

The Women of Swat and 'Mullah Radio'

From a group of NWFP women

"Islam started as soon as we fled from Malakand. People outside Swat think we had Islam and Shariat. There is no Islam in Swat. The Taliban have finished it."

-woman from Mingawera, Swat, in a Sawabai camp

Where does one begin to tell you what they have been saying. It is difficult to explain because it is difficult for some of us to believe, to understand and, at times, even to empathise with. Between their rage and their tears, between giving each other solace and laughing at lighter moments, they opened up to talk to us. They shall not be named but they shall be heard by all of us today.

We write here some of the stories told to us by the women of Swat. They come from Kabbal, Mingawera (Mingora), Qambar, Kanju and other parts of Swat. Some are from Buner and Maidan in Lower Dir. Their lives were affected in many more ways than the lives of their men. Although they belong to a conservative and retrogressive culture, which the Pukhtun male has always guarded very carefully, these women have lived through many months of a terror which has kept them even more house bound and has challenged every aspect of their Pukhtun way of life, in ways that they could not imagine. And yet their ignorance has played a big part in the tragedy of Swat. An ignorance and naivety which made many of them the captive audience of Fazlullah, or, as they call him, 'Mullah Radio'.

When we entered the large tent a few women looked up and smiled. Some got up and put out their hands to greet us, surprised that we could converse in the same language. 'Sit down. We can't even offer you tea' said one laughing 'look at us and what we have been reduced to.' We quite candidly said that they were OUR guests and welcomed them. Their children were lying on the floor, red with the heat, tired and listless in the hot air of the fans. The women had been sitting in silence before we went in. We could hear no noise from the tent which was full

of about forty women and children. What could they share with each other? Each story was the same as the next. It was a pall of misery and silence that hung over their heads. These women were lucky, they had a common place to come to, out of their tents. In most camps the women sit in the heat of the tents, not being allowed out. They wait for their men to come before they can use the toilets. Their children defecate outside the tents as they cannot take them to the toilets. In some schools they feed their children first and, at times, do not eat.

One by one they spoke their ordeal, their flight from the bombing, the endless days of walking with children and the elderly and the dead they had left behind. Soon each one wanted to tell her story. They sat closer and closer to us, listening to the others and telling us about themselves. Most had fled from Mingawera and other places in Swat. Walking for days, avoiding the curfew by moving off the roads and taking to the mountains to walk, walking day and night, hiding their sons in trucks for fear that the Talibs would take them away to fight. One woman had walked for nine days with three children under ten. We cannot recall the number of women who told us about how their homes were shelled and how they had buried their dead without bathing them, in hurriedly dug graves. One had lost her baby on the way down, had dug a ditch beside the road, torn off part of her chadar, wrapped her child in it and buried her in the ditch. She walked on, to save what was left, her own life. Another spoke of how in the madness of the bombing she had asked her husband to pick up her baby from the bed. When they were out of the village, he realised he had picked up the pillow and left the six month old child behind. They also kept walking.

Another woman spoke of how they were eating peacefully when a mortar had hit her house. The word 'mortar' was a regular part of their conversation. 'Matr' and 'karpee' which we finally realised was 'curfew.' Another told us how her neighbours' home was shelled. Four men had died on the spot. People had run helter-skelter. The helicopter passed and the men ran and started digging graves to bury the dead before fleeing the village. They told the women to collect what they could and the women started to round up their children. As the men dug, the helicopter returned to shell. The men left the bodies and ran for cover. The helicopter fired again and flew past. The men returned and dug what they could and dumped the bodies into the graves. She continued to talk, calmly. 'These were not graves, these were ditches. We threw them into these ditches and we ran'.

Another woman in a school camp spoke of how her family had left food in their plates and hot tea in their cups when the shelling began. She was brave and then her brown eyes filled with tears and she said 'My young son, he was in class ten, was hit on the back of his head and he died. I lost my young son' and then her tears flowed. The others sat looking at her, thinking of their own miseries. We sat in silence, nobody consoling, nobody talking. 'At least they should have told us, why did they not tell us they were going to bomb?' She wiped her eyes hurriedly and continued to talk. 'They are beasts these Taliban. They are not human. May God finish them all like they have finished us.' We were surprised, surprised that her anger turned to the Taliban when her son was killed by military shelling. She was a strong woman and continued to talk with a vengeance. 'May God punish these animals for what they have done to us. I hope the army finishes every last one of them.'

From one place to another, from one tent and school to another, we heard them tell us how they were unable to leave their homes for fear of being beaten or killed or flogged, how their men had been dragged out of their homes and slaughtered. One of the men said he lived on the chowk where the Taliban slaughtered people. He told us how they walked into homes and led out their victims in silence. He told us of the sounds he heard when these men were slaughtered, like cattle, on the chowk. He continued to talk "This is the terror they spread, that a father could not save his son and a brother could not save his brother. That they use to stand in silence and watch their sons being led away. I was so outraged once that I started running out to stop them. My wife had to drag me back into the house, telling me that I would only meet the same fate."

