6 Phenomenology of ‘Land’ in the Sundarbans: An Alternative Conceptualization of Land Ethic

A common understanding of land is that of a stable material surface, consisting of soil, plants, and landscape features, that is separated from water bodies by a shore. This surface is relatively stable to the beholder. Even changes in the landscapes that get visually recorded, are gradual and once changed, the surface takes on a new form to the eye. A tree may be cut down, a hillock of soil levelled or a building may be constructed. Yet again, landscape of a certain kind that is spread out in front of one’s eye is also perceived by the beholder as possessed of natural aesthetic beauty. As it is always perceived as a background to human ecological activities, land never occurs as land alone. People often articulate ‘land’ as ‘land for something’ or as ‘land as something’. Examples of the same, include land for housing, land for tourism, land for mining, land as agricultural land, or even land as forest, and land as resource. We find, land as a surface is often relegated to the background defined by components situated on it, such as agricultural fields, forests or buildings. Thus, the discourse of land centres on land as ‘in-order-to’ something. Land as ‘in-order-to’ something actually indicates a utilitarian value that almost, always gets imposed on the perception of land. In other words, land has always been considered as a container and the value of the container depends on the use value of what the container possesses. This kind of perspective towards land as in-order-to something can be denoted as one of the central causes behind conflicts around land. These conflicts are largely based on the struggles generated from the perceived multiple potentials for using the same stretch of land. Examples of these are: conflicts regarding conversion of agricultural land into industrial land, or the immersion of large areas of land due to hydropower dam projects, or conversion of common forests into protected areas. In the Indian context, the constant tussle between developmental activities and ecological conservation projects, primarily, induces these conflicts. The recent controversy regarding the projected biodiversity loss in the Western Ghats due to proposed developmental programs, is also a typical example of that.²

Although land is predominantly conceptualized from the perspective of its usage, it can be considered geographically as well as socio-culturally situated in relation to the humans and nonhumans who dwell on it. How can one capture the deeper conceptualizations of land that is

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¹The most recent and debated one is regarding the land acquisition for setting up the Nano car factory of Tata motors at Singur in Hooghly district, West Bengal, India.

²Please see the debate between Madhav Gadgil Committee report (http://www.moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/wg-23052012.pdf) and Kasturirangan Committee report (http://www.moef.gov.in/sites/default/files/1%20ILWG-Report-Part-1_0.pdf).
particularly necessary in conflict situations? It may be easy to find temporary socioeconomic solutions to such conflicts, but it is worthwhile to philosophically understand the concept of land and the ethical relationship of humans towards land itself, instead of conceptualizing it solely based on its use value. In this regard, one of the most robust ethical theories pertaining to land has been proposed by Aldo Leopold. Leopold attempts to transcend the economic profit based model of land, which he denoted as an ‘Abrahamic concept’ of land. Here, I would like to point out that Leopold is suggesting that land is a biotic community and the human is also part of it, but he does so from the perspective of the human being’s relation to the land. He points out that not only developmental activities, but conservation and ecological preservation initiatives as well are sometimes inclined to follow this ‘Abrahamic concept’ of land. Moreover, he criticizes both our modern way of living which is devoid of a relationship to land and also one that tends to perceive land only on the basis of its use value. According to this notion, human society, in general, essentializes land only as an economic resource and thus fails to recognize as well as acknowledge land with “love and respect”.

To transcend this Abrahamic notion by revealing the interconnectivity among various components, in his seminal work *Sand Country Almanac (SCA)*, Leopold suggests that close attention must be paid to understand the relationship between land and human, plants, and animals who dwell on it. Leopold offers an alternative conception of land as a community to surpass the Abrahamic notion. Following this interpretation, one can comprehend land as a collective to denote the co-existence of biotic and abiotic components. Leopold suggests this modified definition of land can actually guide us to maintain the integrity among these components and create a ‘Land ethic’. He says “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soil, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land”. Leopold recommends we must conceptually combine all environmental components together to generate an ethical approach towards the environment. Such an ethic offers the certainty of the continued existence of these components, in their natural states. He proposes that the integrity of land creates the “biotic community” and thus, brings forth a new moral responsibility to

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4Ibid.
5Ibid., 173.
Phenomenology of ‘Land’ in the Sundarbans

maintain this integrity, holistically. Through the conceptualization of “land pyramid”, he illustrates the same.\(^7\) Both these ideas are derived from an ecological understanding of land where land is defined within the paradigms of ecology. Callicott suggests that these terms are only a poetic sketch of “the physics born ecosystem model”.\(^8\) Here, land figures within a network of its natural relations, and the social idea of land seems to be confined to only understanding of this relation and responding to it ethically. For this very reason, Leopold is considered as ‘the father of contemporary Environmental Ethics’.\(^9\)

