

# Dr. Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin

(1915 - 2014)

Mumbai Legacy Project  
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Dr. Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin was the 52nd Dai al-Mutlaq, or the Unrestricted Missionary of the Dawoodi Bohra community, a sect of the Shia Muslims comprising mainly business people. Syedna Burhanuddin received many honours, including several doctorates, the Star of Jordan and the Order of the Nile, the highest civilian awards in Jordan and Egypt, respectively, for his transformative work. He is widely known as the ambassador for peace due to his lifelong dedication to maintaining peace and harmony (Wajihuddin 2014).

He was born in Surat on 6th March 1915 to the then leader of the community, Syedna Taher Saifuddin (TNN 2012). At a very young age, Syedna was prepared to be an able leader for his community and an accomplished religious scholar, learning from firsthand experience and under his father's guidance. He performed his first Hajj at the age of 15 and received the titles of Burhanuddin (proof of the religion), Haddiyat (guide to righteousness), and Mazoon (authorised missionary) soon after (Madan 2014).

He assumed the title of Dai al-Mutlaq in 1965 after his father's death (IANS 2021). For 49 years, he guided the community through a period of remarkable growth and prosperity, fostering advancements in education and healthcare (Wajihuddin 2023). He worked tirelessly to ensure that within his community, modern practices flourished in conjunction with traditional Islamic values to ensure that the Dawoodi Bohras retained their identity while keeping up with the world (Blank 2001, 2).



Syedna Burhanuddin dedicated his life to the search for and transmission of knowledge. An erudite scholar, he authored an impressive collection of works and treatises on theology and philosophy. He was awarded multiple honorary doctorates by renowned institutions such as Aligarh Muslim University, Al-Azhar University and University of Karachi. He established over 400 educational institutions globally to provide religious and secular education. Due to his relentless efforts, the community achieved 100% literacy during his tenure (Nalwalla 2011). Syedna Burhanuddin also oversaw the administration of the Al-Jamea-tus-Saifiyah and supervised its expansion from Surat to Karachi and Nairobi. He established the first international chain of MSB educational institutes across Kenya in 1985. (Founders) Today, it offers education to children in seven countries.

Believing that women trapped in the confines of domestic chores could not contribute effectively to society, Syedna Burhanuddin provided impetus for them to step out into the world. He directed his community to provide equal educational opportunities to children (Blank 2021, 278). He also established community kitchens to enable women to pursue opportunities beyond their homes. Unlike ordinary community kitchens, these were not meant purely for the underprivileged. Instead, they served all members of the Bohra community regardless of their economic status. The meals were planned by dieticians a month in advance and ensured food security for all members of the community (Diggikar 2015).

Syedna Burhanuddin recognised the value of Islamic architectural heritage and sponsored the reconstruction and restorations of hundreds of historical monuments. He restored the 9th-century mosque, Al-Jame Al-Anwar and the 12th-century mosque, Al-Aqmar, in Cairo. He also commissioned the creation of new mosques globally, particularly in the West (Moini 2014).

He believed strongly in ecological conservation and preventing environmental degradation. He took up several projects that nourished the environment, including mass tree plantations, terrace farming, afforestation and horticulture projects (Najmi 2014). He also funded the establishment of an eco-friendly mosque that ran on renewable energy (PTI 2008). He encouraged mass weddings to pare down the wastefulness of traditional opulent marriages (IANS 2021).

He also ensured the provision of affordable and accessible healthcare facilities to people of all faiths through hospitals and clinics and the renovation of Saifee Hospital into an ultra-modern, state-of-the-art facility. He launched low-financing housing schemes to ensure safe and hygienic housing for all. In Bhendi Bazaar, he redeveloped old and deteriorating housing for over 4,000 families from the community (Najmi 2014).



In 2011, Syedna Burhanuddin completed his centenary according to the Islamic calendar. There were extravagant celebrations with sports tournaments, entrepreneurship exhibitions for women, tree plantation drives, car rallies, installation of water coolers across Mumbai, medical camps, and aero-modelling shows. Over 50,000 bird feeders were distributed across the city to prevent further decline of sparrows, earning Syedna Burhanuddin a name in the Guinness Book of Records. Every event was opulent and luxurious, but each had, at its core, his deeply caring nature (Nalwala 2011).

He appointed his second son, Syedna Aaliqadr Mufaddal Saifuddin, as successor in June 2011. Syedna Burhanuddin passed away in 2014, just a few weeks shy of his 103rd birthday. He was laid to rest at the Raudat Tahera mausoleum alongside his father. The mausoleum, built by Syedna Burhanuddin as a tribute to his father, was made of simple white marble inscribed with the text of the Quran in gold. Thousands of devotees across the city flocked to Saifee Mosque to mourn his death. Workers built a temporary bridge between Saifee Mosque and the mausoleum so that Syedna Burhanuddin could be laid to rest (PTI 2014). His death, described as 'Waafat', translates to a return to God (Wajihuddin 2014).

Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin was an extraordinary scholar, orator, spiritual leader, and philanthropist. He was considerate about the changing needs of his community, encouraging equality, environmental conservation and education while fiercely embracing his identity as part of the Dawoodi Bohra community. He mentioned peace, harmony and patriotism often in his sermons (Wajihuddin 2010). He has been the medium through which his community and, indeed, many people from outside the community have benefitted, and in losing him, the world has lost an able, loving and devoted leader.

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