

Pakistan's Champion of the Poor

Through his extraordinary charitable network, Abdul Sattar Edhi offers compassion and hope to the starving, the abandoned and the mentally ill

By ASHOK MAHADEVAN

IT IS 11:30 P.M. and as Abdul Sattar Edhi sits in his cluttered office in the congested heart of Old Karachi, he yawns broadly. That morning he met Akhtar Ali Kazi, the provincial chief minister, to discuss ways to maintain peace in the city, torn by ethnic violence. The afternoon and much of the evening he spent visiting an orphanage, a shelter for homeless women and an asylum for male mental patients and drug addicts. Now, after a quick dinner at home, Edhi is attending to paper work.

Just then, he learns that Karachi's Civil Hospital has sent over an unidentified man's body. Edhi walks to a narrow chamber and carefully washes the elderly corpse. "Islam requires that we bathe every body before burial," he explains. "There's nobody else to do it for this poor fellow."

Back at the office, there is a teenage girl who was found on a street

stabbing herself with a pen. "What is your name, child?" Edhi asks gently.

"I don't know," she whispers.

"Where do you live, child?"

"I don't know."

"Would you like to stay here?" he asks finally.

"Yes," she whispers.

As she is led away, an aide hands

Edhi a letter from a city judge, ask-

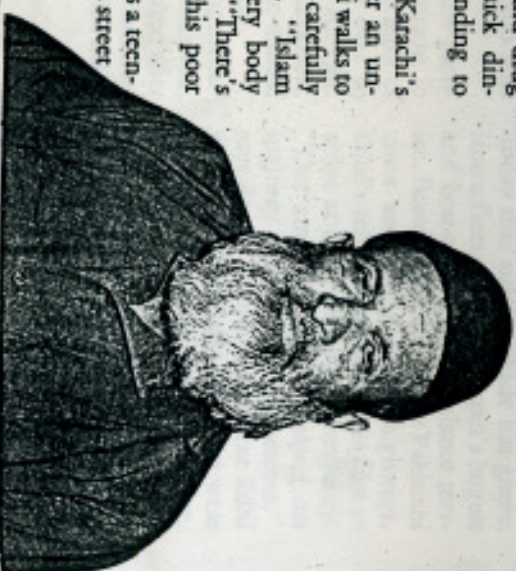


PHOTO: H. ANJANA BHALLU

ing him to organize a meeting between a prisoner in Karachi Central Jail and his two young sons who live at Edhi's Korangi orphanage. "The man is accused of murdering his wife," Edhi tells me. Then, turning to his aide, he says, "All right. Take the boys tomorrow." It is nearly 1 a.m. when Edhi enters his tiny bedroom adjoining the office. He will be awakened many times that night.

Miracle Worker. During the last 39 years, Abdul Sattar Edhi has spent many sleepless nights ministering to the needs of his fellow Pakistanis. Whether they are peasants starving because of drought, babies abandoned on rubbish dumps or patients too poor to pay for medical care — Edhi's compassion encompasses them all. "I like helping people," Edhi says simply. "It's a 24-hour job."

He and Bilquis, his wife of over 20 years, have established an extraordinary social welfare network that helps thousands of Pakistanis each day. They have created dispensaries, ambulance services, maternity homes, blood banks, diagnostic laboratories, X-ray clinics, a nursing school and shelters for orphans, the physically and mentally disabled, runaway women, drug addicts and the elderly. Although most of these centers are Karachi-based, 19 other Pakistani cities and towns have them too.

The Edhis' achievement is especially remarkable since they're not funded by any religious organization, relief agency or government. When Pakistan's late president, Zia-ul-Haq, sent him a check for \$33,200 eight

years ago, Edhi proudly returned it. "This work is for the people," Edhi says, "so they must pay for it." And Pakistanis do donate around \$2 million in cash and another \$4.6 million in goods each year. "I know that whatever I give will be properly used," a young businessman tells me as he writes a check for \$3,300. Handing over a Rs 100 (\$5) note, Ismail Nimi, a retired labor contractor in his 80s, puts it more simply: "I can trust Edhi with my life."

Indeed, Edhi who, with Bilquis, received the 1986 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service, may be the most venerated man in Pakistan. "What he's doing is nothing short of a miracle," says Z. A. Nizami, director-general of the Karachi Development Authority. Such feelings are shared even by Karachi's criminals. Recently, hearing that the police and a gang of dacoits were engaged in a shoot-out in a city suburb, Edhi drove to the scene in an ambulance. As soon as he arrived, the dacoits stopped firing and Edhi was able to carry the body of a dead sub-inspector into his vehicle. The dacoits then impatiently waved Edhi away, and as he left, began shooting at the police again.