While not denying the effectiveness of Leopold’s Land ethic, I suggest culturally there may be difficulties to adopt this ethic straight off in an area where the idea of “land” is conceptually different. This is not to say that the Land ethic is culturally different from a meta-ethical perspective, but I foreground the cultural difference in the metaphysical presuppositions of land. Here, I suggest that capturing the phenomenological experience of land as a methodology to formulate the conceptualization of land, and the understanding of its relation with its dwellers can help us in creating a framework for a more robust and pragmatic land ethic. Within the traditional understanding of land as land for something entails land is valued for a purpose, and a land that is purposeless has been seen as degraded or somewhat unrecoverable. Not only is there an instrumental value of land, land itself is seen as instrumental, having no being of its own. Much like the ethical attitude towards the non-autonomous humans, land that has lost its integrity, from ecological and socioeconomic perspective is devalued. When both these groups try and recover land to one or the other stable state of affairs, conflict arises. An account of land as ‘land by itself’, as a phenomenon, I posit, would extend the Land ethic beyond the limits of land in integrity or redefine the idea of integrity itself.

As per my reading, Leopold’s attempt, to some extent, falls short of capturing the true occurrence of land in the following two ways. Firstly, according to him, land is a collective unit instead of a separate entity for moral consideration. His definition of the land indicates that land is not merely soil, indeed, it is a collective entity. In this way, his understanding of land loads it with a collective value, a sort of a whole where everything natural on soil becomes also part of land. As Callicott (1989) points out that “According to Leopold ‘land’, is his shorthand term for


\(^8\)Ibid., 107.

the natural environment”. In such a case, land loses its own multiple possibilities as a separate entity in Leopold’s definition. Secondly, the main objective of Land ethic is to transcend the Abrahamic notion, and through the concepts of ‘land pyramid’ and ‘biotic community’, it intends to do that. By considering “the pyramid as a symbol of land” and creating a biotic community to maintain the integrity of the pyramid, I argue, Leopold also ascribes a covert utilitarian purpose to land. A ‘purpose to land’ definitely imposes a value on a land that guides one to normatively judge the right and wrong use of it. As he explains, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise”. This kind of conceptualization of land seems to be based on his biological understanding as well as his prolonged experience as an environmental manager. Hence, as per my understanding, his Land ethic is immensely influenced by his ecological understanding of environment. This singular idea somewhat linked to purpose of land (ecologically) confines land as ‘land in-order-to’ maintain the integrity of the land pyramid.

This chapter will, at first, identify the manner in which the Abrahamic notion of land prevalently exists in both developmental as well as ecological conservation approaches. Here, I will demonstrate how these approaches essentialize land by creating an ideal form of land as per their objectives. Next attempt here will be to demonstrate the manner in which an exploration of phenomenological understanding of land in the Sundarbans discloses an entirely different notion of land, which actually could help us grasp the possibilities of its occurrence to the people. Finally, with the insights from this phenomenological study, I will attempt to demonstrate that such an understanding of land can bring forth a different identity of land as a singular entity rather than a collective whole. At the same time, a different conception of land that is relevant to the dwellers of the Sundarbans, would also be established. This phenomenological inquiry, I hope, would enhance Leopold’s land ethic by delineating a way to transcend its aforementioned limitations.

In the era of climate change, land remains as a central concern in the Sundarbans as these islands are getting heavily affected by climate change. The CSE report, 2012 particularly articulates this central concern in the chapter titled ‘Land: the bone of contention’. In this chapter, the report portrays how “Land is at the heart of the crisis in the Sundarbans”.

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10Ibid., 107
11Leopold, Sand Country Almanac, 189.
comprehend this notion of crisis, I will briefly explore how concepts of land have been formulated in the context of the Sundarbans in various developmental as well as ecological conservation programs. This analysis will also highlight the presence of the Abrahamic notion of land in these two discourses. The Sundarbans with its submerged and water-bound land is seen either with ecological value or as a potential human settlement area. I suggest here that capturing the notion of land as it occurs in the course of daily life or everyday experiences, would perhaps be the only way to obtain a phenomenological account of land in its entirety.

i. Tracing the Abrahamic Notion of Land from Development Reports and Initiatives

The 2009’s District Human Development Report for South 24 PGS mentions that 3.9 million people inhabit the ‘water-locked’ area of the Sundarbans. The predominant means of communication in this area still depends on mechanized private boats. The challenges of living in the Sundarbans can be illustrated by the fact that “in 4500 sq.km. inhabited areas, there is only 42 km. of the railway line and about 300 km. of pucca [tarred] road network”. Therefore, in most developmental projects, the main objectives are always to overcome this isolation from the mainland and to create safe conditions for inhabitation in such a water-locked area. The development of roads and bridges are among some of the most prominent projects that are listed in the Pathorpratima Block Development Report of 2014. This priority is reflected in the work accomplished by government schemes like MGNREGS, as a CSE report states, “in this region, the work undertaken under MGNREGS has mostly been infrastructure development such as construction and repair of roads and embankments”. The same priority can also be found in the draft of the 12th Five Year Plan of Govt. of West Bengal. As per the plan, high embankments for a stretch of 778 km will be constructed to protect settlements from the sea and rivers.

