7 Abul Sattar Edhi

The modern incarnation of a Pacifist Sufi

Tahir Kamran

Abdul Sattar Edhi, “a truly selfless spiritual sage” (Oborne 2011), embraced simplicity typical of a *dervish* who, while sitting in his *dargah* (hospice) cares for humanity without provincializing it. In that hospice, all are welcome irrespective of religion, caste or creed and in many instances gender too.¹ “From the cradle to the Grave” is the motto of Edhi’s mission which caters to the needs of “a suffering humanity.” Edhi and his wife Bilquis Edhi embraced the newborn and the old who have been abandoned, the girl who has run away from home, the drug addict who is trying to recover, the handicapped and terminally ill (Raponi and Zanzucchi 2013: 35). According to Hussain Ahmad Khan (2015: 24–25), a historian of Sufism, hospices in the pre-colonial era, provided refuge to the marginalized and outcaste which at times incurred the ire of those in power. Thus, Edhi can at best be explained as a dervish, devoted to the service of humanity who instead of renouncing modernity, embraced it. His motivation and lifelong goal, however, transcended the man-made boundary splitting medieval and the modern, the human welfare. It was, of course, among the very few constants and universals.

Hailing from the state of Gujrat in India, a region known for nestling and nurturing personalities such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, to quote a few, Abdul Sattar Edhi epitomized a multicultural ethos in which he was reared up. Edhi also influenced people markedly different from the rest. He attained the status of an icon in service to humanity without resorting to high politics. Unlike Imran Khan, he steered clear of using high politics to be the messiah of the deprived and dispossessed. Like many South Asian *dervish*, he also gave a wide berth to a high lifestyle. It is important to assert here that Edhi himself never indicated about his any adherence with any Sufi or *dargah*. As it will be noted in the pages that follow, all those having inspired him to choose a life that of a *dervish* were all modern people. However, the austere and simple life of Edhi appears to have a profound rub of medieval Sufis. In the medieval period, among several functions of the Sufi *dargah*, one was that of a charity organization. That is the only possible context that may help us to make sense of Edhi’s gargantuan undertaking to ameliorate the lot of the poor and the dispossessed.

It was in the 1950s that Edhi established the Edhi Foundation, which is the largest social welfare network in Pakistan. The dynamic nature and the range of

social services provided by the Edhi Foundation make it starkly different from other organizations, operating in and outside Pakistan. It claims the credit of becoming the most active welfare organization in the country at the grassroots level. The Foundation is a home for over 6,000 destitute, runaways and mentally ill people, and it provides free dispensary and hospital services to over 1,000,000 persons annually in addition to 45 other wide-ranging services (Durrani 1996: 23). The Foundation “rescued over twenty thousand infants, rehabilitated over fifty thousand orphans and has trained over forty thousand nurses—operating more than 330 welfare centres” in Pakistan. In 1991, “the Foundation provided aid to victims of the Gulf war and earthquake sufferers in Egypt and Iran. The organization has held the Guinness record, 2010, for the world’s *largest volunteer ambulance organization*” (Khan 2017). That fleet of ambulances maintains an enviable record of quick response for the affectees of any disaster. Its nation-wide network equipped with the latest communication system now covers the remotest areas of Pakistan. A fleet of over four hundred ambulances, field mobile units and rescue units, which compose this network, are maintained in a state of readiness to meet any emergency in the shortest possible time anywhere in Pakistan.

My contention in this study is that despite his persona like a *dervish* in a *dargah* Edhi was influenced by socialist ideologies, too, and he used modern tools and institutions to advance his cause, but he lived like a *dervish* who had risen above material gains. He explained to his friends, “[M]uch as my palm turns up to take, it simultaneously turns down to give” (Durrani 1996: 262). That, in fact, was the true essence of Edhi, a *dervish*, who earned respect worldwide, but more important, he was the most trusted man around. His style of praying was reminiscent of the *dargah*. Women prayed with him. Women played an important role in *dargah* culture. He has been shown praying along with girls in *Apna Ghar* is a clear elucidation of indiscrimination among the male and the female (Durrani 1996: 262). His ultimate wish was to be buried in the clothes he wore when he died and for any of his usable organs to be donated. His eyes were donated after his death (Khan 2016). Having only two pairs of *shalwarkameez*, most of the donations for the Edhi Foundation came from middle-class people. Like a *dervish*, Edhi selected a place for his grave on the outskirts of the Edhi village in Karachi:

When I die, I will be buried here. There will be a sign on my grave saying: ‘Those who do not give a donation to Edhi will have an accident on the Super Highway’! Since accidents on the Super Highway are common and people are superstitious, they will donate. In this way I will continue collecting funds for the foundation even after my death.

