

You've become our country's sporting icon. But you had a tough childhood— orphaned and displaced during partition. Why did you contemplate to become a dacoit?

The conditions that we experienced after coming to Delhi were appalling—living on a railway platform with bodies strewn around and being without food and sanitation.

In a state of colossal tragedy and hunger, a person can do anything. I did contemplate becoming a dacoit, but being able to join the Indian Army saved me.

You joined the Indian Army in your fourth attempt as a Sepoy and were introduced to sports there. Do you think it was the Army, which had faith in your abilities and nurtured you?

I owe it all to the Army. I had no idea about 100, 200 or 400 metres in racing. My talent as a runner was noticed and I was encouraged to go further by my senior officers and colleagues. Full credit goes to the Indian Army for my achievements in competitive athletics.

You're the first person to win the Commonwealth gold medal for India in 1958. Can you relive that moment?

It was one of my cherished victories. I was up against some of the world's best runners and no one expected me to win. But my training, which was aimed at setting a World record had prepared me for the moment and I won quite comfortably.

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Ji (Nehru Ji's sister) witnessed the race and after my win she came running to congratulate with a message from Nehru Ji—that I could ask for anything I wished. I expressed my desired for a day to be declared as 'national holiday'.

You defeated Pakistan's champion Abdul Khaliq in the Indo-Pak meet in 1960 in the 200-metre race—a race, which you never wanted to run due to the haunted memories of partition. And it's this race that earned you the title of 'Flying Sikh' by General Ayub Khan. How does it feel to acquire this title?

It was a great honour to receive the title from Gen Ayub Khan and Pakistan. There was a lot of emotion involved with that trip, and Abdul Khaliq had worked hard to avenge the loss he had faced against me during the Asian Games. Reliving the tragedy of partition, experiencing gamesmanship before the race and then the respect and 'khitaab of Flying Sikh' from Gen Ayub after a great race made the entire trip memorable.

Now we're getting medals in various sports. Are you happy with the performance of our sportspersons?

I have full faith that Indians have the talent and we have started getting medals in few sports. However, I do lament the fact that for a country of our size, the number of medals is very low and sadly there's no hope in athletics at the moment.

Why did you refuse to accept the Arjuna awards and what makes you think that awards are being distributed like 'prasad' in a temple?

The process in bestowing the awards should be such that the officials acknowledge the sportspersons' contributions and honour them at the right time. I will not say anything beyond this, but I would like to convey that the awards committee has a huge responsibility and the awards are given for a reason to

deserving sportspersons. They must do justice to their job and should discharge their responsibilities without fear or favour.

Are involved in charity because of your troubled childhood—to make this place a better place for children?

I feel blessed that God has given me so much now. My wife, the backbone of our family, keeps us all grounded—constantly reminding about our responsibilities to society. I know the value of help and I am grateful that we are in a position to do whatever little we can.

In fact, you've adopted the son of a Havildar who died in the Battle of Tiger Hill. What sort of heart does the 'Flying Sikh' possess?

It's a grateful heart—which thanks God regularly.

Bangalore is home to varied sports. How did it feel to be associated with Bangalore Midnight Marathon?

It was wonderful to see the efforts of Bangalore Rotary to promote good health. I consider it my privilege to witness the integration of people and their camaraderie to raise money for social causes.

Bangalore is close to my heart. Besides Secunderabad, I was trained in Bangalore too and have special memories. However, it would be great to see an academy in Bangalore where talented runners are nurtured and developed into champions.

What does success and fame mean to you?

Well, success and fame are an acknowledgement of the fact that you have made some kind of difference and made your country proud. It has always been my desire to see the National Flag flying high. When I was competing, success and fame were motivating factors and for someone from my background, it really encouraged me to give it all.

What is your fitness regimen and do you spend time playing golf now?

I do some form of exercise daily. I play golf about 3–4 times a week. On other days I jog and also work out in our gym at home. I believe that exercise keeps the blood flowing and the body healthy.

You think Farhaan Akhtar did justice to your role in the your biopic movie—'Bhaag Milkha Bhaag'?

Farhaan did full justice to it. His acting prowess and doing the job with intensity and integrity impressed me. I have to admit that a large part of the credit for the movie goes to him. Nevertheless, Praseon Joshi and Rakeyesh Om Prakash Mehra were equally brilliant in communicating my experiences with the script and direction respectively.

Today you're an accomplished person. Which race of life keeps you running now?

