D. JUXTAPOSING THEORY AND NARRATIVES

The concluding remark of the last part quite clearly describes the objective of this part. Here, my attempt will be to see how far the above explicated theory commensurate with the insights obtained from the phenomenological narratives, for teasing out the nuances of environmental change—the phenomenon under consideration. This analysis will also aid in establishing why human beings are an essential stakeholder in environmental ethics and why it is required to reconsider human beings to make a better sense of the human—environment relationship. Moreover, this part will attempt to delineate the process of getting to the narrators’ transcendent mode of being by elaborating on the larger patterns underneath the narratives.
11 A Phenomenological Exploration of the Concept of ‘Change’ in the Environment

We have seen, environmental ethics as a discipline responds to various moral and ethical dilemmas that humanity is facing due to numerous environmental changes and the dismal state of the human—environment relationship. Naturally, in the discipline of environmental ethics, environmental change is taken as a pre-given background to work with. The major commonality between the two most prominent traditional schools of environmental ethics, anthropocentric and ecocentric school, is that both of them accept the fact that human activities are acting as a geological force which is inducing diverse changes in the environment. Despite the commonality in ‘why’ part of the issue, the differences, however, can be found on the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ parts. In other words, what is environmental change and how it could be possible to address environmental change, still are topics of discussion and debate in this discipline. In this context, I have already discussed in the first part of this dissertation that both the schools have developed their own guidelines and avenues to combat environmental changes in their respective ways.

In this context, ecophenomenology, as we have seen, primarily tries to set up an alternative ground for environmental ethics. As Thomson (2004)\textsuperscript{1} describes the primary objective of ecophenomenology is to replace some of the ethical and metaphysical presuppositions which are ingrained in modern philosophy, although are environmentally destructive. To offer this alternative ground, it attempts to bring shifts in our understanding about ourselves as well as our place in the world. Moreover, it focuses on considering real world phenomenological experiences and also attempts to theoretically uncover the ethical and metaphysical roots, which systematically exclude these experiences.

Here, the purpose of this chapter would be to analyze the concept of environmental change from a phenomenological point of view.\textsuperscript{2} I think, this analysis is particularly required because on one hand, the concept of change is being taken as a pre-given background in environmental ethics and on the other hand, for proceeding towards ecophenomenology’s objective to set up an alternative ground for environmental ethics, it is necessary to tease out and transcend the prevailing modern metaphysical presumptions associated with this concept in its very formulation in environmental ethics. The first section of this chapter, will chart out how

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\textsuperscript{1}Ian Thomson, “Ontology and Ethics at the Intersection of Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy,” \\
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\textsuperscript{2}Though there is a vast body of literature on Metaphysical concept of change, I am in this chapter restricting my enquiry only to the phenomenological understanding of change.
\end{flushleft}
both these traditional schools have conceptualized environmental change. Following that, the next section will be an illustration of the phenomenological account of the Sundarbans islanders’ experiences of change in the environment in their day to day lives. Along with it, this chapter will also delineate a phenomenological analysis of environmental change. By juxtaposing the islander’s accounts with the phenomenological analysis, my aim would be to explore the way environmental change is acknowledged at an individual level and what kind of ontological presuppositions is required in the first place to recognize a phenomenon like ‘environmental change’.

i. Conceptualization of Environmental Change in Environmental Ethics

*Conceptualization of Environmental Change in Anthropocentric Ethics:* In the first chapter, detailed analysis of anthropocentric school elucidates that the primary objective of anthropocentric ethics is to achieve human societal development and human wellbeing. To accomplish this objective, this school considers the environment as a resource pool for human society.\(^3\) Environment, from this perspective is considered as just a means to achieve the aforementioned goals. Moreover, it considers the environment as an ecosystem from where we get the essential life-supporting environmental services. The conception of environmental change in this school, I argue, is solely formulated depending on these two ways of conceptualizing the environment. First of all, as human societal development is the main objective and the environment is conceptualized as a resource pool to fulfil the objective, unless and until, there is a detrimental effect on human development and wellbeing, any environmental modification does not get acknowledged as a change. In other words, as the environment is considered as a resource pool for human society, until there is a strong enough resource crunch to impede human developmental activities, induced by a particular environmental change, it does not get acknowledged. For example, 1973-74 oil crisis was a strong enough one and thus, it managed to induce some protective measures in using non-renewable resources and subsequently, the famous report, ‘limit to growth’ acted as the catalyst to initiate the entire discourse of sustainable use of non-renewable resources. Therefore, it can be said that any modification in the resource-pool, which can affect the ultimate goal of this school, is defined as environmental change.

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The second perspective about the environment demonstrates that the environment as a whole is seen as a service provider. Consequently, any ecological imbalance that can be threatening to our wellbeing, is also acknowledged as environmental change. Let me elaborate the account of environmental change proposed by this ethical school with an example: climate change, the recent widely studied change in the environment, manages to capture a lot of attention from this school and there is a constant drive to generate ethical guidelines to combat climate change because this particular change poses serious threat to our wellbeing, through a series of environmental problems like, changes in weather pattern, rise in temperature, irregular rainfall, or increasing frequency of various natural calamities. Obviously, these anomalies have huge consequences on human society in terms of destroying the life supporting systems, which could plausibly stall our societal growth. Eventually, it can be said that anthropocentric school acknowledges any environmental change in terms of its consequences on human life and society. As per this school, any detrimental modification in environmental components as well as the lack of availability of adequate resources, and the degradation in the quality of various environmental services, are denoted as environmental changes.

