

Climate Refugees and Existential Resilience in the Indian Sundarbans: A Philosophical Counselling Approach

Dr. Hirak Sarkar¹, Shelly Bhakta²

¹Assistant Teacher, Department of Geography, Kashimpur High School North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India

²Research Scholar, Department of English, Techno India University Kolkata

Abstract

In the Indian Sundarbans, thousands of residents have been displaced due to climate induced vulnerabilities. This displacement does not involve only movement from one place to another; it also disrupts existing social relationships and community life. Many climate refugees end up in unfamiliar urban areas, where they struggle with poverty and discrimination. Living under such conditions often produces an intense sense of alienation and a fading feeling of purpose. In this way, what appears to be a geographical crisis slowly takes on emotional, ethical, and philosophical dimensions as well. Most development efforts remain focused on immediate relief and fiscal priorities. The inner lives and reflective experiences of displaced islanders are rarely given equal attention.

This paper studies the potential of philosophical counselling as an initial means of engaging with the emotional and metaphysical difficulties faced by marginalised communities in the Sundarbans. It brings together different strands of applied philosophy-such as existential-humanistic therapy, Socratic dialogue, Buddhist mindfulness, environmental ethics, eco-phenomenology and community-based approaches to show that displacement is not simply physical but also intensely psychological and ontological. Those affected often go through anxiety, stress, grief, identity confusion and moral uncertainty. Philosophical counselling, in this context, can help by offering ethical clarity, strengthening resilience, opening space for dialogue, and assisting in the search for meaning, therefore supporting individuals as they manage environmental trauma. Viewing geographical realities through a philosophical lens thus offers a different way of responding to issues in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate Refugee, Counselling, Existential Crises, Resilience, Sundarbans, World View

Introduction

Climate change has emerged as one of the most defining crises of the Anthropocene epoch. In addition to environmental degradation, it induces substantial social and existential upheaval. The Bengal delta is vulnerable to tropical cyclones, sea level rise, flooding, and de vegetation due to historic immigration. The Indian Sundarbans on the Bay of Bengal, shows this prominently. Communities living there regularly face disasters that threaten their homes, occupation, and folk traditions. ‘Eco people’ are now called ‘climate refugees’ because they are forced to move by changes in the ecology and economy caused by climate

change. Displacement occurs due to riverbank erosion, saltwater intrusion into agricultural land and fisheries with strong cyclones such as *Aila*, *Amphan*, and *Yaas*. These disasters almost every year damage the critical infrastructure and weaken social ties and mental health.

Government responses to climate displacement often focus on technology, resettlement, building embankments, or migration policies. However, these solutions often miss the personal side of loss, anxiety, grief, and uncertainty. People who are uprooted can feel a loss of identity, hopelessness, and isolation. In this context, philosophical counselling offers another way to support healing and recovery. It uses philosophical conversation and reflection to address human problems. Unlike clinical psychotherapy, it focuses on meaning, ethical thinking, self-understanding, and worldview reconstruction. This paper suggests that philosophical counselling can help climate refugees find new meaning in suffering, rebuild their feeling of community, and become more resilient.

Literature Review

Studies on the Indian Sundarbans show that environmental vulnerability is closely linked to human suffering, displacement, and response. Early colonial authors such as William Wilson Hunter (1868) and L. S. S. O'Malley (1914/1998) wrote about the region's geography, rivers, agriculture, and administration. Their writings show that people have long relied on a fragile delta, as evidenced by the construction of embankments and efforts to address natural disasters. These works highlight the continuing struggle of people in South 24 Parganas with an unstable environment, giving a historical background for today's climate issues.

Later studies (Banerjee, 1998; Hazra et al., 2002; Jana, 2008; Giri, 2012; Roy & Guha, 2017; Tewari, 2022; Mukherjee & Siddique, 2024) show that climate change is increasingly affecting the Sundarbans. Geographical issues like sea level rise, coastal and riverbank erosion, storm surges, saltier soil, and biodiversity loss have made farming and fishing more difficult. As a result, poverty has increased and many people have been forced to migrate. Roy and Guha (2017) and Tewari (2022) note that migration is both a coping strategy and a source of new social and emotional challenges, changing family and community life.

In addition, critical studies such as Mukhopadhyay (2009) and Sharmila (2014) argue that vulnerability in the Sundarbans is not simply about the environment. It is likewise shaped by how the area is governed, disaster policies, and social marginalisation. They say that decisions about embankments, aid, and environmental management often leave out local people, which makes inequalities worse. So, climate change in the Sundarbans is not exclusively an environmental issue as well as a question of justice, power, and ethics.

While, philosophical counselling has developed as an alternative to psychotherapy to deal with complex human suffering. Gerd B. Achenbach (1981) postulated this approach to make philosophy as first-aid of everyday life, focusing on dialogue, critical thinking and meaning making. In 1995, Ran Lahav and Maria da Venza Tillmanns introduced the idea of "worldview interpretation," suggesting that person's own problems often come from the conflicts in how oneself view the world. Lou Marinoff (1999) views that lots of challenges people are facing are actually philosophical rather than physiological, and proposed PEACE model, a structured strategies to help people gain balanced insights.

Shlomit C. Schuster (1999) and Peter B. Raabe (2001) view philosophical counselling as a non-clinical alternative to therapy, focusing on moral questions, clear thinking, and exploring major life issues. This approach is especially relevant for climate refugees, who face not only material loss but also difficult

inquiries about identity, losing their homes, making hard choices regarding survival, and concerns about the future.

Books such as *The Hungry Tide* (Amitav Ghosh, 2006) present valuable insights into life in the Sundarbans. By bringing out the emotional, cultural, and environmental aspects of living in the delta, these stories add to academic research and help us understand how people cope with insecurity and displacement.

Although there is extensive research on both environmental-related issues and philosophy, these areas are rarely brought together. Most climate change studies focus on physical risks, economic impacts, and policy, while philosophical counselling usually addresses personal problems in general or urban contexts. Few studies apply philosophical counselling to support people who have been displaced, especially climate refugees in at-risk regions like the Sundarbans.

This study combines environmental humanities with applied philosophy. It argues that meeting challenges in the Sundarbans requires more than technology and policy solutions. A philosophical perspective is also important for exploring meaning, resilience, and ethics. By bringing philosophical counselling within climate discourse, we can address the psychosocial aspects of displacement, helping people reconsider their experiences, rebuild their perspectives, and strengthen their toughness as the environment continues to change.

