

# Introducing Interpretive Approach of Phenomenological Research Methodology in Environmental Philosophy: A Mode of Engaged Philosophy in the Anthropocene

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## Abstract

Environmental philosophy, needless to say, is going through a transition in the zenith of the Anthropocene. It is high time to carry out engaged philosophy to bring in philosophical understandings in approaching real-world environmental issues for obtaining some novel insights into the human–environment relationship. For the same, I argue, we need to explore some new methodologies that would be capable of offering the opportunity to do engaged philosophy instead of borrowing methodologies from the social sciences. Here, I examine Phenomenological Research Methodology (PRM) for the same. I elaborate on the process of conducting a field study with this methodology. For analyzing narratives, I choose the interpretive stream over the descriptive one. By drawing extensively from the philosophy of phenomenology, I propose a four-step narrative analysis process that can unveil a narrator’s transcendent mode of being. Finally, I share my research experiences while employing PRM in the field and demonstrate how PRM has the potential to sidestep some of the widely held concerns associated with field studies. Along with, I highlight critical reflection of my experiences while employing this methodology, particularly, in the context of India.

## Keywords

Phenomenological Research Methodology, environmental philosophy, interpretive approach of Phenomenological Research Methodology, engaged philosophy, field experience

## What is already known?

Phenomenological Research Methodology can provide an experiential understanding of the phenomenon at stake. Phenomenology is also being widely employed as a methodology in the discipline of environmental humanities to understand deeper nuances of a phenomenon.

## What this paper adds?

This manuscript demonstrates a new method of narrative analysis for employing Phenomenological Research Methodology, especially the interpretive stream, to carry out engaged philosophy for the discipline of environmental philosophy.

life environmental issues. To foster a versatile approach toward the environment, environmental philosophy brings forth multicultural perspectives and several worldviews. For conducting field-oriented studies that can provide insights into real-life experiences, it usually borrows methodologies from the social sciences (Baindur & Paul, 2015). The social sciences primarily intend to comprehend how human beings as a social being relate to other human beings and social norms. Similar to that, environmental philosophy attempts to explore how human beings relate to other human and nonhuman biotic as well as abiotic entities in their surroundings. Till now, any particular methodology is not in place that can be considered an exclusive and the apposite one to study the human–environment

## Introduction

Environmental philosophy offers an in-depth philosophical grounding of our relationship with the environment and also provides a philosophical orientation to comprehend our real-

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relationship to holistically merge field insights with philosophical theories. Various borrowed methodologies from the social sciences, such as ethnography, case study, and narrative analysis, no doubt, enable a researcher to capture an individual's and/or a community's perspectives of the environment. However, in the process of the inquiry, these methodologies tend to construct human being as a subject who analyzes environmental issues in the light of the environment being the object of the inquiry (Baindur & Paul, 2015).

The question arises at this juncture is about the efficacy of these methodologies in adequately capturing environmental worldviews. Even so, the phrase "environmental worldview" is problematic, as it indicates a particular perspective of human beings, as the subject, of the object, environment. This hint toward a notion that human beings stand alongside the environment and that is how we create perspectives of it. In this manner, it is quite easy to comprehend one's worldview if one understands it in the above-mentioned way. However, I posit, in the era of the Anthropocene, when it comes to the anthropogenic changes in the environment, the definition of worldview becomes more complex and layered. In the Anthropocene, human beings are not mere observers of natural changes; rather, they are the agent of changes and, at the same time, are affected by those changes. This enmeshed relationship of human beings with their environment demonstrates that instead of conceptualizing human beings locating alongside the environment, there is a need to uphold an alternative outlook that can holistically comprehend the human–environment relationship in this phase of transition. Indeed, we need to see in what manner doing engaged philosophy would be helpful to reveal a relational understanding of the human–environment engagements. For doing engaged philosophy, I see, if we follow the trajectory of the methodologies employed in the social sciences, we may fall into the trap of the older ways of documenting, that Latour (2014) claims is through the subjectivity/objectivity binary. Hence, I propose, in the era of the Anthropocene, for carrying out an engaged philosophical inquiry to comprehend the human–environment relationship in a new light, we need to employ an alternative methodology, and for that matter, I vouch for the Phenomenological Research Methodology (PRM).<sup>1</sup>

