

**M RAVI** Kampong  
Boy

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Singapore

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# Foreword

Lawyer M Ravi's riveting personal memoir of his human rights activism and, in particular, his heroic and passionate struggle against the death penalty in Singapore comes at a vital time in the global campaign to put a stop everywhere to this cruel punishment. Opposition to death penalty legislation and executions are now firmly in the international sphere, with more and more countries announcing moratoria on executions or their total abolition. Ravi's rock-firm, inspiring dedication to this cause makes him a major figure, recognised and respected by major international human rights organisations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Yet, for years the international anti-death penalty trend had little impact on Singapore, which was once described by *The Economist* as the world's execution capital.

But now the waves of change have reached Singapore's shores, as Singaporean authorities reconsider the use of the mandatory death penalty, which is applied to drug trafficking and homicide cases. As the authorities consider reforms to the law, many prisoners on death row have been given a temporary reprieve. This is a positive start, which we hope will eventually lead to total abolition.

Ravi's memoir brings the reader right into the heart of the struggle to save the lives of several disadvantaged young drug "mules" who were caught, faced the death penalty and were eventually executed. It also explains how his own difficult childhood moulded him into a caring and determined advocate campaigning to preserve the right to life, and a founding member of the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network.

Thanks to Ravi's efforts, death row prisoners may yet live to see the day when Singapore follows the global trend towards total abolition.

Margaret John  
Coordinator for Singapore and Malaysia  
Amnesty International Canada

# Preface

**O**n 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2009, Singapore judicial history was made. And it was a perfect backdrop: the stakes involved could hardly have been greater.

The focus of all this judicial attention was Yong Vui Kong, a 21-year-old ethnic Chinese Malaysian. As that day began, most observers who had been following his story would have guessed that Yong was in the last forty-eight hours of his earthly existence.

The fact is, this naïve, poorly educated but good-hearted young man was scheduled to be hanged for drug trafficking. There were only two things that could save him from his date with the noose: a Presidential clemency grant or a stay of execution. The former was highly unlikely and the latter seemingly impossible: never before in the history of independent Singapore had a stay of execution been granted to a death row inmate. So on that first Wednesday in December, very few would be willing to bet that Yong would live to see the next week, let alone the new year.

At approximately 10 a.m. on that fateful day of 2<sup>nd</sup> December, I rose to address a single-judge panel of Singapore's Supreme Court. I was now Vui Kong's attorney, having taken that task after his original trial brought a guilty verdict with a mandatory death sentence attached and his appeals hearing confirmed the sentence. This early December hearing was a last-ditch effort to save his life. It was with much trepidation that I started to deliver my arguments. Trepidation because this was not some academic exercise – unless I made a compelling case for a stay, this young man would be hanged shortly thereafter.

This case, this hearing and the importance of it all were a major part of the reason I decided to become a lawyer and why after a few years of standard law cases in Singapore, I have been turning my attention and devoting my energies more and more to human rights cases. To tell

my part of the story, I would have to go back to the early days of my law career and back beyond that to my days in law school and even my undergraduate time at university.

Actually, my part of the story goes back even further, to my early youth in a Singapore kampong (village) and on to a crowded public housing flat when the government's programme of new satellite towns was just being launched. The values that I learned, the fears that I inherited, the dreams that I devised and nurtured back in my childhood have guided me through my education and into my law career. I stood there pleading for the life of a poor young man from a hardscrabble estate because of those same values, fears and dreams.

A good many friends, associates and people in the media have suggested to me that I write my memoirs and that I tell this story, to explain why I fight the causes I fight. Here is that story. I dedicate this book to all those who have influenced me to write it, many of whom will appear in the pages to follow.

M Ravi  
April 2013

## Kampong Daze

**T**oday, the name “Singapore” has become a highly successful brand. Indeed, Singapore 2012 edition seems to increase steadily in prestige and influence far beyond its diminutive size.

The images of Singapore that so many admire and envy include the stacks of medium-sized skyscrapers; the glitzy malls; the network of roads and highways; the sleek, extensive underground train system; the eye-catching Esplanade arts centre; the Marina Bay area with its casino; a resurgent Sentosa with its integrated resorts and various beachfront attractions, an island with bountiful tasty food and drink offerings. This is a shiny 21<sup>st</sup> century city poised and polished, buffed to attract and please.