(Jaffer 2016)

To assess the role and contribution of Edhi and his philanthropic endeavour, it is pertinent to cast a close look at his early life which may enable us to ascertain the source of inspiration for Edhi to choose such a challenging career path. It will not be out of place to mention that in this study the writer has benefitted from Tehmina Durrani’s (1996) book on Abdul Sattar Edhi or K. H. Awan’s (1987) work which is quite insightful. A major part of this chapter is based on newspaper

reports and features. Unfortunately, despite Edhi's status that his contribution to the poor and dispossessed warrants, very little scholarly work has so far been carried out.

Early life: influences of socialism, corporate world and Islam

Abdul Sattar Edhi was born in 1928 in Dhobiwar quarters of a small village of Bantva near Junagarh, Gujarat (India). He was number three among four brothers and a sister (Awan 1987:13). His father was Abdul Shakoor, a small-scale cloth trader who belonged to the Edhi tribe of the Memon community.² About the history of Memon community, it is noted in his biography that “[t]hree centuries ago, a religious leader in Thatta converted them from the Hindu faith to Islam and named them, *Momins*, meaning true believers. This was later distorted to Memons” (Durrani 1996: 23) That account goes ahead to say,

The Memons moved from Hala in Sindh, through the Thar desert or via the Rann of Kutch and migrated to Kathiawar in Gujrat. Wherever they settled became their future identity. The Viravel Memons, the Dorajee Memons and Kotyana Memons and the Bantva Memons.

(Durrani 1996: 23)

Abdul Sattar Edhi hailed from Bantva Memons. As described earlier Bantva was a village of Edhi's birthplace which stuck with him as a part of his identity.

Edhi in Gujrati language means “lazy,” but contrariwise the tribe was known for its vigilance, hard work, commitment, and humanism (Durrani 1996: 23). His father was widowed twice before marrying Ghurba—a daughter of the Diwan family, renowned for its business. Ghurba, Edhi's mother, was divorced and had a son and a daughter before marrying Abdul Shakoor. Edhi got his primary education in a local Islamic *madrassa*, where the medium of instruction was Gujrati. His lack of interest in studies forced his parents to abandon the dream of their child getting further education. Edhi started doing menial jobs at the age of 11. He worked as a salesperson at a local cloth store. He also used to sell betel leaves. He was endowed with the zeal to help the poor right from his childhood. He worked as a compounder in the village and wished to go to Bombay or Allahabad to earn money to help the poor. His friends used to make fun of him.

At the age of 11, Edhi became inclined towards philanthropic work while looking after his mother who was suffering from paralysis. For the next eight years until her death, young Abdul Sattar devoted all his energies to look after her and took it on himself responsibilities of personal care that a physically handicapped person requires. This experience had a profound influence on Edhi, which also distracted him further from his studies. For him, the world of suffering became his tutor and source of wisdom. He would recount many years later how his mother was the first person to inspire him to practice charity. According to Edhi, his mother would give him two paise, of which she would instruct him to spend half on himself and half in charity on some other person. She also advised him, “Always find out if the person is really in need. It is poisonous to give charity to

useless people, or to embarrass those who do not need it” (Durrani 1996: 26). It will not be out of place of mention that the suffering his mother endured when she contracted cancer had been the principal motivation for Imran Khan to build a cancer hospital in her name. Thus, the role of the “mother” is quite decisive in galvanizing both the philanthropists onto an altruistic path.

Edhi began to think of the millions, suffering like his mother, with nobody to look after them. He thought that he had a call to help these people. He had a vision of chains of welfare centres and hospitals that could be opened to alleviate the pain of those suffering from illness and neglect. He also became aware of the fact that the mentally ill, the insane and the disabled persons had not been treated well as the country lacked an effective and fully functional system and the institutional support by the state to take proper care of the mentally retarded and physically incapacitated members of the society.

Apart from his personal experiences, socialist ideas also influenced Edhi’s world view at the young age of 13. He became acquainted with Marxist ideology through a number of local newspapers and magazines that had been published in Gujrat in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. Some of them included *The Muslim Gujrat Gazette*, *Bombay Samachar* and *Sandes* (a Hindi word that means “message”) (Tahir, n.d). He also read works on Karl Marx and Maxim Gorky’s novel *Mother*, which left an indelible impression on him. He was particularly impressed by the perseverance Karl Marx (1818–1883) had demonstrated while pursuing his mission. He began to believe that people’s nature was shaped by their circumstances.