Conceptualization of Environmental Change in Ecocentric ethics: Ecocentric school argues against this consequentialist approach adopted by anthropocentric school and advocates that the environment should be considered as an end in itself. Borrowing from scientific discourse of ecology⁴, this school highlights the importance of ecosystem as being an integrated system which maintains the natural balance among various lifeforms and life-supporting processes. It also emphasizes that this integrity possesses an intrinsic value in itself, and the protection of the environment needs to happen just for the sake of protecting this intrinsic value, not for anything else.⁴ This school, as we have seen, is based on the notion that there is a natural process of change which is always already present in nature and gets impeded by human induced changes in the environment. Human interference is perceived as a hindrance to maintain the natural order and the teleology of natural changes.⁵ According to this school, human induced changes in the environment, actually, is demolishing the pristine form, or in other words the ideal form, and in turn, is hindering the teleology of natural order. Based on this holistic idea—natural order and

the intrinsic value of the environment—the notion of environmental change of this school, I posit, is basically any modification due to human interference in the present ecosystem as a whole or in its parts, or more specifically, in the interconnection among the various parts. It also argues that any modification in the environment due to human interference destroys the pristine nature, and thus, any manipulation of pristine nature is marked as environmental change. In this manner, this school argues for keeping the agency of environmental change to the environment itself rather than to human beings. Naturally, the imbalance in the environment is being measured against the fundamental notion of natural change. In summary, ecocentric ethics conceptualizes environmental change as any forms of loss of harmony in the ecosystem, any disruptions in the natural order, and any damages to pristine nature.

It can be concluded that the difference between the conceptualizations of environmental change by both these schools, lies in the notion of agent of change. Anthropocentric ethics promotes that for the sake of socioeconomic development of human society, any alteration in the environment must be permissible. Subsequently, the concept of environmental change for this school is completely based on changes to those environmental resources and services which can pose greater impediments to development. Whereas, ecocentric ethics opposes this notion and argues that any change in the environment caused by human intention should be condemned. The natural order should not be obstructed and human beings have no right to alter it for any purpose. The notions of environmental change by these two schools, however, I contend, are intrinsically based on either human being as a subject who can change and modify the object ‘environment’ or human as a subject examining the changing object, the environment. This implicit subject/object duality, ecophenomenology strongly critiqued. Along with, promoting predefined notions of ‘ideal environment’ stemming out an ecological and metaphysical understanding and posing value on that generate the fact/value dualism and it is also found problematic from the ecophenomenological perspective. Moreover, ecophenomenology highlights the importance of phenomenological account and claims that through this pre-reflective account, it is possible to transcend the dualisms deeply entrenched in environmental ethics. In the next section, I will explain the phenomenological perception of ‘environmental change’ by analyzing the collected narratives.

ii. Phenomenological Perception of Environmental Change

In the process of analyzing the collected narratives, I have found that most of the narrators spoke about the change in reference to three kinds of environmental change: landscape change, change
in biota, and seasonal change. Before going onto describing each of these, it is worthy to mention that the narrators have used Bengali words and phrases like *badal* or *paribartan* or *farak* or *agae chilo ekhon nei/ agae chilo na ekhon ache* to denote changes they see. Here, it is important to highlight that though these three types of changes are acknowledged by most of the narrators, the context of acknowledgement and the specific changes that have been acknowledged from these three categories, are quite different across the narrators. In the following, I will provide the account of their acknowledgement of change, along with, will highlight the context of that acknowledgement.

*Landscape change:* Although the narrators have not explicitly mentioned about landscape change, the phenomenological description of the place implicitly addresses a significant amount of change in land and water areas. The Sundarbans as a place has unique characteristics which have been succinctly described by a narrator: as in the Sundarbans “land is land until water took over it” [FLDN]. People of this area have experienced many floods with varied intensity. Those experiences of floods, I think, make them realize a very special essence of the place. This essence offers a sense that land is always vulnerable to the invasion of water. This sense creates anxiety among the residents and this feeling of anxiety can be singled out as a particular feature of living in these islands. Phenomenological accounts of landscape change, give a sense that land and water create an intricate network in this area. In their narratives, they frequently use phrases like: *age chilo, ekhon nei/age chilo na ekhon ache,* which means, something was there earlier but not present now/or something was not there earlier but is currently present. This expression highlights the presence-absence framework to depict the constant transformation between landscape and waterscape. The transition between land and water happens quite fluently, land can change into water-body or waterscape can shift into land, as if the entire area is in a process of ‘becoming’, as already captured in the ‘Phenomenology of Land’.

The river is unpredictable, it has stretched itself, and the land and forest areas are getting washed away. However, this is the character of the river—it erodes some area and creates a new area, so we know that the sea will not grasp the entire land, there would be some new places for us to live. [FLDN]

Due to this process of ‘becoming’, changes in the landscape are encountered so often that the inhabitants identify these as the very characteristics of the place itself.
Change in Biota: All the narrators explicitly recognized changes in biota in some form or the other. The most common observation in this regard came from the fishermen about fish stock depletion as well as noticing a reduction in the varieties of fish.

