her in the house, but my father arranged a small allowance for her and a place for Shehnaz and her other brother at his school. Shehnaz had never been to school, so even though she was two years older than me she was put two classes below, and she came to live with us so that I could help her.

There was also Nooria, whose mother Kharoo did some of our washing and cleaning, and Alishpa, one of the daughters of Khalida, the woman who helped my mother with the cooking. Khalida had been sold into marriage to an old man who used to beat her, and eventually she ran away with her three daughters. Her own family would not take her back because it is believed that a woman who has left her husband has brought shame on her family. For a while her daughters also had to collect rubbish to survive. Her story was like something out of the novels I had started reading.

The school had expanded a lot by then and had three buildings – the original one in Landikas was a primary school, and then there was a high school for girls on Yahya Street and one for boys with a big garden of roses near the remains of the Buddhist temple. We had about 800 students in total, and although the school was not really making money, my father gave away more than a hundred free places. One of them was to a boy whose father, Sharafat Ali, had helped my father when he was a penniless college student. They were friends from the village. Sharafat Ali worked at the electricity company and he would give my father a few hundred rupees whenever he could spare them. My father was happy to be able to repay his kindness. Another was a girl in my class called Kausar, whose father embroidered clothes and shawls – a trade our region is famous for. When we went on school trips to visit the mountains, I knew she couldn't afford them so I would pay for her with my pocket money.

Giving places to poor children didn't just mean my father lost their fees. Some of the richer parents took their children out of the school when they realised they were sharing classrooms with the sons and daughters of people who cleaned their houses or stitched their clothes. They thought it was shameful for their children to mix with those from poor families. My mother said it was hard for the poor children to learn when they were not getting enough food at home so some of the girls would come to our house for breakfast. My father joked that our home had become a boarding house.

Having so many people around made it hard to study. I had been delighted to have my own room, and my father had even bought me a dressing table to work on. But now I had two other girls in the room. 'I want space!' I'd cry. But then I felt guilty as I knew we were lucky. I thought back to the children working on the rubbish heap. I kept seeing the dirty face of the girl from the dump and continued to pester my father to give them places at our school.

He tried to explain that those children were breadwinners so if they went to school, even for free, the whole family would go hungry. However, he got a wealthy philanthropist, Azaday Khan, to pay for him to produce a leaflet asking, '*Kia hasool e elum in bachun ka haq nahe? '* – 'Is education not the right of these children?' My father printed thousands of these leaflets, left them at local meetings and distributed them around town.

By then my father was becoming a well-known figure in Swat. Even though he was not a khan or a rich man, people listened to him. They knew he would have something interesting to say at workshops and seminars and wasn't afraid to criticise the authorities, even the army, which was now running our country. He was becoming known to the army too, and friends told him that the local commander had called him 'lethal' in public. My father didn't know what exactly the brigadier meant, but in our country, where the army is so powerful, it did not bode well.

One of his pet hates was the 'ghost schools'. Influential people in remote areas took money from