But the Singapore that even till today lies closer to my heart is a very different place. It was the Singapore I was born and started growing up in: it was a grimy, gutsy place, a tropical island without much of a cityscape but with a lot of heart. This was the Singapore that forged my personality and made me the person I am today, with all the values and commitments that have propelled me in my career and even my leisure pursuits. I think it is only right to start off this very true and unique Singapore story by going back to this special place and the world it encapsulated.

1959 was a most eventful year for both the young nation of Singapore and also for my own family. On May 30<sup>th</sup> of that year, the island gained full internal self-governance and held the first fully Singapore elections to the Legislative Assembly. (Earlier legislative elections produced some seats

popularly elected, others appointed by the ruling British colonial power.) These first fully Singapore elections resulted in a resounding victory for the People's Action Party under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew. And not quite two months earlier, my parents – Madasamy and Papa – were married in one of the most elaborate weddings their patch of the island had ever seen. (Actually, Papa was not my father, but my mother! The name means 'little girl' or 'cute girl' in Tamil and is only borne by females.)

But before we get to my parents' wedding, let me look further back into my family's history in Singapore. All four of my grandparents were immigrants in this new promised land, all of them from the same small town in Tamil Nadu. The village is called Tirunelveli, which roughly means "protective fence of rice paddies". Not only did all of my grandparents come from the same Indian town, but when they emigrated in search of a better life, they all settled in the same small area, a Singapore kampong called Jalan Kayu, close to Seletar.

Jalan Kayu was like many of the kampongs in Malaya of that period, only more so. It was known as one of the poorest kampongs on the island of Singapore. More interestingly, and importantly for my development, it was one of those rare kampongs which was ethnically mixed. Whereas most of the region's kampongs were known as Chinese kampongs, Malay or Indian kampongs, Jalan Kayu boasted all three of Singapore's major ethnic groups, all living together in relative harmony.

As so many of Jalan Kayu's residents were either themselves immigrants or first-generation transplants, their roots to their home societies were still largely intact. Many of the old customs and practices still prevailed. For instance, amongst the Indians in the kampong, the caste system with all its prejudices, injustices and inflexibility was still fairly strong. My own family, on both sides, belonged to the warrior caste, so they occupied a comfortable position on the community's social ladder: not quite at the top, but far from the bottom.

Both my paternal grandparents were rubber-tappers, the necessary ground level workers in the then highly profitable rubber industry. My maternal grandfather was rather more successful: he was a mandor, the equivalent of a foreman on a rubber plantation.



My paternal grandfather later found steady employment doing construction work, which became a boom industry after Singapore achieved its independence from Britain. In fact, he continued working in the construction industry until he was 80! (And it wasn't a desk job, it was out there doing the grunt work.) He died at the age of 96, in the summer of 2000. He was, as you might imagine, a fairly robust man for much of his life.

As was typical of the immigrants and even the first generation of new Singaporeans in those days, neither of my parents had any formal schooling. It was not needed and not expected for those in their class: it was simply assumed they would more or less trudge in the footsteps of their immigrant parents. But fate had ordained a certain turn in the fortunes of my parents.

My mother was gifted with an uncommon physical beauty. In fact, she was known throughout the kampong as the "queen of beauty". Not surprisingly, she had more than a few admirers and many men dreamt of making her their bride.

My mother's eyes had set on a local treat, a fellow named Raju. Raju was a poet, a sensitive fellow who wrote lovely verses in Tamil, an Indian language that lends itself well to the rhythms and lures of poetry. But this Raju was not a typical starving poet; he had a good day job and an inheritance which allowed him to have his own terraced house in Lorong Thangan, one of the more desirable residential areas in Jalan Kayu. My mum felt that in this handsome poet, she had clearly found the love of her life.

But love as a basis for marriage was not that common in the local immigrant communities of those days; arranged marriages were more the order of the day. Still, Raju did have a respectable job and his own terraced house, so it wouldn't be too bad for my grandparents to arrange a marriage with that fellow. But on the negative side of the ledger, he was of a lower caste and this certainly disturbed my grandparents. Could they actually allow their daughter, the beauty of the family, to marry someone outside the caste?

