and no one knew what the fate of these young men would be—would they be killed or just disappear?

She kept pleading with Father to find him and bring him back home. Father, for some reason, was quite reluctant. However, to pacify her, he went to the recruitment centre in Kot Addu, and after many inquiries heard that Makhan was in Madras, a city that was both distant and unfamiliar. Upon hearing this, Mother's cries got louder and stronger. Despite grave reservations, my father boarded a train and set off on a journey to the unknown. When he reached Madras, it took him almost two weeks to locate my brother. He had no idea about where Makhan's unit was or any other details; he could only ask if there were any turbaned (Sikh) soldiers around. He wandered through the city, visiting all the army centres, waiting to catch a glimpse of Makhan. He finally got some leads that led him to Makhan. His patience had paid off. Both father and son had a very emotional reunion, but when my father tried to persuade him to return home, Makhan reassured him, saying, 'Father, don't worry, I am safe and will come home for a holiday after six months, when I have completed my training.'

Father returned to Gobindpura, a happier man, and was able to convince Mother that Makhan was happy in his chosen profession and would be coming home soon for a holiday. Her spirits—and more importantly, health—improved after that, and she waited in eager anticipation for her son's return.

After I had completed Class Five at the village school, my father insisted that I continue my education at a better school. Soon I was enrolled in a government school in Kot Addu, which was about seven miles from Gobindpur. The only other boy from my village to go to the same school was my friend, Sahib Singh. In those days there were no clocks or watches in any home, and it was only when the train to Multan passed by the village that I knew that it was time to start the long walk to school. It would take Sahib Singh and me almost two hours to cover the distance between our homes and school. In winter, it was so bitterly cold that my hands and feet would be numb and frozen with frostbite, and the fog so dense that often I could barely see the footpath. It was even worse in summer, the heat so intense that it felt as if the earth was on fire. I would run as fast as I could from one shady patch to another to escape from the blazing sun, but yet, I couldn't prevent blisters from developing on the soles of my bare feet. Perhaps these were the first races I ran, at a time when I never imagined what my future profession would be.

I studied at my new school for two years. I found it extremely difficult to adjust to the new curriculum, particularly learning English, which was an alien language for me. Both Sahib Singh and I were far behind the other students, which frustrated me and made me hate school even more. But, there was no way

I could avoid school—my father's wrath would be too great. I vividly remember the day I bunked classes to go fishing with my friends, but when I returned home at the normal time, my mother warned me, telling me to hide because a friend of my father's had spotted us and told him about it, and he was furious. I was beaten black and blue that evening and vowed never to repeat the same offence.

As a punishment, every evening, my father would make me read to him the English lesson taught that day in school. But what he never realized was that I read out the same passage every evening, which I had memorized. Since he didn't know the language, he assumed that I was doing well in English at school, and felt extremely pleased.

I was fifteen years old by then and very conscious of the ambitions that my father had for me. But his high hopes did not achieve the results he wanted. The approaching holocaust deemed it otherwise. The events of those terrible days, as India was teetering on the brink of Independence from colonial rule, have had a lasting impact on my life, and I will never ever forget the hatred and bloodshed that had transformed men into beasts.

2

Bhaag Milkha, Bhaag

Before Independence, Gobindpur was just like one big happy family, where people would be in and out of each other's homes, sharing a meal or enjoying a good gossip. The population was predominantly Hindu and Sikh, but we were on very cordial terms with the neighbouring Muslim villages. It was a bond that had been developed over the generations. In those days there was little emphasis on caste, creed or religion; it was only the brotherhood of man that mattered. But this easy camaraderie between villages and communities was soon to change.

In an effort to bring about a compromise between the squabbling political parties, the British had agreed to partition the subcontinent along religious lines, with Muslim-majority regions going to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs moving to or remaining in India. In early August 1947, insidious rumours had begun to seep into the collective consciousness of the people of the region and the tension was palpable. We had heard that Hindus and Sikhs were killing Muslims; that Muslims were killing Hindus and Sikhs. What did all this mean? And why was this happening? We were simple village folk and to us the creation of an India and a Pakistan were alien concepts. Our only concerns were to till our lands, earn our daily bread and live in harmony with our neighbours, whether they were Muslim, Hindu or Sikh. How would this break up affect us? We were soon to learn how devastating the consequences were.

The spread of such vicious stories was fast and furious, and soon the rumours became realities as the violence edged closer to Gobindpur and its environs. Our friendly Muslim neighbours had been threatened by the more radical Muslim groups from Rawalpindi and Dera Ghazi Khan, who accused

them of supporting and sheltering the murderers of their brothers. They abused them, thundering, '*Haramzadon, kafir ko panah dete ho* (you bastards are giving the unbelievers shelter).' As a result, the children who would play with us, stayed away, and the bonhomie that we had once shared vanished overnight. People from different communities had begun to look at each other with fear and suspicion. The fear was on both sides and depended on which community dominated where.

I vividly remember the meeting at our village gurudwara to decide how to face the looming bloodbath. We had received ultimatums from the Muslim rioters demanding that we must cut our hair, circumcise baby boys, eat beef and embrace Islam if we wanted to stay on in Pakistan. These demands were unacceptable; how could we eat beef when we worship cows like our mothers? No, we would rather sacrifice our lives than convert to Islam. Another Sikh village had joined forces with Gobindpur and we were all prepared to fight with all our strength. The woman would take refuge in the gurudwara, the men would patrol the boundaries, keeping watch on all four directions, while the boys and young men would be on guard to protect the honour of the women. We had no guns, just dandas, kirpans, talwars and kulhadhis (axes), that were used to cut trees with, but our strongest weapon was our courage and belief that we would rather die than succumb to their threats and abuses.

On 14 August 1947, British India was partitioned into India and Pakistan. Then, at the 'stroke of the midnight hour' on 15 August 1947, India became an independent nation. Almost simultaneously, borders were being drawn along the west and the east that would divide the subcontinent. We found ourselves on the wrong side of the border. Almost overnight, the unrest intensified, plunging the lands along the newly drawn borders into chaos and confusion. Politics had poisoned people's minds and hitherto friendly relationships were destroyed by the sweeping waves of hatred and communalism. People no longer behaved like human beings, they had become animals. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were brutally massacred, thousands of homes destroyed, mothers lost their husbands and children. There was only bloodshed everywhere.

Makhan, in the meantime, had got married to Isher's sister-in-law, and he and his regiment, the Army Supply Core (ASC), were posted in Multan, some 100 kilometres from Gobindpura. When he heard the news of the terrible danger our village was in, he was given permission by his commanding officer to go home and rescue his family and friends. Accompanied by a few jawans, he left Multan in an army truck, but when they reached Kot Addu, they found the town in flames and heard the heart-rending cries of afflicted citizens. The widespread rioting horrified them, but there was little they could do to save the Hindus and

Sikhs in a town where the Muslims were in a majority. An armed and angry mob surrounded the army truck. But just when Makhan and his fellow jawans were about to retaliate in self-defence, the police arrived and assured Makhan that since they were soldiers, their safety would be guaranteed in the town. They were told to hand over their weapons, so that the mob stopped seeing them as a threat. They also promised that help would be sent to our beleaguered village. Makhan and his fellow jawans were then asked to drive to the police station, but when they reached there, they were thrown into jail. It was at that moment that Makhan realized how shockingly they had been betrayed, and that instead of providing succour, the police had paved the way for the destruction of our village by passing on the details of our village to the marauders.

When Father heard the news that Makhan was in jail, he and my brother Daulat Singh left for Kot Addu at once. At the police station, Makhan urged Father to leave Gobindpur, warning him of the imminent danger the village faced, but Father refused. He stated that he would rather die than abandon his home and land and flee like a coward.

As my brother had warned, catastrophe was awaiting the people of Gobindpur. The policemen at Kot Addu had not only passed on the name and location of our village to the Muslim fanatics, but also equipped them with guns and ammunition and instructed them to obliterate our Sikh village. The following evening after my father returned, hordes of militant fanatics and looters fuelled by the flames of communal hatred, besieged our village, camping just five hundred yards away. We could see the flaming torches they had placed on the ground and hear their angry voices shouting that we must convert at once. Heroically, our lambardar (sarpanch) leapt on to his horse and galloped to the Muslim camp to tell them that we would neither convert nor leave our village and homes. Incensed by his boldness, someone shot him in the back as he was riding back, killing him instantly. We were terrified by what had happened and fervently prayed to our Gurus to give us strength and courage to fight the ferocious mob.

The attack came soon after at about 4 a.m. The hordes, waving guns and talwars, broke through our defences, killing anyone who came in their way. It was a bloody encounter— women hiding in the gurudwara while outside, every man and boy put up a brave fight, in a desperate attempt to ward off the attack, but our lathis were no match for their guns. They were killing everyone in sight. I tried to hide, running from one spot to another to escape being caught. I saw my father fighting valiantly, then I saw him fall, fatally struck by a horse-riding murderer. As he fell, Father screamed ‘Bhaag Milkha, bhaag.’ I was petrified and could barely move. As the carnage continued, I thought I heard my mother’s

wails of anguish as our village gurudwara, where she had sought refuge, went up in flames. It was only much later that I found out what had happened to the rest of my family that night; how my brothers, Daulat and Amir, killed their own wives and daughters lest they fell into wrong hands, before they themselves were slaughtered; the deaths of my baby brother, Gobind, and sister, Makhani. My sister, Hoondi, who was in Gobindpur that night, was the only member of my family who escaped. She was outside the burning gurudwara when she heard the terrified cries of her one-year-old daughter who was trapped inside. Fearlessly, she braved the flames, rescued the baby and ran away. Such is a mother's love.

With my father's warning 'Bhaag Milkha, bhaag' running through my head I fled for my life, sometimes running, sometimes walking all the way to Kot Addu. It was one of the most terrifying journeys of my life. In my traumatized state, I imagined that every sound or rustle was that of a lurking assassin waiting to kill me. I was in such a trance and till today, I do not know how I reached the railway station. The blood-smeared train to Multan was standing at the platform and I jumped into the first compartment I saw and hid under the berth. It was reserved for ladies, and soon some burqa-clad women entered. When they saw me they tried to raise a hue and cry, thinking that I was a thief, but I fell at their feet with folded hands, and begged them to save my life by not revealing my presence to the authorities. My pathetic plight evoked their pity and they allowed me to remain in their compartment

Back at Kot Addu, Makhan collapsed when he heard the news about the village's annihilation. During his period of confinement, his commanding officer (CO) in Multan had made repeated telephone calls to the police to free his men. But when he received no response, he arrived in Kot Addu with two trucks filled with soldiers to secure their release and take them to Gobindpura. As Makhan, his CO and the other jawans entered the village, the sight before them was terrible to behold and the stench overpowering. The fields were soaked with blood and decomposing bodies lay scattered around, a feast for vultures and dogs. Identification of the dead was almost impossible, and in desperation, the soldiers placed all the bodies, including those of my family, in one big heap, poured kerosene over them and cremated them. More than fifteen hundred villagers perished on that fateful day in Gobindpura. It had taken just a few hours to annihilate my family, home and native village.

