

# London inquest into Asian student's death returns open verdict

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A west London inquest jury took just 50 minutes to deliver an "open verdict" into the death of 20-year-old Asian student Ricky Reel. Announcing the decision on November 8, the inquest coroner, Dr. John Burton, said that there "is not enough evidence to reach a conclusion as to how he came to an end—this is an open verdict".

Ricky's mother, Sukhdev Reel, described the verdict as "a start. It's better than what the police tried to prove. If they had held a thorough investigation in the first place there would have been no need for a second investigation using further resources."

The Reel family maintain that Ricky was murdered by racists and has fought a two-year campaign to uncover evidence. They argue that police racism meant that Ricky's death was never properly investigated and dismissed as accidental. The inquest verdict means that the cause of Ricky's death remains unsolved, and opens the way for further investigation.

Ricky, who was studying computer science at Brunel University, died in the early hours of October 15, 1997 after a night out with friends. One week later his body was pulled from the river at Kingston upon Thames.

During their night out, Ricky and his friends had been assaulted by two white youths, shouting "Paki's go home". Ricky was split off from his friends after the attack, and did not arrive home. When Sukhdev first contacted the police later that same evening to report her son missing, she was told to stop wasting police time. Sukhdev was later told that a policeman would be sent round, when they had time. When one did not appear, Sukhdev was told that the officer had gone to the wrong house. No statement was taken from the family, despite evidence of the racist attack earlier in the evening.

In desperation, the family began their own investigation into Ricky's disappearance. They searched derelict ground and showed passers by photographs of Ricky. They were the first to find important closed circuit television (CCTV) evidence showing the racist attack on Ricky and his friends. Only after constant pressure from the family did the police begin dredging the river. Ricky's body was found after only a few minutes' search on October 21.

A police inquiry concluded that Ricky's death was an accident and that he had drowned after falling into the river whilst urinating. Evidence that he may have been the victim of a racist murder was dismissed.

Once again, pressure from the family forced the convening of a second inquiry by the Police Complaints Authority (PCA). This investigation, involving officers from Surrey police force, found "weaknesses and flaws" in the initial investigation.

The PCA apologised to the family saying, "Sadly, you did not receive from the police the professional standard of service you had the right to expect." Three police officers were mildly disciplined for not logging the racially motivated attack, and for not filling out a missing person's log entry immediately.

The PCA report was not made public, although MP John McDonnell used his parliamentary privilege (under which MP's are immune from prosecution for anything they say in parliament) to read out sections. This established that "important information was lost and a vital CCTV tape had been destroyed without being looked at, and the way in which forensic evidence was dealt with is difficult to justify". McDonnell also said that the report condemned "the investigation because it lacked focus, it eliminated the racial element earlier in the evening too readily, it lacked thoroughness, and there was a failure to initiate an early reconstruction". At the inquest, the coroner disclosed that a copy of the PCA report he had received had pages missing.

Evidence presented to the inquest undermined police claims that Ricky's death was an accident. The family's solicitor, Michael Mansfield QC, said that Ricky had gone into the river backwards and that bruises on his back were indicative of a beating.

Dr. Burton told the inquest that he had evidence that witnesses were intimidated and were put under pressure not to testify. "I have been given evidence by witnesses and shown documents in which they claim to show that pressure was put upon them," he said. "They have also told me in court that they were concerned about continuing threats. It is a matter of concern to me. They have said that they were under pressure and they have been pilloried and their families have been pilloried. What can I do if witnesses are bullied and intimidated?"

Friends of Ricky, known in court only by the names Manny, Dave and Brett, had supplied this evidence. In a letter, the three said they had received death threats and that one of them, Brett, had been kidnapped on November 3, the day of Ricky's funeral, and beaten up. The letter went on to explain that they would not attend the funeral, "to allow the family to mourn him peacefully".

Sukhdev has said that the family will continue "with our campaign and maybe we will be able to prove my son was killed".