### *Beyond Subject/Object Dualism: PRM*

If we look back to the history of philosophy, the idea of an uninvolved subject, who studies an object, was problematized with the development of phenomenology. In contrast to the mode of scientific inquiry, where the general tendency is to provide an objective description of a phenomenon, a phenomenological method brings back the subject, through emphasizing on the structure of experiences. The subject/object dualism which is also manifested in discourses as mind/world dualism is historically ingrained in natural sciences. The upshot of this dualism is the projection of a self, which is apart or distinct from the world. Hence, methodologies dependent on it create a discourse based on an objective truth about the environment where the subject (human) and the object (environment) are distinctly

different. Thomson (2004) critiques this mode of inquiry by stating "...phenomenologists argue that these conceptual dichotomies fundamentally mischaracterize our ordinary experience." (p. 382). However, in a "lifeworld" experience, this kind of truth does not hold because our ordinary experiences are integrally "entwinement of self and world that is basic to our experiential navigation of the lived environment" (Thomson, 2004, p. 382). The phenomenological turn in philosophy argues that a thorough understanding of the structure of encountering or experiences of phenomena can actually enable us to transcend the subject/object dualism (Zelić, 2008). Van Manen (2007) points out the upshot of phenomenology are the moments of seeing meaning or "in-seeing" which is only plausible through thoughtful relation to our involvement with the things of our world in everydayness. This mindfulness of our everyday involvement with our world provides an inherent understanding of the phenomenon by illuminating our relation to it.

From this, one can easily point out that methodologies borrowed from the social sciences that usually begin with problematizing certain changes in the environment and subsequently, focus on understanding those changes, and their effects on human beings and their practices are thereby arise from the very perspective that imbibes the subject/object duality. Even, any questions that we may have to ask for transcending this divide will still be framed with this dualism, inherent in the question itself. In the same vein, there is a two-fold methodological challenge, firstly, to conceptually reframe the problem without the symbolic load of the subject/object relation between humans and the environment and, secondly, to seek alternative avenues which could lead us to transcend this dualistic thinking. By taking these points into consideration, I propose that the PRM would be the most suitable one for doing engaged philosophy to comprehend the human–environment relationship, because it solely concentrates on the phenomenon under consideration and attempts to capture human beings' everyday engagements with the environment to tease out the nuances of that phenomenon. I would describe and argue for Interpretive Phenomenological Research Approach (IPRA)—which is a stream of the PRM—that I have adopted for my field study in the Sundarbans, India. This field study is being conducted on G-plot Island of the Sundarbans to obtain phenomenological insights into the human–environment relationship in the backdrop of the phenomenon, environmental change. I have gathered 27 phenomenological narratives to comprehend individuals' embodied experiences of environmental changes and one's engagement with the environment.

### *Nuances of PRM*

The PRM is a widely accepted one in the discipline of psychology, education, nursing, and consumer research. In environmental philosophy, employing PRM is a completely unprecedented in the literature, as far as my knowledge goes. However, there are multiple examples of studies that have employed phenomenology as a methodology to capture embodied experiences. Here, I want to emphasize that there is a

distinct difference between these two ways of doing field research—PRM and gathering phenomenological experiences. The latter one mostly focuses on experiencers' accounts of a particular phenomenon and limits the exploration at the proximate level. Whereas PRM goes one step further and does not limit itself at the proximate level, rather with the help of strong philosophical theorizations, it attempts to carry out an in-depth analysis to obtain a universal knowledge that can go beyond the particulars. Van Manen (2007) highlights that the role of phenomenologists is to unveil the region from where meaning arises and which in turn leaves an impression on us. As there are not many precedents of using PRM for studying and understanding the human–environment relationship, a thorough evaluation of this methodology for charting out its effectiveness and drawbacks could offer some important insights into researchers who would like to employ this methodology in environmental philosophy. Before going into my personal experience of employing it in the field, a brief detail about the methodology would clarify how it is employed for a field research.

The first essential step for a researcher, who intends to employ PRM, is to identify the specific phenomenon that would be the concerned matter of inquiry. To choose a specific phenomenon, the researcher should ensure that there should be a possibility of obtaining direct human experiences of the phenomenon. As the second step of this methodology, the researcher needs to choose his/her coresearchers or interviewees, who have prolonged and in-depth experiences of the phenomenon. As an essential part of this methodology, coresearchers describe their experiences of the phenomenon and eventually, these reflective descriptions constitute the lived experience (Creswell, 2007). Hence, for a researcher, it is important to choose participants who not only have experienced the phenomenon but also are willing to share their experiences and possess the necessary articulation capability. Wrathall (2006) highlights that the important characteristic of the phenomenological description is that it might not be a definitive account of the phenomenon itself; rather, it is a description about the awareness of the condition in which the phenomenon can manifest itself. Phenomenological description is similar to our everyday, nonphilosophical practice of description. Wrathall (2006) also points out:

... the end goal of description is to guide the reader to the practical orientation for the world in which the phenomenon can show itself. In the end, the description is of no independent value. Its merit as a description is completely a function of its ability to lead us to apprehend the thing itself, not its suitability for serving as a foundation for theorizing (p. 44).