On one hand, socioeconomic developmental initiatives find it extremely difficult to manage this water-locked area for accomplishing various developmental goals; on the other, these initiatives face the colossal challenge of managing population surge in the Sundarbans. Statistics shows, from 1971 to 2001, the population of Sundarbans region has almost doubled, which, in turn, has led to a sharp rise in the number of buildings (residential set-up, educational

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14Development and Planning Department, District Human Development Report (October 2009), 291.
15Ibid.
16For more details see Patharpratima Block Sangsad Report 2012-13, 73.
17CSE, Living with Changing Climate, 74. MGREGS in the quotes stands for Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.
institutions, relief centers, etc.) in this region. From a developmental perspective, the population hike has definitely added more pressure on land. To manage this, developmental projects allocate value to a land area as per the economic activity it can support, like land for building, land for agriculture, land for the fishery, and land for improving connectivity, etc. To safeguard land for these specific purposes and to minimize the scope of seawater influx, there is a constant effort to build new, as well as to concretize existing embankments. Precisely for this, there is always a demand of new embankment policies for the Sundarbans region.

In this context, I would like to posit that this kind of developmental approaches sharply distinguishes land from water bodies, which is similar to the geographical understanding of land as not being a water body. Even in places like the Sundarbans where land is always alongside water, developmental approaches still very much function with a binary division of land and water. One can easily see that these so-called developmental activities perceive water as a hindrance. Due to this perception, the sea and rivers are seen as major threats to land. Therefore, the entire focus of developmental projects seems to concentrate on separating land from water by using high and concrete embankments. Moreover, for development of communities, clearing forest land to build houses, roads, and to develop fishery are quite common in the region. In addition, at present, the threat of seawater invasion is making it indispensable to convert forest or housing land into land for embankments. Especially post Aila, plenty of projects to build concrete embankments, are being undertaken. The shore area which remains temporarily under water is often drained to create high embankments. The developmental discourse, particularly, the one that significantly stresses on construction of embankments, posits land as opposed to water, where the water is a flowing, unstable and dominant entity, and land is a stable and vulnerable one.

From the above accounts, it can be said that most of the developmental policies and reports inherently attempt to protect land from water by creating embankments. On the contrary, ecologically speaking, these efforts to separate land from water also heavily hamper some of the unique characteristics of the Sundarbans, a riverine delta. Lack of attention to those characteristics, in turn, affects the rich biodiversity of this region. In the process of accomplishing the developmental objectives present-day developmental approaches become

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21The cyclone which nearly devastated this area in the year 2010.
completely oblivious to the nature of Sundarbans’ unique land, and instead function on the basis of the land-water binary in a ‘water-lock land’.

ii. Tracing the Abrahamic Notion of Land in Ecological Protection Programs

As mentioned earlier, the Sundarbans has unique ecological features and is considered to be one of the prime biological hotspots in India as well as of the world. For this unique characteristic, the Sundarbans has been marked as a National Park since 1984. From 1997, it is also titled as a UNESCO world heritage site. To protect this sensitive eco-region from climate change, from the last decade, a plethora of ecological intervention programs is being undertaken. According to ecologists, however, ecological intervention programs face two major hindrances in the path of their successful implementations. The first one is the increasing pressure of human population and the second one is the unpredictable tides and floods. Both of these threaten the growth of mangrove forests and severely hamper biodiversity in this region. IUCN rightly points out, “extreme natural events and unsustainable human activities are destroying the biodiversity of the Sundarbans and putting its unique ecosystem under threat”.

