

# Freedom for man jailed in 1987 over fatal stabbing | The Independent

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Satpal Ram, an Asian man who claims he was wrongfully convicted of murder after a racially motivated attack, was released from prison yesterday after serving 15 years.

His release came because of a European Court of Human Rights ruling last month when judges at Strasbourg ruled that government executives such as the Home Secretary had no right to overrule a decision of a parole board.

Mr Ram, 36, has always maintained his innocence and said he acted in self-defence. His supporters say he is the victim of a miscarriage of justice and have vowed to continue the campaign to clear his name. Last night, he was released from Blantyre prison, Kent.

In 1987 he was given a life sentence with a recommendation that he serve at least 11 years. In November 1986, he had stabbed Clarke Pearce at an Indian restaurant in Birmingham, when a group of white men began racially abusing the waiters. Mr Pearce, who was among the group, smashed a glass on the table and attacked Mr Ram with it. Mr Ram, then a 20-year-old warehouse worker, said he defended himself with a small knife. Mr Pearce was stabbed twice and died.

The jury was not asked to consider the racist nature of the attack and, supporters say, vital witnesses were not called.

In 2000, Mr Ram's recommendation for release by the parole board was overturned by the Home Secretary at the time, Jack Straw, because Mr Ram refused to admit his guilt.

Mr Ram's lawyer, Daniel Guedalla, said of his release: "It does not mean they accept he is innocent and he is still challenging his wrongful conviction. This is a victory but not complete vindication. He is still on a life licence until his conviction is quashed. He lost 18 months or more of his liberty because of Jack Straw."

A campaign to free Mr Ram, supported by the pop acts Primal Scream, Super Furry Animals, Apache Indian and Asian Dub Foundation (ADF), and a petition signed by 20,000, lobbied for Mr Ram's release.

John Panfit, a band member of ADF, who released a song called "Free Satpal Ram" six years ago and was at the gates of Blantyre prison to greet his friend last night, said Mr Ram's detention shameful.

He said: "This case is a reflection on the failure of the criminal justice system regarding issues of racial attacks. Two years ago, the Home Secretary acted as judge and jury and I find the political intervention by successive governments shameful."

Opponents of his conviction cite a series of injustices. They claim a crucial witness who could have supported Mr Ram's account was not called to give evidence, no translator was present for another witness who could only speak Bengali and Mr Ram was only given a 40-minute consultation with his barrister shortly before going into the dock.

Asad Rehman, of the Free Satpal Ram campaign, vowed to see the conviction quashed. He said: "I am overjoyed he has been released after 15 years for a crime he did not commit but I am going to carry on campaigning until he has been vindicated."

Mr Ram served five and a half years of his sentence in solitary confinement and was moved to 71 different prisons in 36 different locations around Britain. He lodged complaints about being beaten up by prison officers, none of which was upheld.

Mr Ram's legal team had filed for a judicial review in October 2000 after Mr Straw overruled the parole board. After the European Court ruling last month, the Treasury Solicitor told them the Government would not contest the case.