Hence, it is important to remember that phenomenological narrative is kind of a self-reflective narrative. A researcher's role is quite limited here, as these narratives do not emerge from active questioning. Indeed, the interview process is maintained as completely unstructured. The role of a researcher is to only guide her coresearchers to arrive at the juncture, where

they can elaborate on the experience of the phenomenon or the occurrence of the phenomenon in a mode of “self-talk.” Precisely, due to this reason, interviewees are called coresearchers in this methodology.

Moustakas (1994) suggests that it is important for a researcher to conduct the research at the site of the phenomenon. It helps the researcher to get engaged in the world of experience, which eventually ensures that the researcher is completely immersed in the context. It is also important that the researcher remains open to exploring the context of the phenomenon and accordingly is ready to expand reflexivity to gather insights, for appropriately comprehending the experiences. During interviews, the discussion should revolve around three major themes: “What does an individual experience in terms of the phenomenon?,” “What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected one's experience of the phenomenon?,” and “How does it affect the narrator?” (see Bhattacharjee, 2012; Englander, 2012; Groenewald, 2004; Kornhaber, 2009). As this methodology is quite dynamic, a researcher has the crucial responsibility of helping out the interviewees to articulate their experiences, and for this, it is desirable that the researcher maintains the necessary space for herself to contemplate and reflect, throughout the entire process. As per the methodology, one should collect phenomenological narratives of at most 5–25 individuals from a homogeneous group, who directly experience the concerned phenomenon. The number of participants could vary within 5–25, depending on when narratives tend to reach a saturation. The saturation in this case means that new narratives would not be able to provide any further insights into the concerned phenomenon and thus will be redundant.

### Streams of PRM

Before describing the process of narrative analysis, it is important to mention that by following the trajectory of phenomenology, PRM has two distinct streams. The first one follows Husserl's phenomenology and known as Descriptive Phenomenological Research Approach (DPRA) and the second one is based on Heidegger's phenomenological approach and known as IPRA. According to DPRA, a researcher should bracket her own belief regarding the preexisting conceptual framework about the concerned phenomenon before beginning the research work. In this process, a researcher's aim should be to look at the phenomenon from the descriptions given by the individuals who have directly experienced it. In other words, it suggests that one must bracket out her natural attitude, which is thought to be contaminated by the prevailing scientific paradigm. By bracketing out the natural attitude, DPRA attempts to “return to the things themselves” which was Husserl's famous call throughout his philosophical work. Furthermore, descriptive phenomenology also borrows from Husserl's *eidetic* analysis, which attempts to reach the universal from the particular, to establish the truth. This analysis includes multiple accounts of a specific phenomenon and thus teases out the underlying meaning structure of a phenomenon. The essence of a

phenomenon helps us to transcend the particularity and clarifies the matter of investigation, by articulating what these experiences are and what are the fundamental insights these experiences offer or reveal (Wertz, 2015). In the phenomenological tradition, this process is also called phenomenological reduction.

IPRA, in contrast to DPRA, does not focus on the process of bracketing out (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Here, I would like to clarify that I have followed IPRA and in the following, I will elaborate on the same. The main rationale of choosing IPRA is that bracketing out my entire preknowledge and beliefs as being a researcher, for approaching a phenomenon with a fresh eye seems completely implausible to me. I see both the processes of bracketing out and eidetic analysis have a tendency to separate the phenomenon and the inquirer. Moreover, this tendency is geared toward comprehending the experiences of a phenomenon with the awareness of “I am aware that I am experiencing the phenomenon.” This emphasis on “I,” in transcendental phenomenology, I argue, falls into the same trope of the subject/object dualism. To transcend this dualism for holistically exploring the human–environment relationship, I posit, IPRA is an apposite one as it always approaches with an intention to comprehend the structure of the experiences instead of just focusing on reaching to the transcendental ego. Kafle (2011) points out that the major disagreement between descriptive and interpretive stream is that, the researchers who follow the latter believe that philosophy should not be carried out from a detached, objective, and disengaged standpoint. Rather, these researchers actively attempt to interpret what it means to experience the same that is described by narrators. This method tries to capture the underlying mind-set of narrators to get to their experiences and the underlying structure. From this point of view, IPRA is a dynamic process demanding a persistent effort from a researcher’s end to attain the state of experience in an “as if” mode. Or in other words, a researcher must always try to get into the shoe of a narrator. Moreover, IPRA tries to pose critical questions with the intention to make the analysis of an experience richer and comprehensive. The questions are as follows:

What is the person trying to achieve here? Is anything meaningful being said here, which was not intended? Do I have a sense of something going on here that the person himself or herself is perhaps less aware of? (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8)

This way of posing questions, I see, offers an opportunity to generate a “higher level of theories and insight” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) regarding the phenomenon at stake.