When I reached Multan, I went straight from the station to my brother's quarters in the army barracks. His wife, Jeet, was there and we both waited eagerly for Makhan to return from Kot Addu. It took him about three or four days to get back to Multan. I broke down and wept inconsolably upon seeing him standing at the door. We hugged each other tightly and kept crying for a

very long time. Then he gave us the full story about his confinement in jail and the gory massacre in my village. I had lost everything I cared for—it was the end of my childhood.

As the days went by, we heard other terrible accounts about what was happening all around us, and it seemed obvious that we would no longer be safe in Multan. Finally, an official order was circulated stating that the families of all Hindu and Sikh armed forces personnel in what was now Pakistan were to be evacuated to India immediately. The regiments were asked to stay on until further notice. Jeet and I, along with other families, boarded a military truck for a long, eight-hour drive to the Hussainiwala–Ferozepur border. It was a silent journey. We were all displaced people who had lost what had mattered most in our lives, and an uncertain future lay ahead of us. How would we start anew? How would we put down roots in a land we knew so little about? My mind was still numb due to the enormity of the tragedy and I had no clue how to pick up the pieces of my shattered life.

3

Ten Days in Jail

Ferozepur was a sea of refugees, who were desperate to find a familiar face—a husband, wife, child or relative. We were all in the same boat, searching for survivors or finding shelter. After days of aimless loitering, I came upon a dilapidated house abandoned by a Muslim family. Though we had some sort of a roof over our heads, it was almost impossible to find food that would feed the two of us. But the lack of money had made me resourceful. I made frequent forays into the army barracks, where I would polish shoes or do some other menial chores for the soldiers, in exchange for leftover or discarded dal and rotis, which I would take back to share with Jeet. On some days we went to sleep hungry.

We had by now lost all contact with Makhan, who was still in Pakistan with his regiment, but there was little time to worry—we had other, more immediate problems to cope with. At the end of August, the swollen Sutlej river that runs through Ferozepur overflowed its banks and the city was swept by devastating floods. Jeet and I managed to save ourselves by climbing on to the roof of a submerged house, but what little possessions we had with us were washed away. By now I had had enough of Ferozepur and was very keen to leave and move to Delhi, where, I had heard, that it was easy to find jobs. Clinging to one another, we waded through the floodwaters towards the railway station.

Once again, a sea of humanity surrounded us. There was absolute chaos at the station with people moving this way and that with no sense of direction. Getting to Delhi was my priority, but the refugee trains were so overcrowded that it was almost impossible to find a seat. Luckily, Jeet managed to squeeze into the ladies' compartment, but I could only find place on the roof. From my

elevated position I could see caravans of men, women and children, some on foot, some on bullock carts, cycles or any mode of transport, moving towards India or Pakistan. It was a heart-rending sight, this mass migration of people who had lost loved ones, homes and belongings in what must be one of the greatest tragedies of history.

Memories of those bloodthirsty events of that August still haunt me. I had lost most of my family, and yet, I recall the kindness of the ladies on the train. Although I bemoaned my lost childhood, I also knew that I had to find the strength and courage to face whatever lay ahead.

Once we reached Old Delhi railway station, we, like thousands of other refugees, were stranded on the platform with no clue of where to go or what to do. We had no money or contacts, so I teamed up with a couple of other boys to try to find work, but we soon discovered that in those unsettled days, people were wary of employing refugees. Finally, I found a cleaning job in a shop at Ajmeri Gate, which would give me a salary of ten rupees. Jeet and I spent a few chaotic days at the station, mingling with the other displaced people; we were always scared about what would become of us, where would we go. I can still remember how desperate people were and the intense hunger that would drive them to grab the free food distributed by charitable trusts—it was like vultures attacking their prey.

When we had arrived, we had registered our names at one of the help desks in the hope that we would find some members of our families. Throughout the day and night, regular announcements were made, giving the names and whereabouts of relatives. It was then that I heard that my sister, Isher, her husband and his family, had survived the holocaust and were living in Shahdara. When we reached their house, the family reunion was tearful and poignant. At last we had found some family members who were alive and a place to stay.

My joy was short-lived, however. I had barely been in that house a few days when I saw how badly Isher was being treated by her in-laws, particularly her mother-in-law, an enormously fat lady, who would sit on a manjee (cot) all day, issuing orders to Isher. Jeet, on the other hand, was treated with great respect; she was the only daughter among seven brothers and her husband was in the army, which was regarded as a steady profession in those days. It hadn’t taken her long to forget our recent hardships and the bond we had shared travelling from Multan to Delhi.

My poor sister worked like an unpaid maid in that house, waking up at 4 a.m. to start her chores, which included washing clothes and utensils, cooking the meals, looking after her young brothers-in-law and fulfilling whatever demands her husband’s family made on her. At the same time, she was a dutiful

wife and would present her husband with a child at regular intervals. It was a large family, in keeping with the times, and my sister had to labour from morning to night to keep them happy, but they were never satisfied, and even if she made the slightest mistake, they would thrash her mercilessly. Their unkindness and ingratitude upset me deeply, but there was little I could do to stop them. I kept hoping Makhan would come back and save his sister.

As the days passed, I soon realized that I was not welcome. Jeet's family constantly taunted and mocked me by saying that I was a useless, good-for-nothing fellow, who could only sit around all day and eat their food; that I should go out and fend for myself rather than being a burden on them. It reached such a point that I was given only one meal a day. I would then remember my mother and how she would feed her husband, children and extended family with what little was available. I missed her so much that I would sit and cry, indulging in bouts of self-pity at my helplessness. Isher was deeply distressed by my plight and would surreptitiously give me a couple of rotis, whispering, 'Bhaag ja, bhaag, if they find out they will beat me.' These I would eat with salt or an onion, as I was not allowed any dal or vegetables.

By now we had heard that Makhan and his unit were back in India, but we had no idea where he was. The situation at home had made me so unhappy that my health deteriorated. Yet, on some days I reverted to being a carefree lad again —racing trains, flying kites or laughing and cracking jokes with my friends. I would have liked to have resumed my education, but there was no money to pursue that avenue. It was at this time that I had my first infatuation. I was just seventeen and the object of my 'fancy' was the beautiful fifteen-year-old who lived next door. In those days, the mohalla had only one municipality water tap and everyone lined up there to fill their buckets. That's where I first saw her. She was standing behind me and I offered to let her fill her bucket before me.

That day onwards, I tried to help her in small ways, by allowing her to take my place in the queue, or carrying the bucket back to the house. But we were so young and innocent, and there was little else I could think of to further the romance other than waiting to catch a glimpse. We would look at each other when she left for school, or when she went up to her terrace, or when she stepped out of the house on errands. I would talk incessantly about her to my friends. Finally, I decided to pour my heart out and sent her a letter written in Hindi, wrapped in a ball which I threw on to the terrace of her home. To my delight, she reciprocated my feelings. Our romance took wings, but our flight did not last long.

I still vividly remember the day when I had taken her for a walk after school finished. It seemed magical. We lost track of time and she reached home

late. Her parents found out about us and were furious. She was thrashed and locked up in a room. She also stopped going to school.

Soon after, her parents got her married off. I was heartbroken.

The following eight or nine months that I spent in limbo were the worst times of my life. It was also a period that I am still deeply ashamed of. As was inevitable, I fell into bad company, and began to gamble. There was no elder or role model to give me advice or direction or to supervise my actions. As a result, my life went rapidly downhill.

My friends and I would indulge in all kind of nefarious activities. We would steal bags of sugar or rice from the goods trains that were standing at Shahdara railway station and sell them at cheaper rates at the local bazaar. But the thefts were soon discovered and reported to the police, who began to keep a close watch at the station. One day they caught us in the act, and though some of the boys were arrested, I ran so fast that I managed to escape the dragnet.

Fate, however, had other plans for me. In 1948, I was travelling by a local train from Shahdara to Delhi without a ticket, a jaunt I had successfully managed several times before. But as luck would have it, this time I was arrested and brought before a magistrate who stipulated that I either pay a jurmana of fifteen rupees or go to jail. I had not a penny, let alone fifteen rupees, and was thus sentenced to three months' rigorous imprisonment. I was deeply humiliated when the constables handcuffed me and threw me in jail. It was only after a couple of days that I managed to send word to Isher. She secretly sold her gold earrings and paid the fine. I was released, after spending ten days in the company of thieves and dacoits. Often, while in jail, I would get so dejected that I seriously thought of becoming a feared dacoit after my stint behind bars.

Nothing had changed in the house in the ten days that I was in jail. Isher was working as hard as she always did, and the newly instituted rewards for her were regular beatings. I was still humiliated by my stint behind bars and would sit around the house moping. Then we heard the news that Makhan had been posted at Delhi's Red Fort. When he came to visit us, I fell upon him in desperation, bombarding him with tales of our troubles, and about how harshly his wife's family treated Isher. Although he was a hen-pecked husband, completely dominated by his wife, he did try to make an effort to ease the situation during the short time he stayed with us in Shahdara. But his military duties prevented him from being in the house all day, and the ill treatment never really stopped. One day, all my pent-up frustration and anger erupted at the sight of Isher being violently abused yet again. I went into Jeet's room, picked up Makhan's gun, which he had forgotten to take with him, brought it out and aimed it at Isher's in-laws. I said menacingly, '*Khabardar, agar meri behen ko*

phir se haath lagaya to jaan se maar doonga! (If you dare to touch my sister again, I will kill you all).' They looked at me with fear, and I would like to believe that the beatings became less frequent after that incident.

While Makhan was in Delhi he managed to get me admitted in the local school, but it had been more than a year since I had looked at a book and I found it difficult to concentrate on my studies. Regretfully, I must admit, I could not renounce my bad habits and was back on the streets again, in the company of delinquents. When my brother discovered my truancy, he would beat me.

Despite the thrashings Makhan tried hard to find me a vocation, but before a suitable job could materialize, he was transferred to Jhansi and I was back to my bad old ways. Somehow, deep within me, I knew that I wanted to lead a better, more productive life. I yearned to join the army, but it was 1949 and there were thousands of unemployed refugees who had the same ambition. Hopeful young boys like me would throng the recruitment centres, but there were too many of us and too few vacancies to fill.

I was rejected two or three times. At my first attempt at the recruitment centre in Red Fort, I was one of almost five hundred lads who had queued up, waiting for our turn to come. Then, we were asked to stand in line in our shorts, where we were weighed. Thereafter, the medical officer asked me to run a hundred yards, after which I was asked to expand my chest and my chest measurements were taken. A cross was then marked on my chest and I was informed that I was not fit enough to be recruited. At that time my height was 5 feet 9 inches, and my weight 65 kilograms. Dejected but not defeated, I tried again but with the same outcome.

