

‘Is he right, *Aba*?’ I asked my father. I remembered how frightening the earthquake had been.

‘No, *Jani*,’ he replied. ‘He is just fooling people.’

My father said the radio station was the talk of the staffroom. By then our schools had about seventy teachers, around forty men and thirty women. Some of the teachers were anti-Fazlullah but many supported him. People thought that he was a good interpreter of the Holy Quran and admired his charisma. They liked his talk of bringing back Islamic law as everyone was frustrated with the Pakistani justice system, which had replaced ours when we were merged into the country. Cases such as land disputes, common in our area, which used to be resolved quickly now took ten years to come to court. Everyone wanted to see the back of the corrupt government officials sent into the valley. It was almost as if they thought Fazlullah would recreate our old princely state from the time of the wali.

Within six months people were getting rid of their TVs, DVDs and CDs. Fazlullah’s men collected them into huge heaps on the streets and set them on fire, creating clouds of thick black smoke that reached high into the sky. Hundreds of CD and DVD shops closed voluntarily and their owners were paid compensation by the Taliban. My brothers and I were worried as we loved our TV, but my father reassured us that we were not getting rid of it. To be safe we moved it into a cupboard and watched it with the volume low. The Taliban were known to listen at people’s doors then force their way in, take the TVs and smash them to pieces on the street. Fazlullah hated the Bollywood movies we so loved, which he denounced as un-Islamic. Only the radio was allowed, and all music except for Taliban songs was declared *haram*.

One day my father went to visit a friend in hospital and found lots of patients listening to cassettes of Fazlullah’s sermons. ‘You must meet Maulana Fazlullah,’ people told him. ‘He’s a great scholar’.

‘He’s actually a high-school dropout whose real name isn’t even Fazlullah,’ my father retorted, but they wouldn’t listen. My father became depressed because people had begun to embrace Fazlullah’s words and his religious romanticism. ‘It’s ridiculous,’ my father would say, ‘that this so-called scholar is spreading ignorance.’

Fazlullah was particularly popular in remote areas where people remembered how TNSM volunteers had helped during the earthquake when the government was nowhere to be seen. On some mosques they set up speakers connected to radios so his broadcasts could be heard by everyone in the village and in the fields. The most popular part of his show came every evening when he would read out people’s names. He’d say, ‘Mr So-and-so was smoking *chars* but has stopped because it’s sinful,’ or, ‘Mr X has kept his beard and I congratulate him,’ or, ‘Mr Y voluntarily closed down his CD shop.’ He told them they would have their reward in the hereafter. People liked to hear their names on the radio; they also liked to hear which of their neighbours were sinful so they could gossip: ‘Have you heard about So-and-so?’

Mullah FM made jokes about the army. Fazlullah denounced Pakistani government officials as ‘infidels’ and said they were opposed to bringing in sharia law. He said that if they did not implement it, his men would ‘enforce it and tear them to pieces’. One of his favourite subjects was the injustice of the feudal system of the khans. Poor people were happy to see the khans getting their comeuppance. They saw Fazlullah as a kind of Robin Hood and believed that when Fazlullah took over he would give the khans’ land to the poor. Some of the khans fled. My father was against ‘khanism’ but he said the Taliban were worse.

My father’s friend Hidayatullah had become a government official in Peshawar and warned us,