



PHOTO TINA DEHAL

For his determination to help India's slum dwellers, Jockin Arputham is the Reader's Digest Asian of the Year

The Asian of the Year is a person working to shape the future in a positive manner: An ordinary person doing extraordinary things

**ASIAN OF THE YEAR**

**2010**

# JOCKIN ARPUTHAM

## Champion of the Poor

A slum dweller himself, he straddles many worlds, determined to ensure a fair deal for the poor

BY ASHOK MAHADEVAN

**S**HANTI SHINDE STANDS at the edge of the pit and points to the foul black water at its bottom. "We've first got to pump that out," she tells me. "Then, line the ground with large paving stones."

Shanti and I are in the middle of a Mumbai slum. A 20-seat community toilet block is being built here by a slum dweller's organisation to replace an unusable municipal toilet. The new facilities will be a boon for the slum's 2500 residents, most of who currently have to defecate in the open.

It's hot and sticky under the noon

sun, but Shanti patiently describes how a two-storey community toilet is constructed. As the 39-year-old mother of two talks briskly, it's hard to believe that she's a poor, illiterate product of a Mumbai slum.

"How do you know all this?" I ask. Shanti smiles. "It's all thanks to Sir."

JOCKIN ARPUTHAM – Shinde's "Sir" – sits cross-legged on the floor of his office in Dharavi, Mumbai's largest and most notorious slum. The room is packed with slum dwellers. A small man wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, Jockin is talking on two mobile phones at the same



**(Left) Most slum dwellers live in appalling conditions; (above) Jockin in action**

time, as well as to an anxious-looking woman before him.

One of her children has leukaemia, and Jockin has been trying to raise money for the treatment. He's also been sounding Mumbai's municipal hospitals for a nurse's job for another of the woman's daughters.

"Come on Monday," he finally tells the mother in Hindi. As she touches his feet and leaves, one mobile phone rings.

"No," Jockin tells the caller in Marathi, the local language. "I'm

meeting the municipal commissioner on Friday morning."

He's barely disconnected the phone when there's a call from Nairobi. "Hello Jane," Jockin says, switching to English. "Yes, I am going to Zambia. The Minister from Zimbabwe was here and I took him to London for the affordable housing meeting."

If Jockin seamlessly straddles many worlds, his mission in each is the same: to get decent housing, sanitation and livelihoods for slum dwellers - of whom he is one -

by developing their strengths as individuals and as communities. In the past 25 years, the organisations he has created and partnered have helped improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in India and more than 30 other countries.

Says former UN Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson: "The work of Jockin and his far flung network of associates is perhaps one of the most successful anti-poverty initiatives in urban Asia and Africa today."

ALTHOUGH 63-YEAR-OLD Jockin spent most of his life in a Mumbai slum, his family was originally well off. When the young Jockin went to school, servants would carry his books and snacks. But because of his father's alcoholism, the family sank into poverty.

At 16, Jockin dropped out of school and left home, eking out a miserable living in Bangalore working for a carpenter. At one point he grew so desperate that he swallowed poison. Fortunately, he threw it up.

In 1963, an apparently prosperous uncle invited the teenager to live with him in Mumbai. But when the uncle turned out to be a small-time smuggler living in a large slum called Janata Colony, Jockin moved out. But he remained in the slum, sleeping in the open and bathing at a public tap.

Janata Colony, like all Mumbai's slums, was a bustling township. As he began making a living building

PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES; (RIGHT) SPARC/SOI

and repairing huts, Jockin became involved in the life of his 70,000-odd community. He began by organising singing sessions for the children, and then started an informal school.

Next to the school was a huge pile of rubbish, which hadn't been cleared; the municipality's garbage collectors didn't service the colony. So Jockin thought up an ingenious plan to needle the authorities into doing their job.

At six one Monday morning, several hundred schoolchildren gathered before the rubbish mound. Each child packed about a kilogram of garbage in a newspaper. Then, singing and shouting, the children walked to the nearest municipal office – which hadn't yet opened – and dumped the stinking packets outside its doors.

The municipal officials were furious with Jockin. But they agreed to send a truck to regularly remove garbage from the colony.

“That incident changed my life,” Jockin recalls. It taught him the power of an organised community.

Jockin quickly became one of the colony's key youth leaders, well-known for activities ranging from community clean-ups of municipal toilets to arranging illegal water connections.

