B. PHILOSOPHY FROM THE FIELD: TAKING ACCOUNT OF HUMAN EVERYDAYNESS TO REVEAL THE HUMAN—ENVIRONMENT RELATIONSHIP

Combinations of theoretical as well as field-based methods allow a researcher to capture the variations and similarities in environmental worldviews and to understand how that variation influences the human—environment relationship. However, I posit, in the era of the Anthropocene, when it comes to the anthropogenic changes in the environment, the definition of worldview becomes more complex and layered. In the Anthropocene, human beings are not mere observers of natural changes, rather they are the agent of changes and at the same time, are affected by those changes. This enmeshed relationship between human beings with their environment, demonstrates that there is a need to shift the gaze from conceptualizing human beings as being located alongside the environment, to upholding an alternative outlook for holistically comprehending the human—environment relationship in this state of transition. For doing this, I see, we need a methodology to carry out engaged philosophy, which will help to go beyond the subject/object duality, and will also enable us to transcend the mode of mere acquiring of knowledge/perspective/worldview of the environment. Indeed, we need to explore the manner in which, doing engaged philosophy would be helpful to reveal a relational understanding of the human—environment engagements. By following ecophenomenology, this part of the dissertation is based on the fieldwork conducted in two islands of the Sundarbans, India to collect phenomenological accounts of this relationship. The primary objective of this part is to expound on how phenomenology as a methodology has an immense potential to capture environmental narratives which can offer new insights into rethinking the human—environment relationship. Along with this methodological contribution, this part will also elaborate on the insights obtained from this field study that can challenge the conception of the human—environment relationship in the discipline of environmental ethics.
4 Methodology for Collecting Environmental Narrative: Phenomenological Research Methodology

The Phenomenological Research Methodology (PRM) is a widely accepted one in the discipline of psychology, education, nursing, and consumer research. For environmental philosophy, employing PRM is completely unprecedented in the literature, as far as my knowledge goes. However, there are multiple examples of scholarly works which have employed phenomenology as a methodology to capture embodied experiences. As there are not many precedents of employing PRM for studying and understanding the human—environment relationship, before going into the details about the methodology, in the following, I think it is important to provide a short overview of the history of phenomenology for illuminating on the philosophical underpinnings of this methodology. This background will help to understand the developments of PRM in its varied forms.

i. History of Phenomenology

Phenomenology primarily originated as a reaction to the scientific mode of objective inquiry. Although Kant and Hegel have set the necessary philosophical bedrocks, the German philosopher Edmund Husserl can be considered as the pioneer who illustrates the theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology as an approach to overcome various limitations of modern philosophical thinking. Borrowing from Husserl, later, Martin E. Heidegger gives a new shape to phenomenology. Phenomenology as the name suggests investigates about a certain phenomenon. Kafle (2011), by referring to various scholars’ definitions of phenomenology, succinctly describes phenomenology is a study of phenomena based on experience. It entirely focuses on the experience of a particular phenomenon in an individual’s lifeworld with the intent that through understanding all the experiences of a phenomenon, one can reveal the phenomenon in its fullest sense. On the contrary to the scientific modes of inquiry, where the general tendency is to arrive at an objective description of a phenomenon without considering the inquirer’s role, phenomenology entirely focuses on the subjective experience of an inquirer. In this regard, it also argues that lifeworld is a priori context where experiences occur. By providing importance to experience, it attempts to transcend the traditional subject/object dualism as it believes that

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“these conceptual dichotomies fundamentally mischaracterize our ordinary experience.”3 In this sense, Thomson (2004) considers phenomenology as a post-modern development as phenomenology argues that worldly experiences can actually enable us to transcend the subject/object duality.4 It is a philosophical doctrine to comprehend what is the true nature of the world and how one can possibly know it. At this juncture, it is quite important to highlight that there are sharp distinctions between Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenological approaches. In the following, I will try to capture the difference between these two approaches by highlighting some of the important points of contention.

The primary conceptual difference between Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenology actually arises from the very different projects of the two philosophers. Husserl’s project was to demonstrate that through the description of experience, it is possible to acquire truth or ultimate knowledge equivalent to the scientific truth. In doing so, Husserl’s phenomenology is grounded on lifeworld. As Zelić, (2008) describes:

The point of Husserl’s discussion of the modern scientific mathematization of nature is to show that theoretical scientific thinking conceals and at times may even dismiss the lifeworld, which, since primitive times, always is and remains the forgotten meaning—fundament of the pursuit of science.5

Owing to this, Husserl’s phenomenology prescribes to bracket out the theoretical knowledge about the object of inquiry so that it would be possible “to reflect on and systematically describe the contents of the conscious mind in terms of their essential structures”.6 In contrast, Heidegger’s endeavor was to explore the source of being. Heidegger’s phenomenology explains that it is possible to transcend the subject/ object duality as well as it is also feasible to address the fundamental truth regarding things, entities or objects through experiences. The pivotal focus of his project was to explore ‘what is the source of all meaningfulness’, and this inquiry led him also to address the aforementioned issues.7 Heidegger rejects Husserl’s methodology of exploring the structure of consciousness, instead suggests for an exploration of the structure of

4Zelić, “On the Phenomenology of the Lifeworld”.
5Ibid., 418.
everyday ‘being-in-the-world’.* The basic difference between the objectives of these two philosophers is the former tries to transcend the positivist claim and wants to prove that taking account of an individual’s experience and the intentionality of consciousness, is the most important way to acquire knowledge about something to establish the truth. The latter attempts to go beyond getting concerned with only epistemology and argues that individual’s everyday experience can reveal the ontology of the meaningful presence of things in the world.

