

Toffees, Tennis Balls and the Buddhas of Swat

FIRST THE TALIBAN took our music, then our Buddhas, then our history. One of our favourite things was going on school trips. We were lucky to live in a paradise like Swat with so many beautiful places to visit – waterfalls, lakes, the ski resort, the wali's palace, the Buddha statues, the tomb of Akhund of Swat. All these places told our special story. We would talk about the trips for weeks beforehand, then, when the day finally came, we dressed up in our best clothes and piled into buses along with pots of chicken and rice for a picnic. Some of us had cameras and took photographs. At the end of the day my father would make us all take turns standing on a rock and tell stories about what we had seen. When Fazlullah came there were no more school trips. Girls were not supposed to be seen outside.

The Taliban destroyed the Buddhist statues and stupas where we played, which had been there for thousands of years and were a part of our history from the time of the Kushan kings. They believed any statue or painting was *haram*, sinful and therefore prohibited. One black day they even dynamited the face of the Jehanabad Buddha, which was carved into a hillside just half an hour's drive from Mingora and towered twenty-three feet into the sky. Archaeologists say it was almost as important as the Buddhas of Bamiyan, which the Afghan Taliban blew up.

It took them two goes to destroy it. The first time they drilled holes in the rock and filled them with dynamite, but that didn't work. A few weeks later, on 8 October 2007, they tried again. This time they obliterated the Buddha's face, which had watched over the valley since the seventh century. The Taliban became the enemy of fine arts, culture and our history. The Swat museum moved its collection away for safekeeping. They destroyed everything old and brought nothing new. The Taliban took over the Emerald Mountain with its mine and began selling the beautiful stones to buy their ugly weapons. They took money from the people who chopped down our precious trees for timber and then demanded more money to let their trucks pass.

Their radio coverage spread across the valley and neighbouring districts. Though we still had our television they had switched off the cable channels. Moniba and I could no longer watch our favourite Bollywood shows like *Shararat* or *Making Mischief*. It seemed like the Taliban didn't want us to do anything. They even banned one of our favourite board games called Carrom in which we flick counters across a wooden board. We heard stories that the Taliban would hear children laughing and burst into the room and smash the boards. We felt like the Taliban saw us as little dolls to control, telling us what to do and how to dress. I thought if God wanted us to be like that He wouldn't have made us all different.

One day we found our teacher Miss Hammeda in floods of tears. Her husband was a policeman in the small town of Matta, and Fazlullah's men had stormed in and some police officers had been killed, including her husband. It was the first Taliban attack on the police in our valley. Soon they had taken over many villages. The black and white flags of Fazlullah's TNSM started appearing on police stations. The militants would enter villages with megaphones and the police would flee. In a short time they had taken over fifty-nine villages and set up their own parallel administrations. Policemen were so scared of being killed that they took out adverts in the newspapers to announce they had left