To occupy myself and earn some money, I began to work as an apprentice at a rubber factory, with a salary of fifteen rupees a month. I would hand my wages over to Jeet's parents only to receive in return dry rotis and onions for my morning meal. The poor diet and miserable work conditions ultimately had an impact on my health and I was seriously ill for almost two months.

Makhan was now posted in Kashmir and I gave him an ultimatum that he must get me recruited into the army if he did not want me to give the family a bad name. In November 1952, with my brother's recommendation, I was selected at the army's recruitment camp held in Kashmir. I was overjoyed. The other new recruits and I were taken by military transport to Srinagar and then on to Pathankot. My final destination was the Electrical Mechanical Engineering core (EME) Centre at Secunderabad.

4

My Army Life

I soon discovered how tough and disciplined life in the barracks was and the strict rules and regulations that dictated a new recruit's daily routine. Time governed every minute of our waking hours, and besides our duties out of doors, we had to make our beds, wash our mugs and plates and store them, with all our other possessions, in a tin trunk under our beds. We would rise every morning at 5 a.m., down a mug of piping hot tea and then assemble at the parade ground for the roll call and physical training, where we had to go through a series of complicated exercises. After breakfast, we returned to the ground where we had daily drills on how to march smartly and in tandem with our fellow soldiers. The rest of the morning was spent performing several military duties, including practising shooting at the firing range. What we all dreaded most was 'fatigue duty', which meant the non-military duties we had to do every day like digging trenches, building roads, gardening, peeling potatoes, washing utensils in the mess, polishing senior officers' shoes and other types of manual labour. If a jawan disobeyed orders or was unruly, he was made to do push-ups and front and back rolls. The harsher punishments were running around the grounds carrying a knapsack full of rocks on the back or the threat of being sent to the quarter-guard or army jail.

Our days were long and very tiring and we all looked forward to relaxing in the recreational room to play carom, read or just sit around and chat or listen to the radio. Each night, just before lights out, there was the final roll call for the day to check if all were present and accounted for.

Our salary then was thirty-nine rupees a month, of which it was compulsory to send ten rupees home. The balance went towards paying the dhobi, tailor and

canteen charges. What little was left over we spent watching movies.

The training was so rigorous and the regime so strict that often I would despair that I couldn't cope and wanted to run away. Some lads from my group had done so because they couldn't cope with the rigours. Whenever such thoughts came to my mind I would recall my early hardships, and think: army life may be tough, but it is better than the sufferings I had endured earlier. Then a fortunate incident changed the course of my life.

One Saturday morning, after roll call, there was an announcement that a six-mile race was to be held the next day, and the top ten, out of some five hundred recruits who participated, would be exempted from fatigue duty and would also be given an extra glass of milk every day. This was in January 1953.

That night, my Punjabi friends and I could talk of nothing else but the forthcoming race. Our other competitors would be the unit's recruits from all over India and we had all unanimously decided that we could not let the Bengalis, Biharis or Tamilians defeat us—our izzat would be threatened if that happened. I barely slept that night—I was so excited, but at the same time, apprehensive.

When the day dawned, all of us recruits, wearing our canvas shoes and khaki vests and shorts, reported at the starting line. Filled with a sense of mission, I ran with great gusto and took the lead in the first two or three miles. When I would feel tired I would stop, rest for a while, and start running again when I saw that the other boys were catching up. Luck was on my side that day and I came sixth in the race. At roll call that night, my name was announced before a large gathering of almost three hundred recruits. Friends, and even strangers, wildly applauded and thumped me on my back, screaming, 'Shahbash!' I was overwhelmed with joy by the attention I received—this moment was the starting point of my career as an athlete.

Our instructor was a former runner called Havaldar Gurdev Singh, who had been with the army for about fifteen years. Although his task was to train new recruits, he was a good runner and continued to participate in races. This time he was there to ensure that the ten of us would run six miles each day, after which we would be given that promised glass of milk. For me this was a treat after all those years of deprivation. Gurdev was a taciturn, no-nonsense kind of man, whose tough exterior hid his softer, gentler side. He would run with us during our training period, prodding us with his danda (stick), shouting abuses: '*Haramzadon bhaago*! (run, you bastards!),''*gadho, hamari company first aani chahiye*! (our regiment must come first, you donkeys!),' if we did not perform according to his expectations. He would use the same stick to hit the ground in anger or frustration if we were being careless, calling us '*dangar di aulad*'. But

that was his way of motivating and encouraging us. I strongly believe that he was instrumental in motivating me to strive to become a world-class athlete. Even today when I think of his danda and volley of abuses, I respectfully bow my head in tribute to a great teacher.

Six weeks later, the Centre held a cross-country race. In this event, Gurdev came first and I second. Suddenly I became the cynosure of all eyes. I was twenty or twenty-one at that time, but looked much younger. A couple of weeks later, I was asked to take part in the Brigade Meet in which all the units stationed in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad were participating. I was very surprised when they asked me run in the 400-metre event, mainly because I did not know what 400 metres meant, as I had always run six miles. When I asked Gurdev, he said that I would have to run one round of the track that measured 400 metres.

Foolishly, I remarked, 'What, only one chakkar (round)? I can run twenty chakkars!'

Gurdev patiently explained, 'No, you will have to put all your stamina and speed in just one round, not twenty.'

At my first practice run, I took off my canvas shoes and stood there barefoot, in my shorts. Gurdev clapped his hands for me to start—I did, and clocked 63 seconds in my first try. I was eager to run four more rounds. After all, I was used to running six miles every day and considered this quarter mile of little consequence. For days I continued to practise and my time was further reduced to less than a minute.

On the day of the Meet, I noticed that some young men had the word 'INDIA' inscribed on their vests. They were being mobbed by senior officers and their children, and seemed to exude an aura of power and prestige. I could not understand why this was so and when I inquired I was told that they were those athletes who had represented India in international sporting events. That was my Eureka moment, when I made a solemn promise to myself that I would not rest until I, too, found a place in that hallowed world of Indian athletes who had the privilege of displaying our country's name on their blazers and vests.

The Meet opened with much fanfare. Our unit's team was smartly clad in full khaki uniforms—boots, jersey, trousers and vests carrying the name EME; the Sikh soldiers had tied turbans over their joodas (topknots). The military band played stirring martial tunes as all the regiments marched in perfect tandem round the stadium, dipping their colours before the dais where Brigader S.P. Vohra, our commanding officer, took the salute, and declared the Meet open. We then returned to our tents to change into our sporting kits.

As soon as the call for the 400-metre race was given, we reported at the

starting point. I was very apprehensive; this was the first time that I was competing in such an event and that, too, before the eyes of some four thousand spectators. My fellow competitors had all stood first in national events, and here was I, a puny, barefooted village bumpkin surrounded by stalwarts. I had no idea what the procedures were for such events, or what the technicalities were until the race began. And then it all became clear. Numbered lots were first drawn, indicating the lane in which we would run. Then when the starter, who held a gun in his hand, said, 'On your marks,' the participants would place their feet on the starting line and 'get ready'; and when he fired the gun, it was a signal for us to take off. I came fourth in the race, but this was of little consequence when compared with the line-up of stars before me—Sohan Singh of the Sikh Regiment, who was also the national champion in the 400-metre race, came first, and Pritam Singh, one of the privileged few who had represented India, was second.

I was disappointed but not disheartened. My participation in the Brigade Meet gave me the chance to attend the coaching camp in Secunderabad, and also go to Bombay for the Southern Command Meet, where I was given the chance to be a part of the Brigade team for 4x400-metre relay race.

When I returned to Secunderabad it was back to work as usual—parades, other military duties and sitting for examinations, simple language tests that we had to pass if we wanted to be promoted to the next level. Despite the regular routine, my burning desire to succeed as an athlete never dissipated. In the evening, after a day's hard work, I would carry my food back to the barracks and hide it under my bed. While my colleagues relaxed, I was at the grounds practising. I was still unaware of the techniques needed to run a 400-metre race, but followed the rule of thumb—I would run one round at the swiftest speed, rest and then run another one. I would complete five or six rounds every night, then return to my room, bathe and eat my dinner. This was my nightly routine for many months—a clandestine activity no one was aware of.

Then one night, while doing my regular practice rounds, I was spotted by Brigadier S.P. Vohra, who was on his regular after-dinner walk. He stopped me and enquired what I was doing at that hour. I sprang to attention, saluted sharply, and modestly replied that I was practising for the 400-metre race.

'Why are you practising at this hour?' he asked.

'Because I don't have time for practice during the day, sir,' I said.

This seemingly inconsequential encounter led to a series of incidents that I could never have anticipated. The next day, the brigadier spoke to my company commander asking him to exempt me from fatigue duty, so that I had the time to practice. The brigadier also expressed the desire to meet me. As a recruit,

however, it continued to be mandatory for me to be present at PT (physical training) and the parade. The company commander told the JCO (Junior Commissioned Officer), who in turn told my ‘ustad’.

The next day, I was summoned by my ‘ustad’, who severely reprimanded me for daring to complain to the brigadier. ‘If you had a problem, you should have come to me, not the brigadier,’ he said, poking me in the ribs with his stick. This was grossly unfair. I had made no complaint; the brigadier had spotted me and asked why I was practising at that hour. I had merely, and honestly, told him that it was because I did not get enough time during the day. But the furious ‘ustad’ chose to punish me by making me carry a knapsack full of stones and run up and down for two hours. I did not even realize why I had been penalized so harshly.

Still, the brigadier’s order had to be obeyed. But to get to his office I had to move, step-by-step, up the hierarchical ladder, being interviewed and threatened and abused by each officer. It took me almost a week to meet the brigadier, who ordered that I should be groomed as an athlete, given proper facilities and a special diet, and be exempted from fatigue duty.

This incident opened up a whole new world for me, one that offered innumerable opportunities. The armed forces in India have had a long tradition of promoting sporting events and athletes, and if soldiers show potential and are hardworking, they are given incentives to encourage and motivate them to develop as competent professionals.

5

This was Not Sports

The EME Centre's sports meet, held in Secunderabad in December 1954, was the beginning of my rise. I stood first in the 400-metre race, with a timing of 52 seconds. A month later, at the Brigade Meet, in January 1955, Sohan Singh won the 400-metre race with a timing of 49 seconds, and I was second, clocking 50 seconds.

Sohan Singh saw my success as a threat to his position, and I now began to experience the hostilities and rivalries that ran beneath the façade of sportsmanship. Earlier, I had noticed how resentful established sportspeople were towards newcomers, who they saw as challenges to their positions. I had always had great respect and admiration for their prowess and commitment, and now had, for the first time, seen how competitiveness had warped their attitudes. Sohan Singh stopped talking to me and even refused to allow me to train with him. His uncooperative behaviour pained me, but in no way did it stop me from practising with renewed vigour and resolve. I was truly saddened by their demeanour.

About a couple of weeks after the Brigade Meet, I went to Poona for the Southern Command Sports Meet. For some mysterious reason Sohan Singh withdrew from the 400-metre event, preferring instead to concentrate on the 800-metre race. His decision gave me the chance to come first in the 400-metre race, with a timing of 49.4 seconds. The applause and cheers I received from the spectators greatly boosted my morale and self-confidence, which is very important for any sportsperson.