The idea of an uninvolved subject who studies an object is problematized with the development of phenomenology. The subject/object dualism which is also manifested in the philosophical discourses as mind/world dualism is historically ingrained in the natural sciences. Naturalism and its methodologies are based on creating a discourse of an objective truth about the environment where the subject (human) and the object (environment) are distinct from each other. Even, the social sciences which investigate human societies tend to adopt these positivist paradigms of the natural sciences while studying the human—environment relationship. For example, case study is widely accepted as a methodology for studying environmental issues. Here ‘case’ particularly refers to an environmental problem. Problematizing environmental issues clearly denotes that human as a subject is studying the object—the environmental problem. Similarly, in the case of narrative analysis a narrator describes the particular change in the environment over time. This method also separates a narrator as a subject who observes and makes note of the object—the specific change in the environment which the narrator is describing. Ethnography explains the interaction between culture, belief system and environmental perspectives. It tries to capture how these all influence one’s environmental worldview. In all of these methods, it seems that the environment is something out there and the individual’s belief system and cultural tradition guides ones to build the environmental perspectives. The phenomenological turn in philosophy, however, proposes that understanding the structures of experiences of phenomena can actually enable us to transcend the subject/object duality. In lifeworld experiences, our ordinary experiences are “integral entwinement of self and the world that is basic to our experiential navigation of the lived environment”.*

I see, this is an important way to capture the nuances of any phenomenon in the case of doing research in the field of environmental philosophy. An environmental phenomenon always takes place in the midst of life, and the experience of the environment is intricately connected to one’s life. A holistic comprehension of environmental phenomenon can only be plausible

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*Ibid.
through understanding individuals’ experiences. Human beings, in this case, are not a subject studying the object from a distance rather human beings are located in the midst of the environment, and one’s own personal experiences make it possible to comprehend an environmental phenomenon. Hence, I claim that adopting phenomenological approaches is one of the best ways to transcend this subject/object duality in studying the human—environment relationship.

At this juncture, it is important to elaborate further on what is Phenomenological Research Methodology (PRM). The principle of PRM is to describe a certain phenomenon as it is experienced by an experiencer. Capturing the lived-experience of an individual, and describing it as authentically as possible, are the first two steps of this research methodology. In general, it seems PRM has some overlap with other qualitative research methodology mostly, narrative analysis, ethnography, etc. Nevertheless, the specialty of PRM is it “does not begin with a theory, but, instead, begins with a phenomenon under consideration”.10 It takes an individual’s everyday experience of her lifeworld as the main source of information. Through this, the main objective is to explore the way one creates her own world and reveals the essence of a phenomenon. Dahlberg (2006)11 accepts Ponty’s statement “Phenomenology is a study of essence” and for this, it is important to inquire the assumptions which are taken-for-granted. The way one can reveal this taken-for-granted assumptions or unreflective states of mind is by considering one’s everyday life. Based on Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenology, two distinct approaches exist in this research methodology. The one based on Husserl’s phenomenology is known as Descriptive or Transcendental Phenomenological Research Methodology (DPRM), and the other one is the Interpretive Phenomenological Research Methodology (IPRM), based on Heidegger.

ii. Streams of Phenomenological Research Methodology

Descriptive or Transcendental Phenomenological Research Methodology: According to DPRM, a researcher should bracket her own belief regarding the pre-existing conceptual framework about the concerned phenomenon before beginning the research work. In this process, a researcher’s aim should be to look at the phenomenon from the descriptions given by the individuals who have directly experienced it. In other words, it suggests that one must

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bracket out her natural attitude, which is thought to be contaminated by the prevailing scientific paradigm. Owing to this, DPR employs phenomenological attitude over the natural one and is known as transcendental phenomenology as Kafle (2006) points out.\textsuperscript{12} By bracketing out the natural attitude, DPRM attempts to ‘return to the things themselves’ which was the Husserl’s famous call throughout his philosophical endeavors. Husserl insists that consciousness is always consciousness of something. Thus, consciousness always has some direction. This directed nature of consciousness leads us to obtain perceptual experiences about some particular phenomenon. As Reiners (2012) states:

The experience of perception, thought, memory, imagination, and emotion, involve what Husserl called “intentionality”, which is one’s directed awareness or consciousness of an object or event.\textsuperscript{13}