The average population density in the Sundarbans region is 925/km², which is more than the average population density of West Bengal. Undoubtedly, this highly dense as well as rapidly increasing human population act as a hindrance in fulfilling the objectives of biodiversity conservation. Various attempts have been made to reduce the anthropogenic impacts on the Sundarbans. Since 1989, under the UNESCO’s ‘Man and Biosphere’ program, the region has been marked as the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve (SBR). Before that, from 1973, the Ministry of Environment and Forest has demarcated some parts of the Sundarbans as the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (STR). Since then, human access to forest products, is also being controlled through various governmental regulations. Ghosh (2014) highlights that these regulations over time have increased the charges to access natural resources for livelihoods. This kind of attempts by conservationists to protect the Sundarbans from its settlers, I argue, assign more

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value to those land areas which have lesser human activities. Their approaches clearly convey that anthropogenic activities generally hamper conservation of other species.\textsuperscript{25}

In this regard, it is important to mention that this control mechanism directed towards separating human beings from nature is heavily influenced by the wilderness movement. There are a number of debates around this issue, which are not a direct concern of this chapter. Nonetheless, I would like to highlight that the ecological conservation initiatives in the Sundarbans influenced by the discourse of wilderness, where wilderness is defined as:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape.

Is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.\textsuperscript{26}

I would like to also highlight that the above discussed wilderness discourse, where natural ecosystem is considered of more value than the built up and residential areas, echoes Leopold’s notion of integrity of land. This approach brings the notions of wilderness and ‘charismatic animals’ to the forefront to supersede human needs, as the following quote shows:

Between 1969 and 2001, the area under National Parks and Sanctuaries in India grew tenfold, to five percent of the total landscape….While displacement from Tiger Reserves in India since 1973 may have officially affected 80 villages and 2900 families, the actual numbers may be far higher.\textsuperscript{27}

This kind of conservation policies, particularly, limits the access to natural resources of the economically underprivileged section of the society. As Guha (1989)\textsuperscript{28} points out, in a country like India, it is impossible to set up national parks and tiger reserves without displacing the communities residing in the region for generations. Here, I find the biotic integrity of land put forth by Leopold covertly indicates the same suggestive treatment where inhabitants need to step back and let the nature be. In this manner, it can be said that the current discourse of wilderness assigns higher value to land with less human interaction than the land for human settlements. Various measures to conserve this eco-region that are currently implemented in the Sundarbans, entirely borrow this value imposition on its land as well. While effort is on to pay more attention to the surviving forests, degraded land is included under the discourse of

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid.


restoration, where human beings living in that area are perceived as encroachers on a pristine biotic community.

Although conservationists and developmental policymakers, both have major concerns about land of the Sundarbans, there seems to be a divergence between these two groups in terms of how they want to manage the same. To elaborate, let us see how these two groups approach a common challenge, i.e. unpredictability of tides and floods. While developmental initiatives vouch that construction of embankments is the key to saving the settlements, conservationists feel that the shift from earthen embankments to concrete ones is posing a major threat to the ecosystem. An article in *The Hindu* perfectly captures this anxiety:

Doubting the feasibility of these embankments as coastal erosion is constantly reshaping the islands, WWF’s Anurag Danda said the engineering intervention will prove detrimental to the survival of unique flora and fauna of the UNESCO World Heritage site.29

In this regard, the main concern of the conservationists is that the construction of concrete embankments will actually lead to the depletion of mudflats—the prime regions where mangroves foster. As an alternative strategy, they promote the creation of multi-layered mangrove forests to cope with this unpredictability. According to this group, this strategy not only helps to protect the land from erosion, but also creates a natural shield against cyclones and floods.

The possible protection measures of creating mangrove forest in riverbanks, often lead the conservationists to perceive this land as the potential land to convert into forest land. Especially, in an area like the Sundarbans, conservation works mostly focus on protecting those parts of the region which hold mangroves. Moreover, their entire focus concentrates on sustaining the eco-region. In the process of doing so, the protection measures are only directed towards those lands which contain rich biodiversity. On one hand, these conservation programs perceive the entire Sundarbans’s land as land for biodiversity protection and conservation. On the other, though it acknowledges that Sundarbans ecosystem is present alongside water, yet it tends to follow the same notion of protecting a certain type of land from water and from human beings. The notion that the Sundarbans’s land must support and uphold its biodiversity, I argue, is nothing but a different manifestation of the utilitarian notion or the Abrahamic notion that is grounded in an idea of stability of ecosystems.

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iii. Phenomenology of Land: From the Voice of the Dwellers

Field narratives from the island reveal that the community, however, does not respond to the notion of seemingly reducing land area. They think it is an inherent feature of the area in which they belong. During an interview, a prominent local historian, Biswajit Shaw, remarked that “The maximum land of the Sundarbans remains under water...we are accessing just a limited portion of it...that is the characteristic of the Sundarbans” [FLDN]. Drawing from these kinds of narrative, in this section, I will attempt to depict how the community perceives the concept of ‘land’.

Initially, my specific inquiry was geared towards exploring the meaning or perception of the ‘environment’ that the people of this area uphold. In a while, I understood that there is a need to revisit the dwellers’ perception of ‘land’ as being sharply distinct from the concept of land that outsiders have in general. I have found the presence of two consistent themes in the narratives of the dwellers. The first theme is about their articulation of notion of land-water binary and how they perceive water, land, and the boundary between both of these. The second theme is how their notion about land is contingent on their engagements with the environment on a day-to-day basis. As their livelihoods largely shape these engagements, their understanding of land and water seems to be largely influenced by their livelihoods.

