

Interview by Yvonne Lim & photo by Alvin Toh

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THE NUS TURNS 90 THIS YEAR. THIS MAN IS THREE MONTHS OLDER AND QUITE AN INSTITUTION HIMSELF

Hand it to him: Mr Ambivagar (left) pointing to himself in a class photo of the 1928 batch at Raffles College.

Meet S'pore's Mister Education

As Mr V Ambivagar prepares to attend the 90th anniversary homecoming dinner for 1,500 NUS alumni tomorrow, he tells YVONNE LIM what it was like as a pioneer of the university's forerunner, Raffles College

AT 90, Mr V Ambivagar is a part of Singapore's teaching history.

He is one of the first local graduate teachers, and an early union activist for the rights of local teachers.

And, as teacher and first Asian principal of Raffles Institution, he is still remembered by two ex-students — both Prime Ministers of Singapore.

Said Mr Ambivagar, who turns 90 on Oct 20: "I had not been a good student in school. The opening of Raffles College in 1928 helped me get a good education. It proved of special significance in my career."

After struggling through school, the Jaffna-born student-teacher won a scholarship to Raffles College, which was set up to train local teachers to take over English secondary schools from expatriates.

College courses were tough and, out of the original 43 students, only 28 graduated.

Joining Raffles Institution, Mr Ambivagar became chairman of the Teachers' Association. He persuaded colleagues to form the Singapore Teachers Union and clamour for better prospects — including equal pay for men and women.

Authorities drew up proposals — but communists took over the union and rejected these. So Mr Ambivagar formed the rival

Graduate Teachers' Association and, in 1953, got the scheme put into effect.

The result: Locals could now become principals and administrators with higher salaries.

As deputy secretary and deputy director of education after 1955, Mr Ambivagar had his share of tiffs.

He faced-off with then-education minister Chew Swee Kee — who was later impeached for corruption.

The minister wanted him to admit, to a local school, an Indonesian student who did not qualify. "I returned the file, asking him to confirm this as it was against the rule.

"He was angry with me. As a kind of revenge, he had me transferred to Raffles Institution as principal," said Mr Ambivagar — laughing at the irony of how he "won" the honour of becoming its first Asian principal in 1958.

He retired in 1961 as acting director and permanent secretary of education.

Now he lives with his wife Madam Mangalesvary, 81, and enjoys his six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. But he keeps a critical eye on the modern school-going generation.

He doesn't like the obsession with grades and the lack of creativity. He said: "It's bad for the country as there will be fewer people who can think for themselves as future leaders."

MR AMBIVAGAR ON:



TWO FAMOUS STUDENTS

MR LEE KUAN YEW: He still remembers my name, said Mr Ambivagar, who was a teacher at RI in the 1930s — but never taught Mr Lee.

They last met at an Old Rafflesians' reunion last year.

Recalling being called as "a grand-stand witness" after the 1953 student riots outside his Penang Road home, he said Mr Lee, then lawyer for the other side, "climbed up our balcony to see if he could discredit my testimony".

MR GOH CHOK TONG: He was a hard-working, intelligent student, a good leader and very sociable, said Mr Ambivagar who was RI principal in the 1950s.

They met last year. Mr Ambivagar said: "Five of us were taking a photograph. He wanted me to stand in the middle, saying: 'I'm Prime Minister only in the office, not here!' I was pleased that he remained very humble in his dealings with smaller people."

Pictures/
ALVIN TOH