

# *Straw vetoed parole for Asian who killed racist attacker in self-defence*

Special report: race issues in the UK

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In a rare ministerial intervention, Jack Straw, rejected a parole board recommendation for the release of Satpal Ram, the Asian man who has been in prison for nearly 15 years for murdering a man in self-defence in response to a racist attack, the Guardian has learned.

Ram's lawyers believe that his case will be seen as a landmark miscarriage of justice if the criminal cases review commission finally decides to refer his conviction for killing Clarke Pearce during a fight in a Birmingham restaurant in November 1986. Ram had been stabbed twice during the attack.

The case has attracted massive support with the parole board receiving more protests and representations from the public in the past 18 months than it did over its decision to release the two killers of James Bulger. Artists including the Asian Dub Foundation, Apache Indian, the Prodigy, Benjamin Zephaniah and Irvine Welsh have been prominent in the campaign for Ram's release.

He has always maintained his innocence and has now served four years more than his recommended tariff as a mandatory lifer.

The European court of human rights has repeatedly restricted the ability of ministers to intervene in decisions on the release dates of convicted killers.

Mr Straw, as home secretary, was within his powers to reject the parole board recommendation but it is believed to have been a rare step.

Ram has been involved in repeated clashes with the prison authorities and moved more than 65 times to different prisons during his sentence, spending an unusual amount of time in segregation because of his disciplinary record. He is in Winson Green prison, Birmingham.

Ram was 20 years old when he was attacked in a Bengali restaurant in Lozells, Birmingham. He was eating with two friends when a group of six white people arrived. A fight developed when the white group started racially abusing the waiters complaining about the "fucking wog music" being played in the restaurant.

In the course of the argument Pearce smashed a glass on the table and stabbed Ram twice in the face and in the wrist when he put his hand up to protect himself. He claimed he was then pushed up against a wall with no means of escape and he used a small packing knife he used in his job as a warehouseman to defend himself.

The CCRC has been given new witness evidence from the Bengali-speaking waiters, including one not called at his trial, which his supporters claim will support his case that he was wrongly convicted in June 1987 and demonstrate he was defending himself against an unprovoked racist attack. His appeal to the CCRC also questions why the West Midlands police failed to make available interpreters to the waiters who witnessed the attack or translate their statements into Bengali before asking them to sign them.

His solicitor, Gareth Pierce, who represented the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four, has told supporters: "What is now available could have and should have been found at the time. It is what a jury needed to know to ... find him not guilty of murder."

A CCRC spokeswoman said their consideration of his case is in its final stages: "We do not have an announcement to make at the moment."

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/sep/10/race.politics>