Then in the late 1960s, the municipality ordered the colony's residents to leave their homes and move to another site a couple of kilometres away, saying that the land was needed by a government agency to build 700 apartments for its employees. The



Jockin has spent most of his life in a slum

PHOTO: TINA DEHAL

residents protested, pointing out that, unlike most Mumbai slums, which were built on illegally occupied land, Janata Colony had been established by the municipality 20 years earlier. But the authorities were adamant.

A prolonged struggle ensued, with Jockin in the thick of it. He organised road barricades, public meetings and demonstrations, lobbied national political leaders, and filed court cases against the government. He was arrested dozens of times – though he also occasionally managed to evade capture by concealing himself in the midst of large groups of slum women.

Jockin's actions attracted considerable international attention. But it didn't matter. In May 1976, bulldozers flattened Janata Colony.

DURING THE NEXT FEW YEARS, Jockin, supported by various pro-poor Christian organisations, travelled to different cities in India meeting slum leaders and housing activists, who were all struggling to check demolitions. They decided to band together and create a National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) with Jockin as president. Today, NSDF has around two million members across 72 cities in India.

Meanwhile, Jockin's ideas were changing. He was coming to the conclusion that large-scale improvement in the lives of the urban poor was possible only if strong community organisations cooperated with the government. But that didn't mean the poor simply accepted whatever the authorities did. That was why so many development projects had failed. The poor had to have a major say in the design and running of such projects. Moreover, they had to prove to the authorities that they could acquire – despite their poverty and lack of formal education – the skills to oversee projects that affected them.

This strategy was no magic bullet either. The journey would be long and arduous. Infinite patience would be required. But given the government's unmatched power and resources, there was no other option.

IN THE MID 1980s, Jockin learnt about an unusual Mumbai organisation called SPARC (Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres), set up by a group of professional women dissatisfied with traditional social work. These women, like him, believed that the poor must be organised. SPARC worked with women pavement dwellers and was convinced that women had to be at the vanguard of the poor's bid for a decent life. Women knew what their families lacked and needed better

## Pavement dwellers were the poorest and most vulnerable of Mumbai's poor

than men, and they were much more committed to getting it.

In July 1985, the Indian Supreme Court ruled that the Mumbai municipality could start demolishing all pavement dwellings in the city from November. The ruling sparked off panic. Politicians and radicals talked of resistance, but the women pavement dwellers would have none of it. They knew that in any confrontation they were bound to lose.

What could be done? To focus public attention on the crisis, SPARC carried out a detailed survey that revealed that pavement dwellers were the poorest and most vulnerable of Mumbai's poor.

SPARC's survey report, released in mid October, received wide publicity.

Impressed, Jockin met its director Sheela Patel and suggested that their two organisations join forces. It would be an unusual alliance between a street-savvy slum leader and an upper middle-class activist. But it was to prove enormously fruitful.

All Jockin's colleagues in the NSDF were men, but Jockin instinctively realised that it was mostly from SPARC's sisterhood of pavement dwellers that the NSDF's future leaders would spring.

**“If you don't have faith, you shouldn't be in this business”**

At Jockin's urging, the women pavement dwellers began to discuss the kind of houses they'd like, learnt the basics of construction and save money. Since the women were illiterate, Jockin taught them how to estimate length by using *saris* and *mangalsutras* (necklace worn by married women.)

Sheela recalls worrying if all this wasn't raising false hopes. But Jockin disagreed. “If you don't have faith,” he told her, “you shouldn't be in this business.”

Over the years, 60,000 women all over India – they call themselves Mahila Milan (women's congregation) – have saved more than Rs70 million (\$1.52 million). And with the help of banks and other organisations, they've disbursed nearly Rs100 million (\$2.17 million) in loans.

A firm believer in the poor learning from one another, Jockin began spreading his ideas abroad. In 1989, a group of poor Asian women attended a Mahila Milan workshop in Mumbai, and two years later, the NSDF started a programme of regular exchanges with South African slum community leaders. Today, the Slum/Shack Dwellers International connects poor communities in 34 countries.

Another key concern of slum dwellers is sanitation. The NSDF, in partnership with a number of Indian municipalities, has designed and built more than 800 toilet blocks in slums benefiting several hundred thousand people.

The contractors for the majority of these blocks are women like Shanti Shinde.

SUNANDA KAMBLE OPENS the door of her ground floor apartment in a Mumbai highrise and lets me in. Her 14-year-old daughter Trupti is playing games on the computer.

The 20-square-metre flat Trupti, her parents and two brothers live in is a bit of a squeeze, but infinitely superior to their earlier home: a flimsy shack a few metres from a railway track.