We used to get multiple types of fish. Especially various small size fish were ample earlier. Whenever we need to have some fish for cooking, one of our house members used to go to riverside with a small net. That small net was enough to catch fish for two meals for our entire family. Maximum within an hour we used to get varieties of small fish. Alas! Now you hardly get those fish. Now for eating fish either you need to cultivate fish in your pond or you need to purchase it. [FLDN]

Fisher folks mentioned about sharp increment in number of crocodiles in the rivers. They also acknowledged that this increase in crocodile number is a real threat to them as this animal often attacks human beings.

Many narrators have spoken about the decline in forest cover, however, in this regard, there was hardly any mention of loss in plant species, in their account. On a few occasions, some of the narrators while explaining ‘why the Sundarbans is named as Sundarbans’ admitted that the Sundari (Heritiera fomes) tree which were prevalent in this area (from which the place derived its name as well), nowadays is hardly to be seen. Except the reduction in plant diversity, the narrators have barely mentioned about any reduction in diversity of plant species, though the ecologists mark the decline in plant biodiversity as a major environmental change in the Sundarbans. The honey gatherers’ mentioned that the number of wild animals, especially tigers have significantly increased in the last 10-15 years. Due to this, they are now afraid to go inside the forests as freely as they would have gone earlier, and that is obviously hampering their livelihood. Farmers are more observant to the change in insect and bird population. They have also discussed about the abolishment of different native paddy varieties due to pervasive monoculture practices. Farmers have described about this demolition of paddy varieties, especially while indicating the change in the taste of their food. As one explains:

Earlier, for some months of a year, due to extreme scarcity, we used to eat only rice and salt. The taste of rice in itself used to be so delicious you would need nothing else with it. I cannot find that taste now in the ones that I grow in my field. No doubt the production is more, but I doubt about its quality [FLDN].

Inter Season’s Environmental Change: In the context of what is change in the environment and how the narrators perceive that, often they have mentioned about inter-season’s changes in reference to various events in their lives. Fishermen spoke about seasonal change as it is an
important environmental cue for them to predict fish availability. Fishermen considered these changes are the prime factor to decide the right time for fishing. Many of them indicated that the most productive time for fishing is the time of seasonal change, especially, the transition from summer to monsoon. Fisher folks see this period highly productive because during this period frequency of storms increases, and storms always have been one of the most reliable cues to get fish, especially Hilsa as they say “Hilsa is a fish of storm” [FLDN]. However, the islanders have mentioned that the characteristics of the storm have changed over time. Earlier storms were not so frequent like nowadays, but their strength were much more.

Most of the narrators acknowledged a decrease in the winter span from their varied context. To illustrate, boatmen have spoken about this change to compare the risk of being on the rivers during the rainy season and the sense of peace they experience in the winter. Honey gatherers define seasonal change in reference to three distinct characteristics of the forests across seasons. As per them, summer is the toughest time to stay in the forests due to the hot and stuffy weather. Monsoon is the unsafe period as tigers are more active during this season, and winter is a most suitable time to go to the forests for honey gathering. In this context, they mentioned that in the recent past the duration of the winter is decreasing, that in turn affecting their livelihood.

Having elaborated on three various accounts of environmental change, we can see that the everyday examples of environmental change from the islander’s narratives provide diverse notions of environmental change. All the narrators do not recognize or acknowledge all types of change, rather it varies according to one’s engagement with the environment. This inconsistency in acknowledging environmental change exposes that any singular idea about environment and environmental change does not exist in their everyday life. This distinct disparity among the narrators stretch from the acknowledgement of certain environmental phenomenon as change to different individuals having diverse pre-reflective judgements associated with different types of environmental change. This particular diversity among different narrators in terms of acknowledging environmental change, led me to do an in-depth analysis of the very process of recognizing environmental change. Extending from Sheehan’s interpretation, in the rest of this chapter, I will gradually construct how this relationship is indispensable for acknowledging a phenomenon like ‘environmental change’ by an individual. Subsequently, as Langer suggests
“The concept of values constitutes the very core of environmental ethics”.\(^6\) I will make a preliminary attempt to explicate how a pre-reflective judgement gets imposed on a particular environmental change in one’s phenomenological world. I see, this analysis would plausibly unfold the manner in which ecophenomenology could transcend the aforementioned dualisms and subsequently, could offer an alternative ground for environmental ethics.

iii. Acknowledgement of Environmental Change: a Phenomenological Analysis

The phenomenological analysis of the process of acknowledging environmental changes will focus on the ontological presuppositions that are required to recognize these changes. Borrowing from Sheehan’s interpretation in the course of this analysis, I will address questions like how does an individual acknowledge change? What could be an interpretive phenomenological account of acknowledging change?

The forte of the phenomenological encountering of change is, it entails only those alterations which gets directly experienced by the narrators. Generally, knowledge about anything is generated from either sensation or testimony. In this chapter, I will particularly focus on the manner in which phenomenological account of change deals with the first-hand experience of change. In the context of this chapter, I am particularly restricting myself to explicating the underlying process through which one, in everyday life, acknowledges a particular change over others. Philosophically, change can be considered as a permanent phenomenon—all things, in some or the other manner, are changing all the time. Any particular change in this ‘ever-changing’ world, however, gets registered as a ‘change’ in our everydayness by its very acknowledgement. In other words, the acknowledgement of any change is the pivotal factor that ensures whether a change in the ‘ever-changing’ world would appear in our everydayness as a ‘change’ or not. In the following, I would like to elaborate on the process of acknowledging and registering changes in our everydayness with the help of a thought experiment.