Hence, by gathering the experiences of a phenomenon from different individuals one should be capable of describing how these experiences have taken place and what one experiences as such. Furthermore, descriptive methodology also borrows from Husserl’s \textit{eidetic} analysis, which attempts to reach the universal from the particular, to establish the truth. This analysis includes multiple accounts of a specific phenomenon and thus teases out the underlying meaning structure of a phenomena. The essence of a phenomenon helps us to transcend the particularity and clarifies the matter of investigation, by articulating what these experiences are and what are the fundamental insights these experiences demonstrate or reveal.\textsuperscript{14} In the phenomenological tradition, this process is also called phenomenological reduction. This reduction helps to establish the essence of a phenomenon what is empirically given to human beings. Wertz (2015) aptly points out that “Phenomenology aims for a distinct kind of general knowledge that is called \textit{eidetic} by adopting a special attitude and using a rational method for clarifying emergent concepts”.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Interpretive Phenomenological Research} Methodology: In contrast to DPRM, Interpretive Phenomenological Research Methodology (IPRM), inspired by Heidegger’s philosophy

\textsuperscript{12}Kafle, “Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research Method Simplified,” 186.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 87.
primarily argues that it is implausible to bracket out researcher’s own belief, pre-knowledge, and conceptual framework about a phenomenon. Thus the claim of describing the phenomenon under consideration without any presuppositions can also be seen as a futile one. Kafle (2011)\(^6\) points out that major disagreement between DPR and IPR is that, followers of the latter one believe that philosophy should not be carried out from a detached, objective, and disengaged standpoint.\(^7\) Rather, these researchers attempt to interpret what it means to experience the same that is described by narrators. This method tries to understand the underlying mindset of narrators to capture their experiences and the structure beneath it. From this point of view, IPRM is a dynamic process demanding a persistent effort from a researcher’s end to attain the state of experience in an ‘as if’ mode. Or in other words, a researcher must always try to get into the shoe of a narrator. IPRM tries to formulate critical questions with the intention to make the analysis of an experience richer and comprehensive. The questions are as follows:

What is the person trying to achieve here? Is anything meaningful being said here, which was not intended? Do I have a sense of something going on here that the person himself or herself is perhaps less aware of?\(^8\)

Due to this approach, IPRM often is known as a double hermeneutic process.\(^9\) Here, double hermeneutic points towards the dual interpretation; in this process, at first, a researcher tries to get the essence of the narratives from the point of view of the narrators. This kind of process is called an emic approach.\(^10\) After this, the researcher also needs to follow the etic approach where the researcher will make note of her own understanding of the narratives. These explanatory comments can only be generated through multiple readings of the narratives. These thorough readings help a researcher to divide the narratives and to group them under various themes. This kind of explanatory comments noted down during readings as well as during field work, helps a researcher to develop new themes. These multiple themes can eventually be clustered under three or four major themes. Once these themes are in place, the researcher should proceed with the analysis of the narratives on the basis of those themes. Following this structure, the final task of the researcher is to elaborate on each of the themes by drawing examples from the narratives. This double hermeneutic process, on one hand, demonstrates the way interpretation happens in the interviewee’s mind, on the other, it also provides a scope to capture a researcher’s

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\(^6\) Kafle, “Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research Method Simplified”.
\(^7\) Ibid., 188.
\(^9\) Ibid., 7-14.
\(^10\) Ibid.
interpretation of the same. This theme-based analysis is a well-established way of analyzing narratives for making sense of a phenomenon, in IPRM.

Although the double hermeneutic process is the core of interpretive phenomenology, scholars like Pietkiewicz, Van Manen, and Willig and Billin explain the limitation of this theme based analysis. In this regard, Sloan and Bowe (2014) highlight that IPRM consists of both hermeneutic and existential phenomenology.\textsuperscript{21} Van Manen (1997)\textsuperscript{22}, argues that this thematic analysis to some extent overshadow the expressive dimensions of a phenomenological description. Taking this criticism into consideration, scholars have suggested to maintain the double hermeneutic process without getting caught into the thematic analysis. To go beyond the thematic analysis, Willig and Billin (2011), in the light of existential phenomenology, introduce a different process of narrative analysis to IPRM. Instead of attempting to capture the different perspectives of a researcher and a narrator and the mechanical application of themes, this process concentrates on analyzing a phenomenological description at two levels that reveal two modes of being: the everyday modes of being and the transcendent mode of being of the narrators. To attain these two modes of being, this process of analysis allows a researcher to “free acting or seeing.”\textsuperscript{23} Through this free acting, a researcher engages with hermeneutic analysis based on the hermeneutic circle. Here, a researcher gets engaged with her own presuppositions and knowledge and constantly moves back and forth between pre-suppositions and interpretations. In this way, a researcher can possibly explore narrators’ meaning making process and their everyday modes of being. This understanding enables the researcher to entirely grasp one’s lived-experience. Existentialist-informed hermeneutic is particularly suitable for exploring embodied human experiences as it focuses on those aspect that are hard to explain.\textsuperscript{24} This actually attempts to tease out what it means to “be (human), that is to say what it means to live as an embodied being in a (particular) physical and social world.”\textsuperscript{25} In this manner, this explicates how the world seems to be for the narrators, how people make their life meaningful

\textsuperscript{21}Art Sloan and Brian Bowe, “Phenomenology and Hermeneutic Phenomenology: the philosophy, the methodologies, and using hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate lecturers’ experiences of curriculum design,” Quality & Quantity 48 (2014): 1291-1303.