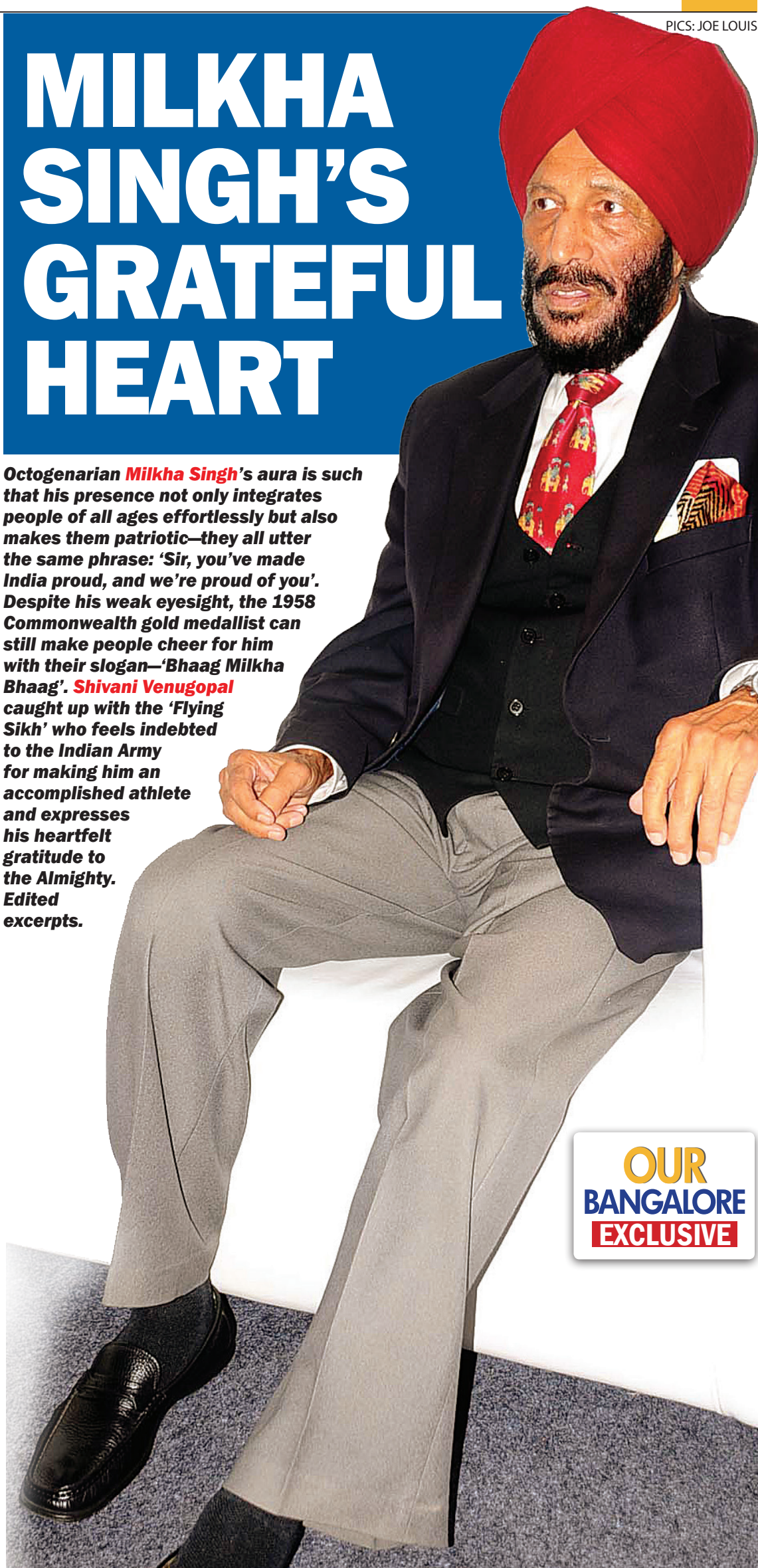
We are working on setting up an athletics academy in Chandigarh. I would love to see an Indian raise the tricolour at the Olympics and hopefully he or she will be from our academy.

Your wish and advice to people who want to take up sports.

There is no short cut to success. Have big goals and then back it up with hard work, discipline and determination. For someone who can work hard with discipline and determination, the sky's the limit and if Milkha Singh can do it, so can anybody.

MILKHA SINGH'S GRATEFUL HEART

Octogenarian Milkha Singh's aura is such that his presence not only integrates people of all ages effortlessly but also makes them patriotic—they all utter the same phrase: 'Sir, you've made India proud, and we're proud of you'. Despite his weak eyesight, the 1958 Commonwealth gold medallist can still make people cheer for him with their slogan—'Bhaag Milkha Bhaag'. Shivani Venugopal caught up with the 'Flying Sikh' who feels indebted to the Indian Army for making him an accomplished athlete and expresses his heartfelt gratitude to the Almighty. Edited excerpts.



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