

## Dismantling divisive barriers

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***DATUK Karam Chand Vohrah, better known as KC Vohrah, almost didn't study law.***

"I was supposed to have been a medical student," the respected former Court of Appeal judge says. "I won an award to study medicine in India but when I arrived there, I was rejected because I had problems with one eye. They said I wouldn't be able to use the microscope and things like that. So I came back to Malaya and applied for law."



KC Vohrah with his wife, Beatrix Vohrah

Vohrah was eventually accepted to read law in Singapore. As it turns out, he also met his wife, now retired law professor Datin Beatrix Vohrah, at university. The retired judge is well known for his independence and fairness during his time on the bench.

In 2002, Vohrah was appointed [Suhakam](#) (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia) commissioner, a position he held for six years. As commissioner, he chaired a [Suhakam inquiry](#) into a May 2006 demonstration at [KLCC](#) which concluded that the police used excessive force on the demonstrators. The inquiry also recommended that peaceful assemblies be decriminalised and that the police cooperate with peaceful protesters instead of intimidating them.

Vohrah is currently a consultant with a legal firm and also hears arbitration cases. He spoke to *The Nut Graph* on 13 Nov 2009 at his home in Petaling Jaya.

**TNG: Where were you born?**

**KC Vohrah:** I was born in Malacca, 1937. I was the second child. LC (Lal Chand), the eldest, was born three years before me and AC (Amar Chand), the youngest, three years after.

**Where did you grow up?**



Malacca High School prefects — Vohrah seated in the front row, 2nd from left  
(pic courtesy of Vohrah)

I grew up in Malacca. I was in Bandar Hilir English School, it was near the sea and just beside it was the convent. After that, I went to [Malacca High School](#).

They were really good days. It was so multi-racial. We had the unique [Chitties](#), Babas and Nyonas, Eurasians, Malays, Indians and Chinese. We grew up in a beautiful mix of cultures, unaware that we were different. We were aware of the different racial groups we came from but not aware of any differences as human beings.

**Where were your parents and grandparents from?**



Vohrah's family portrait (pic courtesy of KC Vohrah)

My grandfather on my father's side was from Punjab. He had a little cloth shop in Kuala Lumpur where my father was born. Then [my grandfather] moved to Singapore. He used to go to Johor to sell cloth and other commodities and he visited this little town on the left bank of the river Sedili. That's where my mother's father had a sundry shop. My father used to follow his father and that's how he met my mother.

My mother's father had come from China as the Sultan of Johor at that time wanted the Teo Chews to [take care of] Johor's harbours and gambier estates. They were from Chaozhou — formerly known as Swatow.

**Tell us a bit about your parents.**

My father was very single-minded in whatever he did, and adventurous. After he finished school, he became a sailor. When my mother's parents died, he decided he [had to] marry my mother.



Vohrah with his friend Tan Wang Seng at Malacca Hospital  
(pic courtesy of KC Vohrah)

So he took a job as a dresser, known now as medical assistant, and married her in 1933. He was transferred to Malacca Hospital. It was an iconic building in those days — four blocks, probably the tallest buildings in this part of the world. He was also an amateur boxer and he was called Battling Leonard.

My mother and her two sisters were born in Kuala Sedili. She imbibed a lot of Malay culture there. Her dress was baju and sarong. Later in Malacca, she also wore sarong kebaya because of the Babas and Nyonyas; our food was mostly Nyonya. We spoke to her in Malay and to my dad in English. We also understand Teo Chew because my mother would speak to her two sisters in Teo Chew.

**What are your strongest memories of the place in which you grew up?**

Some of my most beautiful memories would be of my schooldays.

My good friend Tan Zing Chee and I would cycle together to Mata Kucing, where we would pick up Samad Yahya. We would go to school together, look at girls together and go to the library together after school. We had a beautiful friendship. Zing Chee migrated to Auckland and became a Professor of Physics. Datuk Samad Yahya is a retired lawyer and banker.

[In school, there] was no issue of being treated differently because we were of different races. We were punished because we didn't do our work or we were rewarded because we did good work.

In the hospital quarters where I lived, we children were always in and out of each other's houses. Everybody's parents were our "uncles" or "aunties". They would pamper us with food and shower us with real affection. My aunt's friend visited my house very often; she was like a family member. We called her "Ta chi Ah Eng" (elder sister Ah Eng).



Vohrah with friends Chan Chee Siok, Dayanathan, Woo Lok Wah and brother

Amar Chand (pic courtesy of KC Vohrah)

We visited the Carvahlos and Theseiras during Christmas; Chinese New Year was at the Angs, the Seng Hangs and our home. For Diwali, we were at the Selladurais, the Nadarajahs and our home. For Hari Raya Aidilfitri, it was the Samdins, the Abdullahs and others. There was no issue of "He cannot come here" or "You cannot go there."

