

# Charity and society

Charity  
Dawn  
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**C**HARITY is regarded one of the best solutions to minimize the effects of poverty and to give relief to needy people. Individuals as well as institutions undertake the task to distribute it among those who needed it badly. It is considered a religious obligation and a social responsibility to lessen the burden of impoverishment.

During the Sultanat period, Firuz Tughluq (1351-1388) institutionalised the charity and established a separate department that provided dowry to poor girls and financial assistance to destitute people. It was an old tradition to establish almshouses (*Langar Khanay*), where poor people could get free food. Mughal emperors founded such houses throughout the empire at the state expense.

Such houses increased in the time of famine or

period (1485-1603), there emerged a new kind of beggars called the 'sturdy beggars' as a result of unemployment, dismissal of soldiers from the French wars and the war of Roses, deforestation, and system of enclosures that deprived poor peasants to cultivate wasteland. They became a menace to the English society as they wandered in the countryside in groups and knocked doors for alms.

To solve this problem, the government passed a number of poor bills to provide relief to the needy people. The cost of relief was to be met by voluntary subscribers and Parish was to administer it. Next, the government decided to set up workhouses to discourage the poor to beg and to rely on relief. In 1723, a Workhouse Test Act was passed which required poor to enrol themselves in workhouses and work there. In another act of 1834, the outdoor relief was withdrawn and they were forced to live in the workhouses.

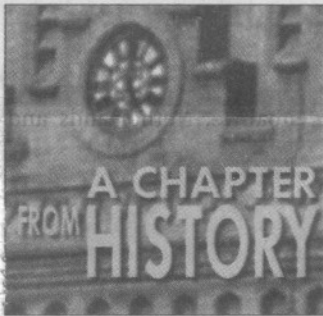
Life in those workhouses was harsh and environment was unpleasant. There was no respect for family as husbands, wives and children were separated from each other and strict disciplines were observed. Meals had to be eaten in silence. Diet was sparse. The inmates there were also provided jobs such as of stone-breaking, bone-grinding and of picking old ropes to pieces. Charles Dickens in his novels graphically depicts the condition of those workhouses.

A historian writes: "There was a famous scandal in Andover workhouse when the inmates, working on bones-crushing were so hungry that they were found to be eating rotten marrow and fats from the bones. No wonder, the workhouses became known among the workers as Bastilles (after the notorious fortress-prison in Paris)."

drought. Akbar (1556-1605) built such houses at Fatahpur for poor Muslims and Hindus. They were known as *Khairpura* and *Dharampura*. A large number of *Jogis* began to come to the capital when they smelled free food. Then a separate house was built for them know as *Jogipura*.

Jahangir (1605-1627) during his reign built such houses at Ahmadabad, Allahabad, Lahore, Delhi and Agra. These houses were known as *Bulgharkahan* (a place for the distribution of cooked food among the poor).

Besides these institutions of charity, there were some social and religious practices to give alms to



some social and religious practices to give alms to poor. For example, at the time of festivals or celebrations a tray full of silver and gold coins was moved around the head of a nobleman or emperor, and then the money was distributed among poor. The ceremony was called *Nisar*. It was thought to avert all evils on all occasions. It was also a practice that when an emperor or nobleman went out in procession for the Eid prayers or to visit tombs of saints and his ancestors, he threw money to the crowd of people who assembled to see the procession. This tradition of throwing money in India was regarded as an act of generosity.

Once Akbar thought a new way to distribute money among the poor. He filled a tank called *Anaptalao* at Fatahpur with coins that were distributed among poor.

Abul Fazl writes: "There was a reservoir in the courtyard of the palace at Fatahpur, twenty-yards long by twenty broad and three yards deep. This he caused to be filled with red, white, and black money (i.e., gold, silver and copper coins)." But on the first day, there was such a crowd that a number of people were stamped on. On seeing it Akbar decided to abandon this practice.

On the other hand the way to handle the problem of poverty was different in England. During the Tudor

ous fortress-prison in Paris)."

Condition of the work-houses improved as a result of public pressure during 1850s. However, their image persisted among the poor who regarded those houses unpleasant to live. By the passage of time, the poor laws were replaced with a series of new institutions, which provided relief to poor people either through state institutions or charity foundations.

There is a basic difference between the individual and institutional charities. In case of an individual, it lasts only during his lifetime while an institution functions for generations, if it is maintained properly.

Moreover, when an individual helps the poor, the receiver personally feels obliged to his benefactor while the alms-giver assumes arrogance and makes an attempt to use it for his social and political motives or for his personal glory. But in case of the institution there is no such thing. Contributors to such institutions mostly remain anonymous. So the institutional help keeps dignity of a receiver.

In the democratic system, it is a right of citizens to demand from state and its institutions to take care of them. Therefore the government should take such measures that no one would ask for help from his fellow citizens for his maintenance.

— Mubarak Ali