

## A Life Well Lived: A Tribute to Abdul Sattar Edhi

By Waqar Haider Hashmi

“My religion is humanitarianism... which is the basis of every religion in the world,” says Edhi the most admired philanthropist of Pakistan. If we, for the sake of an impartial review, ignore all impressions that the name Edhi invokes in our minds and examine this conviction carefully, we come to know the level of clarity of thought and deep insight into human psyche and religious maturity Edhi possesses. He connects to the idea of religious belief at its core: humanitarianism or concern for human welfare.

The word ‘basis’ is used to highlight that no religion can stand on its feet without emphasizing the concept of ‘humanitarianism’. Desired human attributes i.e., morality (to know what’s right or wrong), ethics (doing what’s right and abstaining from doing wrong) and spirituality (a vital force which makes humans strive for constructive work) are the subject of all the holy scriptures in the world. The significance of this philosophy becomes apparent when we realize that it is where generally most of the people falter as they skip the basic plank of humanitarianism while practicing or observing a religion. How can one claim to be a Muslim, Christian or follower of any faith if he or she is blind to humanitarianism? Imagine a Muslim who never misses a single prayer, observe fasts, performs Hajj and pays obligatory alms but has no tolerance or compassion for other human beings. Praying, fasting, performing Hajj or paying alms are not rituals but in esoteric terms refer to moral, ethical and spiritual growth (self-growth) individually and as humankind – rising above the follies. Prayers, fasting, Hajj and alms are continuous practices that should be performed and observed from cradle to grave. Iblis was declared Satan only because he did not obey the command of Lord Almighty of bowing to Adam.

Now you look at the broader schema of things – the scope of activities Edhi performs under the auspices of Edhi Foundation (sometimes referred to as a ‘Trust’ although from legal standpoint both have different implications – timeline difference), again you are surprised to note the coherence between the operations of Edhi Foundation and the emphasis on practice of true religion. Edhi’s words, that I cited in the beginning, are windows to his mind (spirit) and his actions speak louder than his words. Realization of dreams is work, and Edhi is really good at it.

Born in 1928 in Bantva a small town in Kathiawar (a former district of the state of Gujrat in India), Abdul Sattar Edhi is also sometimes referred to as 'Father Teresa' (it is believed he dislikes to be called by this name maybe he expects a better alternate to be used) or 'angel of mercy' because of his extraordinary, meritorious and life-long contributions to public good. Interestingly, it is said that his nickname was 'Roti (bread)' when he was young because of his appearance. The residents of orphanages called 'Edhi Homes' call him 'Nana (maternal grandfather).' Generally, for Pakistani public, there is only one Edhi i.e., Abdul Sattar Edhi and the title 'Edhi' sounds unfamiliar to most people in Pakistan.

It is said that when Edhi was 11 years old, his mother got paralyzed and subsequently became mentally instable. Apparently that was the first shock Edhi got, but he recovered from the pain and devoted completely for well-being and care of his ailing mother – this covered feeding, cleaning, bathing and changing clothes. Unfortunately, despite his best efforts, his mother's health kept on deteriorating, further aggravating young Edhi's misery. Edhi was 19 when his mother passed away. His mother's prolonged illness and early death left an irreparable mark on Edhi's memory. He could not continue his formal studies under the circumstances. However, he rose to the occasion and converted his early-age-suffering in an ever-growing ambition to strive for charitable work. Seemingly, this experience looks pivotal in shaping the life of Edhi in later years. As great Allama Iqbal puts it in a subtle manner:

Ye faizan-e-nazar tha kay maktab ki karamat thi  
Sikhayey kis nay Ismail ko aadab-e-farzandi?

[Referring to Hazrat Ismail's (A.S.) willingness to be sacrificed in the way of Lord Almighty, Iqbal questions whether Hazrat Ismail's (A.S.) obedience to his father was because of special blessings or an outcome of formal learning?]

Edhi was 19 years old when he and his family migrated and settled in Pakistan after independence in 1947. To make a living in the new socio-economic reality, Edhi started as a peddler and later became a commission agent selling cloth in Karachi's wholesale market. After a while Edhi established a free dispensary [free diagnosis and provision of medicine] with

the support of some of his community members. One can imagine how difficult it must have been for Edhi to develop his credibility and stick to the noble cause despite of meager resources.

To date Edhi has not accepted any government financial support [It is said that late General Zia once sent a cheque to Edhi which he returned back politely] in order to avoid unnecessary bureaucratic interventions in his charitable endeavors. Also, if a private sponsor stipulates as to how to use their donation, Edhi is known for refunding the whole donated amount instead of compromising the sanctity of his organization. Such is the extent of autonomy and moral courage Edhi exercises to cope with typical humanly interventions. It is so easy to write a line about the transition but it must have been a monumental task to transform his solitary free dispensary into a 'Trust' and later into a 'Foundation'.