A short, strongly built man in his late 50s with a flowing beard and a ready smile, Edhi is uncomfortable with the adulation he constantly receives. One afternoon, when he was leaving a welfare center, an elderly man rushed up, kissed Edhi's hands, touched them to his eyes and placed them on his head. "This scares me,"

Edhi said, retrieving his hands. "I'm afraid I'll end up thinking I'm a saint." There seems little danger of that, especially with his wife around. A warm, lively 41-year-old, Bilquis and her husband have an equal, down-to-earth relationship full of affectionate teasing. Once, as Bilquis was telling me how Edhi had failed his matriculation exam, he overheard her. "If I tried now," he asked, "don't you think I'd pass?" Bilquis looked at him, eyes twinkling. "No," she said. "It's too difficult for you."

Born in the early 1930s in the small Gujarati town of Banra in India, he was a high-spirited child, always up to mischief. "He was our leader," recalls Gul Mohammed Bharucha, a childhood friend who now does volunteer work for Edhi. "He'd organize raids on orchards and train us to do circus tricks." But alongside the pranks lay a more tender side. If an elderly woman was sick, Abdul would volunteer to take her to hospital; if the town boys teased a retarded person, Abdul would bear them up.

Help for All. Following the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the Edhis, along with most of Banra's Moslems, crossed over to Pakistan and settled in Karachi. Abdul worked as a cloth salesman, then for a pharmacist. But he wanted to do something more useful.

Edhi's resolve was strengthened when his mother became paralyzed, and later, mentally ill. "I looked after her myself," he says, "bathing, changing and feeding her. That made

me think of suffering people who, unlike my mother, had no one to help them. I wanted to build hospitals, shelters, orphanages. But I had no money."

In 1950, Edhi, along with a few well-off members of his community, established a small charitable dispensary. But he soon grew dissatisfied because the dispensary catered almost exclusively to Banra Moslems. "We're all human beings," he says. "All of us suffer — Moslems, Hindus, Christians, Jews. And all of us need help."

In 1953 Edhi and a group of friends started a free 24-hour dispensary open to all communities. They also conducted literacy classes.

Around this time, Edhi realized that Karachi had extremely poor ambulance service. He'd often see people dying in the streets, but when he called for an ambulance, it rarely arrived. So, using donated money, he purchased a second-hand pickup, and converted it into a crude ambulance. Today that single vehicle has grown into a fleet of 245, Pakistan's largest and best-organized ambulance service. Based in Karachi, other Pakistani cities and along major highways, Edhi's vehicles are usually the first to arrive at the scene of an emergency.

"Our ambulances have helped cut highway fatalities by 60 percent," says Anwar Kazmi, a longtime Edhi aide. "And recently, while we were helping victims of an ethnic riot, they told us 'All we have are Allah above, and Edhi ambulances on the ground.'"

When hijackers seized a Pan Am jetliner at Karachi airport 2½ years ago, the authorities called Edhi for help. As negotiations dragged on all day between hijackers and the government, Edhi and his men stood by — 54 ambulances at the ready. Late that evening, when hijackers began shooting passengers and Pakistani commandos were storming the aircraft, the ambulances dodged bullets to pick up the dead and injured, with Edhi personally carrying the body of Neeraj Mishra, the Indian air hostess who was later decorated for her bravery.

Edhi had only his first ambulance in the mid-1950s, when an influenza epidemic swept through Karachi. He and his volunteers did so much useful work during this crisis that grateful citizens presented him with \$2400. Edhi used the money to start a free maternity home and nursing school. Among the nurses at the maternity home in the mid-1960s was a pretty young teen-ager called Bilquis, a Banra Moslem like Edhi. Though about 15 years her senior, Edhi proposed to her.

Special Sensitivity. "Before me," Bilquis recalls with a laugh, "he'd already asked six other nurses. But they'd all turned him down. Who'd want to marry a crazy man like him? He'd always be out, attending to someone or other."

Bilquis's friends urged her to reject his offer, but, to their surprise, she agreed to marry him. Their wedding night set the tone for what was to follow. Dropping in at his dispensary

after the ceremony, Edhi found a 12-year-old girl with severe head injuries. He immediately took her to Karachi Civil Hospital and spent the night there organizing blood transfusions and reassuring family members. "I didn't mind at all," Bilquis says. "Today that girl is married with children. That's what's really important."

Bilquis runs the free maternity home at the Edhi headquarters and organizes the adoption of illegitimate and abandoned babies. The mother of four children herself, Bilquis has placed more than 1000 infants in the homes of childless couples, but confesses every parting is still a wrench. "Many of these babies were dying when they were found," she says, "and we had to nurse them back to health. It's hard, after that, to see them go."

Though coming from a traditional Islamic background, Edhi has no use for conservative views of women. "They work much harder than men," he says, "and they're far more dedicated and honest." He has hired women as ambulance drivers, and encouraged them to handle corpses and accident victims just like men.