Each woman talked of the slaughter of men, whether they had been through it or whether they had heard it – it had terrorised them into silence and acquiescence. They also spoke of how 'disgraced' they felt as they fled with only a dupatta on. One of them laughed and said "*Burqah, burqah*, that is all we heard in Swat but when we ran we were hardly covered and the whole world was looking at us." The men did not think this was funny. The humiliation they felt at this had outraged them—the humiliation at their women being in these camps, being seen by other men, the humiliation of standing in line for food. Perhaps that is why there were so many children standing in line for food at the camps.

But these are stories commonly heard until we heard them tell us unspeakable horrors. In one of the schools a group of women led us to meet their friend. She

could not speak because she could not stop crying. They kept saying ‘Show them, show them what they did to you.’ She was a widow and the Taliban had taken her 12 year old son away to join them. The women said that they use to come to all their homes and ask for their sons. They were too scared to resist. Some boys were taken by force, others went themselves, others simply disappeared from *madrassahs*. The widow had gone and taken her son back from the *madrassah*. They had come into her house, taken all her jewelry and cut off all her hair. She cried for her own humiliation and did not speak a word. Women from Buner spoke of how the Taliban had no respect for the Pukhtun way of life, for Islam or for women. How they would enter any house they wanted, whether to take away their sons or to take refuge. They spoke of incidents of the younger women being raped, after which their breasts were cut off. They told us how their men were beheaded and hung from electricity poles with their chopped off heads placed between their legs. They would leave notes on these bodies for no one to touch.

So why did they let this happen? Why could they not get together to stop it? We repeatedly asked them this. Who ARE these people? This is when the admittance came. They were honest, honest about the power of Mullah Radio and his constituency of women listeners.

“There was peace in Swat. Shut in their homes many women listened to ‘Raidu Mullah.’ He addressed them directly. “He used to talk about Islam, about praying five times a day, about going to the *madrassah* and learning the Quran. We all thought he was a good man.” He told the women about their duties under Islam, about cleanliness. Some of them embarrassingly told us about how he told them to wash their private parts.

“*Radio Mullah ke haramtobe wo*” (Mullah Radio spelled trouble for us) said one woman. “I never allowed my daughters and daughters-in-law to listen to him and used to switch the radio off. I just did not trust him.” As his popularity grew, women would line up outside his *madrassah* and donate. They donated whatever little jewelry they had. Even the poorest woman would donate her nose-pins. Some of them said that Fazlullah gave the jewelry to his wife as they saw her wearing a donated necklace.

This captive, gullible audience, shut in their homes became the main source of Mullah Radio's power and support. They encouraged their sons to join his *madrassah*. They provided the Taliban with a ready following. They provided them their sons which they soon realised were fodder, fodder for suicide bombings and '*jihad*'. It was only when they realised and resisted this that the Taliban turned on their own people. "They would knock at our doors – 'Give us your sons in the name of Islam'. Those who resisted were slaughtered." They wanted the little boys and the young men, so little that the guns they carried were at times longer than their legs; so little that the innocent brains in their little heads were filled with nonsense about so-called Islam. But it was all too late and nobody was willing to listen. "The Taliban did nothing until the foreigners came, the men from Waziristan and Afghanistan. They were the ones who started training the local Taliban". Many said their families approached the army and the government for help. But nobody listened. A few said that anyone who informed the army did not live long. They kept quiet. Even today parts of their areas where the Taliban have fled to are not known to the army. They will not speak.

Suddenly, in a fit of rage, one of them started shouting, "What has happened [happened only] today when for two years we have been screaming for help and the military and the Taliban have been sitting with each other chatting. When their check posts were barely a few feet away from each other. What was that all about that today it had to come to this, that our army has suddenly decided to bomb its own people? Where was this army and this government while our people were relating these incidents to them for almost two years?" This is only a question to be answered by those responsible for what is happening to our people today.

So what was the Nizaam e Adal, what did this mean for the women? They spoke of the flogging of that poor girl, they said Nizaam e Adal may have meant no war but that they could not leave their homes for fear that the Taliban might object to what they were wearing and beat them in public or kill their husbands. As one of them said, "I stopped going to my relatives' homes, for funerals and weddings. We were prisoners in our own homes as we could not move out without our men." But there was no trust left in government, police or military. A government which had signed this deal with the Taliban.

"We have been fooled. We have been fooled by the Taliban, the Army and the government. We knew two years ago that this was not Islam but nobody would

help us. Why did the army not do this two years when the Taliban were fewer in number and when they could be controlled? when they knew exactly where they were? What is the reason for their friendship with these animals? Where was this army and this government when we were screaming for help and going to them?" We heard this repeatedly and endlessly. "We will only believe the army when it catches those three leaders. Where are those leaders? Once they are caught this will all finish. We will believe it once those three men are caught."

How unfortunate it all is. How unfortunate that a culture deliberately keeps its women ignorant, ready fodder for a madman. How unfortunate that these people had nowhere to turn to even when they wanted to save themselves and save our own country. What answer can one give to these poor, helpless women? Who is going to be held accountable for the violence they have suffered? It is quite clear that we have never really cared about them, that we did not bother to educate them because our leaders were busy squandering our money on foreign trips and properties and their own men were too busy thinking about their own control over women. They know today that nobody will ever protect them unless they see the glint of the dollar on the unfortunate horizon of Pakistan. Their questions can only be answered by those who know what they have done. And if they do not answer them in this world, they will for sure answer them in the next.
