

## My cultural awakening: an Asian Dub Foundation song gave me the courage to take a stand against racism

The group's campaigning single Free Satpal Ram, about a south Asian man jailed for murder after an alleged racist attack, led me to become an activist – with their lead singer as my mentor

Classical



Illustration: Martin O'Neill/Cut It Out Studio/The Guardian

**My cultural awakening**

## Nikesh Shukla

Sat 30 Aug 2025 07.00 BST

It wasn't New Labour, my politics A-level or the Tipp-Exed Woody Guthrie slogan "this machine kills fascists" on my friend Simon's bag that set me on the path to activism. It was a CD single I found in a west London record shop, which I only picked up because it was by a bunch of brown guys.

It was the summer of 1998, and I was 17 years old and browsing records in the Harrow Virgin Megastore, when I came across Free Satpal Ram by jungle-punk-rap band Asian Dub Foundation – a buzzing, brilliant, ramshackle protest song about a south Asian man who had been sent to jail after defending himself in an alleged racist attack in 1986. While at an Indian restaurant, Satpal Ram was stabbed with a broken bottle, and retaliated by stabbing his attacker with a penknife; the man later died. Ram was convicted of murder the following year.

I played the CD on my cousin Vimal's stack hi-fi system, and afterwards was changed for ever. Sitting on the edge of his bed, reading the lyric sheet, I was shocked and furious at what I had heard. Maybe it was the buzzsaw guitars, mixed with the furious rapping, the Bollywood sample and the jungle drums, but that heady mix of music made me want to stand up and do something.

The story of Satpal Ram terrified me, just as the murder of Stephen Lawrence terrified me. It was evidence that my worst fears could come true. That violence still stalked our streets, and there were people out there who wanted to kill people like me.

I had grown up very aware of injustice. My mum once held a sit-in at her local newspaper to protest against racial bias in their crime reporting. My uncle brought the first ever case of racial discrimination under the 1968 Race Relations Act, which

resulted in him meeting Malcolm X. Me? I sat in my bedroom listening to rap, eating crisps and longing to fight for something. Now, Asian Dub Foundation gave me the soundtrack to that fight.

*After a protest, I ended up in the pub with John Pandit. He told me he had just turned down an MBE, and I thought he was the coolest man ever*

Immediately after hearing it, I wrote a letter to Ram in jail and joined an email group promoting anti-racist protests and meetings throughout the country. I started attending those meetings, always very quiet, intimidated to be surrounded by committed activists. A few months later, Ram wrote back, telling me of his conditions, saying that my letter offered him hope and that he was glad I had joined the struggle.

The first protest I attended, I was by myself, standing across the road, watching as 10 protesters stood outside the Home Office with signs and placards. I awkwardly went to stand next to them, held the edge of a banner, threw up a fist in salute as a photo was taken, and then ran home.

After a few more protests, I found my voice – joining in with the slogans, and talking to other people.

After one of those early protests, I somehow ended up in the pub with John Pandit, one of the members of Asian Dub Foundation. He told me he had just turned down an MBE, and I thought he was the coolest man ever.

---



Nikesh Shukla: 'If I'm writing for my daughters, I want them to know who I am'

I went on to volunteer for a bunch of different anti-racism organisations, such as Southall's the Monitoring Group, Paddy Hill's Miscarriages of Justice Organisation, Unite Against Fascism, the Institute of Race Relations, and the members of Asia Dub Foundation to push for Ram's freedom. The lead singer even mentored me briefly, during my short stint as a political rapper. I wrote about racism a lot, editing a collection of essays called The Good Immigrant, and my memoir, Brown Baby. Years later, I turned down an MBE myself, inspired by John.

Nowadays, it feels normal for my kids to join marches, write placards, chant along and squeeze my hand when the shouts are peppered with swearwords. I still think back to my mum and her sit-ins and my uncle meeting Malcolm X, and to that hi-fi pumping out hard-as-nails drums and me mouthing along: “Time to join the fight back, because enough is enough.”

*Did a cultural moment prompt you to make a major life change?  
Email us at [cultural.awakening@theguardian.com](mailto:cultural.awakening@theguardian.com)*

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/aug/30/my-cultural-awakening-asian-dub-foundation-free-satpal-ram-racism>