Edhi began to take interest in Islam and drew its similarities with socialism by studying the life of the Prophet of Islam, the tragedy of Karbala and Lenin’s implementation of Marxist philosophy. For him, rebels and reformers addressed the same issues related to humanity. This understanding enabled him to approach the history of Islam from the perspective of the struggle between the haves and the have-nots. The life of the Prophet’s poor companion, Abū Dharr al-Ghifari (d. 652 BC),³ fascinated him in considerable measure who criticized Muslim rulers for accumulating wealth and not bringing in any social reform. According to him, “every reformer renounces his own comfort, he doesn’t even need to build a house. When you think of others you stop thinking of yourself. There is no space for that small character” (Durrani 1996: 263) He viewed Yazid,⁴ the villain of Karbala, as a class enemy who represented wealth and repression. To him,

the tragedy of Karbala was not a mere event, it is a living example. It confirms the extent of commitment required when man becomes aware of an injustice done to another human being. It highlights God’s demand for humanitarianism above all us, especially your own self.

(Durrani 1996: 140)

It is important to note that Edhi did not embrace any ideology without critically analysing it. He possessed a unique ability to scrutinize every concept or a notion before coming to terms with it. That exactly was the reason he viewed

communism as a system which “quashed personal uplift and killed individual initiative altogether.” In its stead, he considered Islam that “aroused human energy” (Durrani 1996: 304) which opens possibilities not only for the common good and welfare but for uplifting of the individual as well. He was quite categorical in saying that his system was not “confined to individual help or charity, it was collective work conducted by personal motivation” (Durrani 1996: 304). That, in fact, was the secret of Edhi’s phenomenal success. He believed in the decisiveness of the role of the individual as well as the collective, not privileging one over the other.

Study of the lives of reformers and revolutionaries made him more rebellious and he began to detest big investors. Various nationalist and anti-imperialist movements in India led by M. K. Gandhi, Inayatullah Khan Mashriqui⁵ and M. A. Jinnah (1876–1948) deeply influenced him. Jinnah was elected president of a leading trade union of British India, the All India Postal Staff Union in 1925 (Wolpert 1984). He was moved by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan’s (1890–1988) Khudai Khidmatgar Party,⁶ which was reaching out to the common man in villages and striving hard to solve their problems. He was appreciative of Gandhi’s decision to remain in Calcutta (in 1946) until the Hindu–Muslims riots ceased. He was cognizant of the seething anger that people felt against colonialism, which aroused his interest in the struggle of Muhammad Ali Jinnah for Pakistan.

All these personalities were a source of inspiration for him, but he had his own philosophy of life which had a Sufi ring to it. That is what made him distinct. He assumed “the responsibility of the elevated human position of *Ashraf-ul Mukhlukaat*, (best of God’s creatures) where God is one and each man encloses His spirit” (Durrani 1996: 305). That seems to me that the kernel of his philosophy which draws him very close to the ideology of *Wahdat-ul Wujud*, propounded originally by Ibne Arabi.⁷ Hence, Edhi was a Sufi and a dervish. That spirit that he partook from God, his “own judgements and decisions had become instrument[s] of success.”⁸ His humanism essentially was predicated on this postulate, which I reckon was embedded in Sufi ethos.

The egalitarian principles which Edhi embraced during his childhood and adolescence fed into the progressive agenda of the institutions he came to subsequently establish. Of these principles, he gave top-most priority to humanism. He openly proclaimed the faith that was “[his] religion is humanitarianism which is the basis of every religion in the world.”⁹ For him, “three evils: mullahs (clergy), politicians, and social workers/NGOs [non-governmental organizations]” are at the heart of the social malaise that Pakistan is plagued with (Jaffer 2016). He kept on following the creed which prioritized humanism over everything else throughout his life and was able to earn the respect of all sections of society (Jaffer 2016). Edhi and his family migrated to Pakistan in 1947. Initially, he was forced to eke out his living as a vendor, but later, he became a local agent for the cloth wholesalers (Durrani 1996).