Suppose, in the bus stand from where I daily catch bus to go to my university, a banyan tree used to be there. While waiting, I used to stand under the shade of that tree. I remember, often a school lad used to entertain himself by swinging with the help of its aerial roots. One morning, I discovered that the tree is not there anymore. In this regard, I obviously

acknowledged the absence of the tree as a change. From this example as well as from the narratives, one can conclude that in the case of phenomenological experience of change, one is actually encountering an absence (or in some other instance, it could have been a presence) of a particular thing over time. In the following, I will be focusing on to explicating phenomenologically what presence and absence of an environmental entity actually indicates. During the course of analysis, I will demonstrate how testimonies about any change also become phenomenologically relevant, similar to the experiences through our senses.

To comprehend the acknowledgement of change, I posit, it is important to understand what does absence or presence of a particular entity mean. Here, I would like to argue that to understand the phenomenological meaning of absence/presence of a particular environmental entity or the process of acknowledgement of environmental change, one needs to invoke the notion of the ‘phenomenological world’. As I have described earlier, the ‘world’ in the phrase ‘phenomenological world’ does not mean the entire worldly space; rather, it points to the world of an individual. Each individual dwells in this “open space” “that allows one to take things ‘as this-or-that and thus to understand their ‘being’—that is, how and like what they are currently meaningful”.

The creation of phenomenological world—as Sheehan’s depicts from Heidegger’s philosophy—depends on the meaningful presence of a thing in this ‘open space’. The meaningful presence of a thing is nothing but accepting ‘something as something’, for example, taking a white page as a place to write. In the physical world, every individual stands in the midst of various entities, but the meaningful presence of entities only creates one’s ‘phenomenological world’. Evidently, depending on various socio-cultural practices, things or entities get their meaning. Although the meaning of a thing is determined by various socio-cultural practices, the meaningful presence of a thing for an individual is only possible while the meaning gets appropriated to one’s world through the everyday or the existential activities. As Sheehan describes “…ex-sistence makes possible the existentiel act of holding together (synthesizing) a thing with its meaning”. According to Heidegger, this appropriation of things in the phenomenological world occurs due to one’s intentionality, which is a very special attribute of the human existential structure or ‘Dasein structure’. As per this structure, a human being is always pressing into possibilities or taking up a particular role at any given moment. One’s pressing into possibilities can also be interpreted as one’s intention to do something for a

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broader goal at a certain moment. As Crowell (2013) would say “in the light of the intentionality things become meaningful”.\textsuperscript{10} This pressing into possibilities only makes the meaningful presence of things possible, or in other words, due to the pressing into possibilities, certain things become intelligible to us within a nexus of intelligibility. Being grounded on one’s intentionality, the realm of meaningfulness is inherently subjective, as Sheehan describes, “Meaningfulness is the mostly unnoticed dimension through which alone I can encounter whatever shows up. Thus, everything I meet is in a sense ‘mine’”.\textsuperscript{11} In the following, I will try to explain this structure with the help of the aforementioned thought experiment, and I will show how this structure is extremely important in acknowledging the presence or absence of environmental entities and subsequently, in making sense of environmental change.

If we accept the explicated structure for acknowledging environmental change, the first premise would be: I have noticed the absence of the tree (the change) because the tree always had a meaningful presence in my world. In other words, in my phenomenological world the tree has been taken as something. Following that, the second premise would be: the meaningful presence of the tree arises from the particular possibility I was or I used to press into, at those moments. As described, the possibility what one is pressing into to fulfil at any moment can be simplified as a role one is attempting to satisfy or the intention one is having at that moment. This very act of satisfying a particular role at a specific moment leads one to hermeneutically interpret certain objects as something, which in turn can be denoted as the meaningful presence of that object for that individual at that moment. For example, as a commuter waiting for a bus, the tree provided me shade from the scorching sun and made my waiting time comfortable and thus the tree became a ‘bus shelter’ for me. Hence, the tree as a shade-giver or a bus shelter, has a particular meaningful presence to satisfy the role of a commuter. Similarly, at the same time, due to pressing into the possibility of a nature-lover or being in the shoe of an appreciator of natural beauty, I used to look at the tree to appreciate its gigantic structure and to cherish its beauty, while waiting underneath. In this thought experiment, the tree had a presence in my world in these two meaningful ways, simultaneously. Hence, in one’s phenomenological world, considering ‘something as something’ (‘tree as a beautiful natural object’) provides the meaningful presence of a thing (tree), and consequently, I argue, for me the absence of the banyan tree is nothing but the absence of these two ways of meaningful presence of the tree in my phenomenological world.

\textsuperscript{10}Crowell, Normativity and Phenomenology, 202.
\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 111.
Now the question arises, how an individual is able to see ‘a particular thing *as* something’ or how does this hermeneutic structure come into play in our everydayness? The answer lies in the described existential structure of human beings by Heidegger. An individual in the course of her life always takes up some or the other roles (like a parent, teacher, artist, commuter, animal lover, or cook) or presses into multiple possibilities at the same time. Depending on the possibility one is pressing into, things become meaningfully present in her world of intelligibility. Here, it will be apt to refer Crowell (2013) to provide a similar account of meaningful presence of things on the basis of Heidegger’s account:

I am constantly self-aware because I discover myself in what I do: I am aware of myself as a carpenter, father, or teacher because the things that surround me, show me the face that they show to one who acts as a carpenter, father, or teacher does. And because I am never without some practical identity, I am always self-aware in one way or another.\textsuperscript{12}

In other words, it can be said that individual’s pressing into possibilities only provides the meaningful presence of things. In this manner, individuals are always entangled in some or the other possibilities in their life. Therefore, I argue, when one particular thing is meaningfully present in one’s world, in the light of the possibility one is taking up, any modification to the thing also becomes meaningfully present to that person.