Water, Boundary and Land: Analysis of field narratives shows, that as inhabitants of an island, water becomes the marker of one’s territoriality. In the following narrative, ‘here’ marks the nearside of water, while ‘there’ marks land that is away from water, the far side.

Every Monday is a market day. We go there [main land]. It takes almost one and a half hour to reach. Monday is a busy day for us; here [on the island] also you will find a market every evening, but it would not be so big. Earlier it was difficult to travel, but now there are plenty of boats so that side is also easily accessible. Life is easy now. [FLDN]

The definition of land, as not being a water body, was also ingrained in my understanding when I first arrived at the island. Having this definition in my mind, I could have also anticipated that in this island there may be seasonal variations when rivers invade the land or dries up, revealing the riverbed; however, I was completely astonished by the way the respondents described ‘land’ as being inside the water. After an hour of interview with one respondent, his wife, who had been silent all along, suddenly summed up her perspective in a single sentence “We are the people of a floating land” [FLDN]. The idea of a floating land implies that land is not materially just a piece of soil-mass surrounded by water. Instead, it gives the sense of land that is on water.
One of the interviewees also remarked, “There is a no high land; every place is surrounded by water so anytime any portion can get flooded” [FLDN]. The conception of high land and low land is completely relative for them, there is no permanent high land or low land. Sometime one portion is more vulnerable due to the direction of waves and winds than the other. This inconsistency of land and water seems to give them a sense of impermanence over permanence. The idea of escaping to a higher ground as against a lower one is completely absent. Constant erosion, deposition of sandbanks and transitions in the land-water topologies are an integral part of this region. From this, it can be derived that in the Sundarbans there is no conception of a stable land, indeed, here land is ‘land’ (a non-water surface) until it turns into water due to the invasion of the sea or rivers. However, with this notion of instability, the residents of this area preserve a broader conception of land, I will explore that in the next few paragraphs.

*Crafting Relational Geography through Livelihood:* I observed some prominent differences between fishermen, boatmen, honey-gatherers, and women who do household work, when they explained their way of living and their relationship with water. The following narratives might not directly depict how people conceive land, but these will be useful in understanding their deep involvement with the sea. I will demonstrate that these diverse perspectives of water, in turn, could provide an extendable meaning of land, because sea is also land for these people. In this way, such an idea of land for these islanders is closer to an ecological perception.

In the course of their occupational engagements, fishermen acknowledge seabed as the home for fish. They also identify that the recent decrease of fish populations is intrinsically connected to the exploitation of the seabed by mechanized trawlers.

The new trawlers come from outside, have a different mechanism to catch fish. They place their net so deep into the sea that it even scratches grass and fish seeds, everything from the seabed.

This seabed is the home for fish-seed to hatch; it is like a cozy bed for them [FLDN]. It seems to be that these fishermen take care of seabed as part of sea-land as a farmer would take care of the farmland. They also identify that sea-land yields fish similar to how farmlands yield crops.

In contrast to fishermen, boatmen who generally drive fish trawlers or passenger boats, connect with water and land quite differently. From their narrations, one can comprehend that they create a relationship with water that is compassionate as well as respectful at the same time. The following expression captures the same:

I feel that I am in the mother’s womb, but when there is a storm it is like that moment when you are coming out from the mother’s womb, turmoil within you [FLDN].
This comparison of the sea as mother or being on the sea as being in the mother’s womb, points out that their sense of belonging to the sea is quite different from other dwellers. For them, the sea is like a mother, it is dynamic in nature. This dynamic nature is difficult to grasp in its entirety. Hence, dwelling in the sea is always being attached to the feeling of the unpredicted and the mysterious, an ineffable environmental experience. The way in which boatmen constantly observe the seashore and identify places is intricately related to their deep awareness and acknowledgement of unpredictability of the sea as already referred a boatman paints images of sea shores in his mind to find his way in the sea. The boatmen are likely to notice the unique features of each part of the seashore. They perceive the boundary area, which is the transition from the sea to land, as a precarious space. From their narratives, it is quite evident that they feel more confident in the sea-land than towards the ‘shore-land’ as they perceive the latter one as a space that is entirely unpredictable.