Hypothesis

Climate stress in the Indian Sundarbans forced to displace existentially distressed marginal people can be compensated by the application of philosophical counselling approach grounded in Socratic dialogue, existential humanistic thought, environmental ethics and Indian knowledge system.

Research Gap

A look at the current research shows that there are several important gaps.

Gap 1: Dominance of Environmental and Economic Perspectives

Most research on the Sundarbans looks at environmental damage, rising sea levels, migration, and economic risks. However, there is little focus on the emotional and metaphysical experiences of people who have been displaced.

Gap 2: Absence of Philosophical Approaches

Most current studies use geographical, sociological, environmental, or policy approaches. Few have looked at philosophical counselling as a way to help with climate adaptation or support refugees' rehabilitation.

Gap 3: Neglect of Meaning-Making Processes

Research typically looks at what people lose, but does not explore enough how climate refugees rebuild their sense of meaning, identity, and belonging after they are displaced.

Gap 4: Limited Interdisciplinary Frameworks

Not many studies bring together geography, environmental ethics, migration studies, psychology, and philosophy to fully understand what climate refugees go through.

Gap 5: Lack of Counselling Models for Climate Refugees

At present, there is no philosophical counselling framework made specifically for climate refugees in the Indian Sundarbans.

This study intends to fill these gaps using suggesting philosophical counselling as a new, interdisciplinary way to address both the displacement and the existential struggles experienced by climate refugees.

Research Question

This study focuses on these research questions:

Primary Research Question:

- How can philosophical counselling frameworks help with the geographical, existential, and psychosocial challenges that climate refugees face in the Indian Sundarbans?

Additional Research Questions:

- How does climate change cause environmental damage and force people to leave the Sundarbans?
- Which environmental processes make people most vulnerable to climate change and lead to migration?
- What types of existential and psychological distress do people go through when they lose their environment and have to move?
- How do climate refugees find meaning, build their identity, and feel like they belong after their environment is disrupted?
- To what extent can philosophical counselling reduce psychosocial distress and help people adapt?
- How can philosophical counselling be put into practice and included in climate adaptation policies and community resilience strategies?

Research Objectives

This study looks at how geo-climatic hazards, displacement, and existential distress are connected in the Indian Sundarbans, with special attention to how philosophical counselling can help.

Primary Objective

- To find out how well philosophical counselling helps climate refugees in the Indian Sundarbans deal with geographical, existential, and psychosocial challenges.

Secondary Objectives

- To study how climate change and geo-ecological processes lead to environmental damage, displacement, and risks to people's livelihoods.
- To look at how displacement affects society, the economy, and the environment, including issues like migration, marginalisation, and insecurity.
- To explore the existential and psychological effects of displacement caused by climate change, such as changes in identity, loss of belonging, and how people find meaning.
- To see how philosophical counselling can reduce distress, help people rebuild their sense of self, and support ethical choices and resilience.
- To find out how philosophical counselling can be included in policy and how it might help communities become more resilient and adapt better.

Research Design

This study uses a mixed-methods research design that brings together both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore how geo-environmental change, displacement, and existential distress are connected in the Indian Sundarbans. The research draws on ideas from geography, environmental studies, migration studies, psychology, and philosophy.

The study uses a convergent parallel design, collecting quantitative and qualitative data at the same time. The data are analysed separately and then combined to give a fuller picture. This method helps capture both measurable social and environmental factors, as well as personal experiences of displacement and how people find meaning.

The research also takes an interpretive and phenomenological approach, especially when looking at existential distress and philosophical counselling. It aims to explain not just the causes, but also how people understand and react to environmental crises.

Database and Limitations

This study uses a mixed-method database that brings together both primary and secondary sources to strengthen its approach. The main data comes from fieldwork in selected mouzas in the Indian Sundarbans, where structured questionnaires, GPS-based surveys, and in-depth oral interviews were used. These methods provided both numerical data, such as education, health, livelihoods, and infrastructure, and qualitative stories about displacement, ecological vulnerability, and fundamental distress.

Oral interviews, viewed through a philosophical counselling lens, were not only for collecting information as well as created space for people to reflect on suffering, identity, and ethical choices. This method goes beyond measuring facts and intends to understand how people deal with environmental crises.

Secondary data came from government and non-government sources, including reports, academic studies, Survey of India topographical maps (1:50,000), Landsat TM and ETM+ images, and Google Earth archives from 1984 to 2024. This allowed for analysis of ecological variations over time and space.

There are some limitations to the database. Data on economic losses and storm-surge impacts can be inconsistent because official records are often incomplete, and differences in embankment subsidence data affect spatial accuracy. Oral testimonies are a key part of the study, but they are determined by memory and social context. Differences among the population also mean that people experience and report hardship along with resilience in different ways.

To deal with these issues, the study uses cross-checking and a reflective, interpretive approach. The variety in responses is seen not exclusively as a challenge but as evidence of the deeper, existential side of climate-related suffering, which points out the necessity of philosophical counselling in comprehending and addressing the human effects of environmental displacement.

Conceptual Framework

This study describes a framework that connects environmental change, displacement, and existential experience. It also shows how philosophical counselling can help people facing these problems.

The framework follows a step-by-step process:

Climate Change leads to Geographical Displacement, which can cause an Existential Crisis. Philosophical Counselling then supports Resilience and Adjustment.

Climate change, seen in rising sea levels, cyclones, salinisation, and ecological instability, is the main cause. These changes result in displacement, land loss, job losses, and forced migration in the Indian Sundarbans.

Displacement can cause an existential crisis. People might face identity disruption, loss of belonging, uncertainty, trauma, and moral challenges. These issues go beyond material losses and deeply affect how people see their lives and find meaning.

Within this system, philosophical counselling operates as a bridge. It helps people move from crisis to adaptation by giving support in several ways:

- It helps people understand suffering and environmental loss.
- It supports people as they rebuild their identity and sense of self.
- It encourages ethical awareness and helps people develop decision-making skills.
- It helps people clarify their personal values and worldviews, and strengthens psychological strength
- It promotes community bonds and a feeling of shared meaning.