### **What are the stories you hold onto the most?**

My father was a Punjabi Hindu, but he was so open minded he defied tradition and married my mother, a Taoist and Buddhist Chinese.



Vohrah's parents celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary (pic courtesy of KC Vohrah)

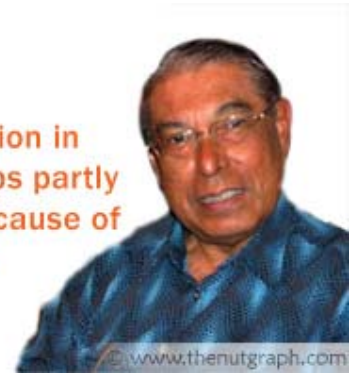
He had two best friends Tan Huah Qwee and Tan Kim Joo in ACS Singapore. They swore everlasting friendship by nicking their wrists and mingling their blood with each others. They became "kek pai"-blood brothers. They were good friends till the end but Kim Joo was killed by the Japanese during the war. Till today we have ties with Huah Qwee's family as if they are our blood relatives.

My father was a disciplinarian. His sense of ethics was very strong. His credo was: The only thing that he could give us was education and the rest was our hard work. He said he and my mother would do their best to give us everything they possibly could. But he said he didn't expect anything in return except that we give the same thing to our children so that our children would be better than us. I'll always remember that and we brothers have adopted that commitment.

### **How have these stories influenced you as a Malaysian?**

I've been lucky in a sense. My elder brother and I, we were in the judiciary. The greater part of my life after university, and a little of private practice was in the Judicial and Legal Services and after that in the High Court and Court of Appeal. I think because we were at a stage where racism had not shown its ugly head, things went on very smoothly. Even in later days, because we were among professionals trained in the law, things were not bad. We had friends across the board and didn't feel different from the other officers.

**"There were already signs of racial polarisation in the early 1980s in the public sector, perhaps partly because of the quota system and partly because of the polarising effect of the school system."**



I did not encounter serious issues on race or religion as some of my friends both in the public and private sector did. There were already signs of racial polarisation in the early 1980s in the public sector, perhaps partly because of the quota system and partly because of the polarising effect of the school system.

As for my family, I was fortunate that my children were in schools which were truly multiracial. But one day my son came back from school feeling very upset and dejected. He was almost in tears when he said that a friend of his who was very good in his studies could not go to Form Six while another with lesser results got a scholarship for pre-university. His words, "We are Malaysian! Why so unfair?", cut really deeply into our hearts.



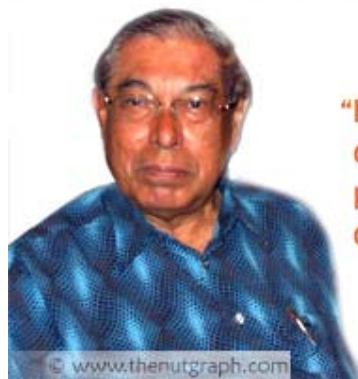
Vohrah and Beatrix on their wedding day (pic courtesy of KC Vohrah)

Another matter that affected us deeply as parents was our children's education. Like many parents, we were not sure whether our children would get into local universities however good their results, let alone be

allowed to do courses of their choice. Like most parents, we prepared by tightening our belts and eventually, sent [our] children overseas [to] university. Sometimes when my wife and I think about it, we feel so guilty that we gave so little pocket money to our children to manage their personal expenses. I am sure many parents feel the same way, too.

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

I would like to see a dismantling of the barriers that divide us, barriers that were wittingly or unwittingly put up in the last 20 to 30 years where race and religion appear to be emphasised and where dysfunctional institutions perpetuate those barriers. It is important that we Malaysians accommodate the culture, religion and racial differences of other Malaysians.



**"I would also like to see more loosening of democratic spaces where legitimate public dissent is allowed, as in every democratic society."**

I would also like to see more loosening of democratic spaces where legitimate public dissent is allowed, as in every democratic society. I would like a nation committed to the 1948 [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) which speaks of the inherent dignity of all human beings and their equal and inalienable rights. These rights should be for all Malaysians without regard to race, religion or gender.

I hope the fundamental liberties in the [constitution](#) on equality, rights of education and property and freedom of movement, speech, assembly and association, will be respected by the executive. I also hope that the courts will courageously enforce these rights.

There must be political will to effect changes. We have to throw away our mindset... We must instead rejoice in the oneness of the nation because of our unique diversity.

**Do you think we will ever be able to regain the cultural intermingling that you had when you were growing up in Malacca?**

It will take time but I think it is possible. 🇲🇾