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The 'Moment of Madness' that Embroiled the British Sikh Community

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The fall-out of the stabbing of Henry Nowak by a young Sikh shows the vulnerability of Sikhs who, despite being British-born or British citizens, are often viewed as foreigners. This reflects the racialisation of Sikhs as non-white and raises significant questions about home, identity, & belonging.

On 3 December 2025, an 18-year-old British university finance student, Henry Nowak, after a night out in Southampton with his friends, was stabbed several times by Vickrum Digwa, with a knife which the media instantly reported as a Sikh ceremonial *kirpan*. Digwa, 23, was convicted of his murder by the jury at Southampton Crown Court on 1 June 2026 and sentenced to life imprisonment, ordered to serve a minimum of 21 years in jail.

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The prosecutors argued Digwa, had in fact, carried two kirpans, one a ceremonial kirpan under his clothing around his neck, and another which the judge described as a 'large Sikh dagger', used in the actual stabbing. Despite Digwa and his family's allegations that he was subjected to racist abuse, that claim was unfounded, with only a brief conversation reported between Nowak and Digwa. Henry is alleged to have innocently remarked, after looking at Digwa's appearance 'Are you a bad man?' to which he apparently responded, saying 'Yes I am' and after a short scuffle, Digwa then stabbed Nowak. There were no witnesses, so it is difficult to say what was actually said and what so incensed Digwa that made him draw his knife. Without further information, it is difficult to disagree with the judge that no 'racist' behaviour was involved.

What followed in the days after the verdict was announced was a frustrating and worrying time for Sikhs. Public uproar and media coverage evolved into a national debate on race and racism, knife crime, exemptions for minorities based on religion, community responsibility and accountability and prevalence of two-tier policing which favours minorities.

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The murder by Digwa has proved to be a huge embarrassment for the entire Sikh community, putting their right to exercise freedom of religion under scrutiny. Discussions in the national media and social media demonstrated an amazing lack of awareness about Sikhs and their religion. In interviews on radio phone-in programmes, many members of the public appeared to conflate Sikhs with recently arrived immigrants, despite the fact Sikhs have a lengthy presence in Britain and their religious rights are enshrined in British law.

The exaggerations and misinformation showed how a single tragedy can unsettle and unnerve a whole community and put it under siege, shattering the self-image of a successful, integrated and prosperous community that has contributed so much to Britain.

British Sikhs and the Right to the Kirpan

There are just over half a million Sikhs living in England and Wales, according to the [2021 Census](#) . This number rose from 423,000 a decade earlier, showing a small increase. British Sikhs are a highly diverse multi-generational community in many aspects-in terms of variety of places of worship and traditions followed, class, caste, and occupational divisions.

British Sikhs are relatively well-off, with a strong work-ethic, law abiding and well-integrated into British life and society. This is mainly explained by their long history of migration, which some have suggested started with the exiling of the young Maharaja of Punjab, Dalip Singh to England in 1854, five years after Punjab was incorporated into the British empire. Although present only in small numbers up to the Second World War, the numbers began to increase rapidly during the 1950s and 1960s, creating a sizeable diaspora. In the last general election in 2024, Sikhs made history when 11 were elected as MPs, of which 6 are female and only 4 turban-wearing, all representing the Labour Party. Satvir Kaur, MP for Southampton and parliamentary secretary for the Cabinet Office,

represents the constituency where Digwa lived. She was one of the signatories to the joint statement put out by all Sikh MPs to condemn the murder of Nowak and offer sincerest condolences to his family.

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Amritdhari Sikhs are mandated (on undergoing amrit sanchar) to keep five articles of faith known as the five k's, because each article begins with the letter *ka* in Gurmukhi, the script used by the Sikhs. The kirpan is one of them and the word itself is an amalgam of two words: *kirpa*, meaning grace, and *aan*, meaning honour or defence. Thus, Sikhs consider the kirpan to be an article of faith that symbolises dignity, duty to stand against injustice, and the offer of protection to the weak and vulnerable. Ceremonial kirpans are usually 5-7 inches long with a curved blade placed inside a sheath and attached to a cloth strap (known as *gatra*) which is worn across the body, over one shoulder and under the opposite arm. The *gatra* is normally worn under clothing, although nowadays some prefer to wear on the outside.