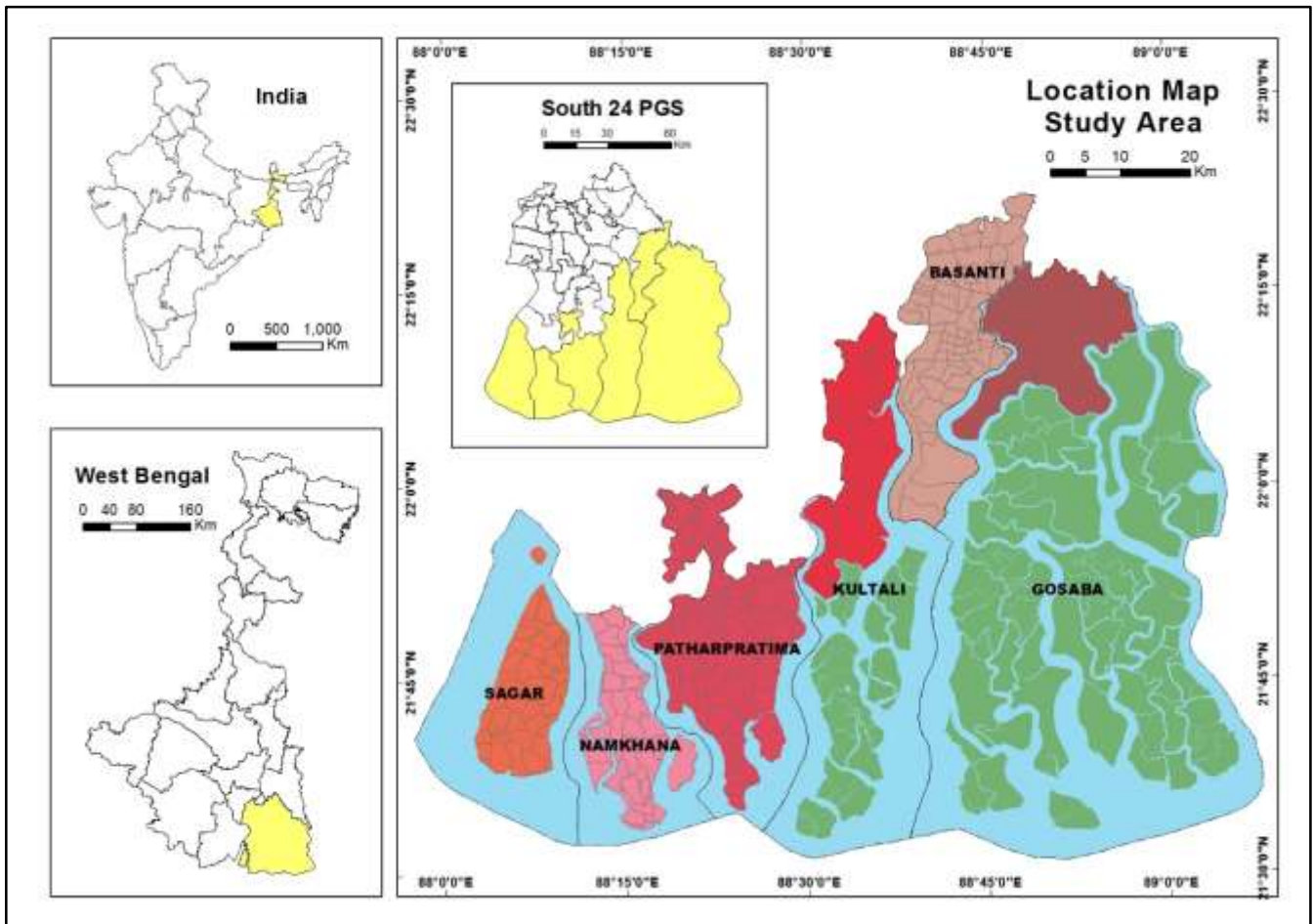
Through dialogue and self-reflection, philosophical counselling helps people rethink their experiences and respond to the challenges of displacement.

This process leads to greater flexibility and adjustment for both people and groups. It includes better coping skills, a restored sense of meaning, enhanced well-being, and strengthened social ties in areas affected by climate change.

Thus, the framework positions philosophical counselling not simply as a therapeutic tool but as an integrative bridge between environmental realities and human existential response, aiding sustainable adaptation and restoration strategies.

Study Area

This study looks at six islands in the Sundarbans delta, in the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, India. The area is roughly between 21°29'00" and 22°26'15" North latitude, and 88°03'45" and 89°04'50" East longitude. The landscape is unstable, formed over time by silt from the Ganga and Brahmaputra



rivers, and it is still changing. The district is divided into subdivisions, including Alipore Sadar, Baruipur, Canning, Diamond Harbour, and Kakdwip. This study focuses on the blocks of Kultali, Namkhana, Pathar Pratima, Sagar, Gosaba, and Basanti, as these areas face more frequent environmental stress.

Existential Crisis of the People of the Sundarbans

Life in the Sundarbans has always been uncertain, but now it feels even harder. People see stronger storms, more frequent floods, and land slowly disappearing. Many villages are below river level, so flooding happens often and affects daily life. Some years are manageable, while others are much harder. Migration is not always sudden; it often happens gradually. Still, people feel a strong connection to their home. Those who rely on rivers, forests, and tides see these places as more than just resources- they are part of daily



life. When people are displaced, they lose more than land or property. They also lose familiar routines, landscapes, and community ties. Many people shared a sense of unease about the future. It is not always dramatic, but it does not go away.

Moving out does not necessarily solve the problem. Those who migrate to towns or cities often find themselves in difficulty. Leaving the area does not always fix the problem. People who move to towns or cities often face new challenges. Work is not steady, living spaces are crowded, and there is little social support. Sometimes, people- especially women- face discrimination or harassment. Even after moving, uncertainty remains, just in a different way. Likely to leave. Women are also increasingly part of this movement, especially when local opportunities are limited. While economic reasons are important, environmental factors play a strong role in pushing people out. Repeated cyclones, erosion, and embankment failures reduce the chances of sustaining a st There are also differences between the islands. Some places, like Maipith and Baikunthapur, have higher rates of people leaving. Others, such as

Ghoramara, have fewer people leaving, even though they have lost much land. Islands like Mousuni, Ghoramara, and G Plot have clearly lost land over time. Field observations show that in some areas, many people have already left.