But fate decided to throw down a trump card and ruin my mother's plans for a happy ending to her romantic yearnings. My paternal grandparents won a local lottery and pocketed \$12,000 in winnings, a

princely sum in those days. They suddenly became one of the kampong's wealthiest families, and they decided they were going to buy their only son one of the area's leading beauties as his bride. While today, \$12,000 might be just a mildly impressive month's salary, in 1959 Singapore, it was quite a lot of money. Remember that the Singapore of that period was a struggling Third World outpost of British imperial reach.

My paternal grandparents then approached my maternal grandparents and suggested an alliance through the marriage of their children. My mother's parents thought it a good proposal; my mother was not at all in agreement on this point.

For two months, my mother mounted a noble resistance, trying to avoid a marriage to a man whom she was not that crazy about and pushing for a union with Raju the poet. My grandparents would not yield, however; they decided to use the usual manners of kampong persuasion to get my mother to see the situation their way. In other words, they beat her. My grandfather slapped my mother on a number of occasions when she pointed out why Raju was a better match than Madasamy; my grandmother preferred to use the broom.

My mother did put up resistance, but my grandparents proved stronger. After two months of their ardent physical persuasion, my mother agreed to marry the man of their choice, that fine young fellow whose parents were dangling hefty lottery winnings in their faces.

The wedding took place on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1959. By all accounts, it was a fantastic wedding ceremony and reception. In fact, the residents of Jalan Kayu called it the "wedding of the century". (The kampong's residents may have lacked a lot materially, but they made up for this with an abundance of overstatement.)

The wedding was certainly something modern, something this poor kampong had never seen before. A gaggle of photographers descended on the celebrations, something unusual at that time for a kampong wedding. My mother's wedding sari was rich and impressive. There was a bounty of festive food, rich in its variety.

Ironically, despite the extravagance and beauty of this wedding, the event was boycotted by many members of my mother's own family. The



M Ravi's parents on their wedding day

reason for this had nothing to do with either my mother or my father; what kept so many on that side away was that my mother's older sister, Suppamma, had just one year earlier married out of her caste. (Read: below her caste.) This was a sin one could not overlook, many in the family believed, and the retribution for this sin was then visited upon her younger sister.

But it was their loss, those who stayed away, because they had missed perhaps the most marvellous wedding Jalan Kayu had seen up until that time.

The celebrations seemed to herald a happy and affluent marriage. But it was not to be. While it still pains me to admit this, my parents' union was neither happy nor healthy and certainly not affluent.

The problem was my father and his many problems. Dear dad quickly ran through the money my grandparents had given him from their lottery windfall. The money went exceptionally fast, largely because when my father had it, he loved to flaunt it. For instance, he would paste banknotes on the cabinet in the family's hall so that visitors would not be able to miss the wealth he had in his possession.

He also went out and bought a fancy sports car. But one was not enough: within a very short period, my father purchased five or six sports cars, buying a new one as soon as he became bored with the previous one.

And he flaunted his sports cars as much as he did the cash he had on hand. He hired a good friend, a fellow Tamil, as his chauffeur who then drove my father around wherever he wanted to go.

But he didn't service only my father. My father would often see British expats passing through the kampong on their way to do a spot of fishing; some of them passed right by the house where my parents lived. Seeing a chance to impress the Brits, whom he felt otherwise intimidated by, my father would call out to them and offer them a ride to the fishing area in one of his fancy sports cars. He then asked them to wait just a few minutes while he fetched his chauffeur, who would drive them wherever they needed to go.

At the start of the marriage, my parents were advised to buy a cosy semi-detached bungalow on Tong Lee Road, the fanciest street in the kampong. They even had a chance to buy one for about \$3,000. But my father preferred spending their money on sports cars and other totems of conspicuous consumption. Oh yes, and also on drink, one of his staples. While he entered the marriage with a sizeable nest egg, my father quickly cracked the shell and scrambled his expenses. The upshot of all this was that within a short time, my parents had slid back into penury.