The kirpan plays an important role, usually at the end of Sikh worship ceremonies, for example granthis use their kirpan to touch the *karah parshaad* (sweet wheat flour pudding) and to *langar* (vegetarian food) before it is offered to the *sangat* (worshippers). The touching by the kirpan implies grace of the Guru before being offered for consumption. Most Amritdhari Sikhs never have to perform this action and therefore their kirpans are merely symbolic. Most Sikhs are non-Amritdhari, thus not mandated to keep the 5 k's, although many keep turbans and beards (known as Keshdhari Sikhs). The majority choose to wear just the *kara* (iron or steel bangle) to symbolise their Sahejdhari religious identity.



However, all Sikhs, whether Amritdhari or not, have an intimate relationship with the kirpan, whether they consciously acknowledge it or not. Every Sikh bowing before the Guru Granth Sahib after arrival at their gurdwara is bowing not only to their 'living Guru' but also to the weaponry, including kirpan(s) placed in front. Sikh grooms arriving at the gurdwara carry a 3-foot-long ceremonial sword on them. It is not unknown for opposing Sikhs to draw swords during skirmishes whether in gurdwaras or outside, in opposition to what the *maryada* (codes of conduct) states. It might be interesting to consider some critical events in Sikh history to understand why this intimate relationship exists.

Nihangs and the Worship of Weaponry

We have limited information about Vickrum Digwa, but his blue attire, as seen in a media photo, suggests he was a member of the Nihang warrior order whose ancestry can be traced back to the 16th and 17th centuries. Earlier known as Akali Sikhs, their following flourished during the time of the tenth guru, Guru Gobind, who, ironically, was stabbed in 1708. Historically speaking, the Nihangs were frontline warriors, prepared to die for their faith, Sikh sovereignty, and the martial ethos. It was Guru Gobind that mandated the kirpan be one of the 5 mandatory symbols.

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Whilst the number of followers of the Nihang tradition in Britain is unknown, they do have a significant, somewhat invisible, following. In recent years, the tradition, including wearing the attire (*khalsa saroop*) and showcasing their martial training (*gatka*) and weaponry (*shastar vidya*, the science of weapons) has become popular especially during nagar kirtans and Vaishaki celebrations. British-born Sikh children are attracted by their warrior martial tradition and forms of weaponry which they can relate to rather than the more popular East Asian martial traditions. Some Sikhs, critical of its appeal to Nihang youth, argue that when taking amrit and wearing the attire, they may not fully understand or properly trained on the significance and responsibilities associated with it.

Digwa was supposedly bearing a large pesh kabz, an armour-piercing dagger of Indo-Persian origin. The difference between a kirpan and a pesh kabz is that the former is a ceremonial dagger with special exemption under British law, whilst the latter is an offensive weapon traditionally carried by Nihangs. Digwa is reported to have used this 21-inch-long illegal weapon to stab Henry Nowak five times.

The use of this weapon, albeit not his ceremonial one, in the stabbing by Digwa has put a new spotlight on the kirpan and a pledge by Labour Party leadership to review its use may lead to more severe restrictions. But it is difficult to imagine its total ban that right-wing populist politicians are calling for.

Recognising of Sikh religious symbols

There has been a hate-love-hate-love relationship between the Sikhs and the British, dating to colonial rule, which has been reflected in struggles over symbols like the kirpan. Punjab was annexed to British India in 1849, but ruling the province was not an easy task. Punjabis began to resist colonial policies, whether in agriculture or in religious affairs. Popular unrest in several spheres led to growing repression and coercion and such legislation was met with further resistance. For instance, during the Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-1925), although attempts to ban the kirpan under the Indian Arms Act of 1878 was dropped after violent protests, regulation to stop public gatherings and disorderly and seditious behaviour continued (under the Rowlatt Act of 1919) culminating in the Jallianwala massacre, enraging the Sikhs further. Udham Singh, a witness to the massacre, made it his life mission to take revenge, finally succeeding by assassinating General Michael O'Dwyer, Punjab's lieutenant governor during the massacre, in London in March 1940.

