

Kirpan use in Henry Nowak murder in Britain and partition violence in India

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People in Britain and the world were shocked by the tragic death of 18-year-old university student Henry Nowak in December 2025. On the heels of the court action against his murderer in early June 2026, the deadly incident came under a renewed spotlight. Nowak's death, knife crime, and policing in the UK—and the trial of the perpetrator Vickrum Digwa and his abetting family members—have generated public debate.

Powerful people from the US and UK brought the questions of race and immigration into the discussion. US vice-president JD Vance and the world's richest man Elon Musk waded in and made

comments that created an uproar in Britain. Thus, it spilled into the transatlantic relationship between the governments of the US and the UK.

All the political controversy aside, the unfolding circumstances in which Nowak lost his life are unbearable and demand answers to questions about religious freedom and public safety.

On the evening of 3 December 2025, Nowak was stabbed to death by Vickrum Digwa in the British city of Southampton. The perpetrator was carrying two knives and used one to murder his victim. Being a member of the Sikh community, Digwa carried a kirpan (sword) considered an article of faith for the Sikhs. Being a member of the Nihang order of Sikhism, he carried an additional ceremonial knife—the fatal one with which he killed Nowak.

What is evident is that the carrying of two knives was theologically validated for Digwa. As a result, the incident stood at the crossroads of religious freedom and legal norms in the UK. However, the reality is that a young man with the prospect of a long life ahead of him met a catastrophic death.

Nowak's murder and the subsequent political debate and media interest that it generated reminded me of a memoir titled *Father & Daughter: An Autobiography* (1971). In the book, its author Jahanara Shahnawaz discusses the role of the kirpan in slaughtering Muslims during the violence that erupted in the aftermath of the 1947 partition of India.

In some pockets in northern India over a million lives were lost during the partition and the subsequent largescale communal violence. The partition incited a sectarian strife between Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other. Members of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities faced a genocide or ethnic cleansing. However, in the violence against Muslims by Sikhs, the kirpan played a destructive role.

During the partition riots, people were trying to leave their homes and boarding trains to go to the other side of the border between what are now India and Pakistan. Violent crowds wielding knives

and other sharp weapons went on a mad rampage, killing train loads of vulnerable groups of men, women, and children. Therefore, in volatile regions, knife carrying was made illegal during those ominous days. However, the Sikhs couldn't be disarmed on religious grounds. They continued carrying kirpans on the pretext of following their religious precepts.

As an influential pre- and post-partition political leader, Jahanara Shahnawaz along with others visited some violence-prone areas in the Indian part of Punjab as part of an effort to quell unrest. They found out that Sikhs were not abiding by the ban on knives. They used a religious excuse to carry kirpans (swords) and commit massacres. They disregarded the general rule and insisted that it was their religious right to carry kirpans all the time.

Moreover, as was the case with Digwa in Southampton, what were supposed to be short swords only to be used for self-defence became "long swords" which the Sikhs in Punjab used to kill Muslims. Thus, the Sikhs appeared as "warlike figures" among "an unarmed population" in Punjab (*Father & Daughter*, p. 200).

As a result, vulnerable Muslims were being massacred and there were "houses where women had been hung by their hair and there were still pools of blood; where little children had been pinned on spikes before the eyes of their parents, and where the houses of the Muslim population had been burnt with the residents locked inside" (p. 200). As Jahanara Shahnawaz describes, the use of the Sikh kirpan exacerbated the brutality of partition massacres against Muslims.

Thus, the debate about carrying or wearing the ritual knife of kirpan is not new. It has continued for centuries.

It was the foundational Sikh religious figure Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) who in 1699 established the Khalsa order in Sikhism that gave the kirpan the status of an article of faith in Punjab. But the British outlawed it in 1849 upon annexing the region into their empire.

After a long struggle by the Sikhs to regain their right to carry the kirpan, in June 1914 the colonial government allowed them to possess and wear it in Punjab; and it "was extended to cover other parts of British India in May 1917" (Jagraj Singh, *A Complete Guide to Sikhism*, 2009, p. 138). Almost the same law has continued in Britain and India till today.

Now the murder of Henry Nowak has prompted a fresh wave of debate and scrutiny into the use of the kirpan in public. How to strike a balance between one's commitment to religious practice and their obligation to ensure public safety?

It is understood that the wearing of the kirpan is symbolic and in self defence and is never to be used to harm others. It is also argued that the Sikhs carry the ceremonial sword to protect self and others from potential harm and injury.

However, it is a slippery slope which may lead to the boundary being crossed. Provoked by anger or revenge, many a person in possession of a knife in public is likely to use it to prevail upon their adversaries. By the way, Italian law does not distinguish between ordinary knives and kirpans. Since May 15, 2017, it is illegal in Italy to carry the kirpan dagger in public.

On a final note, since one past Sikh religious leader introduced the obligation of wearing or carrying the kirpan, theologians of today's Sikh religion might wish to deliberate if its current authorities have the prerogative to reverse what Guru Gobind Singh willed and did in 1699. If public safety is ignored and the religious mandate of carrying or wearing the kirpan is given primacy, the kirpan question may continue to perplex and puzzle the Sikh community globally.

In the interest of all—both Sikhs and non-Silks—it is imperative that the kirpan question is settled once and for all. Needless to say, guaranteeing a safe environment for everyone should be given priority.

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