Causes of Refugee Crisis in the Sundarbans		
Environmental Factor	Geographical Impact	Human Consequences
Sea level rise	Submergence of island	Forced migration
Cyclone	Infrastructure destruction	Homelessness
Salinity intrusion	Agricultural decline	Loss of livelihood
Riverbank erosion	Land loss	Repeated displacement
Mangrove degradation	Ecological imbalance	increased vulnerability

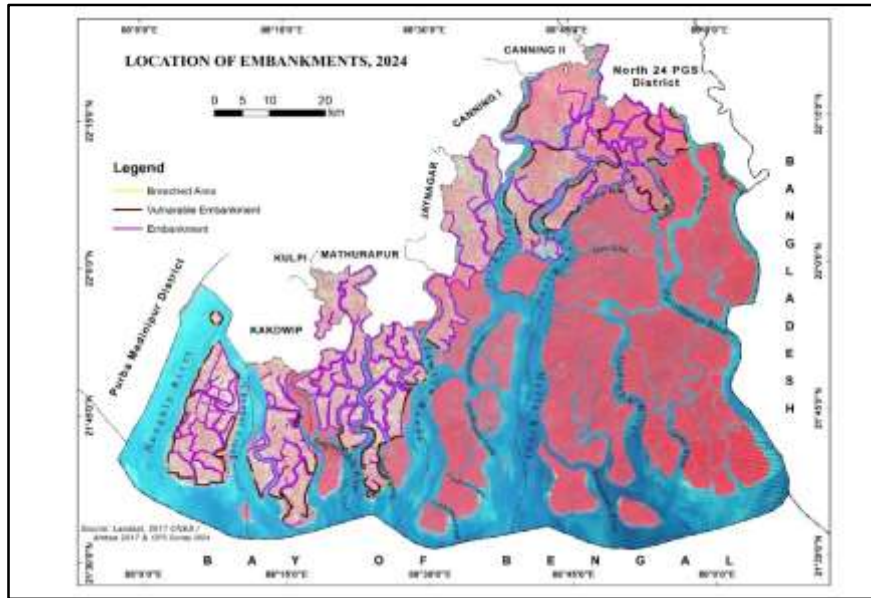
1) Tropical Cyclone

Cyclones are a major part of this story. They usually occur before and after the monsoon, but their intensity seems to have increased. When they hit, the effects are immediate-strong winds, heavy rain, tidal surges, and widespread flooding. Embankments often fail under pressure, and once that happens, saline water spreads quickly across agricultural land. Recovery takes time, and in some cases, people do not fully recover before the next event occurs.

Frequency and Return Period of Severe Cyclones in South 24 Parganas			
Sl. No.	Block	Number of Cyclonic Storms	
		Severe cyclones	Cyclones
1	Gosaba	Six; 1895,1909,1919,1970,1988,1998	Nineteen; 1896,1898,1902,1907,1927,1929,1932,1933,1937,1940(2),1942,1946,1947,1956,1963,1967,1980,2000
2	Kultali	One;1937	Six;1921,1936,1963,1968,1974,2000
3	Patharpratima	One;1916	One;1968
4	Namkhana	Two;1981,1971	Eleven;1948,1951,1952,1955,1960,1962,1964,1968,1971(2),1981
5	Sagar	One;1936	One;1946
Source: IMD			

2) Embankment Breaching

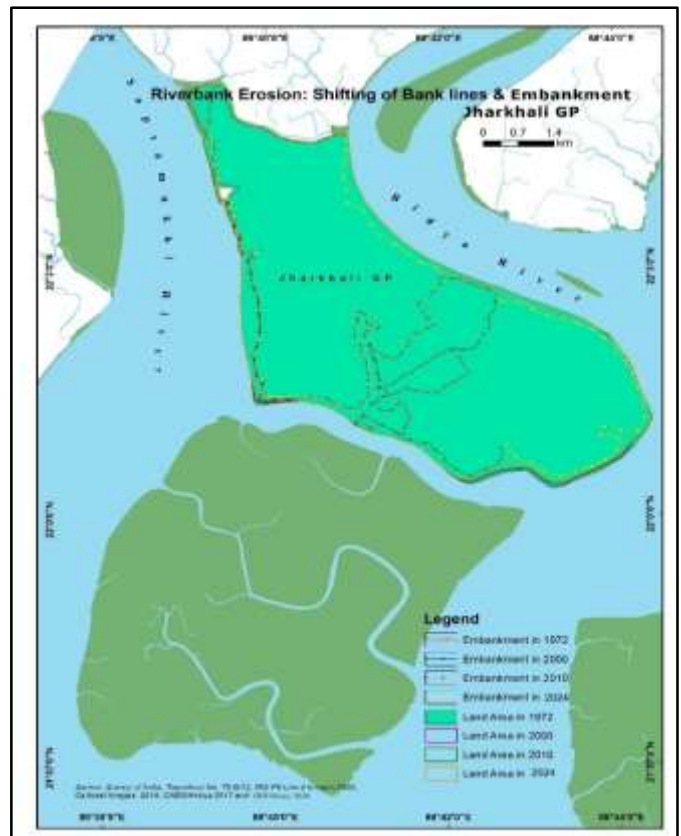
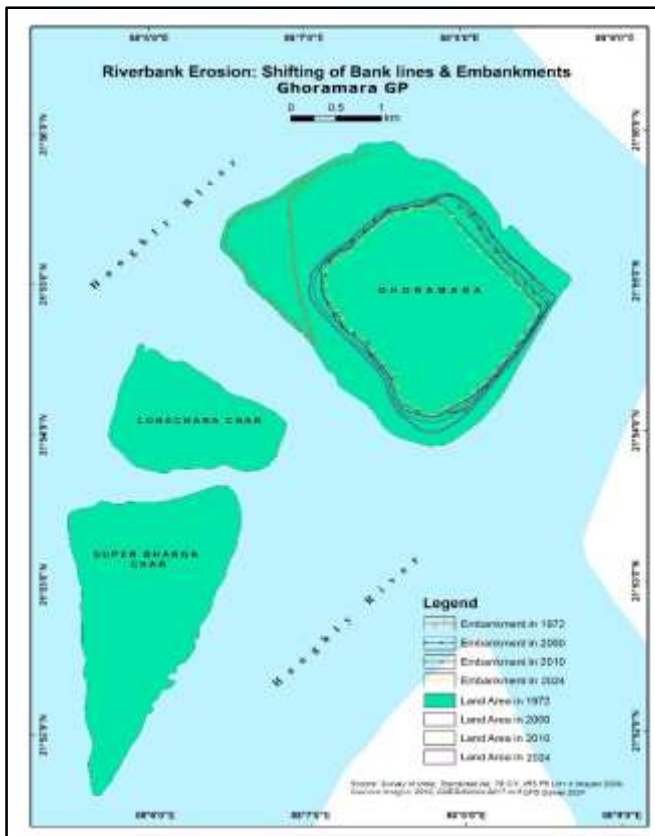
Embankments themselves are a weak line of defence. Many are made of earth and were built long ago. They are not designed to withstand repeated high-intensity storms. During cyclones, waves strike with enough force to erode and eventually break them. Earlier, a belt of vegetation along these structures helped reduce wave impact. Over time, however, this has been reduced due to human use, leaving the embankments more exposed than before.



