

'I was threatened with hanging by racist prison guards' | The Independent

 [independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/i-was-threatened-with-hanging-by-racist-prison-guards-180856.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/i-was-threatened-with-hanging-by-racist-prison-guards-180856.html)

Arifa Akbar

June 19, 2002

Satpal Ram, an Asian man who served 15 years after being convicted of murdering a man who he said had racially attacked him, spoke yesterday of the abuse and bigotry he endured in jail and his resolve to see his conviction quashed.

In an interview with *The Independent*, Mr Ram, 36, from Handsworth, Birmingham, who was released from jail on licence on Tuesday, likened his case to that of the murdered teenager Stephen Lawrence.

He said that 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".

Mr Ram was sentenced to life for the fatal stabbing of Clarke Pearce in the restaurant in Birmingham in November 1986, with a recommendation that he serve 10 years. During the fight, Mr Ram was stabbed twice with a broken glass. Mr Pearce died from wounds inflicted by a small packing knife that Mr Ram claimed he had used to defend himself.

Mr Ram, whose parents emigrated to England from the Indian state of Punjab in the 1950s, said Mr Pearce's death was regrettable and tragic. But he added: "I would have ended up another statistic if I had not defended myself that night."

He also alleged he had suffered appalling and repeated abuse by officers during his time in jail, much of which was spent in solitary confinement.

In 2000 the Parole Board said Mr Ram should be released on licence, but Jack Straw, Home Secretary at the time, overruled the recommendation because Mr Ram had refused to admit guilt.

His release finally came after European Court judges ruled last month that the Government had breached the human rights of the convicted murder Dennis Stafford by keeping him in jail longer than recommended by the Parole Board. The judges added that the power of a minister to overrule the board had been illegally used.

Mr Ram said he would be bringing a civil case for unlawful imprisonment for his incarceration during the past 18 months. "I feel there should be a public inquiry as to why I have been unlawfully held in prison since October 2000," he said.

"The court have ruled that the Home Secretary acted unlawfully. I feel that he should now be charged with unlawful imprisonment."

His supporters maintain that he acted in self-defence and was the victim of an unprovoked racial attack by Mr Pearce. The jury was not asked to consider the racist nature of the attack and key witnesses were not called, the campaigners say.

Mr Ram's cause has been backed by a string of high-profile figures including the pop bands Primal Scream, Apache Indian and Asian Dub Foundation. The 15-year campaign to free him included a petition with 2,000 signatures.

Mr Ram, who has three sisters and two brothers, said he did not regard himself as a murderer but as a political prisoner because of the political dimension to his case.

Thinking back to the fateful night that led to his incarceration, he said he had been "filled with fear" when a group of white men hurled racist abuse at him, calling him a "wog" and a "Paki".

Mr Ram said the knife he had been carrying on the night of the killing was the penknife he used in his job as a warehouseman. He had only had it with him because he had neglected to take it out of his pocket, he said. "I wasn't in the habit of carrying a penknife. It was in my pocket from work that day. I forgot to take it out and my employer verified this at the time."

During the course of his sentence, Mr Ram was moved to 74 different prisons and was regarded, he claimed, as a difficult prisoner. Yesterday he said he endured frequent and random racial abuse. None of his official complaints had been upheld.

"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."

Having served six years in solitary confinement, he said that he was randomly stripped, beaten and threatened with hanging by prison officers. "They would come in and shout at me calling me racist names. Seventeen-stone men would shout "you black c****" at me," he said.

Mr Ram said he received the support of people from around the world and their sympathetic letters helped him to get through his prison experience. Having left school without any formal qualifications, he used his time inside to read and educate himself. "The one thing I refused to let happen was to become institutionalised," he said.

Mr Ram was refused a visit to see his ill mother without handcuffs last year. She died without seeing her youngest son, a moment he recalled as his all-time low in prison.

"Prison leaves very few people's lives intact and it caters for the guilty, not the innocent," Mr Ram said.

"It is all the worse if you are a person of colour who has been wrongfully convicted."