For decades, thousands of such shacks had slowed passing commuter trains to a crawl. Finally, in the late 1990s, a government plan to speed up trainservicesbyresettling60,000-odd people who lived alongside the tracks was drawn up with the World Bank's help and the alliance was given the

## Slum Dwellers' Network

### INDIA

**Organisation Name:** SOCIETY FOR PROMOTION OF AREA RESOURCE CENTRE

**Movement Names:** Mahila Milan, National Slum Dwellers' Federation (NSDF)

**Contact Person:** Sheela Patel

**Telephone:** (91) 222 238 65053

**E-mail:** spararc@vsnl.in

**Web:** www.sparcindia.org

### PHILIPPINES

**Organisation Name:** VINCENTIAN MISSIONARIES SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION, INC

**Movement Name:** Homeless People's Federation of the Philippines

**Contact Person:** Father Norberto Carcellar, Sonia Fadrigo

**Telephone:** (63) 2 455 9480

**E-mail:** vmsdfi@info.com.ph

**Web:** homelesspo.blogspot.com

### THAILAND

**Organisation Name:** ASIAN COALITION FOR HOUSING RIGHTS (ACHR)

**Contact Person:** Somsook Boonyabancha, Thomas Kerr

**Telephone:** (66) 2 538-0919

**E-mail:** achr@loxinfo.co.th

**Web:** www.achr.net

### CAMBODIA

**Organisation Name:** URBAN POOR DEVELOPMENT FUND

**Telephone:** (855) 23 720890

**E-mail:** updf@forum.org.kh

### INDONESIA

**Organisation Name:** URBAN POOR CONSORTIUM

**Contact Person:** Wardan Hafidz

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**Web:** www.urbanpoor.or.id

mammoth task of organising the shift. The railways, without any warning, began demolishing huts.

It took five days before Jockin and his colleagues, cornering every top government official they could, forced the railways to stop. Meanwhile, more than 2000 huts were destroyed and their residents forced to live out in the open.

Jockin did not let the outrage deter him from continuing with the resettlement. Families were housed temporarily in transit camps, quickly built by the alliance at two-thirds the normal cost. Over the next year, the affected people were shifted to new homes. It was one of the world's

largest resettlement projects and its smooth execution prompted a team of Kenyan officials facing similar problems in Nairobi to come to Mumbai to learn how it was done.

Back in the present, Jockin is chatting away with a group of NSDF women after a party. How long can he go on like this? He's 63 and suffers from diabetes. He's had a coronary bypass. He owns practically nothing, not even a bank account.

Jockin looks amused. “This is my life,” he says. “This is what I enjoy. My only prayer is that when I die, it will be at a meeting, or while I'm walking in a slum, or at a get-together like this.”

## SANGDUEN CHAILERT

### An Elephantine Mission

By RAKKIT RATTACHUMPOTH



Sangduen is on a quest to save Thailand's elephants

PHOTO: VINAI DITHA JOHN/ONASIA.COM

### They Do Great Work Too

Deciding who would be the 2010 Asian of the Year was no easy task for the editors of the Asian editions of *Reader's Digest*. Many names were discussed before Jockin Arputham was selected. And after we had made our decision, we realised that our short-listed shortlist had some very worthy notables on it who also personified the ideal of 'ordinary people doing extraordinary things'. The following five are our Honourable Mentions of 2010.

**S**ANGDUEN CHAILERT has elephants on her mind. She works tirelessly to keep the elephant population in Thailand from falling to drastic levels. "Thai elephants are under serious threat. Unless they are promptly and appropriately protected, they might only exist in books and photos in the near future," says Sangduen.

Sangduen was born in a remote mountain community in Northern Thailand 47 years ago. Her love of the pachyderm began when she was very young. She was just a teenager when she first saw elephants being used for commercial logging along the Thai-Burmese border. The experience changed her life.

In 1996, Sangduen, together with her family, founded the Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai. Today, the park is supported by Sangduen's family tour business which runs educational and environmental trips as well as a travel website. The main objective of the park is to provide a sanctuary for elephants to live peacefully in their

natural environment. Thirty rescued elephants of all ages are currently under the park's care. The disabled, orphaned or blind elephants are mostly rescued from private owners, and fees are negotiated to enable them to join the park's herd.

Sangduen's latest project is to remove elephants from urban cities and bring them back to the natural environment. At present, thousands of elephants wander around big cities like Bangkok with mahouts (elephant caretakers) seeking donations from tourists or the public.