3) Riverbank Erosion and Island Subsidence

Erosion adds another layer of difficulty. Riverbanks shift regularly, sometimes cutting into inhabited areas. Land is lost in small amounts at first, but over the years it becomes significant.

The GPS survey shows 1.20 sq. km of land was removed from Satjelia Island, 2.13 sq. km land was lost from Ghoramara Island, 3.64 sq. km lost from Mousuni Island, and about 1.79 sq. km land was removed from Jharkhali Island in between 1984 and 2024. The maps provided below shows riverbank erosion and associated shifting of embankment and land loss.



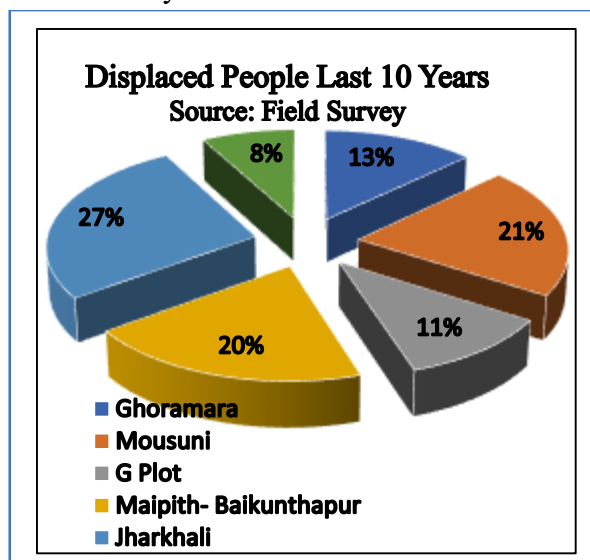
Amount of Agricultural Land loss due to riverbank erosion				
Name of Blocks	Name of Islands	Per cent		
		< 0.5 acre	0.5-1 acre	> 1 acre
Sagar	Ghoramara	71	22	7
Namkhana	Mousuni	73	23	4
Patharpratima	G Plot	69	26	5
Kultali	Maipith- Baikunthapur	69	31	0
Basanti	Jharkhali	73	23	4
Gosaba	Satjelia	75	19	6

Source: Field Survey, 2024

4) Marginal Workers and Depopulation

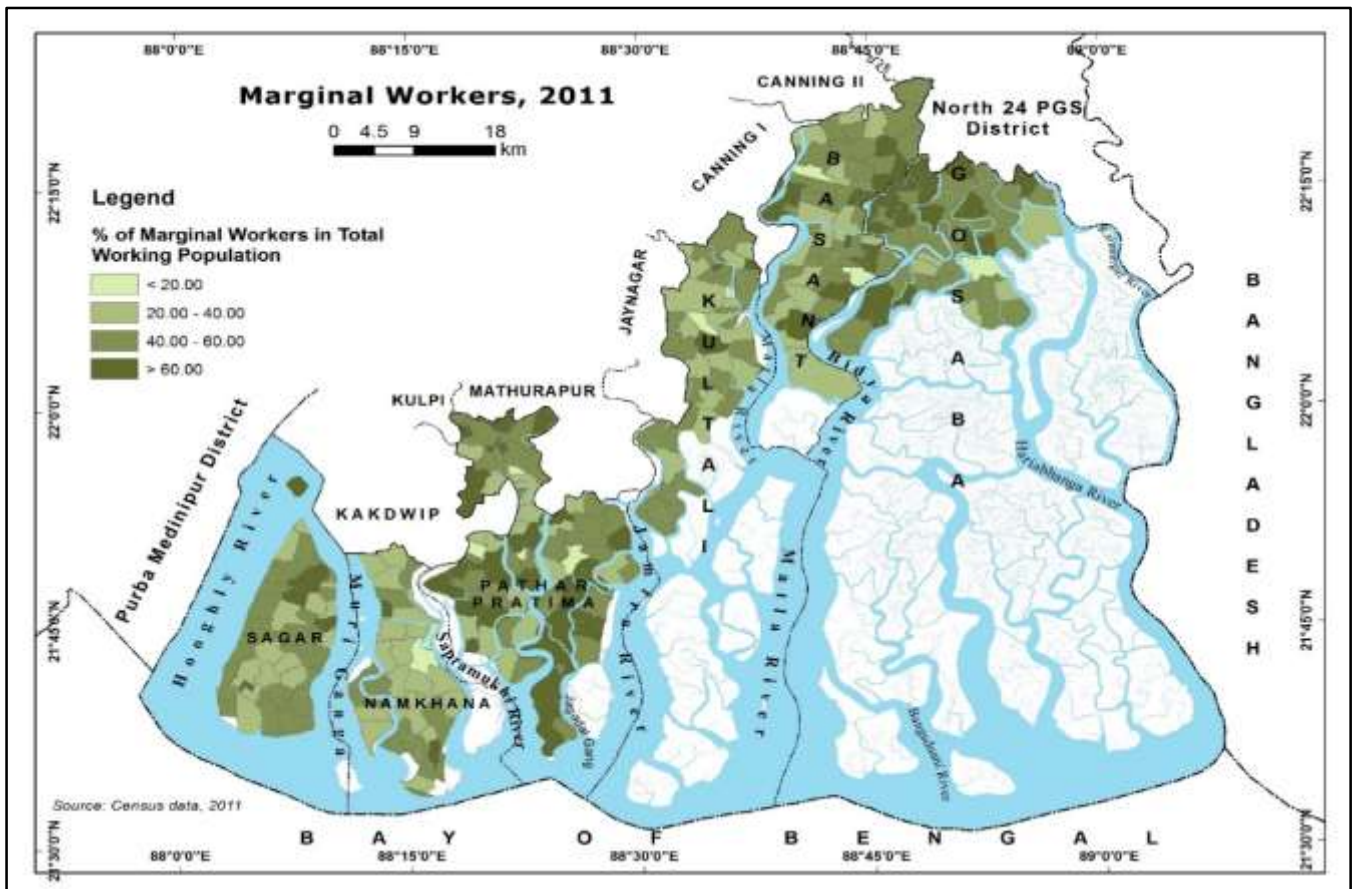
All of this feeds into migration. For some households, moving is temporary-a way to cope during difficult periods. Seasonal migration is quite common, with people leaving for work and returning when conditions improve. For others, especially those who lose land completely, migration becomes permanent. Coastal zones tend to see more of this kind of movement.

