



Sikh leaders report a huge increase in hate crime following murder trial

Description

default watermark

sikh

Sikh [community leaders have spoken out against misleading reporting](#) in the media which claimed that Vickrum Digwa murdered Henry Nowak using his kirpan, a knife carried as one of the five articles (pañj kakkā or five Ks) of the Sikh faith.

The community leaders also highlighted a huge increase in hate crime against Sikhs in the days around the trial, [which concluded on 1 June.](#)

During the trial at Southampton crown court, the prosecution recounted that Digwa was wearing a kirpan beneath his clothing. However, he was also carrying an 8-inch blade, with which he murdered Nowak.

Your actions have stirred up racial tension

The murder took place on the [night of 3 December.](#) Digwa inflicted five knife wounds on Nowak, including a fatal wound to his chest. Nowak had tried to escape by jumping over a nearby bin and a wall.

Still present at the scene, Digwa called family. His mother, Kiran Kaur, arrived before police reached the location, and took the knife home to hide it.

When police arrived, Digwa claimed that he had been the victim of a racialised assault. Police noted that Digwa's turban had been knocked off. The officers put handcuffs on Nowak as he lay on the ground.

Body-cam footage shows Nowak repeatedly telling officers that he was stabbed, and he couldn't breathe. At one point, an officer replied "I don't think you have, mate."

At the trial, Digwa plead "not guilty" to murder, manslaughter, and carrying a knife in public. The judge dismissed Digwa's claims of self-defence, and that Nowak had been racist towards him. He passed down a 21-year-minimum [sentence of life in prison](#). Kaur was found guilty of assisting Digwa in his offences.

In his final sentencing remarks, [the judge stated that:](#)

You have brought shame upon your family and your religion.

Your actions have stirred up racial tension in Southampton and across the country which have made many Sikhs worried about their safety.

Not "a religious obligation"

[The judge noted that](#) Digwa carried a kirpan, also a:

default watermark

large dagger in a sheath. You are a member of an order of Sikhs called the Nihang who have a tradition of having a second knife, or kirpan and that is often fully visible, believing that the guru will look favourably on that. You observed that tradition in your everyday life, at work and in public.

However, it was not a strict requirement; that is borne out by the fact that neither your brother nor father who arrived on the scene after you had stabbed Henry were so dressed.

It's important to note several things here. The [court was told that observant](#) Nihang often carry symbolic miniature versions of their weaponry tucked into the turban. Warwick Professor Gurnam Singh also informed the judge that younger people often wear longer knives outside their clothing:

in a desire to express their cultural identity. They see it as an act of resistance to being denied the ability otherwise to display their identity, rather than a religious obligation.

Further, the [local Sikh community notified](#) the BBC that Digwa was "barred" from a Southampton Gurdwara over his behaviour a long before he murdered Nowak. Sikh leaders also posted on social media:

This incident as reported does not align with the Sikh faith, the Sikh community, or the principles it stands for.

Sikh teachings are founded on compassion, justice, humility, responsibility, and service to humanity.

Make change for the better

Henry Nowak's parents [stated that they didn't](#) want their son's murder to be used to stir up hatred and division. His father said:

We want to use Henry's heartbreaking story to make change for the better. We do not want his death to be used to create further division, hatred or tension. We want his story to help make our streets safer for everyone.

The [Council of Southampton Gurdwaras](#) released a statement following the trial, holding that:

We have been struck by the dignity and moral strength shown by Henry's family, through all of the online noise and parties.

The statement adds:

default watermark

Digwa's actions were in direct contradiction to Sikh teachings and values that have guided Sikh communities for more than five centuries, including in Britain for over 150 years. His conduct is wholly unrepresentative of Sikhs in Southampton, the UK, or anywhere else. We condemn it unreservedly.

Crimes of this nature must not be used to foster division between communities or to weaken the bonds that hold society together. Such division is contrary to the principles of Sikh teaching, which emphasise respect, responsibility and living alongside others in mutual understanding, irrespective of difference, as one large integrated community.

Nevertheless, and with a complete lack of respect for Nowak's family, politicians and commentators have seized on the incident to stir up racial hatred. Reform's Zia Yusuf took the [opportunity to call for a ban on the kirpan](#). Likewise, [Nigel Farage](#) drew a comparison to the murder of George Floyd, and stated that "white lives matter".

An item which can only be called an offensive weapon

After the court verdict, the UK Sikh Federation [released a statement](#):

Fully practising Sikhs who wear a Kirpan should continue to recognise the serious responsibility that accompanies it, together with the limited legal protection that exists for

wearing it for genuine religious purposes.

However, it also remained clear that Digwa's knife:

was not the normal Kirpan worn by fully practising Sikhs.

That's what we wanted to clarify - that actually the perpetrator used an item which can only be called an offensive weapon.

However, the *BBC* still maintained its dangerously misleading line of reporting in its article on the Sikh Federation statement. It claimed that Digwa killed Nowak:

with a ceremonial blade Sikhs are required by their faith to carry.

This article, published 31 May, is in direct contradiction to the judge's words, and that of the Sikh community. The murder weapon was in no way a religious requirement.

default watermark

â€¢Huge increase in hate crimeâ€¢ after the trial. As such, the federation wrote to home secretary Shabana Mahmood, asking that anti-Sikh be recorded in the same fashion as Islamophobia and antisemitism. Singh said:

This is not about the Sikh community and its religion, this is about one individual, and trying to get that across in the current political environment has proved really difficult.

He highlighted that â€¢this could happen to any communityâ€¢:

an individual could break the law and murder someone but you wouldn't demonise that entire community.

He also recognised that politicians and other profiteers of racial hatred were using Nowak's cause to their own ends:

I think what's happened is, as the case was being reported, politicians and Elon Musk and others got on the bandwagon.

Unfortunately, what it's meant is that Sikh communities come under the magnifying glass, to ask why are Sikhs legally allowed to wear the Kirpan.

The *BBC* included this quote in the same article in which it insisted Digwaâ??s dagger was a religious requirement. Not only is this false, itâ??s distinctly dangerous in the current political climate.

A duty in response

In the coming days and weeks, as the racist right seeks to exploit Nowakâ??s death for their own gain, we all have a duty to perform.

Note which voices ignore the wishes of Nowakâ??s family, using his death to stir up hatred and division.

Pay attention to the words used to report the murder. See, plainly, how they slide around the characterisation of the knife as a religious requirement.

Watch carefully as they try to instill fear, as they call for retribution against the Sikh faith. Note how quickly that morphs, inevitably, into attacks against anyone with brown skin.

In any similar incident, over and over again, we have watched this pattern play out. As ever before, we must stand with the victimâ??s family, we must stand with the Sikh community, and we must unite against the voices which seek only to exploit the publicâ??s hatred.

default watermark

Featured image via [Getty/Peter Summers](#)

By [Alex/Rose Cocker](#)

[Source link](#)

CATEGORY

1. News

Category

1. News