Sangduen also plans to open an elephant centre in Surin, Thailand's northeastern province, considered to be the primary home of indigenous elephants. The new sanctuary will serve as another alternative for mahouts to bring their elephants back home to nature.

"The *Reader's Digest* recognition is a great honour for me. It shows that society cares about the survival of the elephants," Sangduen says.

For more on Sangduen's work, go to [www.elephantnaturepark.org](http://www.elephantnaturepark.org).

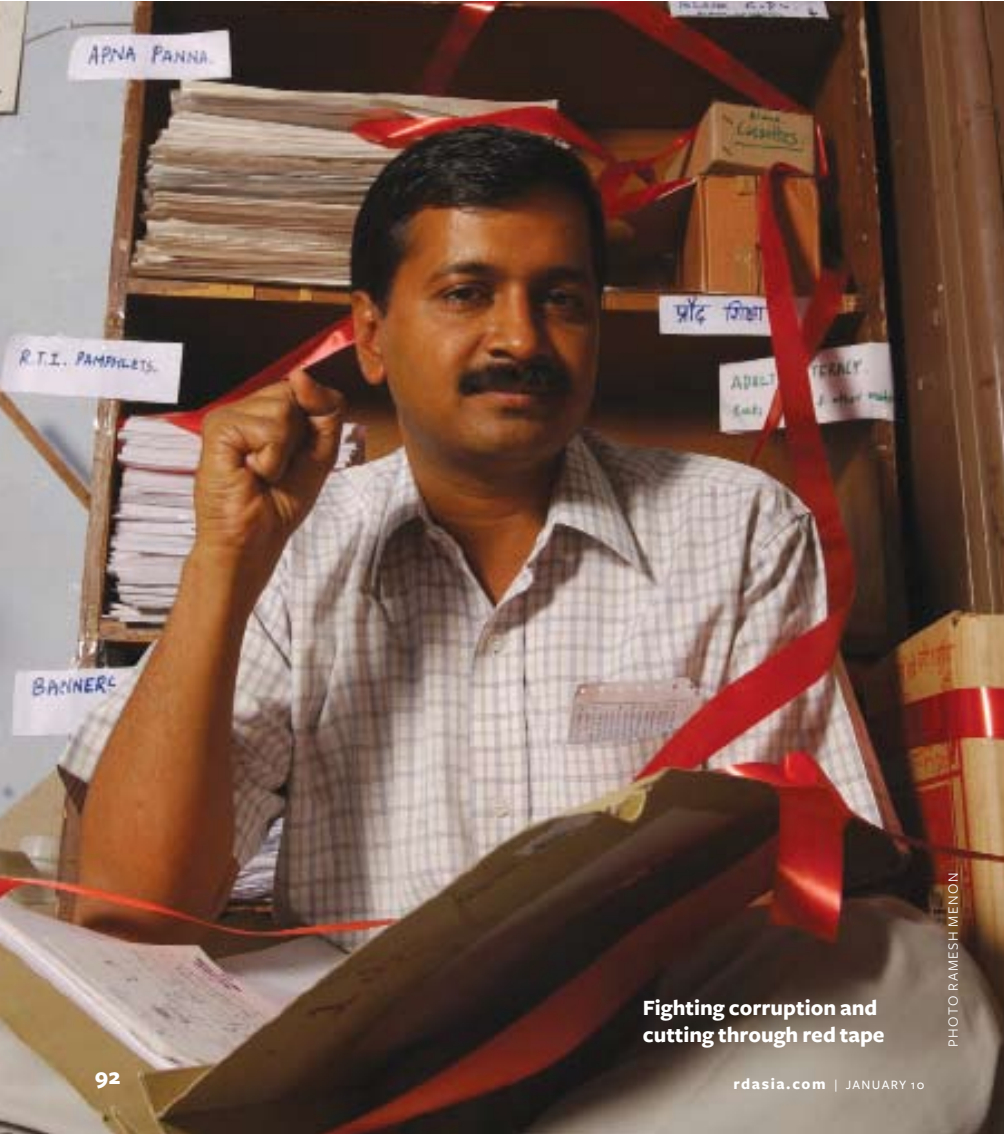
ASIAN OF  
THE YEAR

HONOURABLE  
MENTION

## ARVIND KEJRIWAL

### Empowering India's Citizens

By RAMESH MENON



Fighting corruption and  
cutting through red tape

PHOTO RAMESH MENON

**N**ANNUJI, a middle-aged labourer from a New Delhi slum, lost the ration card that provided his family cheap grain, cooking oil and kerosene through India's public distribution system (PDS). But when a duplicate card he'd applied for didn't arrive, the government officials Nannuji pleaded to were of no help.

