

Amar Singh: More victims of racism lie rotting in our prisons



[independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/amar-singh-more-victims-of-racism-lie-rotting-in-our-prisons-181105.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/amar-singh-more-victims-of-racism-lie-rotting-in-our-prisons-181105.html)

The Independent

June 21, 2002

Satpal Ram has shown the strength of character to shatter the myth of passive, subservient Asians

Saturday 22 June 2002 00:00 BST

At last, Satpal Ram is free. A man who was convicted of murder after defending himself against a racist attacker in 1986 can no longer be beaten by his guards or moved from prison to prison in the hope that his resolve will falter and he will admit guilt to something he clearly believes he is not guilty of. As Satpal said: "I sat and took it all in the early days, but then I thought enough is enough. You can keep a dog in a kennel and kick it in the face every morning for three days but on the fourth day the dog will bite back. I felt the prison officers I encountered tried to crush my resolve but I was determined not to let that happen."

On Tuesday Satpal was released from jail on licence.

He could have compromised and been released years ago, but he is made of sterner stuff than that and stuck to his principles before his triumphant release this week. Defending yourself against a racist attacker is a bold deed, but defending your name and honour for 15 years in such horrendous conditions is an even braver and rarer act of defiance that should one day see Satpal honoured appropriately. As he said in an interview with *The Independent* after his release, if he had not defended himself with a knife in a fight with a customer in a Bengali restaurant, he would have been a "dead Stephen Lawrence rather than an alive Satpal Ram".

Indeed, the repercussions of having a rejuvenated Satpal alongside the many campaigners who have fought tirelessly for his release could (and should) be an impact on Britain's criminal justice system of Stephen Lawrence proportions. And make no mistake, Satpal will not shy away into obscurity. He will not rest until he clears his name and gets the public apology he surely deserves. Satpal has said that he will be bringing a civil case for unlawful imprisonment for his incarceration during the past 18 months, after a recent ruling in the European Court about the Home Secretary's power over sentencing.

Satpal says: "I feel there should be a public inquiry as to why I have been unlawfully held in prison since October 2000. The court have ruled that the Home Secretary acted unlawfully. I feel that he should now be charged with unlawful imprisonment."

Unfortunately, Satpal has tragically lost both parents while in jail and is no longer an optimistic young man but instead a battle-weary 36-year-old. What else does Satpal have but his cause?

Nevertheless, too much of the British media seem indifferent to this cause, preferring to overuse the term "murderer" and concentrating on the fact that Satpal's release was due to a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights. They do this while unfortunately overlooking the facts that led to this blatant injustice. Indeed, the court case was so farcical that the Bengali-speaking waiter who witnessed the attack and spoke only basic English was not even given an interpreter, and nor was his testimony translated for the benefit of the jury.

Amazingly, the racist nature of the attack was never even offered for the consideration of the jury. Satpal had been "filled with fear" as a group of white men hurled racist abuse at him, calling him a "wog" and a "Paki". And what about Ram's attacker, Clarke Pearce? An innocent victim is a seldom a man who corners someone in a restaurant and stabs him twice in the wrist with a broken wine glass. Pearce died, allegedly, after he refused treatment from a female doctor and pulled out the drips that were being used to treat him before discharging himself and dying later at home. You will forgive me, if my sympathies rest with the "murderer" and not the "victim" this time.

The fact is that for many British Asians Satpal is a community hero, having shown the strength of character in his fight for justice to shatter once again the myth of the passive, subservient Asian. Yes, multicultural Britain has seen many positive changes during the 15 years that Satpal has been incarcerated. He will be pleased, as many of us are, to see the many barriers that have been broken and the many Asians who are in higher positions in the workplace, live in wealthier areas and are by and large proud to be British.

But for those of us who know of his plight, this pride is tainted by scepticism for and disillusionment with the British criminal justice system: the very same system that allowed Zahed Mubarek to be murdered by his racist cellmate in March 2000; the system that also let down Sukhdev Reel, who continues her struggle to see justice done to the killers of her son, Ricky Reel; and the same system and the same police force that was exposed as having a racist "canteen culture" four years ago in the Macpherson report into the police's handling of the Stephen Lawrence murder case.

The Commission for Racial Equality's current inquiry into racism in Britain's prisons will probably expose many more episodes and attitudes of this sort. But as I mentioned earlier, a basic understanding of what happened to Satpal Ram will probably hit home even more.

We need to know just how an injustice such as this can happen in our multicultural "civilised society". Satpal Ram was strong enough to highlight his plight, but he is unlikely to be the last to do so.

The writer is the editor of 'Asian Xpress'