

The Autumn of the Earthquake

ONE FINE OCTOBER day when I was still in primary school our desks started to tremble and shake. Our classes were still mixed at that age, and all the boys and girls yelled, 'Earthquake!' We ran outside as we had been taught to do. All the children gathered around our teachers as chicks swarm to a mother hen.

Swat lies on a geological fault line and we often had earthquakes, but this felt different. All the buildings around us seemed to be shaking and the rumbling didn't stop. Most of us were crying and our teachers were praying. Miss Rubi, one of my favourite teachers, told us to stop crying and to stay calm; it would soon be over.

Once the shaking had stopped we were all sent home. We found our mother sitting in a chair holding the Quran, reciting verses over and over. Whenever there is trouble people pray a lot. She was relieved to see us and hugged us, tears streaming down her face. But the aftershocks kept coming all afternoon so we remained very scared.

We had moved again – we would move seven times by the time I was thirteen – and were living in an apartment building. It was high for Mingora, two storeys with a big water tank on the roof. My mother was terrified it would collapse on top of us so we kept going outside. My father did not get home till late that evening as he had been busy checking all the other school buildings.

When nightfall came, there were still tremors and my mother was in a state of panic. Every time we felt a tremor we thought it was the Day of Judgement. 'We will be buried in our beds!' she cried. She insisted we leave, but my father was exhausted and we Muslims believe our fate is written by God. So he put me and my brothers Khushal and Atal, then just a baby, to bed.

'Go wherever you want,' he told my mother and cousin. 'I am staying here. If you believe in God you will stay here.' I think when there is a great disaster or our lives are in danger we remember our sins and wonder how we will meet God and whether we will be forgiven. But God has also given us the power to forget, so that when the tragedy is over we carry on as normal. I trusted in my father's faith, but I also shared my mother's very real concerns.

That earthquake of 8 October 2005 turned out to be one of the worst in history. It was 7.6 on the Richter Scale and was felt as far away as Kabul and Delhi. Our town of Mingora was largely spared – just a few buildings collapsed – but neighbouring Kashmir and the northern areas of Pakistan were devastated. Even in Islamabad buildings collapsed.

It took a while for us to realise how bad it was. When the TV news began to show the devastation we saw that entire villages had been turned to dust. Landslides blocked access to the worst affected parts and all the phones and power lines were down. The earthquake had affected 30,000 square kilometres, an area as big as the American state of Connecticut. The numbers were unbelievable. More than 73,000 people had been killed and 128,000 injured, many of them permanently disabled. Around three and a half million people had lost their homes. Roads, bridges, water and power had all gone. Places we had visited like Balakot were almost completely destroyed. Many of those killed were children who like me had been at school that morning. Some 6,400 schools were turned to rubble and 18,000 children lost their lives.