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In parallel, Sikhs became an important part of the British Indian army. The British had disarmed the losing Sikh armies after the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845-46 and 1848-49). However, after the failed Mutiny of 1857, with the Russian threat on India's western border, and as the empire expanded, the Sikhs, perceived as a 'martial race', were disproportionately recruited into the British Indian army. Sikhs and their religious identity became integral to their role of policing the empire from Africa to China. To ensure loyalty, the British made strenuous efforts to make sure Sikhs were able to stay true to their Khalsa identity, which included allowing them to keep their turbans and kirpans on the battlefield. Over 83,000 Sikhs sacrificed their lives and around 110,000 were wounded in the two World Wars defending the British empire. The movement of soldiers enabled establishment of pioneer Sikh diasporic communities throughout southeast Asia, East Africa, and Canada. The Sikhs are proud of their contribution and are always quick to remind the newer generations about this, as happened in the debate in Parliament after the Nowak murder. Sikhs MPs were keen not to allow one person's evil act tarnish the image of the community and accept collective blame.

This historical overview also points out that when Sikhs started migrating to Britain, their history and religious practices were well-known to ruling elites-although it is difficult to generalise this for later generations. Regardless, legal recognition of Sikh religious

symbols, especially the turban and kirpan, were not just granted when requested. They were only won after protracted legal struggles. *Mandla v Dowell Lee*, 1983, declared Sikhs as a distinct ethnic group was an important milestone. A [dispute](#) over whether bus conductors could be allowed wear turbans rather than hats took several years of protests and a hunger strike to be resolved. Acceptance of the turban in transport was [later extended](#) to construction workers and [motorcyclists](#). Disputes over whether Sikhs should be allowed to wear the kirpan (perceived by the general public as a knife) was only [partially settled](#) with strict conditions over its use and size after extensive lobbying by Sikh pressure groups. However, in many everyday situations, these exemptions for Sikhs did not stop them being [discriminated in job interviews](#), travelling on planes, or going to entertainment venues such as concerts and sports events.

The myth of Two-Tier Policing

The Nowak case has reopened the long-settled debate in the UK over the legal and religious right of Amritdhari Sikhs to carry a ceremonial kirpan. In [media interviews](#), many described the stabbing as 'horrific' and a 'national tragedy' and urged the prime minister, Keir Starmer, to review guidance on knife crime.

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The initial behaviour of the police appeared to endorse Digwa family's view that Vickrum Digwa was a victim of racial abuse. But shortly after the verdict, police released bodycam video that showed the police arresting and handcuffing Nowak while he was slumped on the ground and repeatedly saying he couldn't breathe as he was stabbed. Initially the police refused to believe what he was saying. But as Nowak began to lose consciousness and as the police realising the severity of the situation, they took off his handcuffs and started providing first aid. Nowak died before an ambulance could reach. The Hampshire police was forced to apologise publicly for their handling of the incident. Digwa's mother, Kiran Kaur, was also charged and convicted for removing the large knife used in the stabbing and will be sentenced in July. More charges against members of the family may also follow.

This bodycam video was seized upon by right wing and Conservative politicians who declared this a blatant example of two-tier policing: one, a lenient form for ethnic minorities and another, more stringent, for 'whites'. A day after the video's release, Reform UK's leader Nigel Farage broadcast an ['emergency address'](#) in which he urged the government to abolish the exemption for Sikhs on carrying the kirpan and called on the public to respond, 'with pure, cold rage'. Many of his colleagues echoed his sentiments and [talked about](#) growth in anti-white racism. Rupert Lowe, leader of Restore Britain, positioned even more to the right than Reform UK and endorsed by Elon Musk, is quoted as saying 'the killer should be executed and his family deported'.