To explain it further, I as a commuter while waiting for a bus on a hot day, encountered the tree ‘*as*’ a shade-giver. The tree was meaningfully present in my phenomenological world *as* a shade-giver because of my role as a commuter at that point of time. The meaningful presence of the tree is decided by the dominant possibility I was pressing at that moment. Similarly, on another occasion, as a nature-lover, I encountered the tree with its natural beauty. My possibility of being a nature-lover at that moment guided me to encounter the tree as a beautiful natural thing. On the same line, the absence of the tree, I might encounter solely ‘*as*’ the absence of a shade-giver, while I am pressing into the role of a commuter or ‘*as*’ the absence of an object of natural beauty while I am pressing into the role of a nature-lover. It would be wrong, if we see this process as a causal relationship. It is not an if-then relationship, rather the intentionality of human beings owing to pressing into certain possibilities provides the clearing or the open space to meaningfully experience something *as* something and subsequently, present the very opportunity of recognizing any changes in it. Hence, at this point, it can be summarized that change can be encountered in the following two ways:

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 247.
At first, when an individual feels a lack of presence of ‘something as something’. This lack arises from the following process. When an individual attempts to accomplish any role or is pressing into any particular possibility to fulfil, the individual could encounter an absence in the meaningful presence of certain things, which were present in an intelligible form, for example the absence of the tree creates a lack in my pressing into the possibility of a nature-lover. Consequently, the individual denotes the lack of presence of ‘something as something’, as change.

Secondly, when one is pressing into a particular possibility and in the course, acknowledges certain thing as something, which was not present in the past, instantly, that particular thing appears in the individual’s world as a meaningful thing in an intelligible nexus and the individual acknowledges the change in a form of something which was not there, but present at the moment. For example, as a nature-lover, the afforestation of a barren land would appear to me as a change. Newly growing saplings will be meaningfully present in my world because it would help me to press into the particular possibility of a nature-lover. This kind of illustration showcases that something becomes intelligible in the nexus of other things in the light of the possibility (ies) one is pressing into. Depending on one’s intentionality, ‘something as something’ gets acknowledged, which was not there, but exist at the moment. This newly created meaningful presence can also be marked as change.

To summarize, till now, I have established that recognizing change does not only mean marking the absence or presence of a thing over time, rather it is, at a deeper level is either due to an obstruction in ‘something as something’ structure or an opportunity to formulate the same in one’s phenomenological world. Hence, the acknowledgement of environmental change by an individual is integrally related to the individual’s pressing into possibilities and the subsequent meaningful presence of things in her world. In other words, the creation of the phenomenological world plays a vital role in acknowledging environmental change and the hermeneutical structure of taking ‘something as something’ can be considered as the locus of identifying change.

Here, it can be concluded that recognition of change only happens when in the recognizer’s phenomenological world an entity gets presented in the nexus of intelligibility. Even when one acquires knowledge about a specific change through testimony, then also that knowledge becomes meaningful if that fits into one’s phenomenological world. For example, if someone informs me about a recent study evaluating the rate at which old banyan trees are disappearing due to urbanization in various Indian cities, as a nature-lover, I will quickly relate
to it and will start expressing my frustration against the externalities of rapid urbanization. At the same time, a person without any definite attraction towards nature might not pay any attention to that piece of information. Hence, I argue, not only first-hand experiences about change, the meaningful presence of things are even central to acknowledging any testimony of environmental change.

iv. Phenomenological World and Pre-reflective Judgement

If analyzed closely, we can see that once an environmental change is acknowledged by an individual, a pre-reflective normative judgement instantly gets imposed on that change. At this juncture, I think, it is important to demonstrate the relationship between the meaningful presence of environmental entities and imposition of pre-reflective judgement on changes in those. To establish this, I would like to extend the thought experiment. Suppose, I notice that after the tree got uprooted, a concrete shed has taken its place as the new bus shelter. The concretization of bus shelter by chopping down the tree, I can consider either as a positive or a negative change. Maybe, in some occasion, while discussing about the development of the area with my neighbors, as pressing into the possibility of a progressive citizen, I might indicate that concrete bus shelter is a good thing or a desired form of development to see in our area. In this case, clearly, a positive judgement gets attached to that change. In the following, I will elaborate on the process through which a pre-reflective judgement gets attached to any change that one’s recognizes. This will also explain why it varies across individuals.