The accounts of honey gatherers sketched a very unusual picture of land and sea. Honey gatherers mostly work in the forest land. Although they are more acquainted with forest land, their sense of security belongs to the sea. As already highlighted the following quote of a honey gatherer precisely depict that same:

After a full day of action when I come back to the boat, I feel more at peace in my mind. Between the forest and our boat, the strip of sea water stands like a caretaker. We sleep on the boat. That is the safest place; I do not feel scared. [FLDN]

This conceptualization of the sea as a safer place than land is really an exceptional perspective and a rare account too. Perhaps, the threat of wild animals (including tigers) makes the water safer for them than forest land. Hence, from the above narratives we can realize that the ‘sea-land’ becomes a safe resting place for them.

The narratives of women imprint a completely different picture in my mind. One of them at the beginning of her interview states:

The river is everything for us, then how can we avoid it? We catch prawn seeds and crabs from there. Living in this area implies that we need to build a strong relation to rivers. Everything comes from rivers—mostly fuelwood. There are lots of woody areas alongside these rivers, we go there to collect fuelwood mostly during the ebb and sometimes we find wood floating down on water as well, we collect that also [we call it ‘pala’ in our words]. [FLDN]

From the above quote, one can understand that as they live alongside rivers, rivers are not only an entity from which they need to protect their land, but it is also an expansion of the same land area from where they get resources for their daily needs. Even in another instance, one of them also mentioned that it is relatively more dangerous to stay far away from water, in the middle of
the village, as against staying just near the shore, because the probability of water stagnation is higher inside the island. Hence, the land area near the shore is convenient for housing or settlements.

As we can see, all of these narratives depict quite a different conceptualization of ‘land’ as perceived by different sections of the community. Spending a substantial amount of time on the sea make them feel that ‘sea-land’ is also part of their ‘land’ (as used generally to indicate human settlements and agricultural fields). This phenomenological description of land offers the understanding that the predominant feature of the Sundarbans landscape is that land in this area remains liminal. The community accepts this liminal attribute of land as they deal with it in their everyday life. For the community in the Sundarbans, it is quite easy to accept the fact that the presence of land and water are inextricably linked.

Furthermore, an understanding of this liminal sense of land-water is so ingrained in the inhabitants’ minds that any person who cannot acknowledge this reality, can get easily alienated from this area. Whereas, the insiders always use their experiential knowledge to denote this land-water relational boundary, the outsiders employ the binary to explain land and water area separately. According to me, one needs to grasp this relational boundary to get the essence of the Sundarbans as being a liminal land.

iv. An Extended Notion of Land

While a general understanding of the word ‘land’ implies only an area not covered by a water surface, the people of the Sundarbans extend this to mean even ‘land on water’. In other words, their definition of land is not confined by the embankments. Rather, it transcends its usual boundary and extends into the sea as well. ‘Land’, ‘shore-land’, and ‘sea-land’ coalesce together to create the idea of land for the Sundarbans’s dwellers. Such an unusual typology of land that remains hidden to the outsiders only gets acknowledged in the consciousness of the dwellers. The experiential narratives of the islanders depict that they provide significance to the shore-land as well. During ebb, a number of activities like maintenance of boats, drying nets, segregation of fish, collection of fuelwoods, etc. is carried out on that portion of land which otherwise remains hidden under water. For them the integrity of land includes the integrity of their nature-dependent traditional livelihoods. Land per se does not directly support these livelihoods, they do not have to lay claims to it, but as an integrated part of their lives and experiences, it becomes significant. As a result, a broader notion of land emerges.
Except this shore-land, the rest of the sea-land always remains under water. This portion of land gets acknowledged as land only by those who extensively stay on water like fishermen or boatmen or by even honey gatherers. In the course of their daily engagements, any minute changes in this land come into presence. The existence of sea-land makes them feel confident that they can survive in this place because of the benevolent features of sea-land. In this manner, this kind of land reveals itself to the dwellers during the course of their intricate engagements with the sea.

The dwellers of the place, often accept that water is an integral part of their life. They even acknowledge the fact that living in the Sundarbans means living in a land which is liminal, which reveals itself when the time arises. Although the inhabitants rightly perceive the risks of living close to the sea, they totally surrender to the fact that they cannot run away from water. Water and land together give them the place to live and dwell. Hence, I argue, this perception does not accommodate any notion of sinking island or decreasing land area. The realization of this perception of the inhabitants is highly essential to recognize and appreciate the complexity of the Sundarbans’s land, within the ecological and development discourses. I can clearly identify that the dwellers’ understanding of land is more than ‘land is’ or ‘land in-order-to’, indeed, they experience how ‘land occurs’ and how it gets revealed in their everydayness. Thus, in my view, any scholarly attempt to comprehend the values of land without acknowledging these dwellers’ perspectives, is most likely to be inadequate.