Beginning of charity work

Immediately after Indian partition, Edhi, along with his family, migrated to Karachi and settled in a Memon neighbourhood called Mithadar. In 1948,

Edhi became deeply involved in the charity work, as a rich businessman had established a dispensary in the neighbourhood. He started collecting medicines from that dispensary and distributed them among the poor and needy. Later on, he decided to establish a free dispensary; some of the members of the Memon community supported him in the endeavour. Edhi also established an “Adult Literacy Center” [presumably] in the late 1940s.¹⁰ Like, the other projects that Edhi had launched, the latter had humble origins. He enlisted the support of some of his friends to start the initiative. The centre was established in a single room, where only one teacher taught the adults in the evening. Edhi also allowed the Young Muslims Association, a local charity organization, to organize religious sermons.

The prominent feature of the services that the Foundation offers, is that they are provided on a regular basis. For instance, the Edhi Foundation offers round the clock emergency services across the country through its 250 centres. The foundation runs on a voluntary basis. It does not rely on the grant-in-aid by the government. Significantly enough, the Edhi centres provide the services regardless of creed, race, colour, language, religion or politics (Tahir, n.d).

In 1951 he purchased a van which he named as the *Gharib* van (van for poor).¹¹ He bought it for Rs. 2,400. At that time, he had the total amount of Rs. 3,000 in his bank account. He allocated the rest of the money for paying the salary of the driver. Edhi used the van for collecting/finding unclaimed and decaying dead bodies/corpses. He used to give them the *ghusal* (the Islamic ritual of bathing the dead bodies before burial) before giving them Islamic burial. In a Muslim state, that is a responsibility of the government to arrange for the *ghusal* and burial of the unclaimed bodies. In the 1990s, when the law and order in Karachi had considerably deteriorated, the gunplay and internecine crossfire among various factions could not deter him to collect the corpses and bury them honourably. Reverting to his other philanthropic ventures, Edhi founded a free dispensary in 1954 in the Bolton market area. Later, he expanded the service by purchasing a plot adjoining the dispensary for rupees 14,000.

The year 1957 was of critical significance in Edhi’s philanthropic career. That year Hong Kong was badly afflicted by a deadly epidemic. Edhi headed the team of relief workers and because of his zeal to ameliorate the lot of those hit by the epidemic, Edhi not only won plaudits but also worldwide recognition. His service towards the suffering of humanity in Hong Kong contributed significantly in building the public trust in his philanthropic work. Edhi’s biography offers us clear hints that he had earned respect as a renowned social worker, and it was then that he came to be known as “angel of mercy” (*The Guardian* 2016). Now, more generous funding from various donors started pouring in for his philanthropic work.

In 1958, Edhi set up a maternity clinic that was attached to the dispensary which he had established in 1954. The clinic provided maternity care free of charge, even the mothers had not to pay for the vaccination of their children. The maternity clinic had humble origins. In the initial years Edhi found it difficult to attract the attention of women of other communities towards the nursing profession, as most of the women were reluctant to get training in nursing care. However, Edhi initially could only manage to persuade the girls from Memon families, the community which he belonged, to training in nursing services.

Similarly, in the beginning, only a female doctor used to examine the patients. But with the passage of time attitudes and perceptions changed and sharp-edged gender distinction was blunted over time. Edhi understood that the social norms and practices take time to evolve; therefore, he did not hasten things. The perseverance and patience are needed to make such an evolution possible, in Edhi these attribute had been in abundance.

The year 1965 holds considerable significance in Edhi's life and his humanitarian mission. That year, he got married to Bilquis.¹² In fact, seven women in rapid succession refused his offers for marriage (Oborne 2011). Bilquis worked as a nurse in his maternity clinic. Although the choice of a marriage partner is regarded as essentially a personal affair of an individual, in the case of Edhi, his marriage was much more than merely a personal and private affair. His marriage with Bilquis proved to be a turning point in his life. Bilquis Edhi, herself a selfless philanthropic worker, turned out to be a great asset for Edhi philanthropic mission. She stuck by Edhi through thick and thin. The couple devoted their entire lives to the humanitarian work. Her active involvement in the philanthropic work shows that she possessed an extraordinary talent for managing and supervising philanthropic projects. Edhi, later, handed over the responsibilities of maternity clinics and such affairs relating to women to his wife. He appointed Bilquis, as the head of one of the affiliates to the Edhi Foundation, and named the organization after her.¹³ The couple had three sons, Faisal Edhi, Kutub Edhi, Almas Edhi, and a daughter, Kubra.

A very important task that Edhi assigned to Bilquis was managing of the *jhola* (baby cradles) service for the neglected/abandoned children, which also triggered controversy. Religious clerics raised serious objection to such a service, which according to them was encouraging people to bear children out of the wedlock.

