

FAREWELL, MR PEOPLE

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Khuzaima Qutbuddin was always there for those in need.

Khuzaima Qutbuddin, the claimant to the highest religious post in the Dawoodi Bohra community, passed away in the US a couple of days ago, two months short of his 76th birthday. He was contesting claims on the succession to the Syedna's office made by his nephew Mufaddal Saifuddin in the Bombay High Court.

Khuzaima Qutbuddin evoked extreme reactions among people for the two 'faults' that he carried proudly on his sleeve and lived to the end: his grace under sustained pressure, and wider liberalness in an increasingly narrow world.

Even as one part of the now-divided Bohra community would like to think of him as an audacious contender to the Syedna's office (he said that the succession had been made in absolute secrecy by his eldest brother and previous incumbent Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin in 1965), another part of the community would remember him as the spitting image of his illustrious father, the late Syedna Taher Saifuddin, who is renowned for his humanism, piety and modernity.

Khuzaima Qutbuddin was a man of many parts. He was above all a humanist who extended well beyond the restricting bureaucracy, to reach out to individuals in distress and in need. Once they had engaged with him, they would never be forgotten - either by memory or name or face -- which says something of his outstanding memory and ability to connect across ages, places and time.

He was an educationist who did not merely preach but practiced. Nowhere is this better showcased than within his own family; almost each child is a doctorate from an international university; the eldest daughter graduated from Harvard, is a poet and a celebrated lecturer at the Chicago University; one of his sons completed a thesis from the University of Manchester on Islamic finance.

He was a devout religionist who held the office of the Mazoon (deputy) for half a century, arguably the longest that any Mazoon has held office. During this tenure, he touched thousands of people with his enriching people-orientation before he was cornered and virtually incapacitated and methodically disempowered.

He was a deep spiritualist who had been appointed Mazoon at the age of 26 by his eldest brother, superseding a long sequence of wizened relatives. For decades, he leveraged his deep spiritual knowledge through counsel, advice and help to anyone who selected to engage with him, from within the community or outside.

He was at the end of the day, by all accounts, a fighter who weathered the slings and arrows of palace intrigue and sibling rivalry with dignity. He was there for those who needed him; he was unflappable to those seeking to provoke; he was forgiving to those who vilified him; he was accessible to those seeking to make amends. And this is how he shall be remembered by the many whose lives he touched: as a sparkling human being who could well have been simply called 'Mr People'.

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