### *Description of IPRA Beyond the Theme-Based Analysis*

IPRA often is known as a double hermeneutic process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Here, double hermeneutic points toward the dual interpretation; in this process, at first, a researcher tries to get the essence of narratives from the point of view of narrators. For this, the researcher needs to see the

entire phenomenon from a narrator’s point of view. This kind of process is called an emic approach (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). After this, the researcher also needs to follow the etic approach where the researcher will make note of her own understanding of the narratives. These explanatory comments can only be generated by multiple readings of the narratives. These thorough readings help a researcher to divide the narratives and to group them under various themes. This kind of explanatory comments noted down during readings as well as during fieldwork helps a researcher to develop new themes. These multiple themes can eventually be clustered under three or four major themes. Once these themes are in place, the researcher should proceed with the analysis of narratives on the basis of those themes. Following this structure, the final task of the researcher is to elaborate on each theme by drawing examples from the narratives. This double hermeneutic process, on one hand, demonstrates the way interpretation happens in an interviewee’s mind and, on the other, it also provides a scope to capture a researcher’s interpretation of the same. This theme-based analysis is the well-established way of analyzing narratives for making sense of a phenomenon in IPRA.

Although the double hermeneutic process is the core of interpretive phenomenology, scholars like Pietkiewicz and Smith, Van Manen, and Willig and Billin explain the limitations of this theme-based analysis. Van Manen (1997) argues that this thematic analysis to some extent overshadow the expressive dimensions of a phenomenological description. Taking this criticism into consideration, scholars have suggested the double hermeneutic process, without getting caught into the thematic analysis. To go beyond the thematic analysis, Willig and Billin (2011), in the light of existential phenomenology, introduce a different process of narrative analysis to IPRA. Instead of attempting to capture the different perspectives of a researcher and a coresearcher and the mechanical application of themes, this process concentrates on analyzing a phenomenological description at two levels that reveal two modes of being: the everyday mode of being and the transcendent mode of being of coresearchers. To attain these two modes of being, this process of analysis allows a researcher to “free acting or seeing” (Willig & Billin, 2011). Through this free acting, a researcher carries out hermeneutic analysis based on the hermeneutic circle. Here, a researcher examines her own presuppositions and knowledge and constantly moves back and forth between presuppositions and interpretations. In this way, a researcher can possibly explore the participants’ meaning making process and their everyday mode of being. This understanding enables the researcher to entirely grasp one’s lived experience. Here I see, existentialist-informed hermeneutic is particularly suitable for exploring embodied human experiences as it focuses on those aspects that are difficult to explain. This actually attempts to tease out what it means to “be (human)”, that is to say what it means to live as an embodied being in a (particular) physical and social world” (Willig & Billin, 2011, p. 124). In this manner, this explicates how the world seems to be for the participants, how people make their life meaningful, and how that influences their experience of the

world (Willig & Billin, 2011). In the process of exploring these nuances of the human existence, it is equally important to mediate the particularity of phenomenological narratives for exploring any universal pattern and how the narrators' lives are a part of that bigger pattern (Willig & Billin, 2011). In this manner, this process reveals the transcendent mode of being of the coresearchers. Understanding a coresearcher's transcendent mode of being could lead a researcher to explore the answers of two of the above-mentioned questions: What is the person trying to achieve here? and Do I have a sense of something going on here that the person himself or herself is perhaps less aware of? (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). From the methodological point of view, it is particularly important to investigate how a phenomenon that an individual experiences has a special meaning in her world (Kafle, 2011). It definitely helps to unfold some unique truth about the phenomenon at stake.

Even though this guideline exists, it is necessary to remember that IPRA is a developing one and especially for carrying out field research in environmental philosophy, it is completely a new one. Considering the recent development of interpretive approach, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) highlight the flexibility this approach offers while it comes to the analysis of narratives, as they state:

In general, IPA (*Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*) provides a set of flexible guidelines which can be adapted by individual researchers according to their research objectives. However, these guidelines are merely an illustration of one possible way of analyzing the qualitative material. They should not be treated as a recipe and the researcher is advised to be flexible and creative in his or her thinking (p. 11).

This flexibility in analysis is really worth appreciating, as it allows a researcher to modify the analysis process as per the requirement of her study. This flexibility clearly offers the scope to develop this stream to its fullest potential.

### ***Analysis of Narratives Following Existentialist-Informed Hermeneutic***

The narrative analysis process in PRM consists of three major steps. The first step is the transcription of the narratives, where one needs to write down the narratives along with the peripheral information from the field notes like date, place, time, age and background of a narrator, and a few important behavioral patterns and body languages of the narrator that are observed throughout the interview. This process is quite crucial, as it requires paying minute attention to the tones and expressions of a coresearcher to grasp the underlying motives and emotions and to be able to successfully jot them down. The second step is translation. This step is required if the narratives are in a regional language; in that case, one needs to translate it into the language in which a researcher wants to communicate the findings of her research to global readers, in my case, it is from Bengali to English. There could be multiple issues arising regarding translation, like how to translate an emotive

statement or how to translate specific regional terms loaded with connotations. In PRM, it is important that a researcher pays attention to each and every single emotive expression and description and try to capture the same sense while translating. It could be possible that a literal translation might not be sufficient to capture the same essence of the narratives, and for doing that, the researcher needs to find out a way to translate the essence as comprehensively as possible.<sup>2</sup> Only after the translation, the actual analysis of narratives could begin.