The next event that I participated in was as a member of the Southern Command team for the combined services meet in Ambala. This was a gathering of athletes from the Northern, Eastern, Western and Southern Commands as well as a team each from the navy and air force. There were several national-level champions, including Joginder Singh, India's champion in the 400-metre event who was representing the Eastern Command. Once again I came second in the race, reaching the winning post just a few yards behind Joginder Singh. With this success I qualified for the National Games to be held in Patiala in 1956.

The national-level games were one of the most important sporting events in the country, and it was a great honour for me to have been selected. As a member of the services' team, I would be mingling with the best athletes from all over the country, including sportswomen. What made it even more interesting was that running was just one of the events; other sports including basketball, volleyball, hockey and long jump were also part of the games. For me, everything was new, and it seemed strange but wonderful. I felt like a rustic village boy lost in a big fair.

The National Games in Patiala opened with great fanfare. Buntings, banners and flags decorated the Yadavindra Stadium and when the Maharaja of Patiala, Yadavindra Singh, declared the meet open, hundreds of white pigeons and multicoloured balloons were released. In his inaugural speech, the Maharaja urged all athletes, both men and women, to perform to the best of their abilities because the selection for the Indian team for the forthcoming 1956 Australia Olympics would take place here. This announcement unnerved me. Although I yearned to be part of the Indian team, how could I even hope to be selected? I would be competing against India's best runners in the event, and was uncertain on how I would fare.

A couple of days before the opening of the Games, a sharp stone pierced my heel during practice and caused a swelling. I paid no heed to the injury and continued practicing. As a result, the injury turned septic, and I was ordered by the doctors not to run in the final race. But I could not let anything get in the way of my ambitions, regardless of the consequences. It was as if my entire existence depended on running the finals. I ignored medical advice and ran the race. I came fourth, while Alex Silveria from Bombay came first, Joginder Singh, second and Harjit Singh of Punjab Police came third. My hopes came crashing, as I knew that by coming fourth, I had no chance of being chosen for the coaching camp. But again, luck was on my side. The Maharaja had spotted me running barefoot in the race and had asked who that boy was. My effortless style impressed him and he recommended that I, too, should be selected for the training camp since I showed great promise. My decision to run in the finals was

vindicated.

The training camp was held at the Sri Kanteerva Stadium in Bangalore. This three-week period was a great learning experience for me, particularly since I was being trained alongside India's top sprinters and under some of our best coaches, including Rufus and Baldev Singh. It was the first time I was taught how to start a race as well as the technicalities of running a 400-metre race—to accelerate speed in the last 100 metres. We were made to do hill running and sand running to build stamina and we would lift weights to build muscle strength. We ate healthy food and were given regular doses of proteins to compensate for the nutrients we had lost during training. I was a quick learner and practised zealously. My dedication on the track pleased the coaches, who encouraged me with their praise and support. It was at the training camp that I decided to switch to spiked boots—the latest fad in sports footwear—after running barefoot for three years. I made this switch around the time when Roshan Sports, Patiala, had just started manufacturing spiked boots for the first time in India. I had always preferred the freedom of sprinting without the constraints of shoes, and felt that wearing them would hamper my speed. However, once I got used to them, I was amazed to find how wearing spiked boots could improve my performance.

At the end of the three weeks, a trial race was held, where Joginder Singh, the star of the event, and I were tied for the first place, both clocking 48.2 seconds. As a result, the boy who came second was relegated to the third place and the one who came third to the fourth. Suddenly, I had become the hottest topic of conversation in India's sports fraternity.

Those of us who had attended the Bangalore camp were in Patiala once again for the final selection of the Indian athletic team. Once again, some of my colleagues reacted in a negative fashion, and I was constantly subjected to snide remarks, but I chose to ignore their jibes. I did not allow their animosity to come in the way of my aim and kept practising hard. However, I was completely unprepared for the sinister incident that almost broke my legs.

The night before the selection race, I was suddenly jolted out of a deep slumber by a hard hit on my legs. A bunch of people had pinned me down and thrown a blanket over my head, so I couldn't see them. They continued to hit me with sticks, and only stopped when my screams alerted my companions in the barrack. By the time help arrived, my assailants had fled. Even though I could not see them, I knew who they were but never had the proof to confront them directly. I only knew that I had become such a threat that people thought the only way to prevent me from winning was by breaking my legs. This was also the first time I realized there are people who firmly believe in taking short cuts to

excel in sports. So while my rivals—in the good old-fashioned way—tried to incapacitate me and take me out of the equation, the sporting cheats of today take much more sophisticated routes. My friends and colleagues had all asked me to identify the attackers, but I remained silent.

Anyway, this incident made me even more determined for the next day's race.

Looking at my wounds, my doctor advised me not to run— he said that the bruises and the swelling needed time to heal, but I was adamant. When I arrived at the starting line, I saw some of the competitors give me startled looks, but only I knew why. But I didn't care. In that moment, all the hardships I had ever faced in the past flashed before my eyes. This was the catharsis I had needed. In that moment I swore to myself I would not let anyone (or anything) come in the way of my *future*. I focused all my energies on running fast. I took off like the wind when I heard the gunshot and easily won the race. I had overcome all odds. I was, however, truly saddened by the viciousness of my attackers, though in some way, my winning had probably given them the worst beating of their lives.

I was selected to represent India at the Olympics in Australia. My joy had no bounds. Here, at last, was the moment I had been waiting, even praying, for. It was my proudest moment yet.

6

From the Bhangra to the Foxtrot

With eager anticipation we awaited the next stage. A tailor was called in to measure the five of us boys and one girl, Mary Lila Rao, for the sports kits. We were given blazers, tracksuits, shirts, vests, boots and turbans for the four sardars. I did not know what to expect, or what to hope for—all I knew was that I was filled with happiness, just like a child who had been given a bag full of candy. After all, I would be fulfilling my dream to wear a blazer with INDIA written on it!

A week later, we left for Australia. The night before we left I could not sleep. My small suitcase had been packed with my kit and bedding and I waited for the sun to rise. Excited by the prospects of what lay ahead, we boarded the train to Bombay, the first lap of our long journey across the seas to far-off Australia. We spent three days on the train, singing songs, drinking copious amounts of tea and animatedly discussing the trip. When we reached Bombay's Churchgate station, we were taken by bus to the Astoria hotel. It was the first time that I had seen such a grand place, and I could barely believe my eyes. There was a posh restaurant, a bar and a ballroom where dances were held every night. What was I, a simple village boy doing in such a different world? While we were at the Astoria, Commander Rekhi, our manager, showed us how to knot a tie and gave us lessons on table manners—how to use a napkin and eat with a knife and fork. I have to say that we had great fun manipulating those two implements, trying to pick up pieces of meat and vegetables from our plates and pushing them into our mouths. How much easier it was to eat with our fingers!

On the day of our departure, a deluxe bus waited at the hotel's entrance to take us to Santa Cruz airport. We were told to put our luggage in the bus—only our bedrolls were to be stored at the hotel. I was slightly bemused by that—why do we have to leave our bedding behind? Where would we sleep? What would we do if the nights were chilly? Troubled by these thoughts, I boarded the bus to the airport.

When we reached Santa Cruz, the entire atmosphere at the terminal seemed unreal—its bright lights, the strange sounds, the rush of people. Except for Mary Lila Rao, none of us has flown before. I was scared and confused. I had no bedding and no food. Where would I sleep? What would I eat? How would the plane take off with so many people, their luggage and other cargo? Would it crash under so much weight? I followed my companions towards the huge monster that awaited us, and blindly climbed up the ramp into the cabin. Once inside, like a child, I meekly followed the airhostess to my seat, which was next to Mohinder Singh, our triple and long jumper and another village hick like me. I was asked to fasten my seatbelt, but naturally I did not know what to do and was fumbling with the straps when the airhostess kindly helped me.

When the plane started to taxi along the runway, we both closed our eyes and recited: 'Wahe-Guru, Wahe-Guru.' I had butterflies in my stomach as the plane ascended. And then we were airborne. When I looked out of the window I saw smoke pouring out of the engines, and raised an alarm, thinking that the plane was on fire. The airhostess calmed me down, patiently explaining that it was only the fuel burning. I felt very foolish and laughed with relief.

Our first stop was Singapore. I was awestruck when I saw the airport, by how clean and organized it was, and by the different people all clad in the colourful garments of their respective countries. I had never seen such groups of races and communities before. It was a long flight to Sydney. I tried to sleep, but it was impossible. I was much too excited by what lay ahead. We had a six-hour stopover at Sydney and were given a tour of the city sights. I was shocked when I saw how skimpily dressed the women were and how freely and intimately couples behaved. How different this was from our orthodox society. In the India of the 1950s, it was considered disrespectful for men to look at women directly, or even talk to them. Such free-and-easy ways would definitely be frowned upon. I felt embarrassed watching them and turned my eyes away. At the same time, I realized that customs and norms differed from country to country.

When we arrived at Melbourne, the city that was hosting the Games, we were taken straight to the Olympics Village, where athletes from all over the world were provided with free board and lodging. The rooms were not large but had every amenity that a person would require. What a change from the barracks

that had been my home for the past three years!

The Village itself was completely different from the village I grew up in. There was a swimming pool, a state-of-the-art training centre with sophisticated machines, recreational facilities like a cinema, dance hall and reading room, and a restaurant, which dished up a lavish spread for every meal. I had never seen so much food in my life, and yet yearned for the simple desi dal, roti and subzi.

In the evenings, the athletes would dance together in the dance hall. Again it was a culture shock watching men and women holding each other or gyrating to raucous music. I would shyly sit around almost in a trance watching the antics; for me it was both shocking and amusing but what I remember most was how cordial and friendly the atmosphere was. After a while, we also decided to have some fun. Then, regardless of the music that was playing, we would dance the bhangra.

Finally, the historic moment arrived. I proudly took my place in the Indian contingent for the march past. The men were immaculately clad in blue blazers, grey trousers and ties with the Ashok chakra printed on them, while the women wore maroon saris with blue blazers. My dream had come true. Here I was representing India at the Olympics, wearing a blazer with my country's name displayed on the front pocket. The Melbourne Cricket Ground was packed to capacity, spectators clapping and cheering as their favourite athletes and top sporting stars marched past. I felt like a lost child who had strayed into the wrong party, and yet, I wanted to stay on and join in all the fun and games.

Although sports fans in India were getting more familiar with my name and exploits, I was unknown in the international field. The 400-metre race had a hundred and fifty competitors, and for the heats, we were divided into groups of six. The best three in each group were moved up, and the rest eliminated. I was so nervous and overwhelmed that I came last in my group and thus failed to qualify for the next stage. I was deeply disappointed for I had not realized how stiff the competition would be. How could a young and inexperienced athlete like me hope to compete with top international stars? Though this hurdle seemed insurmountable, it made me more determined to prove myself.