A small bribe might have changed that. Instead, Nannuji approached a local group known as Parivartan and was encouraged by the people there to file a petition, under Delhi's relatively new Right to Information law, questioning why he was being denied a ration card. Within days Nannuji got his card.

Parivartan - which means "change" in Hindi - is the brainchild of Arvind Kejriwal, 41. After graduating as a mechanical engineer from India's prestigious Indian Institute of Technology in 1989, Arvind didn't emigrate to the United States unlike most of his classmates. Rather, he joined the Indian Revenue Service (IRS) and rose to become an Additional Commissioner of Income Tax. He watched on with disgust as his own colleagues took bribes to get papers and tax refunds moving.

Arvind started Parivartan in 2000 to discuss such wrongs and ways to find systematic solutions to them. Parivartan also campaigned for an

effective Right to Information (RTI) Act, which India passed only in 2005. In 2006, Arvind quit the IRS to work as an activist fulltime.

There was a time when he and other Parivartan members stood outside the Electricity Department in Delhi, exhorting citizens who came by to get problems fixed, not to pay bribes, offering to facilitate their dealings with the Department for free.

Since then, Parivartan has carried out "Don't Pay Bribes!" campaigns across India, enabling thousands of Indians to challenge bribery and get their grievances resolved using RTI laws. "Arvind Kejriwal is a great inspiration, a truly creative reformer," says Kiran Bedi, Magsaysay Award winner and one of India's best-known police officers.

Parivartan, which does not accept funding from any organisation, relies on its many young volunteers. Staff salaries are paid for by donations from well-wishers. "There are even government officials who send us donations," reveals Arvind. "Many of them are honest and love the idea of empowering the common man."

"Our work must directly impact people's lives," he says. "We have to keep working hard to keep the idea of democracy alive."

For more information on Arvind Kejriwal's work, visit [www.parivartan.com/home.asp](http://www.parivartan.com/home.asp) or e-mail [parivartan@parivartan.com](mailto:parivartan@parivartan.com).

## YANG WEI-LIN

### Daughter of Cambodia

By RAYCINE CHANG

Watching over  
Cambodian children



PHOTO: ALBERTO BUZZOLLA/ONASIA.COM

**B**ACK IN 1988, Yang Wei-lin was passing through the airport in Bangkok, Thailand, when she saw over a hundred shabbily dressed Cambodian refugees. They were in transit, waiting for their flight to the United States.

The then China Airlines stewardess subsequently learnt that there were thousands more refugees at the Thai border, desperate for help.

She was deeply moved, so much so that the following year, she resigned from her job and joined the Thai-Chinese Refugee Service (TCRS) established by the Chinese Association for Human Rights.

Yang began working in refugee camps run by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) at the Thai border, helping Cambodians rebuild their lives and homes in the aftermath of the war.

IN RECALLING her daily brushes with disaster and death, Yang says, “The more I gave of myself, the more people I found that needed help. The demand for manpower, resources and money was endless. We had to be extremely determined and dedicated in order to deal with the situation.”

In 1995, the native of Kaohsiung, Taiwan, founded the Field Relief Agency (FRA) to train teachers, build schools and homes for street children

in Cambodia. FRA’s beneficiaries include ethnic Chinese as well as Cambodian families.

For more than a decade, Yang has acted on her belief in ending poverty through education. She has mobilised an army of Taiwanese workers to help Cambodian children through fundraising to build schools and libraries, train teachers, and provide textbooks and stationery.

To date, over 70,000 children have benefited and many families are living better lives thanks to her work.

Yang successively opened a village job-training centre that assists Cambodians who are working towards independent living by providing accommodation, job training, education, emergency aid and interest-free loans.

YANG’S STRONG DEDICATION to the Cambodian people has led to her being given another name, “Daughter of Cambodia”. The Cambodian government has also conferred the “Medal for International NGO Assistance in Cambodia’s Post-War Reconstruction” on her.

“It is gratifying to see peoples’ lives change for the better because of our continuing efforts,” says Yang. “It also helps me to see my mission more clearly.”

For more information on Yang Wei-lin’s work, go to [www.fra.org.tw](http://www.fra.org.tw).