To delineate the proximate insights obtained from the phenomenological narratives as a part of the existentialist-informed hermeneutic analysis, I focus on the work-world of participants to capture the prereflective experiences of the human–environment relationship in the context of environmental change. For carrying out a hermeneutic analysis of the narratives, I consider the hermeneutic circle, which helps to explicate a researcher's own presumption and, subsequently, helps her to arrive at a phenomenological description of a coresearcher's encountering of environmental changes as experienced in her livelihood engagements or everyday endeavors. This reveals a narrator's everyday mode of being as well as helps me to reconfigure my own understanding of the phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> This everyday mode of being becomes the decisive factor determining the meaningful occurrence of a certain entity or phenomenon over others in an individual's world. The everyday mode of being discloses the priority of one's life, one's purpose of life, and also the prereflective judgment attached with various phenomena and acts. An in-depth exploration of this everyday mode of being is essential, as it explicates how various environmental entities and phenomena appear to an individual being engaged in her work-world. In case of my study, I choose to engage with the phenomenon: environmental change and I explore the way the coresearchers during their livelihood engagements or during their everyday acts encounter environmental change. This, in turn, explains how a certain environmental change becomes meaningful to a coresearcher over others changes. This meaningful occurrence entirely depends on one's purposes of life as well as the temporal prioritization between various short-term purposes. And finally, this meaningful appearance of a certain phenomenon in one's everyday mode of being ultimately guides a researcher to go through the hermeneutic circle and finds out different meanings associated with and significance of the phenomenon at stake.

As the next level of this double hermeneutic, a researcher's aim should be to explore narrators' transcendent mode of being. In this process, the attempt would be to transcend the immediate reality and unveil some universal pattern underneath the experiences. This provides a bigger picture that is certainly important to flesh out the structure of experiences of a phenomenon like environmental change. Here, I slightly differ from Willig and Billin's (2011) method of exploring the transcendent mode of being. Willing and Billin demonstrate how narrators by themselves identify their individual way of "being-in-the-world" in the moment of resoluteness. However, I am not merely retrieving what the respondents are saying about

their way of being. Instead, based on the theoretical underpinnings offered by phenomenology, I attempt to explicate the structure of their experiences. This opens up an opportunity to explore whether there is a scope to interpret how the coresearchers are interpreting their world and how this interpretation pointing to a universal pattern and in what manner that reveals their transcendent mode of being. I have restrained myself from adopting the illustrated method by Willing and Billin, because as I see, if an individual attempts to identify one's way of being-in-the-world, then that exploration could plausibly make her see herself as a subject who is experiencing the concerned environmental phenomenon in the outer world. This, I strongly think, could in a way again bring in the subject/object duality. However, the process I am proposing possesses the potential to merge philosophical theories with everyday narratives for laying a solid foundation to carry out engaged philosophy. No doubt, the difficult task in this existentialist-informed hermeneutic is to go beyond the proximate insights to tease out the in-depth ones that can transcend the specificity and contextual boundary and thus can unfold the transcendent mode of being of coresearchers. Here, one needs to remember that the exploration of the transcendent mode of being strives to reveal what is it to "be (human)." Before explicating the necessary methodological steps, I need to provide a brief about the concept of the phenomenological world as this will provide the necessary theoretical underpinning for this methodology.

### Heidegger and "What Is to Be Human"

Heidegger introduces his phenomenology as a hermeneutical or interpretive understanding of the world. Heidegger in his *magnum opus* proposes this hermeneutic phenomenology and explicates the human existential structure or *Dasein* as being-in-the-world. By denoting human being as always being-in-the-world, Heidegger's attempts to establish that human beings are thrown into the world that is full of entities and meanings. The world is neither made by us nor can we grasp it in its entirety. The world is always already there; there is no way to escape from it; as he states "whenever we encounter anything, the world has already been previously discovered . . ." (Heidegger, 1962, p. 114). Sheehan explains, *Da* in the *Dasein* refers to the openness, where all forms of meaningfulness are possible at all. Sheehan (2015) argues that for Heidegger, *sein* means phenomenologically meaningful presence of things. Hence, in this light, *Dasein* can be translated as thrownness in the open space where the meaningful presence of things is at all possible. Heidegger clearly mentions that *Dasein* is the essence of the human existence. The human existence only makes things intelligible or meaningful to us. As in the everyday dwelling, things are always meaningfully present to us, and the primary question of Heidegger's phenomenology is, why there is meaningfulness at all. As per him, the answer lies in the analysis of his concept of being-in-the-world.