Overall, it is rare to find a household that has not been affected in some way. Environmental factors clearly play a major role, but they are not the only reason. Social and institutional conditions also matter.



Scope of Philosophical Counselling

Philosophy is sometimes seen as a practical field, but this has not always been the case. Socrates compared philosophy to medicine and midwifery, while the Buddha said his teachings aimed to ease human suffering. Philosophical counselling trains counsellors to offer intellectual support and comfort to people in distress. This approach was first initiated in the late twentieth century to help people address personal concerns by thoughtful conversation. Philosophical counsellors help people explore their beliefs, values, fears, ethical issues, and important life questions. Unlike traditional therapy, philosophical counselling does not diagnose mental illness. Instead, it encourages people to think deeply about their situations and consider questions like:



- What gives life a sense of purpose even in the midst of suffering?
- In what ways should people deal with uncertainty?
- How do humans relate to the natural world?
- How can communities preserve their sense of dignity when facing displacement?

Philosophical counselling can help climate refugees cope with deep emotional distress. Many feel despair as environmental destruction threatens their homes, future, and sense of identity. Reflecting on these experiences through philosophy can help them find new meaning. Existential thinkers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, say that facing uncertainty and creating meaning is important, even in hard times. Environmental philosophy also highlights the close relationship between people and nature. These ideas matter a lot for people who have been displaced from vulnerable places like the Sundarbans.

1) Existential Suffering and the Search for Meaning

Climate refugees must face big questions about fate, justice, survival, and belonging. Losing their home and land often causes "ontological insecurity," which means their sense of stability and continuity is shaken. While existential philosophy cannot remove suffering, it encourages people to face it meaningfully.

Philosophical counselling helps people affected by climate change talk about their fears, think about their values, and find new ways to understand hardship. It gives them a chance to share and make sense of their experiences. Some philosophies say dignity emphasises the capacity to resist, while Eastern traditions focus on impermanence, resilience, and compassion. These ideas together can help displaced communities build emotional strength while still acknowledging their pain.

2) Eco-phenomenology and Community Ethics

Eco-phenomenology sees people as closely connected to nature. This matters for climate refugees because

displacement breaks their bonds with land, water, and community. The suffering of people in the Sundarbans cannot be solved only with technical fixes; ethical and personal issues matter too. Community values like care, connection, and shared survival are essential. In the Sundarbans, people have long relied on working together during disasters like cyclones and floods. Folk traditions, local knowledge, and group rituals help them stay strong. Philosophical counselling can support these traditions by encouraging group conversations and storytelling. These activities help displaced people find new strength and a feeling of belonging.

3) Philosophical Resilience and Indigenous Knowledge

People in the Sundarbans have developed deep ecological knowledge over generations. Local fishermen and forest workers know how to read tides, predict storms and use medicinal plants. This traditional wisdom is also philosophical. Many local beliefs emphasise living in harmony with nature rather than trying to control it. Instead of focusing on abstract ideas, counsellors help people reflect on individual experiences and local customs. Storytelling, sharing memories, and talking about the environment help refugees reconnect with who they are and what matters to them. This approach also questions the idea that nature is only valuable for human use. Environmental crises show we need to see nature as something we are connected to and responsible for, especially for future generations.

Philosophical Counselling Frameworks Relevant for the Climate Refugees in the Sundarbans

One useful way to support climate refugees in the Indian Sundarbans is to integrate ideas from environmental ethics, Gandhian philosophy, Stoicism, Existentialism, and phenomenology into a single counselling approach.

- **Existentialism**

Philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus focused on human freedom and finding meaning in unstable times. Climate refugees can be encouraged to see displacement not only as a loss, but also as a challenge which encourages creative ways to adapt.

- **Socratic perspective**

The Socratic approach in philosophical counselling focuses on self-examination. It encourages people to clarify their ideas, evaluate their assumptions, and explain their beliefs with reason. For climate refugees in the Sundarbans, this method helps them think more clearly about their experiences and build stronger, more resilient ways of understanding what they are going through. Marcus Aurelius also teaches the difference between what can and cannot be controlled. This perspective may help refugees build resilience when dealing with ecosystem change they cannot control.

- **Environmental Ethics**

Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic challenges the idea that humans are at the centre of everything. It encourages refugees to see themselves as part of a connected ecological community. This view advocates environmental responsibility, humility, and standing up against harmful practices.

- **Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy**

Gandhi's philosophy highlights simplicity, nonviolence, local decision-making, and living in harmony with nature. These ideas uphold sustainable living, working together as a community, and building moral strength during displacement. These values align well with the other approaches discussed, which view displacement as a disruption of "being-in-the-world," in which land holds emotional, cultural, and spiritual meaning. This perspective empowers philosophical counselling to address ecological grief, identity loss,

and alienation by helping people convey their experiences, rebuild their ecological identity, and restore meaning.

- **Phenomenological Insights**

Following Dr Ran Lahav's principle, this approach is central to philosophical counselling. It involves helping clients shape their own worldview, which affects their daily lives. Counsellors guide clients to think critically about their beliefs, meet challenges, and, when needed, deepen their understanding.

- **Buddha's Teaching**

Dharma-based therapy, grounded in the Buddhist principle of Dependent Origination, helps climate refugees understand how interconnected causes shape their suffering. By comprehending the links between thoughts, actions, and consciousness, people can better manage their emotions, rethink displacement, and build resilience. This approach supports both psychological coping and overall mental well-being during environmental crises.

Together, these approaches provide a holistic, ethically based, and experience-based model for counselling climate refugees in the Sundarbans. A community-based model includes the following steps:

Stage 1: Dialogue and Listening - This stage focus on understanding people's experiences of displacement and loss.

Stage 2: Philosophical Reflection - Here, people examine their beliefs about suffering, justice, identity, and hope.

Stage 3: Value Clarification - This step helps people identify personal and shared values that still matter to them, even after displacement.