In 1965 Edhi married Ms. Bilquis who worked as a nurse at the Edhi dispensary. Bilquis and Edhi have four children, two daughters and two sons. Mrs. Bilquis Edhi manages child homes, maternity homes, girls' hostels and nursing homes under the auspices of Edhi Foundation. Neither Edhi nor his wife Bilquis are on the payroll of the Edhi Foundation rather their subsistence depends upon the returns from the Government securities Edhi purchased many years ago. Edhi and his family reside in a two-room apartment situated adjacent to the Edhi Foundation's headquarter in Karachi. Bilquis Edhi herself emerged as an equally effective social welfare activist and she has always balanced her professional life with her personal life.

It seems pertinent to highlight here that the quality of online & print material available on the life and work of Edhi is not satisfactory (shoddy and in bits & pieces) which proves that we as Pakistanis need to do a better job at highlighting our accomplishments. Irony is that the world gets to see only the darker side, whereas there is a lot of beauty that exists in the form of human courage, character and resilience. This article, therefore, is an attempt at presenting the good about Pakistan.

Following prestigious international honors have been conferred upon Edhi so far [ideally the awards should have been either arranged in alphabetical or chronological order or maybe in order of importance or stature but here hybrid filter is used.]:

- ❖ International Lenin Peace Prize for services in the Armenian earthquake disaster from Russia (former USSR), 1988 [was the Soviet Union's equivalent to the Nobel Peace Prize, named in honor of the

fonder of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) Vladimir Lenin also remembered as Russian Marxist Revolutionary]amon Magsaysay Award for public service from Philippines, 1986 [The Ramon Magsaysay Award is often considered Asia's Nobel Prize and is announced annually to perpetuate former Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay's example of integrity in government, courageous service to the people, and pragmatic idealism within a democratic society]

- ❖ International Balzan Prize for Humanity, Peace and Brotherhood from Italy, 2000 [named after Eugenio Balzan who was a staunch protestor against fascism – International Balzan Prize Foundation awards four annual monetary prizes to people or organizations who have made outstanding achievements in the fields of humanities, natural sciences, culture, as well as for endeavors for peace and the brotherhood of man]
- ❖ Hamdan Award for volunteers in Humanitarian Medical Services from UAE, 2000 [named after 1<sup>st</sup> Deputy Prime Minister of UAE i.e., Sheikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum]
- ❖ Paul Harris Fellow from Rotary International Foundation, 1993 [named after the founder of Rotary International (1905) – an international organization dedicated to bring together business and professional leaders to provide humanitarian service, encourage high ethical standards in all vocations, and help build goodwill and peace in the world]
- ❖ Largest Voluntary Ambulance Organization of the World by Guinness Book of World Records, 2000

List of local awards is as under:

- ❖ Nishan-e-Imtiaz from Government of Pakistan, 1989 [is one of the state organized civil decorations of Pakistan and is in fact the highest honor bestowed upon any civilian in Pakistan by the Pakistani Government]
- ❖ Recognition of meritorious services to oppressed humanity during eighties by Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, Government of Pakistan, 1989
- ❖ The Social Worker of Sub-Continent by Government of Sind, 1989
- ❖ Shield of Honor by Pakistan Army (E & C)
- ❖ Honorary Doctorate Degree by Institute of Business Administration, 2006

- ❖ Khidmat Award by Pakistan Academy of Medical Sciences
- ❖ Silver Jubilee Shield by College of Physicians and Surgeons of Pakistan
- ❖ Human Rights Award by Pakistan Human Rights Society
- ❖ Pakistan Civic Award by Pakistan Civic Society, 1992

Even though Edhi Foundation is still expanding, it has already evolved into the largest Pakistan-based social welfare network in recent times. Edhi Foundation offers round-the-clock emergency services across the country through around 250 Edhi Centres. The Centres provide for free: shrouding of unclaimed dead bodies, shelter for the destitute; orphans and handicapped persons, medical care through hospitals and dispensaries, rehabilitation of drug addicts, wheel chairs; crutches and other compensations for the handicapped, family planning & counseling services, maternity services and national & international relief efforts for the victims of natural calamities regardless of creed, race, color, language, religion or politics.

Edhi Foundation operates with around three thousand volunteers including zonal heads, workers of Edhi Homes / Centres, and the ambulance drivers. These volunteers are only paid subsistence allowance in lieu of their services instead of compensation in the form of salary.

Contributions in kind (in the form of food, clothing, medicines and animal hides<sup>1</sup>) are accepted by Edhi Foundation. Voluntary financial donations range from PKR 5 to hundreds or thousand of rupees. Annual audit of accounts is carried-out by reputable chartered accountancy firms.