According to Heidegger, "world" in the being-in-the-world is not a realm constituted by objects rather each individual

encounters intelligibility of objects in everyday existence as she presses into some or the other possibilities. The intelligibility of things is generated through pressing into possibilities or due to the intentionality, as he puts forth:

Dasein has assigned itself to an "in-order-to" . . . This in-order-to" prescribes a "towards this" as a possible "in which" for letting something be involved . . . Dasein has assigned itself from a "for the sake of which" to the "with which" of an involvement; that is to say, to the extent that it is, it always let entities be encountered as ready-to hand. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 119)

As Sheehan (2015) depicts, Heidegger's thought aptly demonstrates that each human being is thrown ahead and always presses into some possibility or other to fulfill. These possibilities can be articulated in contrast to actuality. However, if framed in a more positive manner, possibility could be understood as potentiality. Here, possibility means "being able to." This pressing into possibilities acts as a force what gives motion to the ontic existence of human beings. While one presses into certain possibility, it urges certain objects to be present meaningfully in one's world, in certain ways. The possibilities, one is pressing into, would decide how each of our world would be like. In this way, each of our world is entirely personalized. Due to the difference in meaningful presence of things, each of our world is different from the others' world. Hence, as per Heidegger, the phenomenological world in the light of the human existential structure is entirely subjective—my world appears to me because of my intentionality and pressing into different possibilities.

### Steps to Arrive at the Transcendent Mode of Being

Having discussed how an individual's phenomenological world gets created and how possibilities relentlessly shape our engagements with the physical world, now, we should return to the methodology. We can state that the essence of the human existence is pressing into possibilities and the creation of the phenomenological world. This bivalent hermeneutic structure of the human existence is the core of Heidegger's phenomenology. It particularly demonstrates the necessity of finding out the "intentionality" that leads one to hermetically interpret the external world in the realm of meaningfulness. Having acknowledged the concept of the "phenomenological world," if I attempt to merge this philosophical understanding with the phenomenological narratives, then it would explicate the hermeneutic structure beneath the narratives. It will also demonstrate how one's phenomenological world shapes one's encountering of or engagement with the particular phenomenon at stake. In this manner, it would definitely lead to a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon and would also unfold the bigger pattern underneath the narratives that eventually would help to get to the coresearchers' transcendent mode of being. To summarize, in this level, the process of analysis comprises of four steps:

1. finding out the possibilities or roles the narrator is pressing into or aspire to accomplish in a shared experiential narrative;
2. how those identified possibilities get defined in the narrator's sociocultural context;
3. the manner in which the narrator's phenomenological world gets shaped in the light of the identified possibility(ies);
4. and finally, how that influences the phenomenon under consideration.

For example, in my field study, 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. He states:

If I get lost in the sea or at night, only my intuition and own way of marking can lead me back to the shore. I mark islands and seashores. In my mind, I paint the images of seashores, which I have crossed [this seashore is in the process of washing away, there is a deposition in this seashore or there is a thick forest, etc.]. These photographs help me during difficult times. [Field note]

Here, a researcher first needs to highlight that the coresearcher in this particular experiential narrative is sharing his encountering of landscape changes while engaging in his work-world. 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 acknowledgment is highly essential for meeting the possibility of "boatman" entailing the ability to efficiently navigate at sea. I would like to emphasize that no one except the boatmen have spoken about these subtle changes in the seashore or riverbanks. Even, I noticed that some of the young boatmen are hardly aware of these changes probably because the new age technologies, such as global positioning system, 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, socioculturally 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.

In this manner, these four steps would lead one to hermeneutically make sense of the structure of any embodied experience. Through this process, I argue, it would be possible to comprehend the narrators' transcendent mode of being which will reveal how a particular narrator is part of the whole and the way her experience reveals something fundamental that goes beyond the particular context.

I suggest this way of analyzing phenomenological narratives provide a unique opportunity to understand the human–environment relationship. My field experiences clearly demonstrate that environmental problems are outcomes of our engagements with the environment, far from being driven by any intention to harm the environment. Hence, to understand the phenomenological experiences of environmental change, I argue, the human–environment relationship needs to be studied by employing the interpretive stream of PRM. The analysis of narratives in the proposed manner could reveal three-fold nuances:

- it unveils a narrator's everyday mode of being and thus expounds on how the phenomenon at stake becomes meaningful to that individual;
- it reconfigures a researcher's understanding of the phenomenon;
- and finally, it reveals a narrator's transcendent mode of being and thus broadens the narrator's horizon as well as explicates how the human existence influences the structure of the experiences and, consequently, impacts the meaningful presence of the phenomenon.