Stage 4: Meaning Reconstruction - Developing new narratives of resilience and adaptation.



Stage 5: Community Philosophical Circles - Facilitating collective dialogue among climate refugees to strengthen social cohesion and mutual support.

Counselling in the Field

The primary study was conducted as a pilot survey at Mousuni Island just after super cyclone *Amphan* that hit near Bakkhali in South 24 Parganas in May 2020 and severely damaged coastal infrastructure across the state, especially the Sundarbans and encouraged to study further of the climate trauma that the marginal people are facing almost every year after a tropical storm. Four years later, after the cyclones *Remal* and *Dana* in May and October 2024 successively brought the catastrophic storm surges, widespread flooding and undermined livelihood system in the region. The study of existential suffering of the community and use of philosophical remedy to search for meaning began. One person from each island who faced the worst hardships asked for counselling sessions right after the event, and continued to meet them every week for the rest of the year.

Researcher in the Field



Effective counselling involves listening with empathy, building trust, understanding problems, setting goals, and guiding clients. In practice, Marinoff's five-stage 'PEACE' process was used: Problem, Emotion, Analysis, Contemplation, and Equilibrium. In the first two stages, the problem and emotional responses to the disaster are identified and expressed in a healthy way. The third stage focuses on listing and evaluating possible solutions. In the fourth stage, the client and counsellor work together to understand the experiences through a philosophical lens. The process ends with the client reaching equilibrium, meaning they understand their main problem and are ready to take appropriate action. This approach required skills like empathetic listening, logical reasoning, critical and creative thinking, and seeing the bigger picture.

The following philosophical tools and techniques were used during the counselling sessions separately or collectively as per the requirements of the targeted population.

- CBT and REBT
- Client-centred Therapy
- Consciousness building about Geography
- Develop Critical thinking
- Develop Worldview
- Encourage the adoption of the Gandhian philosophy
- Encouragement of Self-transformation
- Existential and Phenomenological Theory
- Existential Group Therapy
- Existential Humanistic Integrative Therapy
- Existential Logotherapy
- Gestalt Therapy
- Healing methods
- Logotherapy
- Meaning making
- Mindfulness
- Narrative Therapy
- Understanding duty to oneself
- Use of Buddhist iconography
- Use of Socratic dialogue
- Yoga and meditation practice



Outcomes from the Counselling

After a year of structured and integrative counselling, participants saw many positive changes. The program helped them find new meaning and build psychological resilience amid the uncertainties caused by environmental changes.

1. Development of Critical Thinking and Self-Awareness

Through Socratic dialogue, people learned to question their irrational fears and fatalistic beliefs. They got better at distinguishing what they could control from what they could not, thought more clearly, and felt less helpless. This made it easier for them to make thoughtful decisions.

2. Restoration of Meaning and Purpose

Logotherapy, existential logotherapy, ikigai, and other meaning-making methods helped people see suffering as a chance to find new purpose instead of just a loss. This change helped them find meaning in their lives even after being displaced, giving them hope and stability.

3. Reconstruction of Identity and Personal Narrative

Narrative therapy and storytelling helped people change how they viewed their own stories. Rather than seeing themselves as “victims of climate change,” they started to see themselves as “survivors and agents of change.”

4. Emotional Recovery and Psychological Resilience

Client-centred and Gestalt therapies, along with mindfulness, yoga, and meditation, improved emotional balance. They helped reduce anxiety, grief, and trauma caused by displacement and reinforced harmony between human life and ecological systems.

5. Adaptive Approaches and Coping Practices

With REBT, CBT, and mindfulness, people developed practical coping skills. They acquired the ability to

manage uncertainty, reduce anxiety, make better decisions and respond to changing environments.

6. Strengthening Social Relationships and Communal Resilience

Existential group therapy promoted open conversations and mutual assistance. This helped establish stronger connections in displaced communities, reduced isolation and created a common sense of meaning and strength.

7. Expansion of Worldview and Ecological Consciousness

Efforts to build awareness through geography, ecological understanding, and Gandhian philosophy helped people see the bigger picture. They began to recognise our connection to nature, chose simpler and increasingly sustainable ways of living, and felt more responsible for the environment. As a result, they began to see climate change not only as a threat but also as an opportunity for ethical growth.

8. Empowerment and Self- Transformation

A better understanding of personal duty, along with existential-humanistic therapy, encouraged people to take more responsibility for themselves. This inspired them to improve, adapt, and take an active role in rebuilding their lives. Rebuilding their lives.

9. Integration of Body, Mind, and Environment

Practices such as yoga, meditation, and integrative healing helped people reconnect with their bodies and surroundings.

10. Spiritual Grounding and Inner Transformation

Practising mindfulness and thinking about life's deeper questions can help people accept loss, adapt to change, and find inner peace and emotional strength.

To sum up, philosophical counselling in the Sundarbans went beyond easing psychological pain. It changed how people understood their lives. Today, this approach is not just a way to heal but also helps build strong, environmentally aware communities that can face challenges with dignity and clear direction.

Limitations identified in the Study

Although this study takes an interdisciplinary approach and uses a new framework, it still has some conceptual, methodological, and practical limitations that should be noted.

First, philosophical counselling can help with the existential and psychological challenges of displacement, but it cannot take the place of material support. Climate refugees in the Sundarbans need food, shelter, jobs, and legal protection. Counselling can only support these needs and does not solve deeper structural problems.

Second, cultural and communication barriers make it harder to use philosophical counselling. Many displaced people are not used to formal philosophical terms or abstract ideas. Counselling should be simple, tailored to the local context and community-focused.

Third, philosophical counselling is not enough for people dealing with severe trauma. Those facing serious psychological distress or shock after a disaster need clinical or psychiatric help before they can benefit from reflective conversations. This means counselling is less useful in urgent crisis situations.

Fourth, there are ongoing problems with making counselling accessible and scalable. The Sundarbans has limited infrastructure, not enough trained counsellors, and low literacy rates. These factors make it hard to offer philosophical counselling on a large scale.

Fifth, there are some methodological limits to this study. Qualitative data from oral stories are naturally subjective, and there are no standard tools to measure things like meaning-making or existential resilience. This makes it harder to be precise or to apply the findings more broadly.

Sixth, it is difficult to include philosophical counselling in policy frameworks. The results of counselling are hard to measure, while policies usually focus on things that can be counted or tracked. Also, lasting change in the Sundarbans depends on new technology, good environmental management, and strong institutions, which counselling by itself cannot offer.

