

A MOMENT THAT WILL STAY WITH ME FOREVER...

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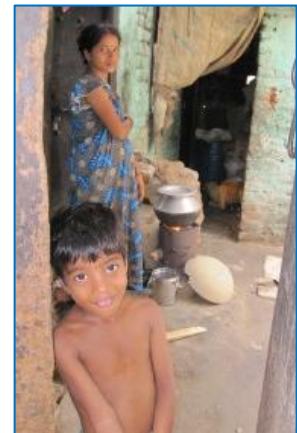
It was one of those moments that will stay with me forever... We were in Bairy Village, Sampatchok Block, Patna District, Bihar, India. We were meeting in a very crowded Community Center with women- carrying-small-children streaming in continuously, cramming themselves in where they could find a small spot on the ground to sit. I couldn't believe we could fit so many women (maybe 100?) into such a small room. A small group of curious men were hanging out at the doorway and Renji from our partner organization, Nidan, was doing his best to manage the very unruly crowd of representatives from about 4 different Self-Help Groups from various hamlets (or tolas) around this particular village.



We did the usual introductions and I asked my usual open ended questions about what they liked about being part of the group, what they have learned, what their challenges and opportunities are. At one point during the Q&A session it became clear that a woman in the front row was agitated and speaking loudly, with her close-by neighbors trying to calm her down. Through various attempts at translation I got the story pieced together. Her 5 year old son had been killed about 5 months ago when he left the Anganwadi Center (a pre-school like center where food is provided to young children) to

get a drink of water and got hit by a car. The Anganwadi Center is right on the main road and she blamed the Anganwadi Worker for letting him wander off and get killed. She was getting more and more agitated, blaming the Anganwadi worker who was actually in our meeting and clearly not very comfortable to be there. She (the Anganwadi worker) was probably from a higher caste and certainly not showing a sense of real connection to the rest of the women there.

I couldn't help but reach out to her, so I asked her to come and sit by me. I knew I couldn't speak with her much, but I wanted her to know that I cared and that I shared her pain. She came to me and stood in front of me looking sad and scared, and when I took her hand in mine to comfort her, the dam broke, her face melted, and she started sobbing uncontrollably. In that one moment I felt that this was what Parivartan (which means "transformation" in Hindi) is all about. This bereft mother represented all that is vulnerable and marginalized. She is a rural woman from one of the poorest states in India, and from the lowest caste (Mahadalit), perhaps even from the lowest rung of the lowest caste, a Musahar, which means in Bihari, those who hunt rats and eat them. She is a young mother who has been kicked in the stomach by a tragedy which we cannot begin to comprehend. Of course I saw sorrow and pain in her face, but it was the unbelievable frustration and



helplessness that really affected me. I asked the group at large if they would be willing to be part of a solution, part of advocating for a way of making the Anganwadi Center a more safe and secure environment (moving it off the main road, putting a gate in front, etc.) and **they all raised their hands in the affirmative and we all applauded our new collective intention.**



This is what Parivartan is all about. Of course we will address MNCH behaviors and mobilize self-help groups, but fundamentally, we will be helping women like this mother (unfortunately I never got her name) and the community she belongs to solve their own problems and work with us to transform their lives for the better. But no matter what happens with the project, I'm sure I will keep this woman's face and her tears in my mind and in my heart forever.