



Reflections

by BOB RUPANI

An ode to 'Flying Sikh' Joginder Singh whose feats in the Safari Rally are nonpareil

I WAS ASKED RECENTLY WHO my favourite rally driver was. A tough question, because I have many rally heroes. But someone who I hero-worshipped from a young age was Joginder Singh, also known as the 'Flying Sikh'.

Joginder Singh was born in Kenya in 1932 and his first job was as a spanner boy in his father's automobile garage. He gained further experience as a mechanic in other organisations, before becoming the Royal East African Automobile Association's first patrolman in 1958.

He was the first Sikh driver ever to win an international rally, and also the first man to win the East African Safari Rally three times. He first took part in the Safari Rally in 1965 and Joginder's co-driver was his brother Jaswant Singh. They entered in a used Volvo PV 544 that had already seen 44,000 miles of competition. They started first, which was a big disadvantage as they could not enjoy the benefit of other cars clearing the course of the loose gravel. Despite this, Joginder led all the way and won the rally. The Singh brothers faced strong opposition from the well-funded factory teams of Mercedes, Saab and Citroen, but in spite of this they scored a glorious victory. It remains one of the best examples of talented privateers, vanquishing well-funded and well-prepared factory works teams. Joginder's amazing winning margin of 100 minutes, is a record that still stands today.

Joginder Singh went on to win the Safari Rally again in 1974 and 1976, driving a Mitsubishi Colt Lancer 1600 GSR. Yes, it was Joginder Singh who gave the Lancer its first ever rally victory. Joginder Singh's amazing record of 19 finishes from 22 starts in the Safari is a stupendous achievement, because finishing the Safari, the world's toughest rally, was once considered a greater achievement than winning other world rally championship events.

But what was the reason for Joginder's astonishing success? He was of course a really brilliant driver. But being a mechanic he also knew how much beating the car could take. He was fast but never harsh on the car. Being a local, he was also more familiar with the tough driving conditions and weather. The Safari Rally was run on open public roads. Wet weather meant mud. A lot of it. And if it was dry, it meant dust. Again a lot of it. Animals both wild and domestic were also a danger. In 1968, only seven of the 74 teams that started the Safari reached the finish. Joginder was amongst the 'Unsinkable Seven', the name given to the survivors



Joginder Singh's record of **19 finishes** from **22 starts** in the Safari is a stupendous achievement

who finished the event.

Joginder Singh had also entered the inaugural Himalayan Rally in 1980, but sadly could not make it to the start due to some tax and legal issues. In fact before the start, there was to have been an exhibition drag race between him and Shekhar Mehta on Marine Drive in Bombay, but this obviously did not happen. As many of you may know, the late Shekhar Mehta was another Kenyan of Indian descent who subsequently broke Joginder Singh's record by winning the Safari Rally five times. Shekhar was also the winner of the first Himalayan Rally.

Interestingly, one of Joginder's Singh's sponsors for the Safari Rally was Air India. Later, for some years, they also sponsored the Himalayan Rally.

In 2002, at the start of the 50th Safari Rally, Joginder Singh was honoured as a special guest and in 2007; he was appointed a patron of the Safari Classic which is run even today. On October 20, 2013, Joginder Singh passed away due to heart failure at his son's home in the UK. His body was cremated in London and the date on which he passed away is celebrated in the Kenyan calendar as 'Mashujaa' Day, Swahili for 'heroes'. ❏

Bob Rupani is a pioneering Indian automobile journalist and is presently the executive editor of Auto India