\textsuperscript{22}Van Manen, M. Researching the lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy (2nd ed.) (Ontario: Althouse Press, 1997).


\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 118.

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid.
and how that influence their experience of the world.\textsuperscript{26} In the process of exploring these nuances of the human existence, it is equally important to mediate the particularity of the phenomenological narratives for exploring any universal pattern and how narrators’ lives are a part of that bigger pattern.\textsuperscript{27} In this manner, this process reveals the transcendent mode of being. Understanding a narrator’s transcendent mode of being could lead a researcher to explore the answers of the two of the aforementioned questions: what is the person trying to achieve here? Do I have a sense of something going on here that the person himself or herself is perhaps less aware of?\textsuperscript{28} From a methodological point of view, it is particularly important to explore how a phenomenon that an individual experiences has a special meaning in that individual’s world.\textsuperscript{29} It definitely helps to unfold some unique truth about the phenomenon at stake.

\textbf{iii. General Guidelines for Phenomenological Research Method}

The first essential step for a researcher who intends to employ PRM for a field study is to identify the specific phenomenon that would be the concerned matter of inquiry. To choose a specific phenomenon, the researcher should ensure that there is a possibility of obtaining direct human experiences of the phenomenon. As the second step of this methodology, the researcher needs to choose her co-researchers or interviewees, who have prolonged and in-depth experiences of the phenomenon. As an essential part of this methodology, co-researchers describe their experiences of the phenomenon at stake and eventually these reflective descriptions constitute the lived-experience.\textsuperscript{30} Hence, for a researcher, it is important to choose participants who not only have experienced the phenomenon, but also are willing to share their experiences and possess the necessary articulation capability. Warthall (2006) highlights that the important characteristic of the phenomenological description is that it might not be a definitive account of the phenomenon itself, rather, it is a description about the awareness of the condition in which the phenomenon can manifest itself. Phenomenological description is similar to our everyday, non-philosophical practice of description.\textsuperscript{31} Warthall also points out:

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{29}Kafle, “Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research Method Simplified,” 186.
...the end goal of description is to guide the reader to the practical orientation for the world in which the phenomenon can show itself. In the end, the description is of no independent value. Hence, it is important to remember that phenomenological narrative is kind of a self-reflective narrative. A researcher’s role is quite limited here as those narratives do not emerge from active questioning. Indeed, the interview process is maintained as completely unstructured. The role of a researcher here is to only guide her co-researchers to arrive at the juncture, where they can elaborate on the experience of the phenomenon or the occurrence of the phenomenon in the mode of ‘self-talk’. Precisely, due to this reason, interviewees are called co-researchers in this methodology.

Moustakas (1994) suggests that it is important for a researcher to conduct the research at the site of the phenomenon. It helps the researcher to engage in the world of experience, which eventually ensures that the researcher is completely immersed in the context. It is also important that the researcher remains open to know the context of the phenomenon and accordingly expand reflexivity to gather insights, for appropriately comprehending the experience. During interviews, the discussion should revolve around three major themes: “What has an individual experienced in terms of the phenomenon?”, “What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected one’s experience of the phenomenon?”, “How has it affected the narrator?”. As this methodology is quite dynamic, the researcher has a significant responsibility to help out the interviewees to articulate their experiences, and thus, it is desirable that the researcher maintains the space for herself to contemplate and reflect, throughout the entire process. As per the methodology, one should collect phenomenological narratives of at most 5-25 individuals from a homogeneous group, who directly experience the concerned phenomenon. The number of participants could vary within 5-25, depending on when the narratives tend to reach a saturation. The saturation in the narratives means that new narratives

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32Ibid., 44.
would not be able to provide any further insights into the concerned phenomenon and thus, will be redundant.

While employing DPRM, the researcher should state her own pre-assumptions and experiences about the phenomenon at the beginning of the research and then only should proceed to collect narratives of lived-experience. Transcendental phenomenology points towards this approach of bracketing out and subsequently, attempts to describe an issue from a fresh eye. After gathering the narratives, DPRM analyses the narratives by reducing them into significant statements from where one can formulate themes. This method of analysis is mostly developed by Van Kaan (1966) and Colaizzi (1978). This thematic analysis helps to generate the essence of a phenomenon as described by Creswell through a three step process and these are:

...a textural description of the experiences of the persons (what participants experienced), a structural description of their experiences (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context), and a combination of the textural and structural descriptions to convey an overall essence of the experience.

Analysis of Interpretive phenomenological narratives, in contrast to DPR, does not focus on the process of bracketing out. Here, I would like to clarify that I have followed IPRM for my field work. The main rationale behind choosing IPRM is that I personally do not believe in the possibility of bracketing out my entire pre-knowledge and beliefs as being a researcher, and subsequently, be able to look at a phenomenon with a fresh eye, each and every time. I believe, every phenomenon has a special interpretation for each individual. Thus, as per my experience in the field study, I found IPRM as one of the best ways to make sense of the environmental change. Along with it, IPRM provides the necessary opportunity to generate a “higher level of theories and insight” from the narratives. It is important in the study of environmental change because the outcome of a research based on IPRM, can provide some important theoretical insights into the broader discourse of environmental philosophy. In this manner, I hope, this methodology would also prove to be helpful in teasing out the nuances of the human side of the human—environment relationship.