Finally, philosophical counselling takes time, but climate displacement in the Sundarbans happens again and again. Because of this timing mismatch, the long-term effects of counselling may not last.

Overall, philosophical counselling should be seen as a supportive and interpretive method that works alongside, but does not replace, structural, technological, and policy-based responses to climate-related displacement.

Conclusion

The experience of climate change in the Indian Sundarbans shows that we cannot fully understand geographical crises just by looking at physical or technical factors. Rising sea levels and repeated disasters damage land and livelihoods, but they also affect how people see themselves, where they belong, and how secure they feel about the future. Because of this, being forced to move due to environmental changes becomes a deeper issue, shaped by the broader challenges of our current era. In this context the present study starts with the idea that the minds and emotions of island communities are strongly influenced by environmental instability. However, these challenges do not have to result only in despair. With support from philosophical approaches to resilience, which include reflective thinking, emotional discipline, and practical awareness, people and communities can find inner stability. When these approaches are combined with indigenous knowledge, they can help create calm, a sense of continuity, and even a sense of fearlessness when facing ecological uncertainty. In this context, philosophical counselling can be helpful. It supports critical thinking, ethical awareness, and community collaboration. So, to truly address climate vulnerability, we need to combine philosophical insight with geographical planning and climate governance to move toward a fairer and more sustainable future.

Acknowledgement

The author sincerely thanks Professor Arnabi Sen of the Department of Philosophy at Sidho Kanho Birsha University for her guidance and support. The author also thanks Prof. Godabarisha Mishra, Dr Pranshu Samdarshi, Dr Rajeshwar Mukherjee, and Dr Pooja Dabral of the School of Buddhist Studies, Philosophy & Comparative Religions, Nalanda University, for their helpful teaching.

Special thanks to the Krishnamurti Foundation and the American Philosophical Practitioners Association for their support. The author is deeply indebted to the locals of the study area and all participants from the Sundarbans for their cooperation and important contributions to this research.

References

1. Banerjee, A. (1998). *Environment, population, and human settlements of Sundarban delta*. Concept Publishing Company.
2. Barua, P. (2011). *Ecology, biodiversity and pollution of Indian Sundarbans*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
3. Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (2000). *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*. Wisdom Publications.
4. Camus, A. (1955). *The myth of Sisyphus* (J. O'Brien, Trans.). Vintage Books.

5. Chakraborty, A., Sen, A., & Biswas, D. (2025). Local institutional strategies and responses to climate change risks in the Indian Sundarbans: A political-economic analysis. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 8(1).
6. Chandra, S. (2014). *Island subsidence in the Sundarbans: A myth or a reality?* LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
7. Chopra, K., Kapuria, P., & Kumar, P. (2009). *Biodiversity, land-use change and human well-being*. Oxford University Press.
8. Chowdhury, A., Maiti, S. K., & Bhattacharyya, S. (n.d.). How to communicate climate change 'impact and solutions' to vulnerable population of Indian Sundarbans? From theory to practice. *Springer Plus*.
9. Cohen, E. D. (2003). Philosophical principles of logic-based therapy. *Practical Philosophy*, 6(1), 27-35.
10. Dash, M. C. (1993). *Fundamentals of ecology*. Tata McGraw-Hill.
11. Dey, S. L. (1997). *Socio-economic change in West Bengal: A study of the Sundarban region*. Shipra Publications.
12. Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press.
13. Fischer, E. (2019). *Philosophical delusion and its therapy*. Routledge.
14. Fleming, J. (2000). Wisdom and virtue in philosophical counselling. *Practical Philosophy*, 3(1), 14-20.
15. Frankl, V. E. (1969). *The will to meaning: Foundations and applications of logotherapy*. World Publishing.
16. Gethin, R. (2001). *The Buddhist path to awakening*. Oneworld Publications.
17. Ghose, A., & Ali, S. M. A. (2024). Displaced by rising tides: Legal insights and policy imperatives for climate refugees in the Sundarbans region of India. *Cambridge Journal of Climate Research*, 1(2).
18. Giri, P. (2012). *Effects of driver changes on the Sundarbans*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
19. Hazra, S., Ghosh, T., Dasgupta, R., & Sen, G. (2002). Sea level and associated changes in the Sundarbans. *Science and Culture*, 309-321.
20. Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Harper & Row.
21. Howard, A. (2011). Socrates as a role model for counsellors. *Practical Philosophy*, 2(1), 15-17.
22. IK. (1970). *Dharma therapy: An intervention program with mindfulness as one of its key components*. HKU Scholars Hub. <http://hub.hku.hk/handle/10722/128225>
23. IPCC. (2007). *Climate change 2007: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability*. Cambridge University Press.
24. Krishnamurti, J. (1995). *The book of life*. Harper Collins.
25. Lahav, R., & Tillmanns, M. (1995). *Essays on philosophical counselling*. University Press of America.
26. Marinoff, L. (1999). *Plato, not Prozac!* Harper Collins.
27. Milne, A. (2018). *Understanding counselling*. SAGE Publications.
28. Mukhopadhyay, A. (2009). *Cyclone Aila and the Sundarbans*. Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group.
29. Naess, A. (1973). The shallow and the deep ecology movement. *Inquiry*, 95-100.
30. Paul, K. B., & Baindur, M. (2017). *Philosophy from the field: A hermeneutical study of the Sundarbans islanders' phenomenological experience of environmental change*. Bloomsbury.
31. Raabe, P. B. (2001). *Philosophical counselling: Theory and practice*. Praeger.
32. Roy, C., & Guha, I. (2017). Economics of climate change in the Indian Sundarbans. *Journal of South Asian Development*.

33. Sarkar, H. (2018). *Ecological significance of breaching of embankments in some selected areas of South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal* (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Burdwan).
34. Schuster, S. C. (1999). *Philosophy practice*. Praeger.
35. Sinha, D. K. (2007). *Natural disaster reduction*. Anthem Press.
36. Sulavikova, B. (2014). Key concepts in philosophical counselling. *Human Affairs*, 574-583.
37. Thich Nhat Hanh. (1998). *The heart of the Buddha's teaching*. Broadway Books.
38. Tillmanns, M. D. V. (2005). Philosophical counselling. *International Journal of Philosophical Practice*, 1-9.
39. Van Hooft, S. (2011). Socratic dialogue as collegial reasoning. *Practical Philosophy*, 18-24.