The Far West of Nepal as a Remote Area

Krishna Prasad Adhikari[*], David N. Gellner
The University of Oxford, UK
[*]Corresponding Author: krishna.adhikari@anthro.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

Remoteness, as a subject for multi-disciplinary analysis, remains largely under-studied and under-theorised. Though the idea of remote areas is familiar in Nepal, thanks to the government's long-running 'Remote Area Development Programme (1966-2017), there has hardly been any conceptual work on the subject in the Nepalese context. We ask who defines ideas of remoteness and for whom it is an issue. Data were collected through two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), organized in Bajhang and Kanchanpur in 2022, as well as through interviews, informal discussion, and observations during fieldwork in the region between 2020 and 2022.

The paper suggests that remoteness: (a) is both a fact of geography and a state of mind and culture; (b) thus, is an idea imposed from outside, but also a condition of lived reality; (c) is a relative concept, defined in relation to multi-layered hierarchical power centres located elsewhere; and (d) is a development category. Therefore, we argue, the very notions of *'sudūr'* and 'remote' (*durgam*) are imposed political constructs, symbolizing (more than spatial position) the loci of power elsewhere, and can have detrimental consequences: persistent neglect, the reproduction of marginalization, and increasing dependency.

Keywords: Far west, Sudur, remote areas, remoteness, Nepal

Introduction

It may hardly be surprising to view the Far West of Nepal as remote. Its very name (*Sudurpaschim* in Nepali) proclaims it. Remoteness is both a fact of geography and a state of mind and culture. Much has been said and written on both aspects. Our conclusion is that, if one seeks to do justice to the experiences of those who live in Far Western Nepal, it would

be a mistake to focus exclusively on one side or other, i.e. if one spoke only about physical distances and obstacles or, on the other hand, only about remoteness as an idea.[1] Remoteness is also a category of the Nepalese state: starting in 1963 the government classified four districts as 'remote areas' (*durgam ksetra*) deserving of special development programmes, a list which was expanded by 1991 to 13 fully and 9 partially remote districts (Neupane, 2021 [2078 BS]).[2] Thanks to government recognition of the area as backward, inhabitants of the Far West, and particularly of the Karnali region, are entitled, universally, to some welfare payments and affirmative policies that elsewhere in Nepal are restricted to the most excluded members of society (Drucza, 2019; GON, 2007 [2064BS]).[3] There is, at the time of writing (2022), no medical college in Far West (Sudurpaschim) Province, and the only medical college in Karnali Province was set up only a decade ago.

Physical distance also counts. It takes a long time to get from Mahendranagar to Kathmandu and vice versa. In July 1966 when Harka Gurung set out from Kathmandu to provide earthquake relief in Baitadi, he and his party had to travel through India, covering 1,200 kms over four days by plane, train, and bus, before they crossed back into Nepal from Jhulaghat (Gurung, 1980, 18–19). At the same time, Mahendranagar and Dhangadhi are closer, much closer to Delhi than they are to Kathmandu. Most people in the Far West region have experience of travel – often regular, yearly trips – to different places in India. Many have never visited Kathmandu, but they are expert at living and surviving in India. The Far West of Nepal is thus a remote area of a peripheral and mountainous country, in a marginalized region of the world; it would seem to be triply remote and triply marginalized, when seen from Europe or even Delhi.

Remoteness is also, and crucially, a developmental category. Remote areas are, by

1   For some of the literature on remoteness, see Huskey & Morehouse (1992), Ardener (2012 [1987]), Harms et al. (2014), Saxer & Andersson (2019), and Ronström (2021). There is also a huge literature on borders and borderlands (e.g. Gellner, 2013).
2   Following the fall of the Rana regime in 1951, Nepal adopted a number of rural development programmes, including the Remote Area Development Programme (Adhikari, 2015).
3   The Civil Service (Second Amendment) Act, 2007 (2064 BS) reserved four per cent of the overall reserved seats for the backward areas. The Act defines the following districts as backward areas: Bajhang, Bajura and Achham in Sudurpaschim Province and Kalikot, Jajarkot, Jumla, Dolpa, Mugu, and Humla in Karnali Province. Welfare allowances reserved for backward districts or castes (the districts differ by welfare benefit types) include child nutrition allowance, senior citizens allowance, and allowance for timely registration of birth.

definition 'backward', 'marginalized', outside of the 'mainstream'. They perform badly on development indicators. Spatial marginality implies temporal distance ('left behind'). People migrate away from remote areas and towards more 'central' areas, in search of the facilities (of the market and the state) that are not available if they stay in place. There is a hierarchy of more and less remote, more and less developed places, as implied by the government classification mentioned above.