36Creswell, Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design, 59.
39Creswell, Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design, 60.
For analyzing narratives, by taking into account the critique of theme based analysis as discussed in the last section, I have followed Willig and Billin (2011) demonstrated existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenology. This kind of analysis on one hand shows that in everyday mode of being how the phenomenon gets revealed with its meaningfulness and on the other hand, the transcendental mode of being unveils that the every individual is a part of the whole. And this understanding enables the researcher to entirely grasp one’s lived-experience. In the process of revealing the transcendental mode of being, it is important to mediate the particularity and explore the universal pattern and how their life is a part of that larger pattern.\(^\text{41}\) Furthermore, as per Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), it is important to note that:

In general, IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis) provides a set of flexible guidelines which can be adapted by individual researchers according to their research objectives. However, these guidelines are merely an illustration of one possible way of analyzing the qualitative material. They should not be treated as a recipe and the researcher is advised to be flexible and creative in his or her thinking.\(^\text{42}\)

This flexibility in IPRM is really worth appreciating, as it allows a researcher to modify the analysis process as per the requirement of a study, and thereby, provides a scope to develop this methodology to its fullest potential. To exercise this flexibility, I employ the process of double interpretation in a slightly different manner to make sense of the phenomenological narratives. First of all, I focus on the work-world of an interviewee to capture the pre-reflective experiences of the concerned phenomenon. The phenomenological description of one’s encountering of the environmental changes in the everyday mode of being reveals the meaningfulness of the phenomenon in that individual’s world. Whereas, the transcendent mode of being goes beyond the immediate reality and unveils some universal pattern. This provides a bigger picture that is certainly important to flesh out their true experiences of a phenomenon like environmental change. In this way, I develop a slightly different approach from the one advocated by Willig and Billin. Through this approach, I am not merely retrieving what the respondents are saying about their way of being, instead based on the theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology, I am trying to interpret how they are interpreting their world and how this interpretation pointing to a universal pattern and in what manner that reveals their transcendent mode of being.

\(^{41}\)Willig and Billin, “Existentialist-Informed Hermeneutic Phenomenology,” 126.

iv. Description of the Field Area

The Sundarbans delta is formed by the river Ganga, Padma, Brahmaputra and Meghna. This largest riverine delta of the world is also the largest single block tidal halophytic mangrove forest in the world. The saline water from the Bay of Bengal and the sweet water from the rivers provide a unique ecosystem to create this halophytic mangrove forest. Hogla (*Typha elephantiana*), Sundari (*Heritiera fomes*), Golpata (*Nypa fruticans*), and Goran (*Ceripos decandra*) trees are predominantly found in this forest. It is often believed that the name ‘Sundarbans’ is a combination of two Bengali words: *Sundar* (beautiful) and *Ban* (Forest). However, as per the islanders, the name is derived from the plant ‘Sundari’, which was quite abundant in these islands even until the recent past. The Sundarbans region spreads in India and Bangladesh; in India, it comprises of 102 islands out of which 54 have human habitation. It is distributed under two districts of West Bengal: South 24 PGS and North 24 PGS. The climatic conditions of the place is directly influenced by its proximity to the sea. For most of the year, it is hot, windy, yet humid; the actual difficult periods for the inhabitants are the monsoon (June-August) and the adjacent stormy periods (April-May and September-October). At these periods, the difficulties arise due to the unpredictable directions of wind resulting inconsistent and random water levels, especially, during tides. These geographical features create a very special eco-climatic zone and for this reason, the Sundarbans is also one of the biodiversity hotspots of India. As UNESCO explains on their website

The Sundarbans provides a significant example of on-going ecological processes as it represents the process of delta formation and the subsequent colonization of the newly formed deltaic islands and associated mangrove communities.

These unique characteristics of the Sundarbans make it a center of attention for biologists and ecologists alike. At present, a significant number of policy reports state that the effects of climate change are leading to irregularities in seasonal variation and a rise in sea level. Along with that, these specific irregularities are leading to innumerable other biophysical changes. As the report also points out,

