

Edhi Ambulance Network

Edhi, known as the 'Angel of Mercy', is regarded as a humanitarian hero at home and abroad having risen from poverty on the streets of Gujarat and Karachi to help thousands of poor people receive free medical care. Here are five things you need to know about his extraordinary life's work.

1. As illustrated by Google's Doodle, Edhi was a man of humble origins whose values stem from childhood

Born in the village of Bantva, Gujarat, in pre-partition India in 1928, Abdul Sattar Edhi's lifelong passion for philanthropic causes originated from his mother's example. She would send him to school with a single paisa coin to pay for his lunch and another to give to a passing beggar.

When she suffered a stroke in 1939, the young Abdul nursed her for eight years until her death – never losing the care and compassion he learned at her bedside.

2. The Edhi Foundation was started with donations alone

In 1947, Britain's colonial rule of India came to end and Edhi, aged 19, moved to newly independent Pakistan, initially selling cloth at a wholesale market and begging for donations to start his own healthcare programme. Edhi dreamed of helping the impoverished masses unable to pay for their own treatment that he encountered every day - and was especially moved by the case of a mother who committed suicide with her six children because of the misery of their circumstances.

Reliant on the kindness of strangers, Edhi had soon raised enough capital to acquire a small office, which he swiftly transformed into a medical dispensary, later buying his first ambulance and driving it himself to deliver aid and pharmaceuticals.

As his ambitions and operations grew, Edhi began to recruit medical students to support the cause. The newly formed Edhi Foundation duly came to prominence by distinguishing itself in public service during the Asian Flu Pandemic of 1957.

3. Today, the foundation is the world's largest volunteer network

Embracing a creed of "live and help live", the Edhi Foundation continued to expand across rural and urban Pakistan, branching out into orphanages, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, rehab clinics, women's centres, outpatient wards and rescue boats.

Today, the organisation can lay claim to having trained 40,000 nurses and currently operates 1,800 "super-efficient" ambulances, a fleet recognised by Guinness World Records in 1997 as the world's largest volunteer emergency services unit.

To give an idea of the scale of the organisation's reach - if you dial 115 from a phone anywhere in southern Asia, the Edhi Foundation will answer.

4. Edhi was a man of modest means - with a sharp tongue

Abdul Sattar Edhi maintained a famously monkish lifestyle, never taking a salary, never owning more than two suits of clothes and living quietly in an apartment room within the foundation's original headquarters.

He was, however, never afraid to speak out against corporate greed and political mendacity and always engaged in international affairs, providing support during the 1985 Ethiopian famine and raising \$100,000 for the victims of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana in 2005.

Edhi was born into Islam but never allowed faith to interfere in his humanitarian endeavours. Once asked why he helped non-Muslims, he answered simply: "Because my ambulance is more Muslim than you."

He is also well-known for the aphorism: "People have become educated... but have yet to become human."

In light of the new US President's "Muslim travel ban", it is worth remembering another of Edhi's remarks, after being detained and interrogated by immigration officials at New York's John F. Kennedy airport in January 2008 under Bush administration terror laws. Questioned by reporters as to the reason for his detention, the philanthropist wryly offered: "The only explanation I can think of is my beard and my dress."

5. Edhi died last year leaving behind 20,004 children

Abdul Sattar Edhi died of kidney failure in January last year, leaving behind his wife of 52 years, Bilquis, a former nurse, and four offspring. Oh, and the 20,000 other children he is registered as the parent or legal guardian of.

Speaking at his state funeral, Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said:" Edhi was the real manifestation of love for those who are socially vulnerable, impoverished, helpless and poor. We have lost a great servant of humanity. "

The State Bank of Pakistan is planning to issue a 50-rupee commemorative coin in his honour this year but controversy reigns over the fact that Edhi has continually been overlooked for the Nobel Peace Prize, the subject of a prominent hashtag campaign on social media in 2014.

No doubt today's anniversary will do much to raise awareness of his superb relief work around the world.

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