

My father consulted my mother on everything. ‘Pekai, help me resolve my confusion on this’, he would say. She even helped whitewash the school walls, holding up the lanterns so they could paint when the light went off in power cuts.

‘Ziauddin was a family man and they were unusually close,’ said Hidayatullah. ‘While most of us can’t live with our wives, he couldn’t be without his.’

Within a few months my mother was expecting. Their first child, born in 1995, was a girl and stillborn. ‘I think there was some problem with hygiene in that muddy place,’ says my father. ‘I assumed women could give birth without going to hospital, as my mother and my sisters had in the village. My mother gave birth to ten children in this way.’

The school continued to lose money. Months would pass and they could not pay the teachers’ wages or the school rent. The goldsmith kept coming and demanding his money for my mother’s wedding bangles. My father would make him good tea and offer him biscuits in the hope that would keep him satisfied. Hidayatullah laughed. ‘You think he will be happy with tea? He wants his money.’

The situation became so dire that my father was forced to sell the gold bangles. In our culture wedding jewellery is a bond between the couple. Often women sell their jewellery to help set up their husbands in business or to pay their fares to go abroad. My mother had already offered her bangles to pay for my father’s nephew to go to college, which my father had rashly promised to fund – fortunately, my father’s cousin Jehan Sher Khan had stepped in – and she did not realise the bangles were only partly paid for. She was then furious when she learned that my father did not get a good price for them.

Just when it seemed matters could not get worse, the area was hit by flash floods. There was a day when it did not stop raining and in the late afternoon there was a warning of flooding. Everyone had to leave the district. My mother was away and Hidayatullah needed my father to help him move everything up to the first floor, safe from the fast-rising waters, but he couldn’t find him anywhere. He went outside, shouting ‘Ziauddin, Ziauddin!’ The search almost cost Hidayatullah his life. The narrow street outside the school was totally flooded and he was soon up to his neck in water. There were live electric cables hanging loose and swaying in the wind. He watched paralysed with fear as they almost touched the water. Had they done so, he would have been electrocuted.

When he finally found my father, he learned that he had heard a woman crying that her husband was trapped in their house and he had rushed in to save him. Then he helped them save their fridge. Hidayatullah was furious. ‘You saved this woman’s husband but not your own house!’ he said. ‘Was it because of the cry of a woman?’

When the waters receded, they found their home and school destroyed: their furniture, carpets, books, clothes and the audio system entirely caked in thick foul-smelling mud. They had nowhere to sleep and no clean clothes to change into. Luckily, a neighbour called Mr Aman-ud-din took them in for the night. It took them a week to clear the debris. They were both away when, ten days later, there was a second flood and the building again filled with mud. Shortly afterwards they had a visit from an official of WAPDA, the water and power company, who claimed their meter was rigged and demanded a bribe. When my father refused, a bill arrived with a large fine. There was no way they could pay this so my father asked one of his political friends to use his influence.

It started to feel as though the school was not meant to be, but my father would not give up on his dream so easily. Besides, he had a family to provide for. I was born on 12 July 1997. My mother was helped by a neighbour who had delivered babies before. My father was in the school waiting and