

school has been there since the 1960s and never converted anyone to Christianity – in fact some of them converted to Islam. And Excelsior is only co-educational in the primary section.'

Muslim Khan didn't answer. 'What about their own daughters?' I asked my father. 'Don't they want them to learn?'

Our headmistress Madam Maryam had studied at Sangota, and her younger sister Ayesha was a pupil there, so she and some of the other Sangota girls transferred to our school. The monthly school fees were never enough to cover all our outgoings so the extra fees were welcome, but my father was unhappy. He went everywhere he could demanding the reconstruction of both schools. Once he spoke at a big gathering and held up an audience member's baby girl and said, 'This girl is our future. Do we want her to be ignorant?' The crowd agreed that they would sacrifice themselves before giving up their daughters' education. The new girls had horrible stories. Ayesha told us how one day on the way home from Sangota she had seen a Taliban holding up the severed head of a policeman by its hair, blood dripping from the neck. The Sangota girls were also very bright, which meant more competition. One of them, Rida, was excellent at making speeches. She became a good friend of mine and of Moniba's, which sometimes caused fights as three is a tricky number. Moniba often brought food to school and would just bring one spare fork. 'Are you my friend or Rida's?' I asked Moniba.

She laughed and said, 'We are all three good friends.'

By the end of 2008, around 400 schools had been destroyed by the Taliban. We had a new government under President Asif Zardari, the widower of Benazir, but they didn't seem to care about Swat. I told people things would be different if Zardari's own daughters were at school in Swat. There were suicide bombings all over the country: even the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad had been blown up.

In Swat it was safer in the town than in the remote areas and many of our family came from the countryside to stay with us. The house was small and got very crowded with the cousins who already lived with us. There was little to do. We couldn't play cricket in the street or on the roof like we used to. We played marbles in the yard over and over again. I fought non-stop with my brother Khushal, and he would go crying to our mother. Never in history have Khushal and Malala been friends.

I liked doing my hair in different styles and would spend ages in the bathroom in front of the mirror trying out looks I had seen in movies. Until I was eight or nine my mother used to cut my hair short like my brothers because of lice and also to make it easier to wash and brush as it would get messed up under my shawl. But finally I had persuaded her to let me grow it to my shoulders. Unlike Moniba, who has straight hair, mine is wavy, and I liked to twist it into curls or tie it into plaits. 'What are you doing in there *Pisho*?' my mother would shout. 'Our guests need the bathroom and everyone is having to wait for you.'

One of the worst times was the fasting month of Ramadan in 2008. During Ramadan no food or drink can pass a Muslim's lips in daylight hours. The Taliban bombed the power station so we had no electricity, then a few days later they blasted the pipeline so we had no gas either. The price of the gas cylinders we used to buy from the market doubled so my mother had to cook on a fire like we did in the village. She didn't complain – food needed to be cooked and she cooked it, and there were others worse off than us. But there was no clean water and people started dying from cholera. The hospital could not cope with all the patients and had to erect big tents outside to treat people.

Though we had no generator at home, my father bought one to install at the school, and fresh water was pumped from a bore-hole, which all the children in the neighbourhood went to collect. Every day