In the concluding part of this chapter, I suggest how comprehending land as a combination of land, sea-land, and shore-land is entirely absent in developmental as well as ecological conservation discourses. In contrast to the inhabitants’ perspective of land in the Sundarbans, I have observed that the developmental discourse posits the value on land depending on the way it is being used. This creates a hierarchy of values among different types of land. Especially, in case of the Sundarbans, the land used for embankments gets the highest priority. The rest of the land features in the hierarchy as per the demand of a situation. Moreover, there is no acknowledgement of ‘sea-land’ and it does not feature at all in that hierarchy, as developmental policymakers do not consider this as a category of land. Hence, it can be reinforced that within the developmental discourse, land is the area that is spread only up to embankments. They also consider that shore-land and its adjacent areas are the ideal places to build embankments. Hence, it would not be wrong to argue that the Sundarbans developmental discourse is established on the land-water binary as well as it essentializes land as a resource only for human development without acknowledging its alternative conceptualizations.
In case of conservation initiatives, ignoring the boundary or shore-land is considered highly detrimental to ecological integrity. Ecologists are quite cautious about this transitional area, as it upholds an important ecosystem, which supports diversity of flora and fauna. I posit, conservationists prioritize the conservation of biodiversity. The conservation efforts are directed towards saving the mangroves for the animals or the charismatic species, like the Royal Bengal Tiger. Although one can argue that conservationists are also concerned about the sea or rivers or as denoted in this chapter as sea-land, an in-depth evaluation of their motives clarifies that for them conservation of aquatic ecosystems is solely driven to save different aquatic species. Hence, it would not be wrong to argue that both water and land appear in their framework as just an ‘intermediate object’ to achieve their larger goal of protecting biodiversity. Imposition of the ecologically-grounded value on land and the sea, ignores the fact that the Sundarbans’s land possesses such liminal characteristics or human habitation. Even, their concern regarding the decrease of land area, clearly exposes their anxiety due to species depletion. These approaches impose higher value on those lands that can behold multiple species. Thus, these fall again in the same trope of defining land as ‘land-in-order-to’ something.

To summarize, throughout this chapter, I made an attempt to portray a phenomenological exploration of land. I assert that in a region like the Sundarbans, the essence of land can only be captured through phenomenological methods. The inhabitants’ experience of land, on one hand, highlights the limitations of the notion of land that is prevalently encountered in various developmental as well as ecological conservation programs. On the other hand, it also highlights the divergence between insiders’ and outsiders’ perception of land. Further, I posit that these phenomenological insights enhance Leopold’s Land ethic by offering a deeper understanding of land and its intricate relationship with its dwellers, shaped by their livelihoods that are closely connected with the environment. Next, I describe how a phenomenological understanding of land expands the conception of Land ethic.

Here, I would like to reemphasize a few details of Leopold’s Land ethic. As Callicott (1989)\textsuperscript{30} points, Land ethic is grounded on three scientific foundations that are: evolutionary theory, ecological biology and Copernican astronomy. On the basis of these three scientific underpinnings, Leopold argues that the formulation of biotic community is an evolutionary possibility. Ecological understanding of biotic community provides the interrelation between human and nonhuman components with all its cooperation and competition. Hence, it can be said that for Leopold the concept of biotic community is a locus of moral considerability. Moral

action towards any members of the biotic community entirely depends on maintaining the integrity of the biotic community. This concept of integrity entirely relies on the ecological concept of land pyramid--“an abstract model of nature, process precedes substance and energy is more fundamental than matter.”\(^{31}\) This understanding clearly demonstrates that Leopold’s conception of land as a summation of entire environment is ecology-centric as well as highly normative. While I find his observation of nature in the SCA has a rich description of the experience of nature, though, depending on that, I agree, it may be philosophically speculative to ask if Leopold’s land ethic is phenomenological or not. Yet, here it would not be wrong to invoke a comparison between phenomenological description and scientific truth. Based on Callicott’s argument, it is evident that Leopold’s theory is centred on some major scientific premises. Borrowing from Husserl, here it would not be wrong to argue that this again is an instance of ignoring the ‘lifeworld’ and emphasizing solely on the scientific world. Husserl clearly enunciates the difference between the lifeworld and the scientific world as follows:

The lifeworld is the world that is constantly pregiven, valid constantly and in advance as existing, but not valid because of some purpose of investigation, according to some universal end. …The scientific world (nature in the sense of natural science, world in the sense of philosophy as universal positive science) is a purposeful structure extending to infinity—a structure [made by] men who are presupposed, for the presupposed lifeworld.\(^{32}\)

He further emphasizes the difference as he explains:

Transcendentalism, on the other hand, says: the ontic meaning [Seinssinn] of the pregiven lifeworld is a subjective structure [Gebilde], it is the achievement of experiencing, prescientific life. In this life the meaning and the ontic validity [Seinsgeltung] of the world are built up—of that particular world, that is, which is actually valid for the individual experiencer. As for the "objectively true" world, the world of science, it is a structure at a higher level, built on prescientific experiencing and thinking, or rather on its accomplishments of validity [Geltungsleistungen].\(^{33}\)

These differences point out that the world of experiences should be the basis for the scientific world. However, in case of SCA, scientific premises suppress the lifeworld experiences. It seems that in-depth description of nature in the SCA has been used by Leopold to validate the scientific knowledge [which already been accepted as a universal truth], and thus the entire description account, I contend, has lost its nuances.

