

Some boys from my father's district went off to fight in Afghanistan. My father remembers that one day a *maulana* called Sufi Mohammad came to the village and asked young men to join him to fight the Russians in the name of Islam. Many did, and they set off, armed with old rifles or just axes and bazookas. Little did we know that years later the same *maulana*'s organisation would become the Swat Taliban. At that time my father was only twelve years old and too young to fight. But the Russians ended up stuck in Afghanistan for ten years, through most of the 1980s, and when he became a teenager my father decided he too wanted to be a jihadi. Though later he became less regular in his prayers, in those days he used to leave home at dawn every morning to walk to a mosque in another village, where he studied the Quran with a senior *talib*. At that time *talib* simply meant 'religious student'. Together they studied all the thirty chapters of the Quran, not just recitation but also interpretation, something few boys do.

The *talib* talked of jihad in such glorious terms that my father was captivated. He would endlessly point out to my father that life on earth was short and that there were few opportunities for young men in the village. Our family owned little land, and my father did not want to end up going south to work in the coal mines like many of his classmates. That was tough and dangerous work, and the coffins of those killed in accidents would come back several times a year. The best that most village boys could hope for was to go to Saudi Arabia or Dubai and work in construction. So heaven with its seventy-two virgins sounded attractive. Every night my father would pray to God, 'O Allah, please make war between Muslims and infidels so I can die in your service and be a martyr.'

For a while his Muslim identity seemed more important than anything else in his life. He began to sign himself 'Ziauddin Panchpiri' (the Panchpiri are a religious sect) and sprouted the first signs of a beard. It was, he says, a kind of brainwashing. He believes he might even have thought of becoming a suicide bomber had there been such a thing in those days. But from an early age he had been a questioning kind of boy who rarely took anything at face value, even though our education at government schools meant learning by rote and pupils were not supposed to question teachers.

It was around the time he was praying to go to heaven as a martyr that he met my mother's brother, Faiz Mohammad, and started mixing with her family and going to her father's *hujra*. They were very involved in local politics, belonged to secular nationalist parties and were against involvement in the war. A famous poem was written at that time by Rahmat Shah Sayel, the same Peshawar poet who wrote the poem about my namesake. He described what was happening in Afghanistan as a 'war between two elephants' – the US and the Soviet Union – not our war, and said that we Pashtuns were 'like the grass crushed by the hooves of two fierce beasts'. My father often used to recite the poem to me when I was a child but I didn't know then what it meant.

My father was very impressed by Faiz Mohammad and thought he talked a lot of sense, particularly about wanting to end the feudal and capitalist systems in our country, where the same big families had controlled things for years while the poor got poorer. He found himself torn between the two extremes, secularism and socialism on one side and militant Islam on the other. I guess he ended up somewhere in the middle.

My father was in awe of my grandfather and told me wonderful stories about him, but he also told me that he was a man who could not meet the high standards he set for others. *Baba* was such a popular and passionate speaker that he could have been a great leader if he had been more diplomatic and less consumed by rivalries with cousins and others who were better off. In Pashtun society it is very hard to stomach a cousin being more popular, wealthier or more influential than you are. My