At the Village I met several foreign sportspeople, including Charles Jenkins, America's top athlete who had won the gold medal for the 400-metre event at Melbourne. Jenkins was a great hero of mine and when I heard that he was occupying the room next door, I was determined to meet him. Although I had received very basic English lessons from an Anglo-Indian nurse in Secunderabad, I was not very fluent in it, so enlisted my roommate Mohinder Singh's help. Jenkins was in the midst of an interview when we entered his room and invited us to return the next day. When we finally met him, Mohinder

introduced me in his broken English saying: ‘Milkha Singh from India, 400 metres, timing 48 seconds’. He further requested him to advise me on how to improve my timing. Jenkins kindly wrote down his complete training schedule for me to follow and from what he had indicated, a runner could only improve his timing and technique through regular and rigorous practice. His kind gesture inspired me and strengthened my desire to excel.

I soon saw how celebrated athletes were and the adulation that was showered on them almost amounted to hero worship. Sardars with their turbans attracted a lot of attention and there were always huge crowds of people outside the Village waiting to meet us, some insisting that we visit their homes, while others wanted autographs. I could not understand why small books and pens were thrust before me, and asked Mohinder what I should do. He said, just sign your name—that’s an autograph—and so I did, many times over. When we would get back to our room we would compare notes and ask each other, ‘*Tu kinne sign kitte*? (How many did you sign?)’ That’s how innocent and naïve we were.

Once the Games ended, we were given a few days off. After I had been eliminated from the event, an Australian family called Smith had befriended me. One evening, they invited Mohinder Singh, and me to their home for dinner, but it was only when we reached their house and saw them bringing out the food that we realized what being ‘invited for dinner’ meant. We had both had our meal at the Village, but didn’t know how to communicate this to them. Mohinder tried to tell them in his broken English, or with gestures like rubbing his stomach to indicate we had eaten, but to no avail, and we were forced to have a second meal. After dinner was over, the two daughters, Christine and Mary, asked us to dance. We were embarrassed and said we could not dance. Mr Smith said, ‘No problem, our girls will teach you.’

This left us with no option but to accept. We nudged each other, whispering ‘you first,’ ‘no, you first,’ awkward at the idea of touching the girls. Boldly, the two sisters came up to us, took our hands and led us to the floor. The gramophone started to play and to the beat of the music, Christine instructed me to ‘put your right foot here and say “one”, put your left foot there and say “two”, one, two, one two…’ And so with my left hand resting on her hand and my right arm around her waist, we danced the foxtrot. Gradually my shyness vanished and I began to enjoy myself.

That night when we returned to the Village, Mohinder Singh and I discussed our evening in great detail. We had a good laugh about our ‘second dinner’, and I teased him, saying, ‘*Tenu ta angrezi andhi hai* (you claim to know English), so why didn’t you say that we had eaten?’

We were both horrified by the parents' laxity, allowing their daughters to dance so closely with strange men. Such a thing would never ever happen in India. As the days went by, we shed our inhibitions and decided to join in the fun. We invited the girls to the Village and took them to the ballroom. But once there, we did not dare dance with them, so conscious were we by the censure we saw in our fellow Indians' eyes.

We spent five days with the Smith family. They had begun to regard us with affection and even came to see us off at the airport. We promised to keep in touch, but this is not always possible. We were geographically too far apart, and culturally too different.

Our flight back was uneventful. By now, we had grown accustomed to flying and did not panic as we had before. I was returning home with no trophies or medals, just my resolve to be a world champion. From now on, this became my sole purpose in life.

7

My God, My Religion, My Beloved

I returned to India, chastened by my poor performance in Melbourne. I had been so excited by the prospects of being part of the Indian Olympics team, but naïvely, hadn't realized how strong and professional the competition would be. My success in India had filled me with a false sense of pride and it was only when I was on the track that I saw how inconsequential my talents were when pitted against superbly fit and seasoned athletes. It was then that I understood what competition actually meant, and that if I wanted to succeed on the international arena, I must be prepared to test my mettle against the best athletes in the world. I remembered Charles Jenkins' advice that it was only through regular and rigorous practice that a sportsman can improve his technique and build his stamina. In my determination to avoid failure, I set myself a goal to work towards, that is, to transform myself into a running machine.

Between 1956 and 1957, my primary mission in life was to excel in running. The track, to me, was like an open book, in which I could read the meaning and purpose of life. I revered it like I would the sanctum sanctorum in a temple, where the deity resided and before whom I would humbly prostrate myself as a devotee. To keep myself steadfast to my goal, I renounced all pleasures and distractions, to keep myself fit and healthy, and dedicated my life to the ground where I could practise and run.

Running had thus become my God, my religion and my beloved.

My life during those two years was governed by strict rules and regulations

and a self-imposed penance. Every morning I would rise at the crack of dawn and after the usual ablutions, would get into my sports kit and dash off to the track, where I would run two or three miles cross-country, in the company of my coach. After the run I would do stretching exercises to develop my muscles.

I followed a similar routine in the evenings—running a couple of miles, jogging between races, and then there would be a period of cooling down. No matter what the weather was, I would practise for five hours every morning and evening, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. It was this disciplined routine that moulded me into the athlete I became. Running had become such an obsession that even when asleep, I would run races in my dreams.

To further build my stamina and strengthen my muscles, I would run long stretches on the sand, or wherever possible, do hill running by going up and down mountain slopes. Three days a week I would lift weights to strengthen my arms, legs and stomach. Sometimes I would play vigorous games like hockey, football or handball, all with the end goal in sight.

I practised so hard and so strenuously that often I was drained of all energy and looked pale as death when the session was complete. There were times when I would increase my speed to such an extent that after my rounds, I would vomit blood or drop down unconscious through sheer exertion. My doctors and coaches warned me, asked me to slow down to maintain my health and equilibrium, but my determination was too strong to give up. My only focus was to become the best athlete in the world.

I recall my practice sessions during the hot summer months of May and June at the National Stadium in Delhi, when temperatures would rise to as high as 45 degrees Celsius. My friends thought I was mad taking such risks, but I refused to let their remarks or the weather daunt me. I would run round after round under the blistering sun and when I would pause for a rest, I could feel the heat radiating from my body and my vest would be dripping with sweat. I would then pull it off and wring it dry into a bucket. By the time I had finished my practice, the bucket would be filled with my sweat, and I would be lying prostrate on the ground, totally exhausted. In desperation I would cry out, ‘*Wahe-Guru, ais wari mainoo bachha lo aur main aae phir kadi nahi karanga*! (Oh God, save me this time and I will never do this to myself again!)’ But then images of packed stadiums filled with cheering spectators, wildly applauding me as I crossed the finishing line, would flash across my mind and I would start again, encouraged by visions of victory.

I had learnt the hard way that the road to success would not be easy, and that I would encounter many obstacles and barriers along the way. Yet, I had

intentionally embarked upon this difficult journey, driven by my desire to succeed. At heart, I was still that impoverished boy who ran to school in his bare feet and who had courageously fought with fate to become what he is today.

My perseverance and tenacity were relentless. Besides, I firmly believed that if a person works hard and sincerely, his efforts would be rewarded. My coach during these years was Ranbir Singh, who would observe my every move and action to see that I adhered to the programme he had prepared.

In my experience, the relationship between a coach and a trainee has to be based on extreme trust. He is your guide, your mentor and also your sternest critic. A coach should be a hard taskmaster as well and discipline you if the need arises; after all, it is he who controls your career as an athlete. All the coaches who have trained me, including Gurdev Singh, Baldev Singh, Ranbir Singh and Dr Howard, have been sources of great inspiration and motivation for me. In fact, it was because of Dr Howard's motivation that I won the gold at Cardiff. I will always be grateful to them.

My strenuous training programme had to be supplemented by a balanced, high-protein diet to make up for the nutrients lost during practice. I avoided fatty substances like butter and ghee, and instead, drank glasses of milk and ate plenty of green vegetables, fruit, eggs, fish and lean meat. I would never eat the same meals every day, but would vary the ingredients and combinations to help digestion. There is nothing more ruinous than a sportsman with diarrhoea.

One of the maxims I have always followed was early to bed and early to rise, because rest and sleep help raise energy levels. I lived an austere, almost monkish life, abiding by the rules I had set for myself. I shunned late nights and never indulged in bad habits like smoking, drinking or too much caffeine—I have seen the impact such addictions have had on athletes, how they affect speed and reduce muscle power.

As my fame grew, so did the attention I received from my fans, both men and women. Huge crowds would follow me wherever I went, and often I would find that the girls outnumbered boys. At times their boldness would embarrass me, but there were also moments when I would feel flattered by their admiration. But one of my rules was to avoid any close relationships with the opposite sex. Starting a romance in those days was not an option for me; I did not want any complications in my life then. I was convinced that I didn't want any distractions that would keep me away from my goal. Besides, I was still young, and in no hurry to find my soul mate.

I had the full support of the army during these years when my demanding practice routine had taken over my life. My regiment gave me extra food and milk and I was exempted from the regular military duties so that I could

concentrate on my training. My victories made my regiment very happy, more so because by setting new records, I was also bringing glory to the armed forces.

8

Going for Gold

In 1957, my career was an unbroken record of victories. I participated in all the usual sports tournaments, ranging from regimental events to all-India meets, establishing new all-India records. At the Bangalore National Games, I won both the 400-and 200-metre races, clocking 47.5 seconds for the former and 21.3 seconds for the latter. As a result, my name became well known throughout the country, not only in sports circles but also in every home.

The next year, 1958, was a glorious one for me, one that I firmly believe was the year of my destiny. My coach was an American called Dr Howard, who taught me an advanced technique of taking a start. Once again, there was the usual cycle of events. My demanding routine had brought the expected results and I was now a running machine, breaking the records I had set the previous year—clocking 46.2 seconds for 400 metres and 21.2 seconds for 200 metres—at the National Games held at the Barabatti Stadium in Cuttack. Other runners lagged far behind me. Seemingly, I had broken the previous Asian record in 400 metres, but I found my new record hard to believe and requested the National Games' organizing committee to measure the track again. They did so and I was assured that my timings were correct.

My new record had created a stir not only in India but also throughout Asia. I intensified my practice, bearing in mind that the 1958 Asian Games in Tokyo were due to take place a few months later. Although the Indian contingent was large, all eyes were fixed on me.

In May, our team left Calcutta for Tokyo. I was thrilled to have been given a

chance to visit Japan, a country I admired for the tenacious way they had rehabilitated themselves after the devastation wrought by the Second World War. When we landed at Tokyo airport, our eyes were dazzled by the brightness of the multicoloured lights. The puddles of water that had collected after a recent shower glowed with the reflection of the lights as well. As we deplaned, we saw hordes of reporters, press photographers and cameramen waiting outside. They had heard that Milkha Singh had arrived, but wanted to know who he was. In response, India's chef-de-mission, Ashwini Kumar, presented me to the press, saying, 'This is Milkha Singh.' Cameras flashed and microphones were thrust before me as I was surrounded by dozens of reporters. I was made to stand in front of the other athletes as a newsreel was shot. Fortunately, I did not have to answer any of the questions that I was bombarded with—they were all taken care of by Mr Kumar and Baldev Singh, our coach.