According to other members of the family, the first two or three months of my parents' marriage had been tranquil and settled, but then financial difficulties and my father's drinking started to steer the marriage into rocky waters. It wasn't long before my father started abusing my mother physically and emotionally. He was especially gifted at spewing out Tamil profanities and other forms of verbal abuse when something my mother did or said irritated him. Or maybe just when the weather was bad.

His own mother, my paternal grandmother, also played a role there. For instance, a year after they wedded, their first child, my brother Shanmugam, arrived. What should have been a joyous time was quickly turned into a nightmare for my mother. She was already suffering slightly from what we now typically recognise as post-partum depression. Then, for some reason, my grandmother refused my mother drinking water,

forcing her to drink collected rainwater. In those days, this water was not always a safe alternative, and my mother came down with a major fever which forced her into the hospital for about a month.

During that month, my grandmother looked after my oldest brother. My mother was, of course, grateful for this. However, when she was released from hospital and returned home, my grandmother refused to let her take back her infant son. Despite all the pleas and imprecations my mother made, my grandmother raised Shanmugam as her own.

Whenever my mother made attempts to go to the police or other authorities, my grandmother defended her indefensible actions with false accusations. She said that my mother was mentally disturbed and even claimed that the reason she had taken my brother away was that she saw some evidence of physical abuse and wanted to protect the infant from further incidents of abuse. All of this was grossly untrue, of course, but the authorities in those days did not like to involve themselves in family matters in the kampong communities. As a result, my oldest brother stayed in the care of my grandmother for the first 25 years of his life. In fact, he only left my grandmother's home to get married and start his own household.

During these early days of the marriage, my mother's sole solace was her mother, who supported her emotionally throughout and was a strong support at that. I sometimes think that my maternal grandmother's warmth and care was partly guided by the guilt she felt at having forced my mother into that marriage. But then in 1962, a second child, a daughter, came and this child quickly became a boon to the family.

Violence and short tempers were a common occurrence in Jalan Kayu. Most of the residents were rubber plantation workers or construction workers, and they themselves were often mistreated at work. They would seek solace in the bottle, and drunkenness was another common phenomenon in the kampong. Often, especially when the men were drunk, the pent-up frustrations and anger (never too deep below the surface) would flare up and explode. And the men didn't only use their fists and feet in the impromptu fights. Knives and parangs were often called into action when tempers spilled over. For instance, my own maternal grandfather, the mandor, had fallen victim to some community vendetta and lost his leg as a result. He remained bed-ridden for years, until his death.

And as we'll soon see, my own father was also capable of taking part in the violence, alone or with accomplices. Madasamy did not follow his parents into a career tapping rubber but opted for the construction trade, a boom industry in those early days of Singapore's nationhood. But his drinking and unreliability often made it hard for him to keep a job. It was a mad spiral that kept the family locked in poverty.

Other children soon followed, almost every year, and the family's economic straits became even more dire. Eventually, we became a family of seven children; I myself was the last but one. My oldest sister was taught how to forage for food so that the family could eat, and she soon became quite adept at that age-old art of survival. She would go out into nearby fields or to the kampong's main drain and find what vegetables she could. The fields fronting that drain were, interestingly, a good source of kang kong, a slightly stringy Asian green which could be used in a nourishing soup or curry.

My sister would also scavenge around the kampong and the more middle-class surrounding areas collecting discarded newspapers from rubbish chutes and such, then sell the papers to the *karung guni* men, or rag-and-bone men, who plied the island's kampongs, often dropping by at least once a day to see what they could buy off residents and then sell later at increased prices. And my sister was doing all this when she was only 5 years old.

Unlike my parents and grandparents, my sister did start official schooling, attending the Jalan Kayu Primary School. However, the family's pressing financial situation forced her to quit school after just three years and take on full-time employment.

So, at the ripe old age of nine, my oldest sister began working as a maid at the home of a local Tamil language teacher. The pay was modest, but she also received food and her salary helped the family, which usually found itself on a stretched budget.

But it was a heavy workload and some of the work was hard, in particular for a 9-year-old girl. My mother would actually assist her with some of the work – for instance, washing the clothes, which was done completely by hand. (Washers and dryers were a great extravagance in those days, even beyond the financial reach of a successful Tamil teacher.)