This process, I see, is quite capable of demonstrating that unaware facets of a coresearcher's intentionality during the moment of encountering a phenomenon and thus illuminates a unique fact about the phenomenon itself.

### *A Critical Reflection*

I have already indicated that PRM is quite a new methodology in the field of environmental philosophy. Here, I would like to share my field-specific insights while employing this methodology. I feel it would be interesting as well as important to highlight the effectiveness and a few drawbacks of this methodology, as experienced by me in the field. These insights might be helpful in developing the methodology further and for making it more robust for wide-scale application in the discipline. In the course of conducting the field study, I have mostly noticed that PRM is a useful methodology to transcend some of the well-discussed issues relating to field research and at the same time, it also has some major limitations, especially when employed in the context of India. In the following, I will try to present my experiences under various commonly referred categories for evaluating any field methodology.

**Gender.** It is one of the prominent concerns for any researcher in India while conducting fieldwork. Particularly, while employing PRM, it is absolutely crucial that a researcher collect enough women voices. As PRM is individual-centric, it seems that it could become more difficult, in case of India, to find an individual woman who is eager as well as allowed to share her experience of the concerned phenomenon. However, in the region, where I conducted the field study, women are quite empowered and participate extensively in various activities. I have experienced that the environment where one is living in and what roles one plays in the society are the decisive factors

that make one empowered. In the islands of the Sundarbans, the societal structure provides enough opportunities to a woman to come out of the shackle of four walls. According to me, there are mainly two reasons for this; the first one is that most of the time men stay away from the island in fishing boats or being a migrated laborer. Therefore, the women not only have to run the family on their own but also need to engage in some sorts of livelihoods to make ends meet. The other reason is very much related to their historical background. Predominantly, the residents of these islands had migrated from Bangladesh during the partition or from some other districts of West Bengal as well as other states of India, especially Bihar and Jharkhand. The displacement and the subsequent resettlement have provided an essential opportunity to women to carve out their own position in the society. During tough times faced by a family (may it be due to political turmoil or natural calamities), women obviously play a crucial role to support their family. Due to these, one can find that women of this area have their own identity in this society. However, it would be utter ignorance if I don't acknowledge the domination of women, which is still very much the part and parcel of these families. But at the same time, one has to accept the fact that the situation is far better than most of the other parts of West Bengal or for that matter, the country. Hence, it is not really a herculean task for a researcher to be able to communicate with women in these islands. Maybe I have had a bit of an advantage being a female researcher in reaching individual woman and listen to her experiences. Here, I would like to mention that, as a female researcher, I found it difficult to break the ice while taking interviews of men. Mostly in the tribal communities, men are really reserved and shy, especially when it comes to interacting individually and in those cases, it took a longer time to make them feel at ease so that they can freely share their experiences. But in general, PRM provides an opportunity to reach to each individual and offers a scope to give enough time, so that one can express her experiences without any interference or being getting manipulated by others.

**Caste.** This is another very well-known category to be mindful about while conducting fieldwork, particularly in India. Accessing people from different castes is an unavoidable challenge in any Indian village. My entry point to the island was through an Non-Governmental Developmental Organization (NGDO). As the NGDO was actively engaged with socially and economically backward communities, I got an easy entry to those communities from the very beginning. However, I went to quite a few villages where the NGDO does not work, and in those areas, I had to enter with the help of "gate-keepers" and most of the gate-keepers inevitably directed me to the upper-caste people. Considering my research question, I haven't felt that I need to consciously avoid upper-caste narrators. Rather, I realized that living in the Sundarbans means that people are forced to choose a life and be engaged in some livelihoods which inevitably require them to deal with the environment on a day-to-day basis, irrespective of their castes. At the same time, being in an island, often brute natural forces hit all the households living in that area without any clear discrimination.

Hence, the upper-caste people were also managed to narrate their experiences of environmental change. Actually, in these islands, I think the environment as a context touches the life of each and every individual. While taking interview of an upper-caste narrator, I felt that he precisely understood the purpose of my research and thus rightly introduced me with individuals from other socially and economically backward classes as generally their livelihoods and lifestyle provide them more opportunities to be closely engaged with the environment. Here, I think PRM is quite effective as this individual-centric approach offers a scope to convince an individual and eventually ensure the access of people from various groups. Moreover, I would like to mention another factor that has helped me a lot in this regard. All the islanders, irrespective of their economic and social backgrounds, agreed on what are the most vulnerable areas in the island. I concentrated on getting narratives of individuals inhabiting in those areas and that helped me a lot to reach to those people who clearly have vivid experiences of and extensively encountered environmental changes in their lives. Hence, it can be said that as PRM solely focus on a phenomenon, it becomes a bit easy to sidestep other sociocultural features of narrators like caste or socioeconomic class.