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42 Recently, it is announced that the Sundarbans region is going to be demarcated as a separate district.
Sundarbans is losing land due to submergence and erosion at a fast pace. In the last 80 years, it has lost about 250 sq. km. Four islands have been completely wiped out.\textsuperscript{47} Another 2010 WWF Report explains that, though there has been a decrease in the number of cyclones in the last 120 years, the intensity of these cyclones has increased by 26%, possibly due to rising sea surface temperatures. Policymakers and ecologists highlight the shifting of the course of the rivers or the increment of water quantity is encroaching the land area and is, in turn, posing a serious threat to the community. In the entire discourse of climate change, the Sundarbans is now being marked as a fragile ecosystem that is increasingly becoming vulnerable to climate change.\textsuperscript{48} As part of the various adaptation mechanism, at present, this area is also subjected to different conservation, and protection programs. Currently, several top-down efforts are being implemented to prevent the perceived crisis through measures like biodiversity conservation, forest regeneration, and construction of concretized embankments to protect these islands from floods, cyclones, or other natural calamities.\textsuperscript{49}

v. Initiating the Research Process

The first step of PRM is to define the phenomenon under consideration. For my field study, I have chosen ‘environmental change’ as the phenomenon to inquire into to understand of the human—environment relationship. Environmental change as a phenomenon is quite crucial in the context of environmental ethics as well. As we know environmental change is a pre-given background of environmental ethics to formulate ethical principles. It can also be said that, environmental change acts as a means to understand what ‘environment’ actually refers to. Hence, I selected this phenomenon to comprehend what is the environment for the islanders. Along with it, I think this phenomenon has also helped me to tease out the nuances of the human—environment relationship as environmental changes certainly influences the same.

Keeping all the geological features about the Sundarbans into consideration, I have chosen an island called G-plot to conduct my study. G-plot is one of the last seaside bordering villages of West Bengal facing the Bay of Bengal. Due to its geographical location, G-plot is quite vulnerable to natural calamities\textsuperscript{50} as well as various environmental changes are commonly encountered on this island.

\textsuperscript{47}CSE, \textit{Living with Changing Climate}, 86.
\textsuperscript{50}As per the recent study by Sandipan Chakraborty and Manjira Adhikary “Vulnerability and Risk Assessment of Environmental Hazards—A Case Study Of Patharpratima Block, (Sundarban Delta Region) South 24 Parganas,
Another practical reason for conducting the field research on this island is that I have a reliable access to the island through a Non-Governmental Developmental Organization (NGDO)\(^5\) where I previously worked. This NGDO has also supported me throughout my field study in terms of providing access to their offices, introducing me to the islanders, and in arranging my stay at the island. No doubt, this kind of logistic support and prior familiarity with the field area are always valuable and help a field-researcher to conduct a field research, smoothly. During the field study, I have followed purposive snowball sampling. Initially, I started interviewing people, mostly using the contacts shared by the NGDO. However, after a few visits, I got familiar with the place and the people, and the first set of narrators directed me to the next set of possible narrators. Following this practice, I expanded the field area and considered interviewees from the adjacent island named L-block as well. I have also found that this snowball sampling method goes well with the PRM because within the first set of narrators, some of them were able to understand the sole purpose of the research and were precise in articulating their everyday experience of environmental changes and their encountering of the

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\(^5\)I am really grateful to Development Research Communication and Services Centre (DRCSC), Kolkata, West Bengal (www.drcsc.org) for their support. Without their assistance, this field work would have not be so smooth and could have taken a much longer time.
environment. For these narrators, it was quite easy to point to those persons who could also be able to provide such in-depth experiential accounts of the phenomenon. Along with that, for PRM, it is also important to maintain this purposive sampling method because as the purpose of a researcher is very specific and certain people can only be suitable for that.

At the beginning of the study, I have mostly concentrated on individuals above forty years of age. The pre-assumption of taking this age group was that these individuals must have enough experience about the place and the environment and how over time these have changed. Due to the process of snowball sampling, however, I have come across a few individuals who did not fall under this category, though have a very special experience about the phenomenon of environmental change, because of their livelihoods. I included them in the research as they had some experiences to share in this regard.

In PRM, it is better to audio record the interviews as most of the time interviews are quite long in duration and unstructured. I seek permission from the narrators whenever I recorded the interviews. Also, it is important to note that devices like recorder, camera, make people conscious, and could hamper the normal flow of conversations. But given the unstructured method, it was almost inevitable for me to use the recorder. Though to avoid the uneasy feelings of the interviewees, at the beginning of the conversation I never used the recorder. Each and every time, I waited for the moment when a narrator gets into the mood of articulating her/his experiences, only after that, I introduced the recorder in between our conversation with the verbal consent from the narrator. Even then, many times, I felt a sudden uneasiness in the voices of the narrators. Sometimes, to overcome that I kept the recorder out of sight, or in other cases, I just gave the narrator enough time to get used to the gadget. Although it is quite a challenge to take notes while interviewing, still I somehow managed to do so for three cases where the narrators were not ready for recording their interviews. I consciously restricted myself from capturing photographs and I was not usually carrying a camera with me at the time of the interviews. Generally, I took some pictures of the interviewees when I met them after the interview, but that too quite rarely.

vi. Methodological Feedbacks from the Field

I have already indicated that PRM is quite a new methodology in the field of environmental philosophy. Here, I would like to share my field-specific insights while employing this methodology. I feel, it would be interesting as well as important to highlight a few challenges as well as the effectiveness of this methodology, as experienced by me during the field study.

92
These insights might also prove to be helpful in developing the methodology further and for making it more robust for wide-scale application in the discipline. In the entire course of conducting the field study, I have mostly noticed that PRM is a useful methodology to transcend some of the very well discussed issues concerning field research and at the same time, it also has some major limitations, especially when applied in the context of India. In the following, I will try to describe these experiences under various commonly referred categories for evaluating any field methodology, particularly in case of India.

