

Showdown in the Sundarbans (or Coping with Gatekeepers)

After doing research in rural India for decades, I thought the time had come when I knew all there was to know about research on sensitive topics and the data collection methods that go with them. Not so, my friends! I snapped back to reality in the Sundarbans.

In 2012, before we began our research on successful toilet adoption in rural West Bengal, our team (Jayajit, Gulab, Pavitra, and I) had started at the top of the hierarchy of government officials to introduce ourselves, our research, its purpose, and its potential benefit to the communities where we planned to work. In addition to our qualitative research, we were using a new remote-sensing technology to measure latrine usage called PLUMs.

Passive Latrine Use Monitors (PLUMs), were developed by Dr. Evan Thomas at the Maseeh College of Engineering and Computer Science at Portland State University. These devices—about the size of a large smartphone—were designed to be installed in toilet cabins and to identify through infrared sensors that a body was inside the toilet cabin. The time a person entered the cabin was time-stamped and recorded, as was the time when the person exited. In this way, an estimate could be made regarding how many times the toilet was in use, for how long, and at what times of day. Ideally, they could detect whether or not a toilet was being used by the family that owned it. A change in temperature was *all* they could detect. PLUMs did not contain a camera or have any way to identify who might be in the cabin. Time stamps were recorded to an SD card, and although this seldom was an option where we were working in rural West Bengal, they did have the capability to connect to the internet and download each day's data to the cloud.

So in a gram panchayat that I will call GP, we first went and spoke to the GP Pradhan about the project and the PLUMs, and later to the whole Panchayat. At that time, the PLUMs were not in our possession, but were being shipped from Delhi. Because the devices' function was not easy to understand in the abstract, we decided to wait until we had the devices in hand to explain to the Panchayat how they worked, their function for our research, and their intentional inability to identify who was in the toilet cabin.

Once PLUMs were in our possession, we began explaining them to households and asking if we could install them for five consecutive days. Some households agreed, and others were hesitant. We *never* pressured households to install one. If the head of the household said no, or if the household head said yes but another family member appeared hesitant and/or showed body language that said no, then we said something like, "Why don't you take some time to think about it and we can come back in a day or two and see how you feel about it. Whatever you decide is fine with us." It was our iron-clad rule that we would not install a PLUM if anyone in the team sensed reluctance from a family member. First of course, because it would be unethical to install if we thought someone did not want it (even if they could not say so), and second, because if any family member felt uncomfortable, then the PLUM might generate bad data because s/he might not use the toilet and instead go for OD.

A few days into structured interviews and installations, a group of men stopped Jayajit on the street as we were leaving a house after an installation. They wanted him to answer some

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questions that they had about the PLUMs and their capabilities. Pavitra, Gulab and I walked ahead a bit and then waited for Jayajit. Jay left the group feeling that he had answered their questions to their satisfaction. This was our first indication of men's discomfort with PLUM installations. On the following day, the brother-in-law of a woman whose house had a PLUM installed came out of his house to ask us if the PLUM was a camera. We gave him a complete explanation, but again, we got the feeling that men were unhappy with installations that occurred in houses when they may not have been there.

By contrast, a daughter-in-law was curious about the PLUMs but in a very relaxed way. She wondered how they worked. She was confident in her questions. We told her that we could show her the data set from her PLUM after a day's worth of time-stamps. She said, yes, that she was interested in seeing the print-out and getting an explanation. Again, it was confident curiosity. She did not fidget, the pitch of her voice was even, and she made easy eye contact.

Within days, we had heard enough rumors to realize we needed to act to dispel them. We decided to go to the Pradhan's house and see if we could install a PLUM in her toilet. Her house was far from the road, and I'll admit I was frightened of tigers hiding in the long grass and paddy fields—it was that remote! The only thing to fear were the two barking dogs, who were promptly called off. We explained to the Pradhan what the PLUMs were and showed her a print-out of their time-stamp data. We opened the case of one of the PLUMs and showed her what was inside—wires, batteries, infrared sensor, SIM card. There was a good deal of explanation and many questions. We installed a PLUM in her toilet. The Pradhan did not seem the least bit concerned about the PLUMs besides the possibilities of children tampering with it.

We had a growing suspicion that a storm was brewing, some rumor about the PLUMs was circulating, but no one was ready to tell us what it was. What we knew was that people who once were friendly, were now cool toward us. At one house, we asked to reinstall a non-working PLUM, but the husband refused saying that his son was frightened of it. We agreed immediately to remove it. Jay left the room to go and uninstall it. We asked the family to tell us more about why the son was afraid. Given that in this house we had already had a detailed, honest discussion—full of laughter and hilarity—about toilet habits in the USA, including my own, we thought we might learn what was the matter. At first, they were closed-mouthed, but finally, as our explanation of the PLUMs went on, as we showed them the print-out of PLUM data, the mother told us that the son would wrap his head in a *gampcha* before using the toilet because he believed it was a camera. At this point, we were worried. If this family, with whom we seemed to have such good rapport and that initially believed our explanation, wanted their PLUM removed, what were we up against in the rest of the GP?