I boarded the deluxe bus, still bemused by the reception I had received. Our bus was escorted by two smart young men, dressed in black outfits and white caps, riding motorcycles, with lights flashing and sirens blaring as we raced through the city. When we reached Diatchi hotel, the place we were staying, hordes of people had gathered outside, waiting for me. I was mobbed when I got off the bus, some people even thrust autograph books at me. Suddenly, Mr Kumar was at my side. He grabbed my arm and led me away, saying, 'Please don't get distracted by all this. Concentrate on your practice and the event. I have collected the autograph books and you can sign them in your room. I will return them to their owners.' He then turned to the crowds and said, 'I request you all to please excuse us so that the athletes can settle down in their rooms and rest after their long journey.'

When we entered the hotel, the receptionist greeted us, saying, 'We have received many telephonic enquiries about Milkha Singh. Kindly give us a time when we can hold a press conference.'

Mr Kumar replied, 'We have just arrived after a long journey and are tired, so at this moment it will not be possible for Milkha Singh to meet anyone. We request all well-wishers to excuse us for now. If they can come to the hotel tomorrow morning at 11, Milkha Singh will be at their disposal.'

My roommate on this trip was Parduman Singh, who had for many years been the Indian and Asian champion for shot-put and discus. We were both gratified by the affection that we had received but could not understand why this was so.

In the bathroom, I looked at my face in the mirror—my eyes were bloodshot and I looked tired. At the same time I was flushed with joy. I smiled at my reflection, wondering how an ordinary person like me could receive such a

hero’s welcome. I soaked in the tub for a while and then went to the dining room. When I entered, I saw flashes of recognition on the faces of the other diners and was greeted warmly by everyone. My English was still weak, even after all the lessons I had received, and I found it difficult to respond to their queries.

At the dining table, Mr Kumar told us all about Tokyo and its famous sights, its clubs, nightlife and fast-paced lifestyles. He warned us not to leave the hotel at night, and said that whoever disobeyed this order, would face strict disciplinary action and be sent back home. He added that after the Games, we would be allowed to stay on and then we could do what we liked. His warning was timely, because Japanese society, like Australia’s, was open and sexually progressive. We retired to our rooms early because we had to report for practice at 8 a.m. the next morning.

At 7 a.m. our doorbell rang. When I opened the door I saw a pretty girl, all dressed in white, standing there holding a tea tray in her hands. She bowed and politely wished me ‘Good morning.’ She entered the room, put the tray down and asked me, ‘How much sugar do you take? Would you prefer milk or a slice of lemon?’ When I repeated what she had asked to Parduman, he protested, saying, ‘She has not wished me “good morning”. Tell her to send another girl up to serve me tea.’

The poor girl looked bewildered, so I asked her to sit down and explained. Smilingly, she poured the tea and handed the cups to us. As we chatted, I discovered that she, like many other young girls, came from good families and worked at the hotel to earn money so they could continue their education. They cleaned the rooms, made beds, washed and ironed clothes, as well as did other chores that made a hotel guest’s stay comfortable.

After we drank our tea, we changed into our running kits and left by bus for the stadium that was about three miles away. Teams from all over Asia had collected on the grounds, practising with great enthusiasm—I was electrified by the highly charged atmosphere. When we walked in, all eyes were turned towards us. Cameras clicked as I started to warm-up. Film units took action photographs of me from different angles. We practised for two hours and then returned to the hotel for the press conference.

For about forty-five minutes, the journalists asked me numerous questions: ‘When did you start taking part in races?’ ‘When did you get interested in sports?’ ‘What are your hobbies?’ And so on and so forth. My answers were basic, and I’m sure, not quite what they expected. One of them even invited me for dinner, another for drinks.

It was at our hotel that I first met Abdul Khaliq, a member of the Pakistani

team. Baldev Singh introduced us, saying, ‘Meet Abdul Khaliq, the world-renowned sprinter in 100 and 200 metres. And this is Milkha Singh, our racing star. Beware of him, he’s a fiend in 200 metres.’ In annoyance, Khaliq shot back, ‘I have met and run races with many a Tom, Dick and Harry like him. They are no match for me.’ I was completely unprepared for such a spiteful attack, and thought to myself, ‘Why is he being so rude? India may have been partitioned, but we still belong to the same race. Surely, he could not have forgotten our traditional norms of courtesy and tameez?’

In the days before the Games were due to open, the newspapers carried glowing accounts of my achievements and career, accompanied by large photographs on the front page. I was deeply gratified by the publicity I had received and hoped that I would be able to live up to their expectations.

At last the opening day arrived. All the participating nations had gathered at the stadium, waiting for the opening ceremony to begin. When the band started to play, it was a signal for the march past to commence. The Indian contingent, smartly clad in blue blazers, grey trousers, white shirts and blue ties with the Ashok chakra printed on them, were led by a beautiful Japanese girl wearing a blue sari and carrying our national flag. As each team passed in front of the saluting base, they dipped their colours before Emperor Hirohito of Japan, who then declared the Games open. The jubilant spectators cheered, waving multicoloured flags, thousands of balloons were released and fireworks burst to mark the memorable occasion. And then there was a hush as a veteran Japanese athlete, Mikio Oda, ran into the stadium carrying aloft a burning torch—an Olympics tradition that was introduced at the Tokyo Asiad. He encircled the stadium and then placed the torch on a specially made stand in front of the emperor. The torch, a symbol of steadfastness, sportsmanship and good luck, was kept lit throughout the duration of the Games, protected by armed guards. The torchbearer then made a reverse turn and left the stadium, followed by the marching teams.

The 400-metre race was held the next day. Several of my fellow competitors, whose timing was more than mine, came up to me to ask for advice and I was happy to offer them some quick tips. I had practised hard and ran the race in a very relaxed manner. I not only won the race, but also set a new Asian Games record.

My heart was bursting with pride as I stood at the first position on the victory stand. On my right and left were the second and third place winners from Japan and the Philippines respectively. The emperor walked slowly towards the stand, flanked by military guards, and led by three beautiful girls carrying trays in which the gold, silver and bronze medals were ensconced. When the emperor

stood in front of me, the loudspeakers announced that Milkha Singh from India had won the 400-metre race, clocking 46.5 seconds, a new record for Asia. The audience erupted with joy, cheering and applauding. I felt my hair stand on end and a shiver of delight ran through me. With a smile, the emperor held out his hand, which I happily shook. I then bent my head and he draped the gold medal around my neck. He followed the same procedure for the other two. When the ceremony was over, we all turned towards the flagpoles to watch the flags of India, Japan and the Philippines go up as the band played the national anthems of the three nations. The entire audience of a hundred thousand people rose as one to honour our flags and anthems. It was the most stirring moment in my life and I was filled with great patriotic fervour just seeing the Tricolour fluttering in the open blue sky. Overcome with emotion, I closed my eyes for a moment, thinking that it was for this flag and for our motherland that thousands of martyrs (shaheeds) and patriots had suffered and sacrificed themselves. Then the realization hit me that this was not only my triumph—my success had brought glory to my country as well.

When I returned to the hotel, I found hundreds of congratulatory messages waiting for me. My victory had affected each member of the Indian contingent and our mood was upbeat that evening. Friends and colleagues would come up to me, pat me on my back, praising me on my performance. The next morning, I was headline news:

MILKHA THRILLS CROWDS
THE REFUGEE WHO ROSE TO STARDOM
MAGNIFICENT EFFORT BY MILKHA: SETS NEW 400-METRE MARK

I was thrilled to see my photographs in the newspapers and to read about my exploits, but only for a short while—I still had another crucial event ahead of me.

The 200-metre race would take place the next day in which I would be competing against the Pakistani champion, Abdul Khaliq. Many thought I could not win, but my spirits were high, buoyed by my victory and the encouragement I had received from my well-wishers. All through the night before the race, I was consumed by an intense desire to defeat Khaliq so that I could be declared Asia's best athlete. The criterion for winning the title was clear: both Abdul Khaliq and I were at the same position, he had won the 100-metre race and I the 400-metre one, and this event would be the decisive one to prove who was the better athlete.

When we reached the stadium, we both did warm-up exercises in

preparation for the race, which was to be held in the afternoon. I was in a fever of anxiety when the call for the race came, a feeling all athletes experience before a major event. The six of us finalists stood at the starting line in our shorts and vests. Khaliq got the outer lane and I the inner one. We wished each other good luck, a mere formality neither of us meant. The gun was fired and the race began. The spectators held their breath, watching, waiting… We both completed the first 100 metres and were running in tandem, our steps parallel. Despite focusing on our running, we were each aware of the other's progress and were pushing ourselves and our utmost limits. It was fast, it was furious, it was neck-to-neck. Then there was high drama. About three or four yards from the finishing line, I pulled a muscle on my right leg. Then my legs got entangled and I tripped and tumbled over the finishing line. At that very moment, Khaliq breasted the tape too. Fortunately for me, the cameras had photographed every movement at the finishing line from different angles, but we still had to wait half-an-hour for the verdict as the organizers needed time to develop the pictures for adjudicating the photo finish. For thirty minutes, the longest in my life, we did not know who had won. Then came the long-awaited result—I had won! Khaliq was devastated. I, on the other hand, was on top of the world—by winning my second gold medal I was now Asia's best athlete!

Once again I stood at the first place on the victory stand, with Khaliq on the second and a Japanese athlete at the third place. Professor G.D. Sondhi, a member of the Indian Olympic Committee, placed the gold medal around my neck. I felt like reminding Khaliq about 'Tom, Dick and Harry', but that was not my style.

With this victory I had entered the select group of Asia's top athletes. My fame had spread quickly, with headlines proclaiming: *MILKHA RUNS 200 METRES IN RECORD TIME*. I returned to my room and once again found scores of congratulatory messages, letters and telegrams waiting for me. As I looked at them, I thought about how far I had travelled from my obscure little village in Pakistan, and a sense of loss suddenly came upon me as vivid images from my life flashed through my mind— my father's and brothers' deaths, my mother's anguished cries from inside the burning gurudwara, the horrors of Partition, bloodshed and slaughter, the train to Delhi, despair, suffering, poverty, rejection, struggles, the days of crime on the streets, ten days in jail, a lucky break in the army, life in the barracks, my chance encounter with running, my relentless training schedule, my sacrifices, my goal, lady luck smiling on me, fame and recognition, hero-worship by the loving masses… My dreams had become reality… The rush of emotions overwhelmed me and I put my head down and sobbed like a child. The storms had steeled me, but the glories of the

present had rocked me back into dark visions of the past. But then the stream of life moves on.