**Accessibility.** Primarily, I have confronted two kinds of limitation regarding accessibility. The first one is the lack of accessibility due to one's occupational commitments. As most of the participants were fisherman or honey gatherers or day laborers (migrant), they have to be periodically away from their homes for quite a long stretch of time. Owing to this, it is often quite difficult to access these three groups of people together in one visit. So a researcher needs to visit the place at different times as per the convenience of different interviewees, keeping in mind their occupational commitments. However, PRM being an individual-centric approach does not demand the presence of different individuals at the same time, and therefore, it becomes easy to conduct interviews as per the convenience of the concerned individuals.

Another kind of limitation concerning accessibility arises due to the underdeveloped state of various parts of this island. Lack of development and political negligence made people disapprove the presence of outsiders and often I felt an uncanny gaze. Also, as in the recent times, the Sundarbans has become one of the hot spots for various research studies and NGDO projects, the islanders have become quite sensitive to outsiders. An outsider visiting this place gives rise to a lot of expectations. I have faced many questions like "what will be our benefit?," "Is there any opportunity for us?," and so on. Again, as a phenomenological researcher, it was a bit easy for me to convince one individual separately about my intention and, more importantly, my limitations, rather than explaining that to a group of people or a cluster where one's view can get easily manipulated by the powerful voices.

**Interference.** This was one of the most difficult challenges that has repeatedly restricted me as a phenomenological researcher. In India, it is quite difficult to access an individual entirely alone. Irrespective of gender, an individual is always

accompanied by family members or neighbors or friends. So, interviewing a person solely as an individual is almost next to impossible, especially in Indian villages. Although this kind of societal structure is quite helpful to employ other qualitative methods, in case of PRM, interference by another individual is quite interruptive and can heavily affect the interview process. Because, in PRM, a researcher must concentrate on getting an in-depth narrative of a person and should always try to make a coresearcher reflect on the issue in such a manner that can eventually generate a self-talk rather than an interview. Hence, any kind of interruption could prove to be highly detrimental to the process. I had to deal with these interruptions in different ways. Sometimes, I consciously ignored others, so that they stop by themselves; sometimes, I shortly listened to them and tried to convince them that after the ongoing interview, I will also listen to them. In some cases, I have organized a group discussion to satisfy those individuals who were eager to talk. Nonetheless, on a few occasions, these interruptions have helped me to gain some important cues about the interviewees to steer the interview process innovatively.

**Articulation.** The power of articulation and explaining everyday experiences is a pivotal requirement for PRM. Without a thorough articulation of experience by a coresearcher, it becomes extremely difficult for a researcher to capture the nuances of any phenomenon. Especially, when the phenomenon is like environmental change, which is so impalpably present in one's life and everyday affairs, that often it becomes tough for a narrator to articulate it adequately. Also, as for most of us, everyday affairs are part of a very mundane reality in contrast to some special events, often narrators find these mundane experiences irrelevant to talk about. These are times when I as a researcher had to intervene and actively facilitate the interview to be able to get to those experiences.

## Conclusion

PRM is a powerful tool to capture individuals' experiences of and reflections on an environmental phenomenon. It is not as simple as giving an account of an environmental phenomenon like environmental change, where narrators can state a general account of changes in their environment over time. But the phenomenological experience of environmental change denotes a narration of individualized, personal encountering of a phenomenon. Each coresearcher gets the necessary space to thoroughly describe her experience of encountering the phenomenon meaningfully in her everyday affairs and livelihood engagements. However, a phenomenological narration of the human–environment engagement might not always be geared toward describing the phenomenon at stake. Indeed, as I have experienced, it is an elaboration of an individual's life and her meaningful engagement with the environment. For my particular inquiry, I have seen that the environment and environmental change remain in a milieu in which the narrators' life stories get embedded. Hence, a researcher has to concentrate on each and every layer of it and should move back and forth from one

layer to another, as then only the nuances of the encountering of environmental change can be unveiled in its entirety.

I would like to accentuate that, as experiences of environmental phenomena are quite difficult to grasp and single out—being entangled with other experiences and life events, I see, PRM offers a unique as well as apposite avenue to capture those experiences. PRM not only focuses on the phenomenon at stake but also provides equal importance to unfold individuals' encountering of the phenomenon and the structure of experiences, and most importantly, narrators live as a dynamic assemblage of events steered by intentionality. In this manner, PRM offers us a more nuanced way of understanding any environmental phenomenon.

## Author's Note

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## Notes

1. For more details about the relevance of this methodology in environmental humanities in the era of Anthropocene, see Baidur and Paul (2015).
2. For an illustration of translation, see Paul (2017).
3. For more on the process of analysis, see Paul and Baidur (2016) and Paul (2017).

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