We left their house to go to the Women's Crafts' showroom where we planned to buy some gifts. The women in the shop jumped on us about the PLUMs so fast there wasn't time to inhale between sitting down and when the barrage of questions began. The hostility was intense! It was scary, it was understandable, it was bizarre. They were shouting in anger, accusing us of installing cameras, not clearing things with the proper authorities (meaning them), and not interested in anything we had to say. We learned that the villagers had been wondering about

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the PLUMs, and that these women leaders were angry that we had not consulted them or requested their permission. Their fury took us completely aback. Ultimately, the ex-Pradhan, who was among them, received an explanation that satisfied her, and she condescended to let us put a PLUM in her toilet. We were explicit about what her example would mean to people, and she was generous enough to play this role. We, of course, thanked her again and again.

That night we got a call from the canteen where we took our daily meals, to come by in the morning. The canteen cook would not say why. The next morning we went straight to the canteen. Jay saw a group of men gathering nearby and overheard enough of their conversation to know what was going to happen.

It was an ambush.

We sat down and ordered tea, and a few seconds later men were shouting, surrounding us. It was ugly, harsh, and threatening. A self-styled *neta*, shouted, “*Chup!*” at Jay in a thundering voice when Jay tried to speak. I stood up and shouted in English that he stop it. He replied to me in the same voice, “*Chup! Bosh!*” (sit down and shut up). I bellowed back, “No!” and stayed standing. There was no question he was trying to intimidate us—his tone, his volume, his bulk, his age, his posse—were all elements used effectively to threaten us. He demanded to see my papers, especially the GOI proof of research permission. All the while, the four of us were thinking wildly, “Who is he? We have already followed the proper chain of command!”

Jay and Gulab kept arguing and shouting with these rude, belligerent men who had clearly not come for an explanation (because no matter what Jay and Gulab said, the men just kept repeating themselves). The conversation was not progressing. Finally, we told them that we were not going to put up with their behaviour, that we did not do our work in this way, and that we would be happy to meet with them at the panchayat office and talk together in a proper way. More shouting and arguing followed as we four drank our tea with shaking hands, and we walked away from the gang with a plan to meet them at the Panchayat office on Monday.

On the road, we called the canteen cook and he informed us that the matter appeared settled, that the gang had talked to the Pradhan, and that now the issue was that they wanted us to make a donation to their Trinimool Congress village *mela*. Jay asked, “What did you have in mind for a donation?” He answered, “Something like 21000 rupees!” Jay said, “You must be joking! 21 thousand!? That is never going to happen!”

Apparently they thought they could make it happen. At lunch, the mob again appeared at the canteen. They all rode up on their motorcycles and surrounded the exterior of the canteen. There were at least ten men, very easily more. One of them stuck his head in the door and said, “Eat your lunch. We’ll speak to you later.” Jay lost his appetite. Gulab stopped eating. Pavitra pushed her food around her plate. However, I ate all my food leisurely, and then even more leisurely ate two *rasgullah*. By the time I had washed my hands, my anger at their behaviour had filled me with unwavering determination that what had happened in the morning was

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never going to happen to us again. Protectiveness for the team welled up in me like I was one of the tigers I had been so afraid of a few nights before.

The gang escorted us into an upstairs room. As I climbed the narrow stairs, I contemplated the difficulty of our escape if things turned violent. But there was no need. In English, I was requested politely to sit down in front of the group. I refused, both to indicate I would not accept their hospitality and to indicate I had no intention of sticking around long. Then it was repeated that they had some “un-comfort” with our research, but that aside, would I donate to their *mela* for the good of the villagers and would I please attend the event as their guest. I replied that their behaviour was very bad and that in all the years I had worked in India I had never been treated so disrespectfully. I calmly stated that they had started off badly and I was not inclined to give anything after such a start. “I do typically make a donation in the villages where I am working,” I softened, “so I will consider it.” They apologized sincerely, wondered when I would make a decision, and I said that I would decide the following Monday at 10 am. It was clear by now that they were very interested in the money.

In the end, I did not give a donation. Their behaviour was aggressive, rude, and intended to intimidate. However, they accepted my decision with grace. After that day, we had no other unpleasant encounters with villagers, and even those who had been skeptical or suspicious treated us kindly. They did not install PLUMs in their toilets, and we didn’t ask them too!

We turned our experience into a protocol for the successful implementation of PLUM technology. We realized that we needed to address the concerns of gatekeepers carefully, *and* that gatekeepers are not always officials or elected leaders, but sometimes a gang of young men or a women’s NGO that wants to restrict access to participants. Thus, it is necessary and time-consuming to include as many prospective and actual gatekeepers in the early stages of explaining the research, and to execute the protocol per the local hierarchy.