In the aforementioned example, my possibility as a commuter, waiting for a bus might not acknowledge the concretization of the bus shelter as a negative change as it is not obstructing my pressing into that possibility, rather complementing it. In other words, though the tree is not meaningfully present in my world as a shade-giver, I do not acknowledge the change as a negative one. Indeed, I might even see this change as rather a positive one. Whereas, pressing into the possibility of a nature-lover, I would definitely encounter this change as an undesirable one as that meaningful presence of ‘the tree as an object of natural beauty’ is uprooted. The tree had a meaningful presence in my world as being a beautiful natural object to particularly fulfil the aesthetic demand of my pressing into the possibility of a nature-lover. With the absence of the tree, subsequently, this entire chain of intelligibility has fallen apart. Particularly, in this case, there is nothing that can substitute the meaningful presence of that banyan tree in my phenomenological world. This lack will induce me to impose a negative pre-reflective judgement on that change.
Here, I would like to emphasize that the pre-reflective judgement on a particular change is intricately connected to the meaningful presence of the concerned thing. When a particular change induces the meaningful presence of certain object as something and helps one to pursue a particular possibility, the probability of a positive pre-reflective judgement getting associated with or the chances of that particular change being referred as a ‘good’ one, increases. Whereas, when a change in a meaningfully present entity induces a collapse in the chain of intelligibility and creates a hindrance in pressing into the concerned possibility, then mostly a negative pre-reflective judgement gets imposed or the change is referred as a ‘bad’ one. Hence, as an individual recognizes an environmental change in the light of certain possibilities, it can be said that, any pre-reflective judgement that gets associated with that change is also contingent on its effect on the chain of intelligibility created due to the pressing into those possibilities.

With the help of the thought experiment, we have seen that a particular entity can have multiple meaningfulness in one’s world. From this insight, it can be derived that different pre-reflective judgements can get imposed on a change in an entity in the light of different possibilities. Now a subsequent question arises: how does a particular judgement get priority over others as an ultimate judgement gets ascribed on an environmental change in one’s phenomenological world? To address this question, I argue, it is indeed required to comprehend what induces the pressing into possibilities or why human beings in the course of life always take up some or the other roles to accomplish? According to Heidegger, the Dasein structure or the existential structure as being-in-the-world is the fundamental truth about how does human being function. Our very Dasein structure of ‘thrown-aheadness’ shows each and every human individual has to take various possibilities in life. The human existence is always already engaged with the world, which is called thrown-ness. Human beings as being-in-the-world are thrown into the world and always work towards fulfilling some or the other possibilities. As Sheehan describes the human existence is structurally “thrown ahead as possibility into possibilities”.

Pertaining to this process, various things have a particular meaningful presence in one’s world. As Sheehan has shown through the comprehensive diagram:

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How Meaningful presence of things occurs

Thrown-aheadness

In this manner, human life can be seen as a continuous back and forth between possibility and actuality as due to the existential structure we are thrown-ahead into some or other possibilities and then return to encounter things meaningfully in actuality. Hence, owing to the thrown-aheadness, one presses into different possibilities in various moments of one’s life. At this juncture, I would like to emphasize that the acknowledgement of this relentlessly functioning existential structure is highly essential to make sense of our actions, especially, in the context of our engagements with the environment. We, as finite beings, are caught up in this structure as Sheehan elaborates that our existence is nothing but moving from one possibility to another.28

In the light of this relentlessly-functioning structure, in the following, I would make an attempt to explore the aforementioned question regarding the imposition of an ultimate pre-reflective judgement.

Here, I argue that within various possibilities an individual pressing into, the one that has a more dominant presence in her existence, firstly, decides whether a meaningfully present thing will become a significant one to the individual. Secondly, it determines the ultimate pre-reflective judgement that will be imposed on any particular environmental change. I would begin explicating the first point by demonstrating that a meaningfully present thing is not equivalent to a significant thing for an individual. It is evident that an individual’s pressing into a possibility at a moment provides the clearing for a thing to be presented in a meaningful way. Once, an entity is meaningfully present in one’s world, then the entity might become significant for the individual depending on the individual’s priority to persist with that particular possibility. In other words, all significant things have to be meaningfully present in one’s world, but all meaningful things might not bear the same significance for that individual. Here, I would like to accentuate that the significance of a thing to an individual is crucial to be acknowledged in the context of the human—environment relationship as, I accentuate, one becomes responsive and shows interest to take care, or protect, or preserve a significantly present environmental entity than the entities that are just meaningfully present.
To elaborate it with an example, I will again refer to the thought experiment. As a commuter the tree as a shade-giver possesses a meaningful presence in my world and this particular meaningful presence of the tree, however, may not have the similar significance, in comparison to the instance when I see the same tree, being a nature-lover. Suppose, for me the possibility of nature-lover has a greater priority over the possibility of a commuter. Because of this priority, the meaningful presence of the tree as a beautiful natural entity has a significant presence in my world over the meaningful presence of the tree as a mere shade-giver. Consequently, as a nature-lover, I would be more responsive towards any harm to that banyan tree, rather than being just a commuter. To conclude, an individual would be more responsive to any change in a significantly present environmental entity over a change in a meaningfully present one.

As elaborated, the particular possibility that has the highest priority in one’s phenomenological world in a way decides which meaningful presence of an entity among the various other meaningful presence(s) will become the most significant one. On the same line, the hierarchy of possibilities for an individual also guides her to decide the ultimate pre-reflective judgement about a change in that thing. For example, if I, in my existence bestow highest priority to the possibility of a nature-lover over other possibilities, then, the absence of the tree will ultimately be seen as a negative one in my eyes. On another occasion, I will instantly acknowledge the afforestation of a barren land as being a die-hearted nature-lover and thereby, a positive judgement will get imposed on it. However, for an outright householder, who attaches the topmost priority on to pressing into that possibility, and thus, dedicated to building a house and looking for a land for the same, the conversion of a barren land to a forested landscape will get acknowledged as an obstacle in obtaining a cheaper barren land for housing and might lead her to ultimately ascribe a negative judgement to it. Hence, it can be summarized that the prioritization of possibility is the decisive factor to decide the significance of an environmental entity in one’s world and to determine the ultimate pre-reflective judgement that will be imposed on a change in that entity. However, I completely agree that more elaborate understanding is required in this regard, which could be a topic of a future project.

