

## **A child of their choosing**

*There are no well-reputed government-run adoption agencies in Pakistan. The vacuum is filled partially by non-government child welfare organisations*

*By Aafia T. Hussain*

There is nothing extraordinary about the white-washed office furnished with two tables and a few plastic chairs. As I walk in, loud cries of an infant no more than three months' old greet me. I'm asked to wait.

The fair-complexioned chubby baby continues to cry. He is rocked and then put on a glass-topped table to be wrapped tightly in a white cotton blanket. A feeder filled with milk is brought for him. All preparations done, the baby accompanied by a middle-aged woman is ready for perhaps the first journey of his life -- to Karachi where he will be adopted in less than "ten minutes", says Salma Apa, a volunteer at the Edhi Home in Lahore's Gulberg area. She adds as a matter of fact, "Someone left him in the cradle in Iqbal Town two days ago."

Someone? Mother? Or was it the father? It has to be someone not wanting the child. And no better place than the white wrought iron cradle at the gate of an Edhi Home, with a message written in red that translates as 'Do not dump your baby. Leave him in

this cradle'.

There is no well-reputed government-run adoption agencies in Pakistan. The vacuum is filled partially by non-government child welfare organisations -- and largely through a network of blood relations and friends. Therefore, accurate statistics about adoption are impossible to find. However, "by a rough estimate, one child a week is left at the gate of an Edhi centre," says Salma Apa. "But the demand for these abandoned children is very high. There is a long list of people anxiously waiting to adopt a child," she adds.

Yet, adoption has benefited only a small minority of abandoned children in Pakistan, "because of the narrow mindedness of our people," opines Bilquis Edhi. "There is an obvious reluctance to adopt an orphan, a stranger or a non-relative. They prefer blood relations," she tells TNS by telephone from Quetta.

When Fatima (not her real name), issueless after ten years of married life, decided to adopt a baby, she was sure someone from the family would be her only choice. Because "blood is thicker than water," she believes. "Luckily my husband's niece who is married to my cousin agreed to give her six-month-old baby girl to us. I was thrilled. What could be better than adopting a child of close relative?" she explains. "I took the little girl home initially for a week. This was like a probation period. If she stayed fine I was to keep her,

otherwise she was to go back to her natural parents. Things worked out just fine during that one-week period, so fine that she stayed with us for a good twenty years till she got married a couple of years ago."

For Anees Jillani, a lawyer from Islamabad, "adoption is one of the best things that can happen. It fills the need of many people. It is a way by which issueless parents can bring joy to parentless children."

However, adoption is not an adventure. "The notion is unusual in the history of family formation," writes Dr. Benjamin Spock, a popular expert on parenting, "because the most obvious thing about adoption has been that it is a different way of making family." According to him, since ancient times and in all human cultures, children have been transferred from adults who would not or could not be parents to adults who wanted them for love, labour and property. He further explains that "Adoption's close association with humanitarianism, upward mobility and infertility are however uniquely modern phenomena."

The factors convincing a couple to adopt a child in our society, for instance, are: to save their marriage, as a companion in old age, to replace a child who has died, to have someone to look after the family business or simply because all friends have babies.

While the adopters can pick a child they want, the child who is being adopted is usually an infant and has no say in selecting his parents. To ensure the right home for a homeless child, Edhi organisation as a first step assesses the adopting parents. "We look at the husband-wife relationship, their monetary condition: Do they own a house? Are they educated? Are they understanding and empathetic?" informs Begum Edhi, who heads the committee comprising six to seven volunteers. "At present there are about 3500 to 4000 parents in waiting in Karachi," she says.

But there is no hard and fast rule to follow in deciding the right child for the right parents. "It is purely based on the need and desperation of the parents in waiting," Bilquis Edhi says. "I give preference to parents who have lost a child or to those who wish to take the child abroad. That is because the salaries of individuals working abroad are higher than those working here. They will be in a position to offer a better quality life to the adopted child."

The fact that in the last 50 years she has given away about 14,700 babies to people aspiring to be good parents fills her heart with joy. "Many of my children are studying in reputed English medium schools of Karachi," she says with pride.

A child once given away is not forgotten at the Edhi centre. The volunteers of the organisation conduct regular visits "at least every three months for the

first five years of adoption."

No doubt, good adoptions fill the need of many people. A child unwanted by his birth parents gets a permanent home to live in, a couple gets a child to love and care for, and in the process the welfare workers are relieved some of their responsibility .

But not all organisations in Pakistan trust individuals enough to pass the responsibility of child rearing on to them. Take the case of SOS Children's Village. "We as an organisation adopt children deprived of their natural parent as our own," explains Almas Butt, director SOS Village in Lahore. "We provide children with a home and warm family-like environment. They are legally ours. Why should we give them away?"

An SOS village usually comprises 15 to 20 family home, each home sheltering 10 to 12 children who are looked after by one 'mother'. The organisation as a policy never refuses shelter to a child. "Girls move out only when they marry and boys are shifted to the youth hostels while they continue with studies," tells Almas Butt.

Besides the SOS Village, the orphanage run by Anjuman-e-Himayat-e-Islam in Lahore follows the same ideology of adopting orphans as their babies. But they do not accept children less than five year old as "they are too young to wash and eat themselves. This becomes a problem for us," says Nazeer Tariq, honorary secretary of Dar-ul-Shafqat,

boys' orphanage run by the Anjuman.

So, it is down to the choice of individuals and sometimes of institutions who they want to adopt and when.