Perhaps because of his mother, Edhi has a special sensitivity for the mentally disabled. During my visit he took me to a center for retarded children. As soon as the kids saw Edhi, they crowded around him, straining to touch him. As he tenderly cradled a boy in his lap, Edhi smiled at me wistfully. "I care for these children most of all," he

said softly. "I see God in them." Edhi's compassion is not confined to fellow Pakistanis. He has distributed \$53,000 to Ethiopia's famine and drought victims and \$66,300 to families of Palestinians massacred by Phalangis in Beirut's refugee camps. He has donated an ambulance in Bangladesh and given \$10,000 to help build a women's hostel in Thailand.

To run his welfare networks, Edhi uses a unique management style. In his institutions, the residents do all the cleaning, cooking and general maintenance. "This keeps costs down," Edhi says, "and it's good therapy too. Everyone feels useful." Though he delegates authority, he frequently answers phones and drives ambulances himself.

Edhi also has a temper. Once, as we were sitting in his office, a woman came in to complain that the doctor at the dispensary across the street was not attending to his patients. Edhi rushed over and found the doctor relaxing. For several minutes he berated the unfortunate physician, threatening to sack him on the spot. By the time he returned to the office, though, he had calmed down. "It's

the only way to keep these educated fellows on their toes," he told me with a grin.

Despite his enormous prestige and the vast sums that pass through his hands, Edhi's life-style remains that of any lower-middle-class Pakistani. The Edhis live with their children and Bilquis's mother in a two-room apartment near the office. Neither Edhi nor Bilquis receives a salary. Instead, they live off the interest from government securities that Edhi bought many years ago.

Never content with past accomplishments, Edhi's latest projects include an air-ambulance service, a modern children's hospital, a leprosarium, an animal hospital and a huge hostel and nurses' training complex for 2000 destitute women. "All this is going to cost a lot of money," he admits with a sigh. "We need all the help we can get."

On my last afternoon in Karachi, I asked Edhi what returns he got from his work. For a moment he looked annoyed. "Must you get something for what you give?" he asked. Then his face softened, and he said, "I can't describe the feeling that I get. It stings and soars in my heart."

Nature Study

My sister, a primary school teacher, was informed by one of her young pupils that a bird had built its nest in the tree outside the classroom.

"What kind of bird?" my sister inquired.

"I didn't see the bird, ma'am, only the nest," answered the child.

"Well," said my sister, "what does the nest look like?"

The child studied her innocently for a moment, then replied, "Like your hair, ma'am, except it's got more sticks."

—Continued by C. D. Neuge

IT PAYS TO ENRICH YOUR WORD POWER

By Peter Funk

Colors not only describe what we see, but some of the following "colorful" words also portray emotions and conditions. How many correct answers can you pick from the following array? Turn the page to see how you rate on this verbal color chart.

- verdure (vɜr juɜ) n.—A: blue. B: fragrance. C: green. D: white.
- sallow adj.—relating to A: an unhealthy complexion. B: a gaunt look. C: a small valley. D: a facial expression.
- rubicund adj.—A: countrified. B: jolly. C: moonlike. D: reddish.
- lowhead n.—person with A: an aura. B: light-colored hair. C: a dull wit. D: a golden crown.
- cerulean (seh roo leɜ un) adj.—A: gray and murky. B: shining. C: engraved in wax. D: sky blue.
- roseate (roʝ zee it) adj.—A: ornate. B: delicate. C: thorny. D: optimistic.
- hoary (hoɜ eɜ) adj.—A: rough. B: lewd. C: humorous. D: ancient.
- tawny adj.—A: spotted. B: brownish-yellow. C: shaggy. D: light purple.
- livid adj.—A: enraged. B: ominous. C: disfigured. D: confused.
- emblazon v.—A: to set fire to. B: decorate. C: spread out. D: permit.
- iridescent adj.—showing A: joy. B: transparency. C: interplay of colors. D: a temporary situation.
- jaundiced adj.—A: anxious. B: peculiar. C: sad. D: embittered.
- swardy adj.—A: rough and ready. B: hairy. C: pearl gray. D: dark-complexioned.
- tabby n.—cat that is A: orange with white stripes. B: black with white spots. C: light-colored with dark stripes. D: calico-colored.
- hazel adj.—A: blue-green. B: gray-blue. C: light golden brown. D: flecked with blue.
- harlequin (hɑrɪ leʝ kwɪn) adj.—A: pulsating green. B: yellow-and-black. C: multicolored. D: fluorescent orange.
- terra-cotta (tɜr uh koɜ uh) adj.—A: brownish-red. B: rocklike. C: pale gray. D: tortoise-shell markings.
- ebony n.—wood that is A: white. B: dark. C: soft. D: pale.
- gild v.—A: to cover with gold. B: paint in flat colors. C: make geometric designs. D: speckle.
- monochromatic adj.—A: glistening. B: dull. C: silver. D: done in one color.