"Jhoolas" are installed at most of the emergency Edhi centres, where unwanted infants can be left. These abandoned babies are then taken into custody and given shelter in Edhi Homes. Although initially, Edhi was subject to a lot of pressure from several quarters on initiating Jhoola service, gradually the idea caught on. He faced trenchant criticism from the clergy; some of them incriminated him of encouraging the "sinful" act of producing illegitimate children.¹⁴ Now people even come forward to hand over the babies themselves to officials at the Edhi centres. Such infants are thereafter given in the care of suitable deserving families not having children of their own, for adoption. Mrs. Bilquis Edhi, the head of this service, through a centralized system, checks the credentials of the adopting parents and conducts a regular follow-up. Babies left over in garbage dumps outside Karachi are air-lifted to the central nursery located in Karachi, where medical and nursing care is provided before adoption. All documentation of this service is kept confidential to save the child from facing social problems afterwards. That initiative draws our attention back to dargah where abandon children were accepted. We do find references to abandoned children, fatherless children or orphans, being sheltered in shrines. We can conjecture that since shrines were spaces for the marginalized, the Sufis protected such children as it was also their religious obligation. The Sufis probably did not reveal identities of such children to protect their honour and future. Even at the state level, Ottomans protected

such children, who later become part of janissaries. Janissaries were always connected with local Sufi Silsila (Order). It was the Ottomans' strategy for making them valuable citizen (see Bhaduri 2001: 125; Dhau and Kamath 2006: 38; Valdinoci 2012: 34).

Another manifestation of Edhi's progressive outlook was that he continued to encourage greater participation of women in economic activities. About woman, Edhi thought that she is "a natural social worker, child bearer and child rearer. She has greater social guts, stronger nerves and superior sensitivity towards injustice than the male" (Durrani 1996: 114). That is why one is not surprised to find out that women constituted a substantial part of the paid employees of the Edhi Foundation. A report that was published in *Pakistan Times* quoted that

Of the 2,000 paid workers of the Edhi Foundation around 500 are women. They work in various capacities, in-charges of Edhi centers, heads of maternity homes and dispensaries and office workers. Moreover, several women volunteers help Edhi Foundation in fundraising. Edhi encourages women to do all sorts of work without differentiation.¹⁵

Pakistan and India were entangled in another armed conflict in 1971.¹⁶ Edhi played a proactive role during the war in helping the people, who suffered, despite his meagre financial resources. He visited the places affected by bombardment of Indian artillery and air force and brought a fleet of three ambulances that transported the wounded to hospitals. He also provided mats/terpolain bamboo poles for shelter, food grains (rice and pulses), quilts, clothes and the other articles of daily use to the Behari-speaking refugees who came to Karachi in large numbers from East Pakistan.¹⁷ When Swat was hit by a severe earthquake in 1974, Edhi and his wife stayed there for eight days and distributed Rs. 16,000 worth of medicines besides some other relief goods like blankets.

The establishment of the Edhi Foundation (1974): a brief overview of its activities between 1974 to date

Till 1974, Edhi's philanthropic network had expanded to such a scale that he decided to get the organization registered under the name of the "Edhi Trust." The organization grew over time into the most vibrant social welfare institution of the country. Edhi made an appeal to the public for funds, which triggered an enthusiastic response. Edhi managed to collect donations of Rs. 200,000.

K. H. Awan's work provides us useful insights about the expansion of Edhi's philanthropic network till 1987. The dispensary from which Edhi had launched his humanitarian mission in the early 1950s had developed into a large building with three stories. The emergency centre and office occupied the ground floor, whereas dispensary and maternity homes were on the upper floors. The trust owned 80 ambulances. The numbers of vans had increased to 175. The number of Edhi centres had risen to 24. The annual funding of the Edhi Trust had increased to 50 million rupees (Awan 1987: 24–25). The free dispensaries had been providing treatment services to 500 patients per day on average. The Maternity Home

(Clinic) had provided maternity care to 21,000 cases since 1958 (Jaffer 2016). We can add that the Apna Ghar, a community project for the shelter of homeless persons, which the Edhi Trust had launched in Sohrab Goth, had been providing shelter to 41,000 people. The Edhi centres also started providing free meals to indigent patients in the tuberculosis and civil hospitals in Karachi. Edhi Home, also called as “Apna Ghar” (Our Home), is a home for the mentally ill destitute, for orphans and for runaways. There are 13 such homes in the country, of which seven are in Karachi. About 6,000 persons live in Edhi Homes. A destitute or homeless person becomes a member of Edhi’s family once he enters its premises. All boarding, lodging, clothing, and logistic arrangements are entirely free. If a person dies within these homes, the burial arrangements are made by the foundation according to the religious rites of the deceased (Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Christian, or any other religion).¹⁸