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**Volunteer Services That Make a Difference  
Angels of mercy in Pakistan's largest city**

**BY RICHARD M. WEINTRAUB**

Riaz Uddin remembers that terrible day in 1965 when a truck careening through the crowded streets of Karachi hit his 10-year-old sister Zubida and crushed the life from her. He remembers standing over her helplessly because there seemed to be no one in a city of millions who would come to take away the body—no ambulances, no officials, no one. Then, as word of the accident spread through the slums, a small man came in a white truck crudely fitted out as an ambulance, lifted Zubida's body and took it away to be washed and wrapped in white Moslem burial cloth. "My sister was crushed. I saw her on the street, and no one was there to pick her up. I always will remember that. Edhi had only one ambulance then, but he rushed to her. That is when I decided I

would work with him," Riaz said as he carefully cradled a young retarded boy in his arms.

Today more than 30 years later Abdul Sattar Edhi has 175 ambulances and Riaz Uddin oversees, an orphanage and home for retarded boys. Both are part of an extraordinary volunteer social service effort built by Edhi that has bypassed the woefully inadequate and often corrupt public system while touching, and probably saving, the lives of hundreds of thousands of people here in Pakistan's largest city and beyond. Karachi's angels of mercy,

Abdul Sattar Edhi, 55,. And Bilquis Edhi, 40, are people with a simple mission in life: to help others who cannot help themselves. When hijackers of a Pan Am jetliner opened fire on its passengers at Karachi airport a year ago, it was Edhi and his fleet of little converted trucks that rushed onto the runway, lights flashing and sirens wailing, even before the shooting stopped. Many died that night, but, had it not been for Edhi and his volunteers, many more would have. When a runaway child is found by Karachi's police, it is to Edhi and his wife that they turn for shelter. When a young woman, pregnant and battered by her husband, is thrown out of the house, it is to the Edhis that she turns. And when a destitute man or woman dies and there is no one to

bathe and bury the body, it is Edhi and his helpers who do. While Pakistani officials are proud of the fact that their country has welcomed with open arms more than 3 million Afghan refugees, they do not speak as openly of a public social service system that is virtually nonexistent compared to the need.

Karachi, a city of more than 7 million, has no functioning public ambulance service. Its three city hospitals often have inadequate or nonexistent medical supplies. Regular hospital blood banks often stand shuttered and empty while a few feet away medical students, out of exasperation, urn their own blood-gathering facilities and laboratories.

Orphanages, homes for the aged and retarded, local medical clinics for the vast part of the population that is desperately poor, basic help for the destitute—all are woefully inadequate here, if they exist at all. Islamic societies and some private groups have tried to help, but the need ultimately seems to fall prey to the greed and corruption that by universal acknowledgment dominate public life here. How Service Was Built

It is against this tide that the Edhis swim with single-minded determination. Talking contributions as small as a few rupees, a couple of items of clothes or a goat and as large as half a million rupees or the bequest of an estate, they have built a service organization without parallel in this nation of 100 million, and

probably matched by few anywhere in the world. Millions and millions of rupees are in accounts bearing their names, but they live with their four children in the same simple two rooms they occupied when they began their married life. smiling, joking with each other, constantly at each other's side, theirs is a relationship rarely seen in an Islamic society where men and women usually do not openly share lives, especially in the traditional, non-westernized part of society in Julie knows what Abdul Sattar Edhi and Bilquis Edhi do for the downtrodden of Karachi. She had tried to run away from the beatings and abuse before, but with the help of police, she say, her husband had forced her back. One of his previous wives had killed herself by immolation. Two others had divorced him to escape, and one had run away to Bangladesh. Julie was six months pregnant when she had had enough and, with her two other children, left the house. Julie went first to Apna Ghar-"Our Home"- a center run by the Edhis for runaways, the destitute and others with no place to go. When it was time for her to deliver her child, she went to their maternity clinic, part of a complex of free medical facilities in the heart of old Karachi. There, her child became one of more than 70 to be born in the first week of December. The surroundings were spartan but clean, and the midwives were efficient. All of them were young women who had come to the Edhis

for help and subsequently were trained as nurses. The staff at the maternity center wanted her to stay for a few days to recover her strength, but she was worried about her other two children. So a day after giving birth, she brought her family to yet another Edhi center in northern Karachi. Soon the complex in which she is now housed will contain dormitories, training facilities and recreation areas for 2,000 women. She is charged nothing for all of this help. "I don't have any parents. I have three sisters but when I went to them, my husband would come after me. Finally, I thought there was no other place to go, so I came here. At least here they will raise my children properly. What can I do outside?" she asked as she held her new born child.

As the drama of Julie's childbirth was it self out in one part of the complex, that make up the Edhis main medical center, another was taking place a few rooms a way. Only hours before, a baby had been brought in to the center. "Come upstairs and see my children," said Bilquis Edhi with the boundless enthusiasm that she displays whether she is holding a newborn child or talking tenderly to an elderly retarded woman. Her "children" were two babies, one of whom she believed to be only a day old. "Paro's father cried when he left her here, but the mother was seriously mentally ill and left home. He

just couldn't cope," Bilquis Edhi said of a bright-eyed, 10-month-old girl. Paro hopefully will go back to her family when they can once again manage, but for a baby abandoned outside one of the Edhi centers the night before, there is no such hope. The baby had been placed in a cradle outside one of the ambulance centers. Outside all the centers are permanent cradles that carry signs pleading with those who might want to abandon a child to place it there rather than let it die. Over the years, more than 90 children have been left in the cradles and hundreds of others rescued from trash heaps, ditches or roadsides. For many of these children and hundreds born to young women in Edhi clinics, the Edhis have been not only the difference between life and death, but also the providers of new homes. By late morning, the baby abandoned the night before had been checked by a pediatrician and was being cradled in the arms of its new mother. Like more than 1,000 others, the baby quickly was given to foster parents who desperately wanted a child of their own.