

BILQUIS EDHI

by Faisal Abdulla



In Newsweek International's Special Edition Oct-Dec 2003, Ron Moreau has praised the Edhi Foundation to the skies for adopting the destitutes in Pakistan and thus filling the gap left by the government's failure on this front. He goes on to list the achievements of the Edhi Foundation under the patronage of Abdul Sattar Edhi; "His Edhi Foundation operates the world's largest volunteer ambulance service. In addition, Edhi's staff runs a missing-persons hot line and more than a dozen homes for orphans, the homeless, battered women, the mentally ill and drug addicts. He has set up literacy-training courses for all ages, free medical clinics and a soup kitchen that serves 1,000 free meals a day." Reading about this list of accomplishments, one wonders how much of it would have been possible had Bilquis Edhi not joined hands with the '*maulana*' (as Abdul Sattar Edhi is fondly called by people close to him) when she did back in 1965.

At that time Edhi Foundation at Mithadar, the old city district of Karachi, was no more than a dispensary where just a handful of nurses provided medical aid to those in need. Many of the nurses who worked there came from Hindu or Christian families. Muslim families generally did not consider nursing a suitable profession for girls. With time a number of the nurses left the centre and Edhi sahib felt the need to induct more nurses to fill the gap. He hired several new nurses, one of whom was Bilquis Edhi.

She was studying at the time and had recently sat for her 8th grade examinations. She wasn't very fond of school and wished instead to join the recently set up Edhi nurses training centre at Mithadar. It was a six month training program where disciplines such as midwifery and basic healthcare were taught to women who joined the program.

Her enthusiasm, response and interest during her training made her stand out from among her colleagues. Edhi sahib took notice of her at an early stage and put her in-charge of the nursing department. Later, Edhi sahib proposed to her for marriage and the two were married in April 1966. Bilquis was seventeen years old.

After being given charge of the nursing section, other women specific departments such as the maternity home section and child adoption also became her responsibilities. Since then a number of destitute women have been given shelter, raised and trained by the Edhi Foundation under the supervision and guidance of Bilquis Edhi. Widows and girls in distress who come to the hospital are trained in midwifery. "It is a 12-month course during which they are paid rupees 1000 to 1500 [per month]. Later, Bilquis refers them to good institutions as she frequently receives requests for hardworking girls. There they earn at least Rs 3000 [per month as starting salary]. In the article "Women must be skilled to earn their livelihood", The Nation, 8th March, 2002, Bilquis proudly recalls one such girl, who had joined another hospital and donated Rs 100 to Bilquis. "I was so pleased, it seemed to be Rs 1 one lakh (hundred thousand) for me," she said while expressing her satisfaction.

Unwanted infants that are left at Edhi emergency centers are given shelter and cared for at Edhi homes. These children are then handed over for adoption to couples in need. Bilquis Edhi personally meets and conducts interviews with the prospective adopting parents. The background of the prospective parents is thoroughly checked. So far more than 14,700 children have been adopted through the Edhi Foundation after personal approval from Bilquis Edhi.

Besides lending tremendous support to Edhi sahib's cause, Bilquis Edhi has also brought with her added value in terms of her ability of identifying new areas of public welfare thus adding to the number of services offered at the Edhi Foundation. The 'Highways Project' includes paramedical staff equipped with emergency ambulance service at Edhi Centers located every 25 Kms along the Karachi-Peshawar highway; it was the brainchild of Bilquis Edhi, according to Anwar Kazmi, Edhi sahib's personal secretary. Apparently, on one of her trips to Europe, Bilquis had observed such an arrangement on the highways there and thought the need was there for a similar arrangement in Pakistan. "[Besides

providing] ambulance service at nominal charges, [there is a] facility for vaccinating new-born babies and children against diseases, and other welfare services. The dispensary and mobile dispensary at each centre cater for medical assistance to approximately two hundred and fifty patients daily.” (Edhi: Breaking the silence, 2000, Abdul Sattar Edhi Foundation)

With Edhi sahib now mainly looking after the financial aspects of the organization, the burden of administrating and co-ordinating the daily activities of the Edhi Foundation (especially the Women’s wing) rests squarely on Bilquis’s shoulders. Edhi sahib himself has publicly credited Bilquis with being responsible for no less than 70% of Edhi Foundation’s achievements. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that Bilquis is currently being considered for the UNICEF award for Women’s Welfare Work. Besides this, she already has a number of awards to her credit handed to her by various organizations, such as, The Rotary Club Award and The 1986 Ramon Magsay Award for public service (Phillipines).

To Bilquis Edhi, the most cherishing moments for the services she has rendered would no doubt be the ones that have gone unnoticed in the public domain. Two such instances according to Anwar Kazmi are as follows:

“There was a function at the Liaquat National Library and Bilquis was invited. She asked me to accompany her to this function. Shortly after the function got started, a 10-11 year old girl went on stage and started singing. Bilquis remarked how pretty the girl was. A short while later a lady approached her and told her that she had adopted this girl from her at the Edhi Centre eleven years ago.”

“A lady doctor came to me and said she wanted to meet Bilquis. She must have been around 35 years of age. She had two children with her and was crying profusely. Bilquis at the time wasn’t around so I asked her to confide in me whatever it was she wanted to say to Bilquis. She told me that 30 years ago Bilquis had set me up for adoption ~ my parents (who adopted me) took me to America. They looked after me, educated me and I became a doctor. When they were dying they told me for the first time that I was actually adopted and

now that they are dead I believe that Bilqis is my mother. I have come from America just to meet my mother.” (Translated from Urdu)

Bilqis has had a long, fruitful, and rewarding association with the Edhi Foundation. Her contribution in administrating, training, as well as her personal involvement in looking after both the staff of the Edhi Foundation and the destitutes that are being cared for at the institution, has been appreciated by all at the Edhi Foundation. Perhaps the greatest tribute comes from the '*maulana*' himself, who has seen her work more closely than anyone else at the institute. When asked to elaborate on the kind of support Bilqis has provided him and to the Foundation, Edhi sahib remarked, “When I married her we did not become one plus one equals to two ($1 + 1 = 2$), instead we became one plus one equals to eleven ($1 + 1 = 11$).” (Translated from Urdu)

Courtesy to www.jazbah.org