

## BOOK EXCERPT

# For young readers: A new biography of star athlete Milkha Singh aka The Flying Sikh

An excerpt from 'The Incredible Life of Milkha Singh: The Runner Who Could Fly,' by Swati Sengupta. Illustrations by Devashish Verma.

**Swati Sengupta**

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Wax statue of Indian athletics legend Milkha Singh captured during the launch of Madame Tussauds Delhi in New Delhi on November 30, 2017 | AFP

The young boy looked dreamily at the vast expanse of the field that lay in front of him. There were patches of ripe, golden wheat plants dancing in the breeze. Far, far away, the lush greens and buttery yellows melted into the blue sky. Who knew what lay beyond the fields?

The boy, Milkha, was only seven or eight years old – in fact, he wasn't sure how old he was – and he had never ventured beyond the fields. His eyes followed a bird high up in the sky. How tiny it looked against the enormous sky! Suddenly, a huge bird came out of nowhere and swooped down on the tiny bird. It could have gobbled up the bird in a fraction of a second. But the tiny bird was sharp. It flapped its wings and took off in the blink of an eye. Before Milkha could count one, two, three...it had soared high into the sky. Soon enough, it was gliding away merrily.

Milkha's eyes followed the little bird, and after a few seconds, he lost track of it. He rubbed his eyes in great wonder. How did the bird fly so fast?

When he looked around him now, he could see no one. His father and brothers had already finished their day's work in the fields and gone home. Dusk was beginning to descend, the day was coming to an end.

Ah, home! His mother must be preparing hot rotis for him. Milkha could almost smell the dough being pressed by her soft hands, flattened under a rolling pin, heated on a hot tawa, then placed on the flame till they filled up with steam to magically puff up like balloons. Then she would place the rotis on plates with dollops of white butter rubbed on them to make them softer and tastier. His stomach growled as he jumped up from the ground and brushed away the dust from his shorts in three swift pats. Time to run home!

**Who knew then, that little Milkha Singh, the one with long, silken hair tied up in a knot, with thin limbs and dreamy eyes, would grow up to be one of the greatest Indian athletes of all times? Nobody could have imagined how incredible his life story would be, what mountains he would move! That some day he would not just run, but fly like a bird?**

Milkha loved to play with his younger brother, Gobind, and all the other children in the neighbourhood. That's what they did every day, after school. He hated school. The teachers were very strict, and he was confused by the Urdu letters and Maths lessons. He would much rather spend his time flying kites and running through the fields, serpentine earthen roads, stumbling on bricks and rocks, falling, getting up and running again with the kite strings entangled between his fingers. He would scream with delight as he managed to cut down someone else's kite. Milkha could do this all day.

Life was mundane but peaceful at Gobindpura village in the Kot Addu administrative block of Muzafargarh district. Lahore was nearly 400 km away and Delhi was as far as 600 km. The village had blocks of tiny mud huts with thatched roofs, earthen roads with lush green fields on both sides filled with rice, wheat, corn, sugarcanes and the chirps of birds that filled the air.

**Milkha's family had a small mud hut with two rooms – one in which they lived, studied, cooked, ate, and slept. And in the other they kept the cattle and its fodder.**

It was the late 1930s, and India was still an undivided country. India, and what is now Pakistan in the west and Bangladesh in the east, were all part of the same country. The British had already been in India for over 200 years, and at that point, they had overall control over the country's administration.

Around this time, countries in Europe such as Italy, France, Germany, England, Poland were engaged in some serious political differences that eventually led to the outbreak of the Second World War – a fierce conflict that led to the loss of many lives. Though nearly 7,000 kilometres from Europe, this had a huge impact in a country like India because it was ruled by the British.



*The  
Incredible  
Life of*

# Milkha Singh

*The Runner Who Could Fly*

Swati Sengupta

*Excerpted with permission from The Incredible Life of Milkha Singh: The Runner Who Could Fly, Swati Sengupta, illustrated by Devashish Verma, Talking Cub.*

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