\(^{31}\)Ibid., 90.


\(^{33}\)Ibid., 69.
Whereas, phenomenological experiences of land for the Sundarbans’s dwellers reveal a phenomenological understanding of land (not as a summation of entire environment but land as a surface to dwell on). Instead of focusing on any such ethical trait to maintain integrity, this phenomenological study reveals the ‘occurrence’ of land rather than the ‘is’ ness of it. This occurrence intrinsically carries the notion of change, ingrained in it. Subsequently, this phenomenological understanding of occurrence of land reveals a second layer of understanding where one can grasp that perspective of the islander’s relation with the environment as well. Following from the earlier description, I can confirm that along with the occurrence of land, the dwellers also depict that change is an integral notion to comprehend the environment in this island. In Land ethic, there is a commitment to certain stability of the components of biotic environment which is based on the notion of land as a stable whole, supporting human and non-human biota. However, from the field experience, it is clear that in the Sundarbans, where change and impermanence are always in the background, integrity of “land” as proposed by Leopold is neither perfectly appropriate nor it is able to capture all the nuances of this environment.

Furthermore, I suggest that without acknowledging the dwellers’ phenomenological perspectives, imposing values on land as ascribed by the developmental policy reports or the ecological conservation programs, are going to be meaningless and ludicrous. Any kind of interventions to uphold these values can neither be successful nor be effective in the eyes of the dwellers. To move beyond this apparent value and to eventually protect the ecological heritage of the Sundarbans, it is necessary to generate a new ethic which will be faithful to the liminal character of this land. It is required to acknowledge the subtle nature of land of the Sundarbans and to remain authentic to it. Echoing from the dwellers’ account, in my opinion, one must pay utmost attention to land. This should be in tandem with accepting land ‘as it occurs’ rather than ‘as it should be’. In turn, this can generate an appropriate as well as an alternative land ethic for places like the Sundarbans. Instead of just offering biotic community as an answer for ‘what should we do to build an ethical relation to the environment’, it is far more important to understand how to explain the ‘occurrence’ as permanence, and subsequently, provide a moral ground to uphold that. Also, as we have seen from the dwellers’ narratives, this occurrence of land is only visible through their everyday mundane activities. Hence, it is inevitable to focus more on various processes through which one gets to realize the presence of this occurrence of land as well as the recurrently changing features of the Sundarbans’s environment. Eventually,
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this can lead to the understanding of the phenomenological fact of a ‘floating land’, what the Sundarbans actually is.

v. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have made an attempt to explicate how pre-theoretical analysis of everyday phenomenological experiences reveals a different notion of land that is found to be ingrained in the narratives of the islanders. The analysis of the work-worlds provides an opportunity to see how each person depending on their work-world discovers land and sea differently. This analysis also shows us that an open encountering of one’s environment without any presumptions helps to find out neither a fact about environment nor a value, rather it helps to disclose a transcendental source of meaning about land for these narrators. The islanders’ engagement with their environment leads them to explore the malleable characteristics of land of the Sundarbans, and the sea-land. These islanders explore this sea-land and dwell on it and accept this occurrence of land without any pre-theoretical judgement. As we have seen, due to their work-world engagement in their everyday modes of being they are innately connected to the sea-land. In their everyday modes of being, we have also seen that there is hardly any value attached to the phenomenological occurrence of land. In a way, this phenomenological occurrence of land and sea-land becomes a part of one’s everyday mode of being as being the resident of the Sundarbans.

However, phenomenology of land should not be limited to merely a person’s subjective account. As Stefanovic (2000)\textsuperscript{34} points out that accepting phenomenology merely as a simple first person account of long-standing subjective experience which can be taken as a fact, is going to be misleading. Instead of limiting itself to a first person relativistic storytelling, phenomenology should concentrate on the consciousness. Hence, after taking account of one’s everyday mode of being, now it is important to carry out the project of phenomenology to explicate “possibility as possibility”\textsuperscript{35} and describe the “originary belonging of human being as being in the world”\textsuperscript{36} And this would be possible by moving on to the second step of the analysis to understand the transcendental mode of being of the islanders.

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.