L.C. Vohrah: A typical Malaysian specimen

By Ding Jo-Ann, 23 May 2011, the Nut Graph

Tan Sri Lal Chand Vohrah

TAN SRI Lal Chand Vohrah has always been proud of being a "hybrid". Born to a Punjabi father and a Teo Chew mother at a time when interracial marriages were rare, he has always considered himself a full-bred Malayan, and now Malaysian.

Vohrah is the eldest of three brothers, all of whom studied law. He was a Malaysian judge from 1978 to 1993, and was a founding judge of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. In 2009, Vohrah was also appointed a member of the first Judicial Appointments Commission set up under Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration.

The Nut Graph interviewed Vohrah on 26 April 2011 at his home in Kuala Lumpur.

TNG: When and where were you born?

I was born on 3 June 1934 at the old Durian Daun Hospital in Malacca.

Where did you grow up?

I spent all my growing-up years in Malacca. I had no idea at that time what Kuala Lumpur looked like. We used to go to Singapore for holidays [as] I had relatives there. We would travel by car for five hours through Muar, Batu Pahat and Johor Baru to reach Singapore.

What was Malacca like when you were growing up?

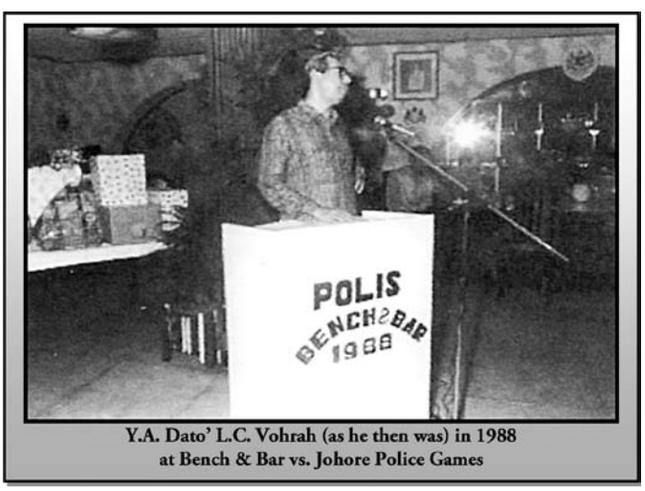
It was called a sleepy hollow, very slow-moving, with a mix of people. There were Malays, Baba Chinese, Portuguese-Eurasians, Eurasians of Dutch descent – we called them Ceylon Burghers – [and] some Gujerati cloth merchants. It was a very relaxed and friendly town.

What are some of your fond memories of growing up?

I had many good friends when I was growing up. One of them, Tay Yew Seng, was particularly close. We used to cycle together to eat air batu kacang at a restaurant called Tai Chong in Bunga Raya. We used to call him "portable", because he was well-rounded. Whatever I did, he followed. I studied Latin, he studied Latin. I went to do medicine, he also did medicine. He qualified, but I didn't.

In Malacca High School where I studied, I worked hard. I used to wake up at 5am to study. I managed to become head prefect and school captain. We had excellent principals and dedicated teachers. […] In class, we had no consciousness of racial origins.

I had an English language teacher, Mr Pang Yong Wah, who was conscious at the time that Malaya would be given its independence. He encouraged us to think of ourselves as Malayans. I remember one day Mr Pang said, "We're going to have a nation of Malayans." Then he pointed at me and said, "And Lal there is going to be a typical specimen of a Malayan." I was taken aback at first because he called me a "specimen". Later, I understood what he meant. We don't have [this] today. The Malayan and Malaysian have been replaced by Malay Malaysian, Chinese Malaysian, Indian Malaysian. As far as I'm concerned, I've always considered myself a Malayan, and then a Malaysian.



Y.A. Dato' L.C. Vohrah (as he then was) in 1988
at Bench & Bar vs. Johore Police Games

I'm also not comfortable with the requirement in having to designate one's race and religion in official forms. For bangsa, I put warganegara. For religion, I leave it out.

Can you trace your ancestry?

My father's parents were Hindu Punjabis who came to this part of the world from the Punjab in the 1890s. My paternal grandfather was a cloth merchant who moved

from Sumatra to Kuala Lumpur and then later on to Singapore. Their firm was called the Vohrah Brothers, and they had a good reputation in Singapore. They had fixed prices for all the items they sold. There was no bargaining in their shop.

There's always been a strong tradition of education in my father's family. My father's mother was highly educated, during a time when women were not usually given education. She knew Persian, Gurumukhi (Sikh script) and Hindi.

My grandfather came from a family of land [owners]. They were akin to village heads. Marriages were arranged by the barber. The barber was also the surgeon, and he knew the stories about all the families in the surrounding village.

On my mother's side, my grandfather Yeo Teng Poo and grandmother Chang Lai Im were part of a wave of immigrants from Southern China who settled in Singapore and Johor. They were both Teo Chew. We're going to my mother's village in Swatow (now called Chaozhou) in August 2011 to investigate her roots further. I never met my maternal grandparents as they passed on before I was born.

Are there any stories that you hold on to from your family?

My father had the ambition of going to the [US]. It was the land of opportunity in those days. Boxing was a sure means of earning a living in the US, so he learnt to box. He became a contender for the bantamweight title of Malaya after fighting his teacher Battling Key, the famous bantamweight champion, to a draw. He was always very proud of that fight. He was called Battling Leonard. It was such a tough fight – one of his eyes almost came out and his sense of smell disappeared.

He worked on board a ship as a deckhand with a view of going to the [US] …When he returned from a trip, his father, however, told him to go back to school. So he did and sat for his Junior Cambridge examinations. And all his dreams of going to America disappeared. He joined Tan Tock Seng Hospital as a trainee dresser (medical assistant). And then he met my mother, when he followed a cousin of his to a town called Kuala Sedili to sell cloth.