Given below are the major initiatives and programs of Edhi Foundation – extracts from sources mentioned at the end:

- Jhoolas (Baby Cradles): At most of the emergency Edhi Centres, ‘Jhoolas’ (baby cradles) are installed where abandoned or unwanted infants can be left to be picked by Edhi workers. Identity of these children is kept secret so that they do not face social implications in later life.

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<sup>1</sup> Animal hides are collected during the week of Eid-ul-Adha, the second largest festival of a Muslim year, when people sacrifice animals and distribute it to the poor.

- Apna Ghar (Home for Destitute): A home for mentally ill, destitute or runaways.
- Welfare Centres of the Foundation are located in all the big cities and towns of Pakistan. The prime function of these centres is to extend all services of the Foundation to the needy persons at their door-steps.
- Highway Projects: Under this project, it is planned to construct five hundred Edhi Centres in order to cover a sizeable population on all highways and major link-roads of Pakistan in a properly phased fashion to extend the coverage of the services of Edhi Foundation.
- Warehouses: Warehouses have been established in big cities like Karachi, Islamabad, and Multan to store the contributions received in kind.
- Field Ambulance Service: A fleet of over four hundred ambulances, field mobile units and rescue units, which comprise this network, are maintained in a state of readiness to meet any emergency in the shortest possible time anywhere in Pakistan.
- Air Ambulance Service: The Foundation has set up a helicopter and fixed wing aircraft-based emergency service centre at Karachi to supplement the field services. Two aero planes and one helicopter have already been acquired.
- Marine & Coastal Services: Through this scheme Edhi Foundation covers coastal areas.
- Other facilities: Include a blood & drug bank, cancer research hostel with treatment facilities, missing persons service, shelters for animals, grave-yard services, emergency posts, prisoners' aid, refugee assistance, international community centres, and collaboration with other resourceful organizations.

Edhi Foundation has rendered the following services in international arena:

- ❖ Aid to Afghan refugees since 1978.
- ❖ Relief to the needy in the civil war in Lebanon during 1983.
- ❖ Rupees 0.5 million for flood relief in Bangladesh during 1986. In addition an ambulance was also provided.
- ❖ Rupees one million in aid to the drought and famine-stricken areas in Ethiopia during 1985.
- ❖ Aid to earthquake victims of Armenia, USSR during year 1989.
- ❖ Aid for the affected people and refugees of Persian Gulf War during 1991 in the form of blood, plasma, medicines and surgical instruments, etc., worth approximately Rs.4.5 million.
- ❖ Aid to earthquake victims of North-Western Iran during 1990.
- ❖ Continuous relief goods including tents, clothing, blankets and rations for refugees in Azad Kashmir.
- ❖ Relief aid to Kurd refugees.
- ❖ Financial and travel assistance to the stranded Pakistanis in Kuwait during the Persian Gulf War in 1992.
- ❖ Aid during the earthquake in Cairo 1992.
- ❖ Efforts for the release of prisoners and detainees involved in minor immigration irregularities in Iraq and Romania during 1993-94.
- ❖ Supply of rice and edibles to Mogadishu in Somalia during 1993 in collaboration with the Pakistan Army.
- ❖ Relief supplies for Bosnian refugees in Pakistan and supply of relief goods and assistance in Croatian Camps during 1993-94.
- ❖ Relief goods, edibles supplied to Afghan refugees in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, during 1994.
- ❖ Continuous relief operations including provision of transportation facilities to Bosnian refugees during 1993-94.
- ❖ Relief activities conducted in Croatian camps for Bosnian people during 1993-94.
- ❖ Evacuation and relief for plague victims in Saurat (India) during 1994.
- ❖ Provision of blood bags for Japanese earthquake victims during 1994.

Edhi International Foundation with its branches in U.S.A., England, Japan, Bangladesh, U.A.E., and Canada, is engaged in humanitarian work, supporting especially people belonging to Third World.

While looking at the achievements of Edhi one realizes how much one person can accomplish in a small period of time. Irony is that Edhi is never appreciated the way he deserves. Time is running, so we should make sure

that we acknowledge his good work during his lifetime. International media and other cooperation agencies that sincerely want to see a better Pakistan should support and enable and enoble people like Abdul Sattar Edhi.

We can only summarize the life and work of Edhi in the following words of great Iqbal:

Mata e bay baha hay dard e soz e arzoo mandi  
Maqam e bandagi de kar na loon shan e khuda wandee

[It is such a great wealth in itself to go through the difficult process of achieving something, I shall rather opt for the station of ‘obedience-only-to-Allah’ rather than the station of ‘divine grace’ - privilege to realize anything i.e., ‘kun-fa-yakoon’ - ‘Be! and it is...’ continuum as fa-yakoon is still happening]

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