*Gender:* It is one of the prominent concerns for any researcher in India while conducting fieldwork. Most researchers claim that it is hard to capture women’s voices, perhaps I am the fortunate enough to experience quite the opposite. In the Sundarbans, women are quite empowered and participate significantly in various activities. Maybe I have had a bit of an advantage being a female researcher in this regard. I have experienced that the environment where one is living and what roles one plays in the society are the decisive factors that make one empowered. In these islands, the societal structure provides enough opportunities for a woman to come out of the shackles of four walls. According to me, there are mainly two reasons for this; the first one is, most of the time men stay away from homes for the commitments pertaining to their livelihoods. Therefore, the women not only have to run the family on their own, but also need to engage in some sorts of livelihoods to meet the demand of the family. The other reason is very much related to their historical background. Predominantly, the residents of this area migrated from Bangladesh during the partition or from some other districts of West Bengal as well as other states of India, especially Bihar and Jharkhand. This displacement and resettlement have provided an essential opportunity for women to make their own position in the society. In tough times faced by a family (may it be for political turmoil or natural calamities), women obviously play a crucial role to support their family, especially, in terms of ensuring both the meals. Due to these, one can find that women of this area have their own identity in this society. However, it would be utter ignorance if I do not acknowledge the domination of women, which is still very much the part and parcel of these families, but at the same time, one has to accept the fact that the situation is far better than most of the other parts of West Bengal or for that matter, the country. I have also encountered an incident like: while I was interviewing a woman, her husband was constantly interfering and commenting on her narration, but after a point, the woman raised her voice to shut him and made my job really easy. Hence, it is not really a Herculean task for a researcher to communicate with women in these
Methodology for Collecting Environmental Narrative

islands. Yet, I have restricted myself from choosing too many women narrators because I tried to capture narratives of different individuals engaging with diverse livelihoods. Due to my purposive sampling technique, one could find less female voice in my research. From a different point of view, as a female researcher, I found it rather difficult to break the ice while taking interviews of men. Mostly in some of the tribal communities, men are really reserved and shy, and in those cases, it took a longer time for me to make them feel at ease so that they begin to share their experiences.

*Caste:* This is another very well-known category to be mindful of while conducting fieldwork, particularly in India. Accessing people from different castes is an unavoidable challenge in any Indian villages. My entry point to the island was through an NGDO. As the NGDO was actively engaged with socially and economically backward communities, I got an easy entry to those communities from the very beginning. However, I went to quite a few villages where the NGDO does not work, and in those cases, my entry had to be with the help of ‘gate-keepers’, and in most of the cases, the gatekeepers inevitably directed me to talk to upper-caste people. Considering my research question, I have not felt that I need to consciously avoid upper-caste narrators. Rather, I realized that living in the Sundarbans means that people are forced to choose a living and be engaged in some livelihoods which inevitably require them to deal with the environment on a day to day basis, irrespective of their castes. At the same time, being in an island, often brute natural forces strike all the households living in that area without any discrimination. Hence, upper caste people were also able to narrate their experiences of environmental change quite fluently. Actually, in these islands, I think the environment as a context touches each and every person. While taking interview of an upper caste narrator, I felt that he precisely understood the purpose of my research, and thus rightly introduced me to other socially and economically backward individuals as generally their livelihoods and lifestyle provide them more opportunities to be closely engaged with the environment. Thus, I felt snowball sampling is highly effective for accessing people from various groups. Also, I would like to mention another factor that has helped me a lot in this regard. All the islanders, irrespective of their economic and social backgrounds, agreed on what are the most vulnerable areas in the island. I concentrated on getting narratives from those sites, and that helped me a lot to reach those individuals who have vivid experiences and extensively encountered environmental changes in their lives.
Accessibility: Primarily, I have confronted two kinds of limitation regarding accessibility. The first one is the lack of accessibility due to one’s occupational commitment. As most of the participants were either fishermen, boatmen or honey gatherers, they have to be periodically away from their houses for quite a long stretch of time. Due to this, it is quite difficult to access these three categories of people together in one visit. So as a researcher, I need to visit the place at different times as per the occupation of the interviewees.

Another kind of limitation concerning accessibility has arisen due to the underdeveloped state of various parts of this island. Lack of development as well as political negligence made the islanders disapprove the presence of outsiders and often, I felt an uncanny gaze. Also, as the Sundarbans has become one of the hot spots for various research studies and NGO projects, the islanders have become quite sensitive about outsiders. An outsider visiting this place brings a lot of expectations in their minds. I have faced many questions like “what will be our benefit?” “Is there any opportunity for us?” etc. Again, as a phenomenological researcher, it was a bit easy for me to convince an individual separately about my intentions and more importantly, my limitations, rather than explaining these to a group of people or a cluster where one’s view can very easily be manipulated by the powerful voices.