But after a couple of years working for the teacher and his family, my sister was lucky enough to find another domestic helper job, working as a maid for a well-heeled Eurasian family in a terraced house in Seletar Hills. This work was not only easier than her previous employment, it was also clearly better paid.

One other sister and two more brothers soon came along. Then my mother finally managed a break from child-bearing and caring for infants as there was a gap of several years between my next eldest sibling and myself.

My parents' preferred method of contraception in those days was to have my father sent to prison. And he saw to it that he was dutifully sent away for the few years before I was born.

As I said, my father was rather too fond of the bottle, and would often get into fights when he was drunk. (Not to mention the beatings he rendered to his wife and children.) He was short and stout and, I think, naturally pugnacious. Well, he was born into the warrior caste, and he tried for a number of years to be true to the call of his caste.

He would fight others in the kampong, and he was not above engaging in fights within his own family. These fights could involve either physical blows or verbal spats with streams of invective, most of it from my father's side. My mother showed a lot of forbearance, but she often reached a breaking point and sought refuge from the abusive treatment elsewhere.

My mother's first choice of refuge was usually the home of her older sister, Suppamma. Suppamma was herself a bit stout and could be rather fierce when the occasion called for it.

One of the leading incidents occurred during Christmas time 1967. It was during that season of goodwill towards all men that my father's behaviour became too much for my mother to take. She packed up all the children (five by that time), necessary clothing and other accessories, and left home. She headed straight for her protective older sister's place.

By this time, Suppamma and her own family had moved to pleasant quarters on what was at that time the British Naval Base grounds. When my mother arrived with the five children, Suppamma, her husband and her own kids welcomed them. But my father figured out where my mother had sought sanctuary, and he himself turned up at Suppamma's soon thereafter.

In his then typically pugnacious manner, he demanded that my mother return home with the children. My mother refused. My father did not believe in my mother's right to first refusal. He again insisted that she return with him immediately. But this time, he underscored his demand by pulling roughly at my mother's shirt. He pulled so roughly that he not only ripped off her shirt, but also her bra.

This was too much for my aunt and uncle. As Suppamma and her husband stood up for my mother, my father turned his anger and invective towards them. This was his big mistake. This pair was not intimidated by my father, as many other people were. My uncle decided that true family honour called for my aunt to take on my father first, so he deferred to her as the avenging angel. She was more than a match for my dad.

Aunt Suppamma rushed towards my father as if she were suddenly infused with the spirit of the goddess Kali, delivered some impressive blows and then tripped him, sending him crashing to the floor. She delivered a few more blows, then stamped on him. When my father saw a chance, he swept himself up from the floor and ran out in terror. He knew when he had been soundly defeated.

The next day, my father returned in a completely different demeanour. He was repentant and begged for forgiveness. Sweet talk and whimpering pleas replaced the invectives he had employed just the day before. In fact, he was so convincing with his pleas and promises of repentance that my mother relented and returned home with the children.

But a week later, she returned to Aunt Suppamma as my father forgot all his promises and his deep repentance leaked out on a daily basis until it was fully depleted. This time, my mother and my older siblings stayed about a year with my aunt and uncle.



## Kampong In My Heart

**M**y father's first spell in prison resulted from one of his fights. Nobody can now remember what was the occasion for the fight (both of the men had probably forgotten the reason themselves after they had sobered up), but during the course of the fight, my father slashed the other man's hand with a small knife. This earned my father two years in jail.

Freshly out of jail, he decided to supplement his modest income by turning to theft. He first tried his hand at being a snatch thief: he pulled a necklace right from the neck of a Chinese woman and ran off. Unfortunately for him and our family, he was apprehended a short time later and sent off for another stay in jail.

Back out a free man, my father had clearly learned a lesson: he decided that snatching jewellery or other valuables on an open street was not a good modus operandi. He and a few friends then got together and decided to pull off a somewhat difficult heist, something that actually required skill. They sneaked into a newly constructed building and removed the wiring newly installed there by a telecoms company. The idea was to sell this wiring to someone who bought stolen materials and make a nice profit. Unfortunately, the stolen wire scheme got all tangled up and my father was again arrested. This time, he was sentenced to a year in jail.

After his release, my father decided to go more or less straight. But the fighter in him got him into serious trouble one more time. One day, a