## BRIDGET LEW TAN

“Social justice is the responsibility of each and every person”

By DORA CHEOK

Tan provides counselling for vulnerable migrant workers



PHOTO CHARLES PERTWEE

**B**RIDGET LEW TAN hails from Singapore, home to one of the largest migrant labour workforces in Asia. For over a decade, she has been at the forefront of migrant labour rights.

“In Singapore the group of people that are discriminated and marginalised, more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse than other groups are migrant workers, who are unskilled and semi-skilled,” Tan says. An additional disadvantage: Local labour laws that protect workers in the country aren’t applicable to migrant domestic helpers.

Tan founded the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics, or HOME, in 2004. Since then, HOME has provided direct assistance to more than 50,000 migrants and victims of human trafficking and forced labour.

A large number of those in need are women, specifically domestic workers. Tan tells us about the case of an Indonesian woman who climbed out of a window on the 32nd floor of a condominium.

“She got out of the window and climbed onto an air condition compressor unit and hopped from one unit to another, to try and get to the lift lobby access.”

What could have driven her to do something as extreme as this?

“I asked her why . . . she said she

couldn’t tolerate the verbal abuse from the grandmother of that household. For a person to be driven to this, it must have been really bad. And yet verbal abuse is usually treated as a ‘no case’ by the authorities because there is no proof,” Tan says. As a result, the complainant is usually deported instead of given the opportunity to opt for a change of employer.

“For me, social justice is the responsibility of each and every person. The strong must help the weak; the rich should help the poor. Those who are knowledgeable should help those who aren’t. We all have a part to play,” says Tan.

And this is something she does with great diligence. Tan counsels these women, explaining their rights under the law, what they can complain about, and the consequences of their action. “It’s sad, I know. For some it’s really unfair.”

HOME, under Tan’s direction, continues to aid hundreds of displaced foreign workers, providing food, shelter and legal council. “It’s just human to care about other people . . . the world, it isn’t perfect. But we have to do our part to show kindness, understanding and compassion.”

*For more information on Bridget Lew Tan’s work, go to [www.home.org.sg](http://www.home.org.sg). Also, go to [www.mtvexit.org](http://www.mtvexit.org) to watch Traffic: Lucy Liu, a video documentary featuring Tan.*

## ABDUL SATTAR EDHI

### “Humanity is the biggest religion”

By MASEEH RAHMAN



Abdul Sattar Edhi is known as Pakistan's 'Angel of Mercy'

PHOTO GETTY IMAGES

**W**HEN THE Pakistan Army began its assault on the fundamentalist Taliban late last year, hundreds of thousands of people fled from the bloody battles in the country's mountainous western region. Abdul Sattar Edhi, on the other hand, headed towards the conflict zone, to Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier Province.

“Religion does not teach violence, this is the wrong use of religion,” says the 81-year-old, variously hailed as an ‘angel of mercy’ and the ‘Father Teresa of Pakistan’.

“I’ve come here on a humanitarian mission, to organise food, warm clothes, and blankets for those who are OK, and ambulances and medical aid for the dead and injured from the tribal areas.”

“In war, it’s the innocents who suffer,” he adds. “And it’s the oppressors and the profiteers who gain.”

EVER SINCE THAT DAY in 1950 when Edhi set up a dispensary in the port city of Karachi, he has worked tirelessly for the poor, the suffering, and the abandoned.

The Edhi Foundation, which he runs together with his wife Bilquis, supervises the country's largest humanitarian and charitable network – from hospitals, blood banks and

ambulance services to homes for abandoned children, drug addicts, destitute women, the mentally and physically challenged, and the elderly.

“When I saw the poverty and helplessness around me, I felt this passion in my heart to help people,” he said. “I made Pakistanis aware of the importance of humanitarian work. In return, they love me like a child.”

EDHI WAS BORN in Bantva Village in the western Indian state of Gujarat. In 1947, he migrated with his Muslim clan to the newly-created Pakistan, and became a successful textile broker in Karachi before spurning business for charitable work.

In a country torn by sectarian strife, his organisation helps everyone, regardless of religious and ethnic division.

“When a 20-year-old Christian girl who works for me was asked her religion, she replied ‘Humanity,’” said the bearded Edhi, who is a devout Muslim. “Humanity is the biggest religion. Islam teaches us that the basis of all work should be humanitarian.”

“I’m a *fakir*,” he concluded, referring to the Arabic word for poor. “I don’t care about anything. I just go ahead with my work. God helps me.”

For more information on Abdul Sattar Edhi's work, go to [www.edhifoundation.com](http://www.edhifoundation.com).