The provision of blood to save human lives remains an essential element of emergency services. In major accidents, natural calamities and bomb blasts, among other emergencies, blood is supplied to the needy on an emergency basis. All welfare centres of major cities in Pakistan regularly keep an updated list of donors of all blood groups and conduct campaigns for enlisting more donors for the collection of blood. Blood is pooled in hospitals from the volunteer donors and is provided free of cost in cases of heart surgeries and other major operations to poor patients. Two blood banks, one at Karachi and the other at Mirpur, have proper facilities for storing and screening blood, from where hundreds of pints of screened blood are being regularly dispensed to the government hospitals.

The Edhi Foundation was a pioneer in starting its marine services. Thus, qualified divers were recruited, and other amenities were acquired. Rescue teams had been organized at all rivers, lakes and dams, who “relayed advanced signals in hazardous areas. Air dropping of provisions for the entrapped ships and fishermen in the ocean, as well as recovering bodies from the sea” (Durrani 1996: 267).

Another excerpt of K. H. Awan’s work provides us insights about the effective role that the Edhi Trust had been playing in the country. He wrote about Edhi that:

[h]e is not narrow-minded, makes no distinction between this man and that man on the basis of color or creed. He is out to serve all suffering humanity. His ideological bent led to opposition from a vocal section of his community but he ignored it and founded institutions under the name of EdhiTrust, small though it was in the beginning, it is now a large organization well known not only in Karachi but throughout Pakistan and beyond and calamity, natural or otherwise be it an earthquake, a cyclone and epidemic or a bomb blast by terrorist or any other man made tragedy, Edhi arrives there with his men and materials for rescue and relief operations.

(Awan 1987: 9)

The existing centres provide first aid to accident victims and arrange for their speedy transfer to the nearby hospitals. Moreover, these centres are being used for providing medical facilities in rural and semi-urban areas. Also, they provide

ambulance service at nominal charges, a facility for vaccinating newborn babies and children against diseases, and other welfare services. The dispensary and mobile dispensary at each centre cater for medical assistance to approximately 250 patients daily. Edhi divided Pakistan into 16 zones, and each zone was responsible for raising its own funds and meeting its own expenditure, which was quite like the commune system in socialist countries, particularly in People's Republic of China. More so, it also demonstrated extraordinary organizational skills of Edhi. His organizational skills came to him naturally despite lack of apparently sophisticated education. He was compassionate but extremely meticulous and led others by example. Despite the vastness of Edhi Foundation, it never seemed wanting in the efficiency or management. He at times acted like a corporate head. The Edhi management style was to assign a task to a person you trust completely and then get out of his way (Jaffer 2016). That is yet another trait that Edhi shared with Imran Khan.

One of the blog posts of the foundations contains the profile of its founder Abdul Sattar Edhi, which is a vivid reflection of his humane and austere nature. The post reads:

He involves himself in every activity at Edhi Foundation from raising funds to bathing corpses. Round the clock, he keeps with him an ambulance, which he drives himself and makes rounds of the city regularly. On finding a destitute or an injured person anywhere on the way, he escorts him to the Relief Centre where immediate attention is given to the needy person. In spite of his busy work schedule with the Foundation, Edhi finds enough time to spare with the residents of the orphanages called "Edhi Homes." He is very fond of playing and laughing with the children. A short strongly built man in his early seventies with a flowing beard and a ready smile, Edhi is popularly called "Nana" (Grandfather) by the residents of "Edhi Homes."¹⁹

He still rests or sleeps at night on a wooden bench of his breakfast, and eats his breakfast, which is a leftover loaf of bread baked a day earlier. He neither chews betel leaves nor smokes doesn't like to view T.V. programs or listen to radio broadcasts. His heart throbs with the desire to do as much good as possible for his country for his people and for the humanity at large. (Oborne 2011)

The last paragraph is a vivid testament of Edhi as a genuine and authentic being. Sleeping on a wooden bench, eating leftovers and abstaining from such frivolities like smoking and chewing betels, among others, prove him to be a dervish who effortlessly defied all worldly enticements. In this day and age, when materiality reigns supreme, a person of so little wants and needs cannot be defined other than the dervish. He is said to be on the guard in the face of flattery and praise by the media and other sources and kept reminding himself that he was an ordinary man. About the eulogizing newspaper articles, he once said, "Do not let them exaggerate your position. Many have fallen flat by forgetting their ordinariness. You (Edhi himself) are a small man trying to prove that the extraordinary is ordinary" (Durrani 1996: 107–108).