As if acting on Farage's call on the public to respond 'with pure, cold rage' the well-known right wing activist Tommy Robinson held a [rally in Southampton](#) which resulted in serious violence, injuring 11 policemen and arrest of over 11 individuals for violent disorder. Feeling the political heat, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood made [an oral statement](#) in Parliament, describing the stabbing as an 'evil act'. She instructed the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) to carry out a three-month investigation to establish the truth and possible consequences. Importantly she wished to 'pay tribute to the powerful words of the Nowak family' who had explicitly stated 'we do not want his death to be used to create further division, hatred or tension'.

Yet this is exactly what happened.

UK's Culture Warriors

The stagnation in the UK economy, complicated by ongoing consequences of Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and Trump's trade war have caused political turmoil, fear and uncertainty, unemployment, discontent and eternal pessimism which provided a fertile ground for the rise of right-wing populist parties, already emboldened by rampant electoral support, both nationally and locally. Right-wing political leaders such as Farage and increasingly Leader of Opposition [Kemi Badenoch](#), who fears the rise of Reform UK, openly emulate the political rhetoric and policies of Trump on mass immigration to tap into people's innermost fears to win votes.

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In addition to deteriorating economic conditions, their culture war can be seen as a backlash against multiculturalism, anti-racism, and diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) policies which are blamed for appeasing, promoting and pampering ethnic minorities at the expense of the white population. The solution offered is a correction of these policies, starting with reforming or abolishing legislation such as the Equality Act 2010, end to two-tier policing and special exemptions for ethnic minorities.

All of this implies cancelling or totally ignoring an enormous body of published evidence on racial disadvantage, discrimination and inequalities in employment, housing and health. The myth of two-tier policing and leniency of the criminal justice system also ignores the findings of the Scarman Report (after the Brixton riots, 1981), the Macpherson Report (after the murder of Stephen Lawrence, 1999), the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report (Sewell Report, 2021), and the Casey Review Report (after the Sara Everards murder, 2023), amongst many others. In fact, the right-wing cultural warriors' plea amounts to rolling back history, deny the slow but small progress made by ethnic minorities on eradicating racial injustices and to restore the status quo of the 1960s and 1970s.

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Some commentators have suggested that after the Black Lives Matter movement, there may have been over-correction towards anti-racism which have led the police and other people in authority to fear being labelled as racist. Yet as the MP Preet Gill among others have argued, especially after two Sikh women suffered racially aggravated rapes, hate crimes against Sikhs continue to rise but are not monitored.

Time for Introspection

There are several lessons that the Sikh community needs to learn from the Digwa incident. This episode showed the need for serious introspection by the Sikh community itself about kirpans as the general impression created was to **uncritically defend it** rather than condemn the illegal pesh kabz weapon carried by Digwa. How will they defend this to the inquiry reviewing use of religious knives in public? Sikh political and religious leadership, including of Nihang groups which promote gatka training, need to acknowledge changing times and publish clearer and stricter guidance for Amritdhari Sikhs on wearing kirpans otherwise there is a danger of losing the hard-won legal exemptions on turbans, helmets, and beards. The community labelled a 'model minority', cannot afford to go through another ugly, misinformed debate as happened this time.

Legal exemptions carry extra responsibility and accountability, especially in a diasporic setting. This episode also illustrated to the Sikhs, after being constantly reminded that they are foreigners, irrespective of whether they were British-born or British citizens, the vulnerabilities they still face, being non-white. This raised critical issues for many regarding 'home', 'identity' and 'belonging'.

Fortunately, except for the Southampton riots, racial hostility calmed down and failed to spread. Senior politicians from main parties need to be congratulated for moving the debate on from race, knife crime and Sikhs towards police conduct, anti-racist training and accountability, although memory of this murder will not fade easily.

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