Having this theoretical analysis—phenomenology of the acknowledgement of environmental change and the process of ascribing pre-reflective judgement to it—in place, the next section will be an attempt to pragmatically demonstrate the manner in which this existential structure functions in everyday life, especially in our engagements with the environment. To
accomplish this, I will extensively use the islanders’ narratives depicting the experience of environmental changes and the allied insights accrued from my fieldwork.

v. Enmeshing Everyday Perception of Change with the Existential Structure

This section will be an attempt to merge the theoretical analysis with the islanders’ narratives of environmental change. First and foremost, it is important to highlight the fact that all the narratives of environmental change from the island are intrinsically connected to the livelihoods or everyday endeavors of the narrators. On the basis of the above insights, I contend, as I have explained in earlier sections, the meaningful presence of things is the actual ground for recognizing environmental change. Here, the livelihood and a narrator’s everyday endeavor actually indicate the possibilities, she is taking up to accomplish. In this section, I will try to establish that in the light of these possibilities only, the islanders recognize certain environmental change. For example, a farmer notices any minute change in soil quality and how that is affecting crop production quite closely, whereas, a fisherman notices any change in the seabed and how that influences fish production. A farmer due to her phenomenological world, however, does not really acknowledge any change in the seabed, and the underlying reason can easily be explicated through the aforementioned explanation. Although a farmer knows what a seabed is, still, changes in seabed do not get acknowledged by a farmer as it is not meaningfully present in her world. Whereas, the farmers’ accounts of environmental change include acknowledgement of change in soil quality over time, as the possibility of ‘farmer’, shaped by various socio-cultural and political-economic factors, entails that in the world of a farmer, soil needs to be meaningfully present, and must get enough significance for acknowledging any miniscule changes in it. Moreover, in the fishermen’s world, soil does not have similar significance as it possesses in a farmer’s world, and thus, a fisherman’s account does not contain any acknowledgement of changes in the soil quality.

In other instances, a veteran boatman narrates how he specifically notices the submergence of the existing landmasses on the sea or rivers and the creation of new islands, while taking his boat deep in the Bay of Bengal. Pressing into the possibility of being a boatman, the person acknowledges the submergence and the creation of new islands as these changes appear in his phenomenological world as landmarks. This kind of acknowledgement is highly essential for meeting the possibility of ‘boatman’ entailing the ability to efficiently navigate at sea. No one else except boatmen have spoken about these subtle changes as these do not possess any meaningful presence in others’ world. I also noticed that some of the young boatmen are
hardly aware of these changes probably because the new age technologies, like GPS, wireless phone, have made their journey so safeguarded that they do not feel the need of remembering any external landmarks for navigating. Technological devices guide them relentlessly while they are at sea. This again shows that in their phenomenological world ‘submergence and creation of new islands as landmarks’ are not meaningfully present, and thus, they are mostly ignorant about these changes. Here, I would like to highlight that with the introduction of these new technologies, socio-culturally formed definition of ‘boatman’ (or in other words, the definition of the possibility of ‘boatman’) has been reformed from the diligent use of external landmarks for navigating to smart use of available technologies for the same.

As against these acknowledgements, the narrators have mentioned about landscape change in a very implicit manner, and have not emphasized enough on this kind of change; even they were quite reluctant to acknowledge it as a change. They mentioned about modifications of the landscape as if that is the very nature of the place where they are living. These modifications also get acknowledged in the backdrop of their livelihoods. According to them, one of the primary characteristics of these rivers is that these change course over time, and those changes in the course of rivers, in a way, induce changes in the landscape. Hence, it can be said that being islanders, they negate the notion that landscape modification is a form of ‘environmental change’, and instead, accept this change as a part of the very natural process that is forming these islands. And subsequently, while pressing into the possibility of ‘islander’, they do not acknowledge this landscape change as ‘change’, rather it gets acknowledged as a characteristic of the place.

All the narrators while discussing about the recent changes in their island, mentioned the sharp decline in two of the widely accepted signature species of the Sundarbans: Sundari tree and snakes. They mentioned, though Sundari tree was abundant in this region until the recent past, the density of this tree is rapidly descending as the old-growth forests are getting washed away in rivers. In this regard, it can be derived that while pressing into the possibility of being islanders of the Sundarbans, all the narrators acknowledge this sharp decline in the abundance of Sundari tree which is intricately linked to the history of the Sundarbans and its ecological heritage. Furthermore, the narrators have identified a distinct drop in encountering snakes, especially after the cyclone Aila. Many women in their narratives vividly described how earlier, during heavy monsoon and floods, they had to survive amid snakes, under the very same roof. Naturally, for an individual pressing into the possibility of being an islander, snakes were
significantly present as a threat to reckon with. Owing to this, the islanders closely take note of this reduction in snakes on the island.