My maternal grandfather had a sundry shop. People used to assemble in his shop as he ordered the Chinese newspapers. He took a liking to my father and asked my father to make sure that when he passed away, my father would see that his three daughters would be well looked after. Eventually, my father married my mother. My mother's two sisters, Yeo Ah Jee and Grace Yeo, also came to live with them.

This was much to the disappointment of my father's parents in India, who were waiting for him to take part in an arranged marriage.

The L.C. Vohrah family (as they then were)

What happened to that arranged marriage?

Everything had been planned and my father was supposed to go to India for the usual prenuptial meetings between the bride and groom which would take place before the wedding. But my father never appeared.

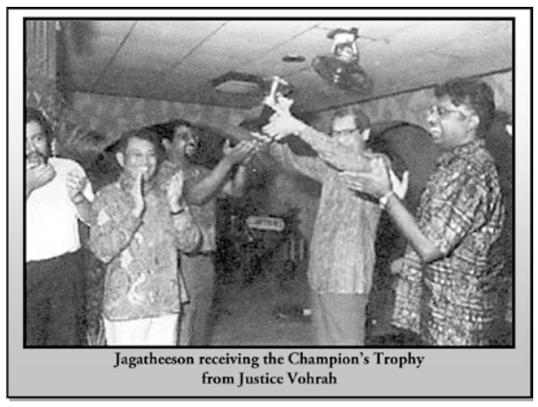
As was customary, my grandfather went to an astrologer to consult him on when my father would arrive. The astrologer told him, "Your son is not coming. He has already gotten married and he has married a 'foreigner'." That was true. And that was the end of his Indian marriage. His family were all waiting for him and he never turned up.

In 1934, my father was transferred from Tan Tock Seng hospital to Durian Daun Hospital in Malacca, where I was born.

You mentioned you didn't pass your medical exams. How did you end up going from medicine to law?

I managed to obtain good results and was offered a state scholarship and federal bursary to do medicine. My father wanted me to be a doctor. He was a dresser, and when he retired, he [wanted to] set up a practice with a doctor to come in to see patients. He was hoping I could do that, as one of his colleagues had a son who did that.

I have always wanted to do law. The Indian freedom movement was strong at that time. My father, who was a great reader, had many books about the freedom fighters, including Gandhi and Motilal Nehru, who had sacrificed so much for India's freedom. I read all those books about them, they were all lawyers. Another factor that probably influenced me was watching the judges arrive for the assizes at the Malacca courts. The courts fronted the outdoor dispensary, which my father had charge of. I used to watch the assizes ceremony from our flat above the dispensary and was impressed by the grandeur.


Jagatheeson receiving the Champion's Trophy from Justice Vohrah

But in those days, the only way you could do law was to go to London to the Inns of Court, [which] was expensive. There were no scholarships for law as the colonial power saw lawyers as potential "troublemakers". Then when I failed my first year of medicine, my father said, "Your heart is not there. If you want to go and do law, I'll find the money." And he did.

So I went by ship on the *Carthage* from Singapore. It took about 21 days to get to London via the Suez Canal. I reached England just before Christmas in 1954. […] I joined the University of Bristol. I finished my LL.B there and read for the Bar at Lincoln's Inn. It was in London that I met my wife.

You were a High Court judge when Lord President Tun Salleh Abas was dismissed. What was your reaction when you first heard about his dismissal?

I thought it was unjustified, not just towards Tun Salleh but the other five judges who were suspended – people of absolute upright character. (Datuk) George Seah, (Tan Sri) Wan Suleiman Pawanteh, (Tan Sri) Eusoffe Abdoolcader, (Tan Sri) Wan Hamzah and (Tan Sri) Azmi Kamaruddin – they were all great believers in the separation of powers. I always thought they had intellectual honesty. (Editor's note: Seah and Wan Suleiman were dismissed, while the three other judges were later reinstated. In 2008, Tun Abullah Ahmad Badawi's administration made ex gratia payments to all six judges to recognise their contributions.)

After the constitutional debacle, I was posted from Kuala Lumpur to Johor for six years. Then the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia was mooted to deal with the atrocities committed in the Balkans, and I was nominated for election to be one of the founding judges.

Are there any aspects of your identity that you struggle with as a Malaysian?

Not really, only once. There was a Peranakan lady in Malacca when I was a teenager who inquired about my race. I recall her saying to me, "Oh, you are chap-cheng, mixed blood." I remember being taken aback. But I've always prided myself on being a hybrid. I could get on with people of all races. And I've always considered myself a full-bred Malayan, and now Malaysian. That was the only incident that jolted me a bit. I don't know how my mother got on, as interracial marriages in those days were almost unheard of.

Describe the kind of Malaysia you would like for future generations.

I would like Malaysia to be what Malaya was when I was in school. Nobody then thought of race or religion. Now, I think religious bigotry and ethnicity are coming to the forefront. Perhaps there should only be one type of school. In my school, at that time, we studied in English and we studied other languages as vernacular subjects. Then, you would have the same orientation and mindset.

I also look forward to a time when opportunities would be made available to all without regard to race or religion.

And what kind of judiciary would you like for future generations?

A judiciary which follows the rule of law. We have taken one good step in appointing the Judicial Appointments Commission. I would like to see a judiciary that is capable of being perceived as completely independent.

Editor's Note:
Extracted from The Nut Graph, 23 May 2011
Tan Sri was Senior High Court Judge Johor Bahru till 1993 when he took up the posting in the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague.