

Beyond Religion: Re-Contextualising the Humanitarian Services of Abdul Sattar Edhi

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Abstract:

This study attempts to explore, investigate and analyze the long services of Abdul Sattar Edhi for humanity for which he has been termed as a 'Great Humanitarian'. He started his social work from scratch and built an empire of his humanitarian network and received global fame for his contributions. There are few works on his services. I am surprised no serious academic work has been done on his organization and social contributions. Abdul Sattar Edhi's contributions have not received the attention they deserve so this study aims at filling the research gap in the historical literature of Pakistan. The underlying hypothesis of the study is that Abdul Sattar Edhi was the man who truly rendered a vast array of humanitarian services and showed the world what it truly means to be a genuine philanthropist. He considered humanitarian services as transcending all religious beliefs. 'Humanity connects all' was his motto throughout life, and he kept his mother's promise to the very last breath he took. This Research Paper aims to analyze the humanitarianism practiced by Abdul Sattar Edhi along with his vision of life of service to all of humanity and inspiration to build the Edhi Foundation which showed the forward to every individual.

My religion is Humanitarianism... which is the basis of every religion in the world,” said Abdul Sattar Edhi, the most renowned humanitarian and philanthropist of Pakistan. To understand the thought-provoking theories of religion espoused by Edhi, one must eradicate all the biased opinions, look deep into human psychology and bring clarity to one’s mindset. Edhi viewed religion and humanity impartially and brought the best out of it. The core ideas of his religious belief revolved around working for human welfare. This applies to all human thought and action such as moral values (knowing the difference between right and wrong), ethical behaviour (opting for the right path, and refraining from the misdeeds), spirituality or self-purification (a significant force driving humans to do positive, constructive work). He considered significant components of Holy Scriptures in the world. The importance of a humanitarian philosophy inevitably arises when the majority neglects the basic humanitarian principles of their respective faiths. How is it even possible that one can claim to be a Christian or a Hindu or Muslim but is blind to Humanitarianism? For instance, there is a Muslim who never misses fast or any of the five prayers a day, and he goes on to perform Hajj as well. Still, he is not inclined to show any tolerance, support or compassion towards his fellow human beings so does he even qualify either as a human being or a good Muslim? Surely, praying and observing all the obligatory practices is necessary for spiritual growth but practicing moral and ethical values is also indispensable for the good of the society. Even Satan prayed round the clock but his refusal to bow before Adam turned him into a Satan.

Abdul S. Edhi once said, “People have become educated, but have not become human”. Heroes do not come from heavens but are this world’s ordinary human beings who show greater physical and mental strength than others, the will, determination and dedication to deliver for a good cause and have a soft heart for the poor of the society. There may be many out there who are physically healthy and brave, but their willingness to sacrifice for humanity is what makes them stand out. The heroes of today must strive to bring a vision for a better future and have a heart that is engaged in raising the

standard of living for others by serving humanity with their thoughts and actions. Abdul Sattar Edhi is one such contemporary hero. He was an Indian-born Muslim who moved to Pakistan after its creation. And, he crossed religious frontiers to establish the most significant social and private welfare foundation in Pakistan, earning him numerous humanitarian awards and gratified millions who adored and respected him. The tremendous amount of sacrifice for humanity, the passion for delivering the best, having a compassionate heart earned Edhi the title of “The Richest Poor Man” which is a cause of inspiration for many. This is the reason why he is considered the biggest hero of today’s world.

Edhi’s Vision:

Being a visionary man, Edhi followed his motto of “care for all”, and he spent his life in doing so. This practice of selflessness is why he received an immense amount of attention at both the national and international levels. His remained deeply committed to his core purpose throughout his life and he went to every extent possible to fulfill it. In an interview given to a journalist in Lahore, in 1991, Edhi said, ‘I want to request the people not to invite me to social gatherings and inaugural ceremonies. This only waste my time which is wholly devoted to the wellbeing of our people.’¹

Neither Edhi nor his wife Bilquis received any kind of salary or incentive from the activities of the very Edhi Foundation. They received income from the Government securities which they bought years ago to satisfy their personal daily needs a daily. So, they devoted themselves entirely to one cause which was service to Humanity . He operated ambulances, worked in clinics, visited and worked with children, provided medicine, oversaw emergency relief, and handled the foundation’s money. He travelled by bus in performing his work, often sleeping in his office or clinic. Edhi believed that it is an excellent service to help other through acts of kindness. The poor and helpless were given basic training and education so that they can build their own identities. It helped in increasing the living standard of many in the society. Thus, the mission statement of the Edhi Foundation expanded on ‘Giving the

opportunity to Pakistan's underprivileged children through the right to basic education'.²

He also knew that it is education that could help people come out of the miserable cycle of poverty and ignorance. It is only through education that the common people of the society can be made aware of being a part of, and building the strong foundations on which the whole societal building can flourish. In addition to helping the disadvantaged people to read and write he also believed that they should develop into well-rounded and self-sufficient people in life. He founded many vocational services for people which included teaching them driving, pharmaceutical and para-medical training. Edhi knew that it is education that could help them find good jobs and earn a good status in the society. He acknowledged that people who have the money to earn an education could help them find jobs and, most importantly, live with dignity and pride. Through education and service, he felt, many lives can be changed for the better. After establishing the Foundation and focusing on how people can help each other, Edhi served others wholeheartedly because he cared deeply for humanity thus acting as a symbol of courage and sacrifice for the coming generations.

Humanity above Religion:

Abdul Sattar Edhi believed in the equality of all people. He did not distinguish or discriminate based on religion, creed, class or race. Everyone had the same status per his standards of judgment which were based on basic human principles. He believed that discrimination in religion creates an inferiority complex, and this is a hindrance in the character-building of a person. This factor was the leading cause which made him cross all the limits and create an organization for the very welfare of society and Humanity.

When asked, 'Why must you pick up Christians and Hindus in your Ambulance?' his reply was, 'Because the ambulance is more Muslim than you.'³

More or less, every religion in this world emphasizes on being empathetic, caring, peaceful and loving. Humanity exists beyond religious beliefs, and Edhi exemplified that in the best way possible. His role is a correct and dignified answer for generations to come. Somebody may turn his back and refuse to help another person due to his dislike for the latter's religion, however, humanitarianism helps others to grow instead.

And, Abdul Sattar Edhi was just that, a human being whose principles and actions came together where humanity was concerned. This principle enabled his organization to far outgrow others.

Story of Edhi's Humanitarian heroism:

Edhi started his journey of Humanitarian heroism at a young age. His mother played an instrumental part in the development of his character and helped him turn into a good human being. She instilled the spirit of caring for others in him from his childhood. Edhi carried this spirit of helping the less well-off all his life. She gave him two 'paise' every day as pocket money and asked him to spend one on somebody poor and the other on himself. She kept a strict check on him at the start to make sure that he followed her advice.⁴ In fact, from looking for others to help as a young child, Edhi's mother instilled in him the spirit of caring for those who were unable to cope with their surroundings. Actively identifying and assisting people since childhood can help people to empathize with various issues and difficulties in other people's lives. When Edhi reached his teens, his mother became seriously ill and he had to nurse himself because they were so poor, and she had no one else to help them. After taking care of his mother for a few years Edhi came to understand the health problems faced by poor people. After his migration to Pakistan he became aware of the difficulties in the health sector and how the poor people of the society suffered due to lack of facilities. To help in the cause, he created a medical care center at first. In doing so, he joined a local community organization but helping people outside that community got him huge opposition. He did not

like it at all and opened his own dispensary.⁵ His dispensary was free to all poor people regardless of race, religion or color. This humanitarian practice created some personal challenges for him because many did not understand the importance of helping those in need because they wanted to help people of only their respective race or religion. However, Edhi had a huge heart and felt a pity for all the suffering humanity. So he went ahead to find a way to raise money to increase his ability to help those people and increase the number of services they could be offered. Edhi's heart inspired him to find a vision for a better humanity, which made him a hero for today's world.

Edhi's inspiration behind the Edhi foundation:

In the very initial stages, seven "Apna Ghar" sites had been opened in Karachi and Thirteen in Pakistan as a whole. The ones suffering under the dark cloud of poverty always gave him the charge of a situation and melted his heart into a Gold mine which he was always ready to spend. In those miserable times, he knew that the formation of a Foundation is inevitable. It has to be done sooner than later for a better cause. What inspired him was his mother, who he served in the toughest phases of his life. He could not imagine anyone else's mother suffering in such a situation. He had a small amount of experience but a heart of Gold. The nurturing process in his childhood only made him a better person.

He realized the difficulties for the poor and the ones who had no time or money to look after their sick relatives at home. He visited the houses of poor, where he found his mother's illness, pain and death, and they were not able to do anything to overcome it. As a boy, his mother urged him to sympathize with those who suffer. He did so and fulfilled his mother's dream by creating a worldwide organization named "Edhi Foundation".

Founding of Edhi Foundation:

His ideals led him to start a foundation at first and then create a system of donation where anyone could donate from as less as

a rupee to as much as one would wish to contribute. “Moreover, he set up a welfare trust, titled as the Edhi Trust with a starting amount of five thousand rupees. Considered as a protector of the poor people, Edhi started accepting various payments, which permitted him to extend his administration base.”⁶ It was an all-volunteer organization with a rather big dream. In the start, the funding received enabled him to purchase him an ambulance and start a free pharmacy. He drove the ambulance himself at the start. A major chunk of donations came in 1957 when a renowned Merchant from Karachi enabled him to buy a couple of vans. He named his first van as “Poor Man’s Van” driven by Edhi. This eventually grew that into a fleet of several Ambulances and Air Ambulances which served millions of needy and poor every year. With the passage of time, he started to get recognition at the national and international levels. He did not ask government for help but the donations came in regularly. He started to build pharmacies, expand ambulance services, and started his services in many new areas as well. His next area of expansion was caring for the homeless children and abandoned babies. In that cause he built orphanages and expanded funeral services. He created Edhi centres for women, children and elderly. All the required facilities were provided for in those centers.

Edhi expanded his private services network to become the largest social service network in Pakistan. Everybody who was needy was provided assistance. Edhi became a hero through the founding of the Foundation. The Edhi network expanded to meet the needs disaster victims and Pakistani refugees worldwide. Its growing network of services has gained public attention not only in their country but around the world. Edhi was recognized and honored for his humanitarian services everywhere.

One of the important services provided by his foundation was the transportation of dead bodies for burial with due respect and care. During the month of Ramadan, food was supplied to hundreds and thousands of households. Forty-five million meters of cloth were given to people in Karachi City. Edhi tried to provide the basic needs of every human being so that they

could live the right life, and he succeeded in his purpose. The Foundation also has marine ambulances to help victims of flooding. The Child Adoption Center saved many lives and provided children's blessings to couples without children. The description of the Edhi Center is incomplete without describing Bilquis Edhi School providing free education to children from grades one through five.⁷ Edhi knew that many children could not go to school because of the rising population, inflation, and unemployment. Therefore, they established schools in developed areas and now these schools are raising good citizens for the society.

No Mosque in the Edhi Centre:

The best example of his humanitarianism is that he did not build any mosque in the Edhi Centre. He created several prayer rooms where different religious communities regardless of their faith could offer their prayers. All the festivals like the Holi of Hindus, Christmas of Christians, and Eid of Muslims were duly celebrated. Both Bilquis and Edhi himself used to come and celebrate with the respective community. The office of Bilquis had many Hindu and Christian workers. They helped her in her daily chores. The start of Edhi Graveyard was another huge step forward to the problem of burying the dead.

There was a huge number of dead bodies which were abandoned without any identification. They were thrown away by the families who could not afford the burials and were poverty-stricken. The low-income families got turned away from the situation to avoid social embarrassment. This caused to create such burial services that could be helpful for such families. Not only in Pakistan but this idea has solved many problems of burial worldwide. The burial services offered by Edhi in many cities at his Foundation's expense picks up the dead bodies and buries them with proper religious rites.⁸

The major controversy popped out when Edhi started the same ritual for both Muslims and Non-Muslims. He received heavy criticism and opposition from the clerics. This religious extremism did not turn him down from the cause he was

fighting for, which was humanity. He received public support and answered all this criticism by saying that,

“The next time when there will be an injured child who needed to be taken to the hospital. I would first ask for his certificate as to confirm his religion”.

Fight against Religious Extremism to lift Humanity:

Edhi fought bravely against religious extremism and provided a place for orphans and illegitimate children. A cradle was placed outside the centre to reduce the increasing rate of infanticide. Because his aim was greater than any religion his work saved twenty thousand infants from death. He is now considered the "Father Teresa" of Pakistan. By the time he died, Edhi had been registered as the father of about twenty thousand children. He fought for the rights of orphans and won the case for a national identity card for orphans. Children are well cared for in these orphanages, and they are given quality education. Those children are now serving their country as best they can and making the world a better place to live.

Children with Disabilities:

‘Edhi’s cradle’ is for those children who are mostly children who are born handicapped and with various disabilities. Their parents can’t look after them due to poverty or lack of education but these children grow up discriminated against so require lot of support which Edhi Foundation tries to provide.

They grow up in the Edhi Center and it helps them fit into life according to their disability. The Edhi Center has always made instrumental and heartfelt contribution towards this cause.

The disabled children are adopted by the Edhi Centre. Edhi Centre becomes their legal guardians by the age of 18. It is estimated that 18000 children were adopted by the Edhi Foundation since 1957.⁹

There are over 1000 photographs of children in the Bilquis's office, which clearly shows the huge amount of care and respect given to such cases. This has remained a huge subject of research and development for many other relevant

organisations. All documents for the protection of the child and his new family are kept private, only information disclosed is for the Child's adopter.

School for the Training of Nurses:

The range of activities provided by Edhi is large. The nurses got training in the school for couple of years. The ones to join the school were mostly divorcees or the widows who had been the rejected by their families and the society at large. Edhi gave them due shelter and accommodation plus all the help and support which could help make them a better person. They also received a small apartment to live in. Moreover, after the completion of the course, they received a diploma certificate through which they could go on and work for either the Edhi Foundation or in private hospitals.

Bilquis stood shoulder to shoulder as her husband's partner in his demanding mission. She supported his cause in every aspect. She believed that all the educational courses initiated by her husband turn a woman into a better person and help her to grow and progress over time. She thought that all the hospitals needed nurses being trained by the Edhi Foundation's medical institutes.

Mental Health care section for women:

"No man is an island entire of itself, each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main"

John Donne

Women are treated fairly in a mental health care facility provided by Edhi Foundation. They are prompted to follow the routine of waking up early in the morning, washing their faces, and then having a breakfast. Moreover, they clean their clothes and rooms, wash their bedroom floors by hand scrubbing with soap and water. They clean the corridors and the benches themselves. Edhi Foundation looks after those who are not able to wash clothes and arrange things properly. Workers are there

to help them anytime needed. Everything is kept nice and clean over there.¹⁰

The person who visits the area finds the place to be clean, so if the mud or dust is spread on the floor by older or troubled patients Edhi workers are present to help out. There are clean and well-covered hallways, and there are plastic jugs and blankets for patients. They have ample facilities for drinking, eating and sleeping. If any odd situation comes up, assistance is always readily available.

Every religious holiday or Muslim, Christian or Hindu festival is celebrated. People from all backgrounds interact with each other and all the observances take place. Women who were evicted from their homes were taken care of as his own children.

Edhi wanted support from his people to change this attitude, and he has done so by implementing a strategy and working for a cause.

Edhi Village:

The village has about 63 acres of land. Edhi Foundation always looked after the mentally ill people with disabilities because they were not even accepted and treated well in government hospitals, so there arose a dire need for a place where such people could live freely, enjoy and spend time together. These constitute basic amenities for such people. Edhi always thought of building a place where he could house and provide open spaces for the disabled. Back in the days when he was a little boy, he was tortured by the sight of a sick boy. He wanted to do something for such people. His desires were different from his peers and Humanity was always his top priority.

Edhi told the stories of his childhood to his workers, colleagues and his adopted family of thousands. grew confidence in many people around him. It gave them courage to live a life that is completely free from any kind of stress. In the making of Edhi Foundation and running its operations solely for humanity, he faced a lot of criticism. But this was a victory that her mother trained him for and she praised him for having

a son like her, because she raised his voice for someone who was nobody in the waiting to become someone all the world would praise about. The village was built in 1996 with the help of mercenaries and drug addicts from nearby villages. Edhi foundation has since been taking care of them because according to them this is work therapy for them and they can do anything in return for doing nothing. The Edhi bought the generator, and the students swept, cleaned and wired the entire building by themselves.

Awards:

The vision, the mission, the dedication were accompanied by a strong will and a thorough approach and planning to achieve his purpose. Edhi was a man of action and he showed that to a great extent. His Humanitarian services were duly awarded for bringing positive changes in the life of millions. He won the following international awards:

1. The Lenin Peace Prize (1988)
2. Peace Prize from the former USSR, for services during the Armenian earthquake disaster (1988)
3. Hamdan Award for volunteers in Humanitarian Medical Services (2000)
4. International Balzan Prize (2000) for Humanity
5. Peace and Brotherhood, Italy
6. Gandhi Peace Award (2007), Delhi
7. Seoul Peace Prize (2008), Seoul
8. Muslim Peace Prize (2010); London Peace Award (2011), London

National awards including:

1. Human Rights Award by the Pakistan Human Rights Society
2. Shield of Honor by Pakistan Army (E & C)

3. Pakistan Civic Award from the Pakistan Civic Society (1992)
4. Recognition of exemplary services to oppressed humanity during the 1980s by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare
5. Government of Pakistan (1989), Edhi's life was lived simply and without any income from his charity.¹¹

He died, but his work is still alive. It is his legacy which will be carried on in the times to come. His work which amply reflects his doctrine of Humanitarianism is still alive. At this very moment, the Edhi Foundation has more than 6000 volunteers who are working days and night to make things better for poor and dejected ones of the society. All these volunteers are divided into different groups and organized to help twelve major service areas which range from finding missing people and rendering aid during disasters worldwide.¹²

Moreover, the impressive thing about Edhi was his lifestyle and the moral values he practiced. He always remained true to his words, and did all in his ability to deliver for the community. It was the course of the action he took from the very first day, which made him stand apart from others.

The 'Richest poor man' did what most of us could barely imagine. Only for the benefit of others, to feed the poor, to help the needy and shelter the depressed, he spent his life for Humanitarian cause.

International community centres:

As the work of Edhi is way beyond the limits set by religion, similarly, it is way beyond the borders. Edhi foundation has extended and provided services in the following cities:

1. New York
2. Ontario
3. Dacca

4. Tokyo
5. Sydney
6. London
7. Dubai

The activities include the following:

- Burial services for the dead
- Managing a person's finances
- Providing some personal support to those needy people who visit foreign countries for medical treatment
- Help in restoring the run-away children to their families and drugs helpful service.¹³

Refugee assistance:

The services and support of people extends way beyond borders or limits of any kind. He lifted the will of humanity and served them in the best way possible. Refugee assistance is another significant example. Here is the list of countries who are receiving valuable services provided by the Edhi Foundation:

1. Afghanistan
2. Kashmir
3. Bosnia
4. Iraq
5. Burma
6. Nepal
7. Bangladesh
8. Somalia

Over the years, it is estimated that Edhi saved the lives of nearly 50,000 babies. His organization has 1800 emergency vehicles, 28 rescue boats and two airplanes for emergency use.¹⁴

Conclusion:

The whole discussion done above demonstrates the fact that the services of Edhi were second to none. Today's world is full of Humanitarian organizations operating globally. But the parallel to Edhi or his works is near impossible. The commitment, the desire, the sincerity he had in his heart and the way he delivered is just incredible. All through his life, he worked on his goal, which ultimately made him the most prominent philanthropist of all time. His work spread over six decades in which he helped an infinite number of people to grow beyond the needs of society and find a solution that is immaculate in every way possible. He taught the spirit of humanity, love, brotherhood in the society. His zest for humanity amazingly was never subject to the law of diminishing return. He changed the dynamics of people and the public who were divided based on creed, religion and race. He was there to fill the void and gap left by incompetent governments. One after the other, the need for more was always there. The governance methods were flawed, and no one succeeded like that of Edhi in the toughest of times possible.¹⁵

Below given verses best explain him:

insan ban'na *Farishte se behtar hai*

mehnat zyada *Magar is men lagti hai*

(It is better to become a Good Human being than wishing to be an angel, but it takes much more effort and time than it seems)

The services of Edhi were second to none, and it were Abdul Sattar Edhi's exemplary character and achievements which made him a better human being. Such a path will surely lead to a more peaceful world.

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