

What Do Law Students Do with Their Hard-Earned Vacation?

This vacation, I didn't spend it at the kind of bar you might be thinking of. Instead, I spent my time at the Bar—a career path I had never fully considered until I encountered the organisation Sikhs in Law, which has a strong presence on social media and offers various outreach initiatives. It was through them that I secured an invaluable mini-pupillage opportunity.

I was allocated five days with Baldip Singh, a family law barrister at No5 Chambers. On the morning of my first day, I met Mr Singh for a fact-finding hearing in a family law case. Having studied criminal law, I quickly realised that family law operates under different rules—particularly with regard to the burden and standard of proof, which in family law is based on the balance of probabilities. I observed the judge managing the Schott schedule (the list of allegations) and the timetable for witness evidence, including each barrister's estimated time for cross-examinations.

The hearing began with the applicant, the mother, giving evidence, followed by her cross-examination. The father then took the stand, and his cross-examination spanned two days due to the numerous allegations against him. The mother was tasked with proving these allegations on the balance of probabilities, and Mr Singh had to present each one to the father to formulate his closing speech.

During lunch breaks, Mr Singh generously took the time to explain how he had prepared for the case. He walked me through his case analysis and how he meticulously planned his cross-examination, including reference numbers from the bundle, previous police interviews, medical records, and witness statements, along with exhibits such as text messages. He emphasised the importance of mastering the brief and the bundle—skills crucial to becoming a successful barrister.

I was fortunate to witness Mr Singh's expertise in action when he confronted a witness with an inconsistent statement—highlighting contradictions in their evidence. Watching Mr Singh effectively “ring-fence” the witness and emphasise the inconsistencies to the judge was an eye-opening experience.

One of the most striking observations I made was how multifaceted the role of a barrister truly is. Beyond the courtroom, counsel has a range of responsibilities—as an officer of the court, to the judge, to the lay client, and to the professional client. Beyond simply understanding the trial, Mr Singh provided me with career advice and insights into the reality of a barrister's daily work. Each day, he was not only focused on the case at hand but also managing tasks from previous cases, drafting orders, attendance notes, and preparing position statements for upcoming cases. The role demands a delicate balance of responsibilities, much like a swan—graceful and poised on the surface, yet paddling furiously beneath.

This balancing act was not unique to Mr Singh. Throughout my mini-pupillage, I observed other barristers juggling their professional duties and personal commitments. It became clear to me that their unseen efforts contribute immensely to the smooth running of the legal system.

Another key lesson I learned was the importance of adaptability and problem-solving in the courtroom. I often heard advocates discussing pragmatic approaches to address issues such as missing evidence. These moments underscored the flexibility required to navigate unexpected challenges in legal proceedings. Mr Singh referred me to an article he had written titled “*Family Justice is the Art of the Possible*”, echoing a sentiment often expressed by Mrs Justice Lieven.

The structure of the family courts is designed to be proportionate to the issues at hand. It requires a pragmatic view to focus on the salient points, given the constraints on time, interpreters, judges, and courtrooms. The barristers must work together to further their first and most fundamental duty as officers of the court, while also representing their clients fairly, justly, and fearlessly.

Before this experience, I hadn't considered a career at the Bar, partly because I hadn't seen anyone who looked or sounded like me in that role. However, during this trial, I was struck by the diversity of those involved—the judge, Mr Singh, and other barristers were all from ethnic minority backgrounds. This

experience made me reflect on why I had believed the Bar was closed to me. Perhaps it stems from a lack of representation in mainstream media or from the legal sector's failure to adequately promote the diversity that exists within the profession. Whatever the cause, this mini-pupillage has given me much to think about as a third-year law student.

I encourage everyone to explore new opportunities through organisations like Sikhs in Law. My time spent on this mini-pupillage has given me valuable insights and has encouraged me to seek out more work experience at the Bar and in law offices across different fields. Mr Singh wisely told me that there is a place for everyone in the legal profession; the challenge is to find the role that suits your skills rather than trying to mould yourself to fit a specific position.

If you haven't yet had the opportunity to experience life at the Bar, I strongly encourage you to do so. Even if you can't secure a mini-pupillage, visiting the criminal courts and sitting in the public gallery will give you a flavour of the advocacy techniques used in court. You'll witness barristers not only as lawyers employing their legal minds but also as advocates and, at times, quasi-social workers.

And that, in a nutshell, is how law students spend their vacations.



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