Interference: This was one of the most difficult challenges that has recurrently restricted me as a phenomenological researcher. In India, it is quite difficult to access an individual entirely alone. Irrespective of gender, an individual is always accompanied either by family members or neighbors or friends. So, interviewing one person solely as an individual is almost next to impossible, especially in Indian villages. Although this kind of societal structure is quite helpful to employ other qualitative methods, for phenomenological research methodology, interference by another individual is quite interruptive and can heavily affect the interview process. Because in PRM, a researcher must concentrate on getting an in-depth narrative of a person and should always try to make the co-researchers reflect on the issue in such a manner that can eventually generate a self-talk rather than an interview. Hence, any kind of interruption is highly detrimental to the process. I had to deal with these interruptions at many levels. Sometimes, I consciously ignored others so that they stop by themselves, sometimes I listened to them and tried to convince them that after the ongoing interview, I will listen to them separately, and in some cases, I had to organize a group discussion to satisfy those individuals who were eager to talk. Nonetheless, on a few occasions, these interruptions have helped me to get some important cues about the concerned interviewee that aided me to steer the interview process innovatively.
Articulation: The power of articulation and explaining everyday experiences is the pivotal requirement for PRM. Without a thorough articulation of an experience by a co-researcher or narrator, it becomes almost implausible for a researcher to capture the nuances of any phenomenon. Especially, when the phenomenon is like environmental change, which is so impalpably present in one’s life and everyday affairs, that often, it becomes difficult for a narrator to articulate it adequately. Also, as for most of us, everyday affairs are part of a very mundane reality in contrast to some special events, typically, the narrators found these mundane experiences irrelevant to talk about. These are the times when I as a researcher intervened and actively facilitated the interview to be able to get to those experiences.

My Identity: This was another challenging issue for me to manage in my initial days in the field. As my entry point was through the NGDO, most of the people thought that I still belong to the NGDO. Often in conversations, many of them shared their expectations with me supposing that I will communicate those to the NGDO. Even after giving a detailed declaration about my identity and purpose, in the initial days of my field study, it was quite challenging for me to establish myself as an independent researcher. I would say that partly because of my earlier identity as a developmental worker, it took a while for me to convince the islanders that I am now an independent researcher. Repeated description of where I stay, what I do and why I came to the island in all possible manners, especially, during informal conversations have particularly helped me in this regard. However, clarification about my identity was very much necessary because otherwise there could have been some scope of miscommunication as well as a misunderstanding, which could have hampered my relationship with the narrators and also, could have really complicated the process of interview.

To conclude, I must acknowledge that PRM is a powerful tool to capture the individual experiences, reflections on environmental changes. It is not as simple as giving an account of environmental change; in that case, a narrator can state a general account of changes in her environment over time. But the phenomenological experience of environmental change denotes individualized, personal description of a phenomenon. Each individual magnificently describes their perception of various changes in their environment in the context of their everyday affairs and livelihood engagements. However, it is important to note that their narrations were not entirely about environmental change, rather it were about their lives. 52 In places like the

52I have provided excerpts of a few narratives as examples in the Appendix.
Sundarbans, people live in a very close proximity with the environment. The ups and downs of one’s life, are always inherently connected with the environment. In other words, the environment and environmental change become a milieu in which their life stories get embedded. Hence, the researcher has to concentrate on each and every layer of it, and travel back and forth from one layer to another, and then only the nuances of their experiences of environmental change can be revealed in its entirety.

vii. Analysis of the Narratives

The narrative analysis process, consists of three major steps. The first step is the transcription of the narratives, where one needs to write down the narratives along with the peripheral information from the field notes like date, place, time of the interview and age and background of a narrator and a few important behavioral patterns and body languages of the narrator that are observed throughout the interview. This process is quite crucial as it requires paying minute attention to the tones and expressions of a co-researcher to grasp the underlying motives and emotions, and to be able to successfully put them on papers. The second step is translation. This step is required if the narratives are in a regional language; in that case, one needs to translate it into the language in which a researcher wants to communicate the findings of her research, in my case it is in English. There could be multiple issues arising regarding translation, like how to translate an emotive statement or how to translate specific regional terms loaded with some connotation. In PRM, it is important that a researcher pays attention to each and every single emotive expression and description and try to capture the same sense while translating. It could be possible that a literal translation might not be sufficient to capture the same essence of the narratives, and for doing that researcher needs to find out ways to translate the essence as effectively as possible. Only after the translation, actual analysis of narratives could begin. For my research, as I already specified that I am not employing theme based analysis, and instead I employ a two-step analysis process. At first, I analyze their everyday modes of being through their work-world narratives and finally I attempt to disclose the universal pattern to reveal their transcendent mode of being.

For carrying out the first step, I see environmental hermeneutics as a method could be an appropriate one to interpret the work-worlds for explicating how the narrators in their

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53I particularly chose environmental hermeneutics because this is an already accepted method for interpreting environmental narratives. Along with that, hermeneutics as a method originates from the phenomenological tradition. So, it is worthy to explore whether environmental hermeneutics can also be a potential method to interpret phenomenological narratives or not.
everyday modes of being engage with the environment. The interpretation, perhaps, could reveal a new dimension of the human—environment relationship.