At the same time, further exploration to the next level would reveal the pre-reflective judgements that get imposed on various changes acknowledged by the narrators. During my fieldwork, I have noticed that normative judgements about the same environmental change varies across narrators. For example, one of the most prominent impacts of Aila is the upsurge in soil salinity. This change is no doubt being acknowledged as a detrimental one by the farmers as it hampers the chain of intelligibility of soil for them because the increased salinity in soil severely reduces yields. Whereas, fishermen acknowledge this unintended change as a positive one as they get the opportunity to convert a piece of land into a saltwater-pond to cultivate highly profitable fish and prawns. In this case, the change in soil has enhanced the chain of intelligibility for fishermen and thus, positive judgement gets ascribed. Furthermore, in different instances, I have noticed that most of the narrators have acknowledged the decrement in the duration of winter over the last few years and ascribed a negative judgement to it or marked it as a negative one. As we have seen, although all the narrators have acknowledged the change and subsequently articulated it as a negative one, intentionality of each narrator is quite different from others. Each of their livelihood as possibilities, determines their acknowledgement and induces them to ascribe negative judgement to it. Moreover, the ‘possibility of islander’ also urges every individual on this island to mostly ascribe a negative judgement to this particular change as the winter season used to be the most pleasant and peaceful time of the year. During this season, rivers and the sea generally become calmer and less threatening, and life in these islands becomes smooth and without too much of a hassle.

Finally, it can be concluded that the acknowledgement of environmental change is entirely dependent on one’s phenomenological world created by the possibilities an individual is pressing into and subsequently, the pre-reflective judgement that gets ascribed to a particular environmental change is reliant on the priority one is posing to the concerned possibility in her concrete existence and how the specific change has an effect on the pressing into that possibility. Although it might seem that the acknowledgement of change in this manner is rather obvious and can be obtained from one’s common sense, I would like to argue that it is highly essential to comprehend what is beneath this common sense. The detailed explication of this process delineated throughout this chapter actually illuminates the conceptual bedrock of this common sense. Moreover, I would like to highlight that Heidegger’s phenomenology as interpreted by Sheehan, provides us a novel way to comprehend the inconsistency in acknowledgement of
certain environmental change across individuals and the disparity in pre-reflective judgements. It also helps to analyze the process through which an individual acknowledges an environmental change, and aids to answer why an individual becomes receptive towards certain changes over several other environmental changes.

vi. Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempt to capture the diversities in the conception of environmental change that exist in the two traditional schools of environmental ethics, anthropocentric, and ecocentric school. Their conceptions of environmental change clearly denote that it is about who has the right to make changes in the environment and what kind of alterations can be marked as environmental change. I also establish that the conceptions of both these schools are found problematic from the ecophenomenological point of view. Both anthropocentric and ecocentric ethics do not seem to focus on the very existential structure of human beings—the structure of the *Dasein* as being-in-the-world. The creation of the phenomenological world as an upshot of the human existence, is also not incorporated in the discipline of environmental ethics. Whereas, I demonstrate, the underlying human existential structure is the fundamental one for acknowledging any environmental change by an individual. This structure also seems to clarify how one becomes responsive towards a change, over several others. Hence, it can be said that there is a need to incorporate the role of the human existential structure in the realm of comprehending environmental change, then only in the pragmatic realm, it would be perhaps plausible to draw individual’s attention towards some pressing environmental changes, usually marked as environmental problems.

Here, I claim, this explicated theoretical understanding is extremely necessary for ecophenomenology to attain an alternative ground for environmental ethics. First of all, this analysis highlights the need to focus on the relationship between the environment and human to set an alternative ground for environmental ethics. It justifies the meaningful presence of environmental entities and phenomena entirely depends on the relationship or the engagement between an individual and those entities and phenomena. Secondly, phenomenology of environmental change also opens up a new way to explore the human—environment relationship in the light of the process of creation of the phenomenological world. Possibilities, in a way, define how one would encounter environmental entities and changes in those entities, in an intelligible form. On one hand, the meaning of an environmental phenomenon or entity gets defined by the socio-culturally moulded possibilities. On the other hand, one’s persuasion
to certain possibilities opens up the realm of meaningfulness to the individual. Hence, I propose, this phenomenological exploration of environmental change shows us a prudent way to formulate an ethic based on ‘possibility’, where not only the relationship between an individual and her environment will get the priority, but at the same time, how that relationship is emerging through possibilities would also be considered equally important. Thus, through the incorporation of this phenomenological analysis, I believe, ecophenomenology would be able to offer an alternative ground for environmental ethics by acknowledging ‘possibility’ as the bedrock to act upon.

This attempt is an initial one to merge the theory and the narratives for teasing out an in-depth understanding about the phenomenon under consideration. It unfolds the bigger pattern laying beneath these narratives, thereby offering some universal insights into the phenomenon by transcending the particularity of a study. Along with it, this juxtaposition also illuminates the transcendent mode of being of the narrators. It shows in the transcendent mode of being, one will be able to recognize oneself as a part of the whole, and be able to realize how one’s way of engaging with the environment and acknowledging certain environmental change over others, actually fits into the bigger picture or the pattern laying beneath these experiences. This, I see, is particularly important to understand one’s engagements with the environment and also could play a crucial role to unfold deeper nuances of the human—environment relationship. It will help one to create meaning of various facets of this relationship by reflecting on their being-in-the-world—as the fundamental existential structure.