For the meritorious services that Edhi rendered to the suffering humanity, he was acknowledged both nationally as well as internationally. His profile indicates that he got 12 national and 14 international awards. He received the Philippines' national award for social service, Ramon Magsaysay, in 1986. But the awards like Lenin Peace Prize (in 1988) and Ahmadiyya Peace Prize were contentious as the religious impulse of Pakistan's public takes strong exception to anything associated with communist ideology or the Ahmadiyya community. Among the choices he made in his life, one inference can easily be drawn that Edhi lived his life on his own terms. He was never intimidated by anyone nor was he overawed in any situation. Until he breathed his last on July 2016, Abdul Sattar Edhi lived as brave man who was answerable only to his own conscious.

Conclusion

An individual will practically be recognized as a citizen of Pakistan if he is Muslim, and in many cases, he has to be a Sunni Muslim. Human as a category does not exist in Pakistan's national discourse. However, Edhi, despite all odds, remained engaged with humans, which makes him what he eventually became: a social icon; some called him the richest poor man whereas for some, he was beloved of all but a very few. He was well conversant with Karl Marx and Lenin, and he might have drawn inspiration from their works. But by embarking on a philanthropic path and subsequently establishing *Apna Ghar* and the Edhi centres, he seemed to have drawn much of his inspiration from medieval institution of dargah. Dargah catered to the human, irrespective of the attendee's religious identity. *Langar* (free kitchen) was its hallmark where everyone was welcome. That, in fact, was a unique symbol of rebellion against the entrenched hierarchy imposed through the caste system.

Edhi, too, was an advocate par excellence of social equality. His own persona was no different from that of a dervish with his simple attire and unpretentious lifestyle and mannerism. The biggest attribute of a dervish is his indifference to the material gain. In the South Asian culture, only dervish can wield the trust of the masses—and Edhi not only wielded that trust but also honoured it.

“Edhi placed a little cradle outside every Edhi Centre, beneath a placard imploring: *Do not commit another sin: leave your baby in our care*” (Oborne, 2011, italics added) Edhi has been insinuated by a (Deobandi) maulvi for adopting children, abandoned by those who would have sired them. In the medieval era, dargah was a place where such “unwanted” children were deposited. Many of those children used to grow up into *malang* or *sadhu*, and some became the servants of dargah. Edhi's adoption of these children seems to me as another legacy of dargah. However, he treated such children with greater kindness and compassion than the medieval dargah. Thus, we can argue that Edhi's set-up is a far more evolved form of the medieval dargah. Peter Osborne (2011), a reporter of the *Daily Telegraph*, writes,

In the course of my duties as a reporter, I have met presidents, prime ministers and reigning monarchs. Until meeting the Pakistani social worker Abdul

Sattar Edhi, I had never met a saint. Within a few moments of shaking hands, I knew I was in the presence of moral and spiritual greatness.

All the time he prayed to God, “Make me do big work for you. Such big work that will change the direction of the world. I want nothing more.” But for a Sufi it indeed was far too ambitious. I quote a tribute paid to him by the *Washington Post*; Abdul Sattar Edhi was a beacon of hope in a country too often mired in despair:

He was an ascetic in a country where politicians regularly skim millions of dollars through corruption; a humanitarian in a country rife with sectarian hatred and violence; and ultimately the provider of public services in a country where the government often fails to provide even the most basic ones, like adequate hospitals and ambulances.

(Bearak 2016)

Edhi was a unique phenomenon. But whatever he achieved had its historical antecedents. But it was extremely daunting to carry it out. No one else can do it. That probably is the reason hardly anyone aspires to emulate him.