Parduman Singh, who had won the gold in shot-put and silver in discus, returned to the room in good humour. Listening to him speak and laughing at his jokes was like a tonic and I began to feel more cheerful again. As we talked, the phone kept ringing and there were frequent knocks at the door as my fellow athletes, including some Pakistani athletes from Punjab, came in to congratulate me. This spirit of camaraderie, particularly from the Pakistanis, dispelled some of the rancour of our bloodstained past.

That night, we attended the emperor's banquet at the Imperial Palace and I was formally introduced to His Highness, who graciously said, through an interpreter, 'We were pleased to watch your run. If you continue your efforts you will become the world's number one champion.' I humbly thanked him for his kind words of encouragement and diffidently replied, saying that my success was due to the love and encouragement extended to me by the people of Japan.

For the closing ceremony on the next day, we assembled once again at the stadium as the Japanese bid us sayonara. Electronic boards displayed messages in both Japanese and English that said: 'We have done our utmost to make these Games a success. Please forgive us for any inadequacies, and do visit our city and country again.' Towards the end of the show, the lights dimmed and children in rainbow-coloured clothes holding lit torches performed a wonderful dance. It was a magical conclusion to a memorable event.

Fans were waiting for us at the hotel and the moment we descended from the bus, we were mobbed by scores of eager and well-meaning boys and girls. Some brought us little tokens and gifts while others just wanted autographs. I was touched by their love and affection.

Parduman Singh and I wanted to buy presents for the young girls at the hotel, but they surprised us by giving us dolls and other small objects. We thanked them in Japanese: *'arigatou gozaimasu'*, we offer our thanks to you. They were delighted. In return we gave them scarves and some brass curios we had brought from India. We had grown very fond of them and when we left, they came to the airport to see us off.

9

Meeting Pandit Nehru

We returned to India via Hong Kong, where we spent four nights. Hong Kong was a vibrant city with a swinging nightlife. However, my vow of self-control remained steadfast and I was not tempted by what I saw.

We landed in Calcutta to a tumultuous welcome. And then it was on to Delhi. As we entered the airport building, a band started to play and well-wishers rushed up to garland us and offer us sweets, felicitating us for the many gold, silver and bronze medals we had brought back with us. Invitations from the president, Dr Rajendra Prasad, prime minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, defence minister and the chief of army staff poured in.

Panditji held a grand reception in honour of the Indian team on the lawns of his imposing residence, Teen Murti Bhavan, which was attended by cabinet ministers, government officials and high-ranking officers from the armed forces. He received us graciously, warmly shaking our hands. When I was presented to him, he gave me a friendly smile and then embraced me. I was elated that such a great man had greeted me so fondly.

Panditji asked me to sit next to him at one of the tables. ‘My boy,’ he said to me, ‘you have brought great pride to our country. If you keep up the hard work, you will be one of the world’s top athletes.’

‘Panditji, my interest in running was awakened recently, and I have taken an oath to persevere until I attain the goal I have set for myself.’

The prime minister was pleased by my reply, and asked me to tell him about

myself. When I narrated the story of my past and the tragedy of losing most of my family during Partition, he reassured me in a voice choked with emotion, ‘I cannot change the past nor bring the dead back to life, but remember my boy, you are not an orphan. I, and many Indians my age, are your father and mother. If ever you are in need of anything, you must come to me.’

He then told General Thimayya, the chief of army staff, to take special care of me.

At Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon’s reception the next day, it was announced that all gold medallists would be promoted immediately, an unprecedented move that elevated me from a sepoy to the rank of a junior commissioned officer (JCO). This promotion was a huge jump in my career. If I hadn’t won two gold medals, I would probably have remained a sepoy or risen to the rank of a havaldar at the most. Now thanks to the decision taken by the defence minister and chief of army staff, a new military tradition had been initiated, where it was mandatory that all soldiers who received gold medals in international events would be promoted automatically. What a tremendous incentive this would be for future sportsmen!

On the third evening, at General Thimayya’s reception, my promotion became a reality. All of us who had received gold medals stood in a straight line while we waited for our names to be called. When it was my turn, the general called for the stars and ceremoniously fixed one on each of my epaulets. He congratulated me saying, ‘The honour of the army and the nation is now in your hands. I have ordered your unit to provide you with special facilities.’

After the function, I returned to my lodgings at my unit. My promotion had filled me with such pride that I refused to remove my uniform and, wherever I went, I was saluted by jawans—a novel experience for me. Throughout my army life I was the one who had been saluting my seniors, and now, here I was, being saluted at. Such are the ironies of life!

I returned to my unit in Secunderabad after a few days. As the plane was hovering over the airport, a flood of emotions swept over me. This was the place where I had begun my career, where I had made a solemn pledge that one day I, too, would represent my country in international tournaments, where coaches like Gurdev Singh had given me the confidence to compete, succeed and move ahead. I remembered my late-night practices and the sacrifices I had made. The insignificant jawan was now returning as a hero! But I would never let success go to my head. My past helped to keep me grounded and I remained focussed on higher goals.

Thousands of jawans, officers and the general public were impatiently waiting for me at the airport. When the plane taxied to a halt, I emerged from the

cabin and waved to the waiting crowds, who cheered me vociferously. The military band started to play as I slowly descended. Brigadier G.S. Bal, our commanding officer, came up to greet me, while cameras flashed. Jawans presented the guard of honour and I proudly took the salute. With my face covered by garlands of marigolds, roses and jasmine, I walked alongside Brigadier Bal and other officers, down the red carpet lined by cheering jawans dressed in their best uniforms.

Tea was served at the airport, and throughout the time we were there, officers and their families kept coming up to me, eager to know more about my victories in Tokyo. The band preceded me as I came out of the building, where an open jeep awaited me. I sat between Brigadier Bal and Colonel Bhave, as our cavalcade slowly moved through the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad until we reached the unit. The roads were lined with local citizens, as well as jawans who smartly saluted us. It was flowers, flowers all the way. My joy was limitless and I was filled with gratitude for the affection and respect I had received. God had been more than good to me.

10

‘Come on, Singh’

I spent a few days at the EME Centre before the next major sporting event—the Sixth British Empire and Commonwealth Games was a few months later. It was initially known as the British Empire Games and was renamed to the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in 1954 and the British Commonwealth Games in 1970, before finally gaining its current title, the Commonwealth Games, for the 1978 edition.

I had resumed my practice schedule soon after I returned from Tokyo and when it was confirmed that I was part of the Indian team, I was filled with both joy and trepidation. Joy at the thought of competing with some of the best athletes in the world, trepidation because I was uncertain about the outcome. Friends and well-wishers who came to see me off at Delhi airport were all very supportive and repeatedly remarked that they had great hopes of me returning with another gold medal. But in my present state of apprehension and self-doubt, this seemed a formidable task.

We landed in London and after a brief stopover left by train for Cardiff in Wales, where the Games were to be held. On the train we were informed that for part of our journey we would be travelling through a tunnel that had been built under the River Severn. I was flabbergasted by this fact and wondered what amazing engineering feat had created this underwater tunnel.

At Cardiff, we were received by representatives of the organizing committee and taken to the military base where we, along with the other teams, were staying. In the evening we were taken to the Cardiff Arms Park for

practice. There I saw athletes who looked stronger and sturdier than I. Some even seemed seven feet tall! Compared to them I was like a pigmy among giants. All the press reporters and cameramen were clustered around athletes of international repute and no one paid me the slightest notice. My fame was restricted to Asia, but here I was just another participant in the midst of eminent sportsmen from about thirty-five nations who formed the Commonwealth.

Three days later, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth declared the Games open, and the specially designed Commonwealth flag was ceremonially raised. The Queen's Baton, which she had handed over at Buckingham Palace and which had then been carried by a relay of runners to Cardiff, was presented to Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, so that he could read the Queen's message to the assembled participants and audience. The Queen's Baton, which is so much a part of the Commonwealth Games today, was launched at Cardiff.

Our American coach, Dr Howard, had accompanied the Indian team. He was an outstanding trainer, who was very well acquainted with international training patterns and techniques. He was also very astute and could easily judge the strengths and weaknesses of the other athletes. For an entire day he mentored me, giving me pointers on what to expect. More than anything, he was trying to rid me of my inferiority complex and instil self-belief. I had convinced myself that there was no way that I could be among the six finalists, let alone win a gold medal. What chance did I have against superbly fit professionals like Malcolm Spence from South Africa, George Kerr from Jamaica, Kevan Gosper from Australia, Terry Tobacco from Canada and John Salisbury from England.

However, because of Dr Howard's motivation and advice, I won heat after heat, and effortlessly reached the finals. The night before the race, Dr Howard reiterated the tips he had drilled into me. He revealed that Spence had more stamina than speed, and that I should stick to my own style of running the 400-metre race, that is, to start in top gear. He emphasized that I must not start slowly, that I must maintain my speed for the first 300 metres, and then give it my all in the last 100 metres. He said that if I ran the first 300 metres at full speed, Spence would do the same, although that was not his running strategy.

The morale-boosting attitude and clever strategies Howard gave me, equipped me with the confidence I badly needed. I started believing that I could be the best. Another constant motivation was a burning desire to do well for the country—I was well aware that my good performance would lead to the glory of India.

In spite of all my positive thoughts, I spent another sleepless night before the race, tormented by nightmares of what could go wrong. My confidence again had plummeted and I wondered what I should do—participate or quit. The lack

of sleep and my morbid thoughts had drained me. The race was scheduled for 4 p.m. in the afternoon. I got up at the usual time, soaked in a tub of hot water to relax, had breakfast and then fell back into bed and covered myself with a blanket. After a refreshing nap, I awoke at noon, had a meagre meal of a cup of soup and a couple of slices of bread. I did not want to overeat, in case it would impact upon my performance.

At 1 p.m., I combed and knotted my long hair on the top of my head and covered it with a white kerchief. In my Air India bag, I packed my spiked shoes, a small towel, a comb and a packet of glucose. Then I put on my tracksuit, and closed my eyes in meditation, conjuring up images of Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh and Lord Shiva. I silently and fervently prayed to them to give me strength and to guide me through what lay ahead.

My other team members were waiting for me on the bus. When I took my seat, they jokingly remarked: 'Today, Milkha Singh is off colour.' 'Well my friend, what is the matter?' 'Why are you not happy?' I did not respond to their wisecracks and humour, but it did lighten my mood. All my thoughts and emotions were focused on the forthcoming event.

Sensing my nervousness, Howard came and sat next to me. Encouragingly he said, 'Milkha Singh, today's race will make or mar you, it will either put you up or pull you down. Such a chance will not come your way for another four years and four years is a long time. It is now or never. If you follow my tips, you will beat Malcolm Spence. This feat is not beyond your capacity.' His words raised my spirits, somewhat.

When we reached the stadium I went to the dressing room and lay down, agitated and disturbed. I felt feverish and queasy, sick both in mind and body. At 3 p.m., Howard came to me, rubbed my back and massaged my legs. He said, 'My boy, get ready. Your race begins in an hour.'

