

Legal Aid For Convicted Murderer On The Run

***Sun* columnist Richard Littlejohn has a catchphrase: “You couldn’t make it up”. This is true especially of the British legal system, where some of the pronouncements of the courts beggar belief. Fortunately, the courts do occasionally get it right, and in the case of Satpal Ram they have got it right consistently. Unfortunately, the well-established system of checks and balances, and particularly the extensive mechanism of appeals, lends itself to abuse, none more so than by the just plain guilty.**

It is not unlikely the reader has heard about the case of Satpal Ram. When Mr Ram has been featured in news and similar articles in - the mainstream as well as - the left wing press, his story has consistently been reported as a long-standing miscarriage of justice. Poor young Satpal killed a *racist* attacker in self-defence and ended up doing life for murder, or so the story goes. The facts though are somewhat different, as both the contemporary press and more importantly the court record shows.

The story begins in the small hours of November 16, 1986. Twenty year old Ram was dining in the *Sky Blue*, an Indian restaurant in Birmingham, England. So was the slightly older Clarke Pearce. Pearce said something about the background music which provoked a reaction from Ram, and within a minute or two, the older man was lying on the floor with serious knife wounds in his back. He had been stabbed twice, possibly three times, with a flick knife. According to the autopsy report, Pearce suffered “a complex double incised wound” to the rear of his chest. Another wound pieced his lung.

Ram fled the scene of the crime with the murder weapon still in his hand, accompanied by his girlfriend and a second man. Both were innocent of any involvement in Ram’s crime. Before Ram left the restaurant however he gloated over his victim and expressed a desire in fluent Anglo-Saxon to see him dead. Less than two hours later he got his wish; Clarke Pearce died on the operating table. The following week, Ram surrendered to the police with his solicitor, was charged with murder, and rightly convicted.

He appealed his conviction twice; the first appeal, presided over by the Lord Chief Justice, was dismissed in March 1989; his second appeal was dismissed by the Court of Appeal in November 1995.

Undeterred, Ram orchestrated another appeal, from his prison cell, an appeal to public opinion, an appeal which was little more than a campaign of defamation against not only his victim but against the victim’s family. This appeal was successful. Ram’s story was taken up by the *Guardian*, and Members of Parliament signed an Early Day Motion in his support. In October 2000, the Parole Board recommended Ram’s release, but Home Secretary Jack Straw over-ruled this recommendation, and Ram remained in prison. In May 2002, another life sentence prisoner won a judgment in the European Court of Human Rights which ruled in effect that the Home Secretary had acted illegally by his “political interference” in keeping Ram in prison. Ram was released on licence shortly, and was awarded £20,000 compensation by the High Court for the extra time he had spent in gaol. He became a minor celebrity on his release, giving a carefully stage managed press conference, railing at Jack Straw, and vowing to fight on to clear his name.

Here his story might have had a reasonably happy ending - for Ram if not for his victim - but Ram had also brought another legal action - for personal injury - from which he withdrew. The costs of this action were deducted from his award, so the twenty thousand pounds shrunk to a mere thousand. All the same, this is a not unreasonable discharge grant, and at the very least Ram could have bought himself a new wardrobe and a few chattels. Alas, he had been at liberty less than a year when, following allegations of assault and criminal damage, the authorities recommended he be recalled to prison. His life licence was revoked on May 7, 2003, and he has been unlawfully at large ever since.

But there was still the little matter of his thousand pounds compensation. Ram wanted this, but of course he didn't want to collect it in person, so he contacted his solicitors and asked for them to collect it and pay it to his brother. His solicitors were willing to comply, but David Blunkett - Jack Straw's successor as Home Secretary - would only agree to pay Ram by cheque if he surrendered himself to Islington Police Station, London. So the case went back to the High Court where on January 12, 2004, Mr Justice Crane dismissed the application. The taxpayer will of course have to pick up the tab for this murderer on the run, but at least justice has been done, and has been seen to be done yet again in the increasingly boring saga of R v Satpal Ram.

At the time of writing, Mr Ram's whereabouts are still unknown.

[The above text was submitted to presscopyright.com on February 14, 2004. When I checked it February 7, 2018, the site long gone].