Notes

- 1 For the role and status of women in Sufism in South Asia, see Kelly Pemberton (2004).
- 2 The term *Memon* refers to a Muslim commercial community from Gujrat (India), including Memons historically associated with Kathiawar. It can also refer to Kutchi Memons and Sindhi Memons. Many Memons migrated to Karachi after the partition of India in 1947. They became leading businessmen like Dada Ltd, Araak Ltd. and Adam Ltd.
- 3 Abū Dharr al-Ghifari al-Kinani also known as Jundab ibn Junādah was one of the early converts to Islam. He belonged to the BanuGhifar, the Kinanah tribe. No date of birth is known. Abu Dhar is remembered for his strict piety and his opposition to Muawiyah I during the CaliphUthman ibn Affan era. He was regarded by many acclaimed scholars, including Ali Shariati, Muhammad Sharqawi and Sami Ayad Hanna, as a principal antecedent of Islamic socialism, the first Islamic socialist. He protested against the accumulation of wealth by the ruling class and urged the equitable redistribution of wealth. For further details, see <https://www.al-islam.org/the-great-companion-of-prophet-abu-dharr/chapter-20>.
- 4 Yazid bin Muawiyah I (647–683 CE) was the second ruler of Umayyad dynasty. He is known to be the adversary of the Holy Prophet’s grandson Imam Hussain, who was assassinated at his behest at the battle of Karbala (in Iraq). Because of that act, he is widely regarded as a tyrant and ruthless ruler who could go to any extent to retain his power.
- 5 Inayatullah Khan Mashriqi, also known as Allama Mashriqi (25 August 1888–27 August 1963) was a mathematician, logician, political theorist, Islamic scholar and the founder of the Khaksar movement. Around 1930, he founded the Khaksar movement, aiming to advance the condition of the masses irrespective of any faith, sect, or religion. For further details see, Nasim Yousaf, *Pakistan’s Freedom & Allama Mashriqi; Statements, Letters, Chronology of Khaksar Tehrik (Movement), Period: Mashriqi’s Birth to 1947*. AMZ Publications, 2004.
- 6 Khudai Khidmatgar (literal meaning “servants of God”) was a Pashtun non-violent movement against the British Empire by the Pashtun people of the North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) in Pakistan. It is also called *Surkh Posh* or “Red Shirts,” which was originally a social reform organization focusing on education and the elimination of blood feuds. Another name of that movement was the Anjuman-e-Islah-e Afghania (Society for the Reformation of Afghans). The movement was led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known locally as Bacha Khan or Badshah Khan. For more details see Mukulika Banerjee (2000).

- 7 'Abū 'Abdullāh Muhammad ibn 'Alī ibn Muhammad ibn 'Arabī al-Hātimīyat -Tā'ī was a Sufi mystic, poet, and philosopher of pre-eminence. He was born in Murcia, Spain on 26 July 1165 CE. He is renowned among practitioners of Sufism by the names al-Shaykh al-Akbar ("the Great Shaykh"), Muhyiddin ibn Arabi, and was considered a saint. He was also known as Shaikh-e-Akbar Mohi-ud-Din Ibn-e-Arabi throughout the Middle East. He died in 1240 at the age of 75. For further details about Ibne Arabi, see William Chittick (1989, 1994).
- 8 Chittick (1994).
- 9 Cited in Waqar Hashmi, "A Life Well Lived: A Tribute to Abdul Sattar Edhi," *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies* 3, no. 2 (2011).
- 10 It did not mention the exact year.
- 11 The work of Tehmina Durrani informs us that he had purchased a dispensary "for rupees 2,400, out of a total fund amount of rupees 3,000 which he had in his account at that time" (1996: 57).
- 12 Bilquis Bano Edhi, widow of Abdul Sattar Edhi, is a professional nurse and one of the most renowned philanthropists in Pakistan. She has been named the Mother of Pakistan. She was born in 1947 in Bantva. Along with her husband, she was the head of the Edhi Foundation. With her husband she received the 1986 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service. In 2015, she also received the Mother Teresa Memorial International Award for Social Justice.
- 13 The section shows that how the A. S. Edhi's family continued to play central role in the organizational structure of Edhi's Foundation.
- 14 Edhi's that initiative has been discussed at length in Raponi and Zanzucchi (2013: 32–49).
- 15 <https://www.pakistantimes.com/topics/abdul-sattar-edhi/>.
- 16 It is beyond the scope of our discussion to delineate the causes of the 1971 war.
- 17 "Edhi Foundations," "Details of Relief Works," <http://www.contactpakistan.com/socialwork/Edhi/nerwork.htm>, accessed on 13 August 2018.
- 18 "Graveyard Services," <https://edhi.org/graveyard/>, accessed on 13 August 2018.
- 19 We can presume that this profile would have been written in the early 2000s as the brief allusion to Edhi's age indicates. See "Founder Profile," <https://edhi.org/founder-profile/>, accessed on 14 August 2018.

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