I reached the track, put down my bag and, like the other competitors, began my warm-up exercises. Throughout the waiting period, Howard stood beside me, murmuring words of encouragement.

The first call for the 400-metre race came at 3.50 p.m. The six of us reported at the starting line and were made to stand in a row. As we stood there, I heard voices calling, 'Come on, Singh; come on, Singh'. I wiped the sweat from my legs with my towel and was tying the laces of my spiked boots when the second call came. I removed my tracksuit and stood there in my shorts and vest emblazoned with the word INDIA under the Ashok chakra. I took a few deep breaths. The six of us went through the usual courtesy of wishing each other good luck. Salisbury was in the first lane, Spence in the second, Kerr in the third, Gosper in the fourth, Tobacco in the fifth, and finally I in the last one. My heart

was pounding wildly. When the starter said ‘On your mark’, I got into the starting position, with my left foot just behind the starting line, my right knee parallel to my left foot and both hands touching the ground.

I invoked the blessings of the Almighty once again while I waited for the signal. The gun went off with a loud bang and as we took off there were loud cheers and claps from the spectators, some backing Spence, some Gosper, while the majority were yelling for Salisbury.

I ran as if the furies were after me. I remembered Howard’s advice and strained every muscle for the first 300 metres. I was in the lead and when Spence saw that I was running at lightning speed, he tried to overtake me, but luck was on my side. I saw the white tape when I was just fifty yards away and made a mighty push to reach it before Spence caught up. There was a gap of a yard or so between us when I floated ahead and breasted the tape. Wild cries of ‘Come on, Singh; come on, Singh’, filled the air. I had won the race!

And then, my body felt lifeless and I fell to the ground unconscious. The effort I had put into the race had taken its toll. From what I later heard, I was taken on a stretcher to the medical post, where I was revived with oxygen.

It was only after I regained consciousness that the realization that I had won started sinking in. My teammates and other supporters surrounded me and lifted me on to their shoulders. As they brought me back to the stadium from the medical post, thunderous cheers greeted me. I draped the Indian flag around me and took a victory lap of the stadium.

After my race, I was interviewed by BBC television.

‘Mr Singh, how do feel after winning the race?
‘I felt nothing at all, I was lost in another world. Now I feel just like any other winner in my position—on top of the world!’

‘Did you hope to win the race?’
‘I had no such hope. I only tried to do my best and I am happy that I succeeded beyond my expectations.’

‘In your hour of victory, do you have any messages for your country?’
‘Only to say: my country, your son has done his duty towards you. May every citizen do his duty to his motherland.’

‘ *What are your impressions about the people of this country?’*
‘Their love and good wishes inspired me to win.’ (This reply was just a formality.)

‘Did you have a chance to run with these athletes before?’
‘No, this is the first time that I have had the honour.’

My win was a historic event, particularly significant because this was the first time that an Indian athlete had won a gold medal at the Commonwealth Games. My victory had put India on the sports map of the world.

When I first arrived in Cardiff I was a nonentity. Today, I was treated like a celebrity. Our high commissioner to the Court of St James, Mrs Vijaylakshmi Pandit, had watched my win from the VIP enclosure, and she came up to congratulate me after the victory ceremony. When I saw her approach, escorted by our manager Ashwini Kumar, I wondered who that lady with ‘bob-cut’ hair was. Then we were introduced and I was very happy to meet the sister of our prime minister, Pandit Nehru, whom I had the privilege of meeting after I had returned from Tokyo. She embraced me and remarked that I had raised India’s honour and the nation was proud of me. I was uplifted by such warm felicitations. Then she told me that Panditji had sent a message asking what I would like as a reward for bringing such glory to India. I requested that a national holiday be declared on the day I landed in India—a wish that the prime minister happily granted! The Duke of Edinburgh had also come up to greet me. He had watched me winning the race and said, ‘I greatly appreciate Milkha Singh’s style of running.’

That night we met sportsmen from all the other Commonwealth nations. We congratulated each other and talked of this and that. The next morning, I received a tsunami of telegrams praising my performance and congratulating me for winning.

After the Games ended, we left for London where we stayed at the Dorchester Hotel. Queen Elizabeth had invited all the teams who had participated in the Games for a grand banquet at Buckingham Palace. We were all awestruck by the invitation, well aware of how prestigious it was for us humble athletes to be given the opportunity to visit the Queen’s palatial residence and mingle with a distinguished guest line-up of royalty, ministers, diplomats and celebrities. When our team arrived at the palace, smartly clad in our blue blazers—and us sardars in turbans—we attracted the attention of the glamorous crowd. A ball was held after the banquet. By then the guests had congregated in groups and drinks were served. I had my first ever sip of beer that evening and was bold enough to join the dancing couples on the floor. After all, I had received good practice in this area in Australia. The Indian contingent was amused, but I egged them on to join in. I said, ‘Today is a day of great rejoicing and no one should disapprove of dancing at such an occasion.’ My words acted

as an incentive and my companions joined in the festivities. While we were dancing, the lights dimmed and some couples got closer and more intimate with their partners. When the lights came on, we were all amused to see that many of the young men had traces of lipstick on their lips. Such behaviour is unacceptable in India, but this was the West.

We left for Delhi the next morning, where once again I was received rapturously. What was even more gratifying was that my arrival was celebrated with a national holiday!

I was a star, my name a household word and the stories of my exploits had acquired legendary proportions. My struggles and perseverance had finally heaped huge rewards, not only for me but for my country as well.

11

The Flying Sikh

My triumph at the Commonwealth Games had elevated my status to such a level that I was now an international sports celebrity. Between 1958 and 1960 I received numerous invitations from different countries and travelled throughout the world, participating in at least eighty international races, out of which I won seventy-seven. The international press featured glowing articles on my life and achievements, because wherever I went I broke the old 400-metre records, establishing new ones.

In 1960, the much-awaited Olympic Games was to take place in Rome. I was very excited; this would be my second Olympics after Melbourne in 1956. In the years since then, I had matured and grown as an athlete, and was now at my peak. Perhaps I would have better luck this time.

But, before that, in January, I was to participate in the National Games at Delhi's National Stadium. My sister Isher and her family were very keen to see me run. They had heard of my exploits but had never watched me on the track. I happily invited them for the event. I was overjoyed to see them, especially my beloved sister Isher, who had sold her gold earrings to secure my release from jail all those years ago. When I greeted her, she said, 'Dear brother, you have endured terrible hardships and trials, but now good fortune has smiled upon you, and us because of you. Don't get exhausted by running so fast.' Her love and concern overwhelmed me and I embraced her warmly, at the same time assuring her that running did not debilitate my body; instead it gave me added strength.

She responded with tears in her eyes, 'My dear brother, your name is like a

shining star in the world today. You have raised the honour of our family enormously. If only our parents were alive to see what you have achieved. How happy and proud they would have been.' I wiped her tears gently and tried to console her, 'Who can fight fate? Perhaps I would never have reached such pinnacles of success if I hadn't endured those early days of austerity and adversity.'

My sister was unaware of the little surprise I had planned for her. I asked her to put on my India blazer. Once she did, I asked her to put her hands in the side pockets of the blazer. I had put a gold earring in each of the pockets. 'These are for you', I told her. She took the earrings and just couldn't stop crying.

Inside the stadium, I ordered tea and fruit for my family, but Isher demurred saying, 'Why are you going through all this trouble for us? We've already had tea.' Her simple remarks filled me with affection as I led them into the stadium. As we entered, I felt the crowd staring at their simple attire with disdain. For a moment I felt embarrassed, but then was filled with loathing at people's snobbish attitudes. With great love and consideration I made them sit in the best seats and stayed with them until my event began.

Isher asked me where I would run and I pointed to the track, and patiently explained that the athlete who would reach the winning post first would receive a medal, which added to his glory as a sportsman. When I entered the field, Isher tried to keep her eyes fixed on me throughout the duration of the race. I came first as usual, but fainted yet again because of the energy I had expended while running. My poor sister thought that I had been shot dead by the gun that had started the race. She started wailing loudly when she saw me being carried away on a stretcher. The other spectators attempted to reassure her, but she was not convinced and demanded that she be taken to me immediately. When she saw me lying down looking pale, with a film of glucose on my lips, she cried, 'I can't bear to see you in this condition. *Veer* (brother), please, I beg you, give up running.'

When I recovered, we returned to the stadium to be greeted by vociferous cheers. I nudged Isher and remarked, 'Look at the honour and praise I receive when I run and win races. If I stop running, no one will bother about me.' But she was still not convinced.

The National Games were held for three days, during which I set new records—100 metres (10.4); 200 metres (20.8); 400 metres (46.1); 4×100-metre relay (42.1); and 4×400-metre relay (3.12.6).

Soon after the National Games, our team had received an invitation from the Pakistani government for the Indo-Pak Sports Meet. What an ironic twist of fate. I was returning to the land where I was born, where I had lost my home and

most of my family in the inhuman savagery that followed Partition. It was not the religious bigotry that troubled me, just the fear that the visit would revive those horrible memories. I did not want to go, but Pandit Nehru intervened, saying that this visit was for the honour of our country and that I was going there as an ambassador for India. The others in our team felt as I did, as we reluctantly travelled to the border at Attari via Amritsar. The welcoming committee at the border greeted us warmly and then we were taken by bus to the Faletti's Hotel in Lahore.

Days before the Meet opened, headlines in newspapers as well as banners and posters carried large-print notices that said:

'Indo-Pak Athlete Duel
Abdul Khaliq to meet Milkha Singh'

The Meet was declared open by the president of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan, at the newly constructed Gaddafi Stadium. There were more than thirty thousand spectators in the men's enclosure, and several thousand more of burqa-clad ladies in the women's. The general, other senior officials and their families sat comfortably in the Presidential Box.

At this event I was once again pitted against my old opponent, Abdul Khaliq, whom I had defeated at the Tokyo games.

Consequently, the massive crowd's excitement levels were high as they eagerly waited for the moment when their hero would defeat me. In this Meet, too, the pattern of our victories were the same as at Tokyo—Khaliq won the 100 metres and I, the 400-metre race. The deciding race would be the 200-metre one. My teammates reassured me by saying that there was no way that I could lose, my technique was too finely honed and my timing was much better than the one at Tokyo. But as usual, on the day of the race, I woke up feeling feverish and bilious. I was shivering, either because I was unwell or by memories of those terrible days that still haunted me. Instead of succumbing or feeling sorry for myself, I forced myself to get up and go to the stadium. As I said to myself, over and over again, I had to win because a defeat in Pakistan would be a fate worse than death.

The Pakistanis had heard about me, but only because I had defeated their hero two years ago in Tokyo. They felt that the time had come for Khaliq to avenge his defeat. While the two of us were going through our warm-up exercises, there were deafening shouts from all the spectators: 'Long Live Pakistan, Long Live Abdul Khaliq.' The entire audience kept cheering for him as he walked in before me, followed by other Pakistani athletes and Makhan Singh,