Remoteness is also a category of popular culture, expressed in song and in everyday interaction, as we will demonstrate below. Remoteness is partially an artefact of political arrangements. In the present case, the fact that the capital is far away is expressed in the region's name. Remoteness is often associated with proximity to borders with other countries. But within the Far West region, some areas, by dint of difficulty of access, are more remote than others, regardless of proximity to the Indian border. Remoteness has been theorized as the premodern condition of 'Zomia' – i.e. upland areas beyond the control of monarchical states – by van Schendel (2002) and Scott (2009), though there has been much criticism of the crudeness of the contrast, including the important point that little kingdoms established themselves in the heart of the uplands and not just in the fertile lowlands.[4]

This paper attempts to make a preliminary contribution to understanding the concept of 'remoteness' in the context of Far West Nepal. We recommend a bottom-up anthropological research ethic, i.e., listening to diverse voices on the ground and recognizing the simultaneously culturally constructed and embedded social structural nature of remoteness, as outlined below.

Methodology

This paper is written on the basis of fieldwork by the first author and focus group discussions in far western Nepal between 2020 and 2023. On October 24, 2022, a special focus group discussion (FGD) on the theme 'The Far West as a Remote Area' was coordinated by Dr Deepak Chandra Bhatta, an academic teaching development-related subjects in Far Western University. The FGD included 26 individuals representing various professions, including music, sports, teaching, business, and politics, and was held in Bhimdatta Municipality, Mahendranagar. The discussion was conducted in Nepali, for three hours, following FGD guidelines and covered the following six major themes: (a) connection/access; (b) understanding and views of *durgam* and *sudur*; (c) local cultural expressions of Durgam and Sugam (and associated connotations of *sukha*, *dukkha*, *vikas* – happiness, suffering, and development); (d) political systems and investments (the flow of

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4   See the discussion in *The Journal of Global History*, vol. 5(2) (2010) and several chapters in Gellner (2013).

resources); (e) outcomes; and (f) challenges and future perspectives. Journalist Mahadev Awasthi assisted by taking notes of the programme observing both non-verbal and verbal communication. The FGD was audio recorded, and part of it was video recorded with the permission of the participants. The first author transcribed the FGD record using MS word.

A second, shorter FGD was conducted on December 2, 2022, with 38 head teachers of local schools in Khaptad Chhanna, Bajhang, following the same guidelines. The discussion was recorded and the first author took detailed notes. Fieldwork in Khaptad Chhanna included formal and informal interactions and interviews. A selection of folk literature and music, mainly *deudā* songs related to the subject matter became part of the data corpus. The data was coded and analysed manually, following the pre-designed themes. Two major themes that emerged from the study are presented below.

Results and Discussion

Remoteness as the experience of hardship and underdevelopment

In Khaptad Chhanna, when asked whether Bajhang is a remote area, most people agreed to the idea that it is remote and cited its physical inaccessibility as a reason. One man defined remoteness as the lack of facilities that are found in urban areas, where you can buy anything at any time. "Here, if you want to eat meat, you have to arrange to have a goat killed and then you have to buy at least a kg. In the city, you can even buy just 200 grams of meat." The lack of that kind of choice, of easy access to roads, markets, medical facilities, education (higher and private), and consumer goods – all this is what belonging to a remote area means to them.

Social reflections are well summed up in Bajhang's famous *deuda* songs. Most notable in this connection is a *deuda* song that was frequently repeated by many interlocutors with slight variations.[5] At a big annual fair in Saindanda, men from Chhanna declare, in song, to girls from Bajura[6] that the people of Chhanna are rich, so the girls should feel shy in front of them:

Dudhyā Chhānnu, bhātyā Chhānnu, Chhānnu ta Chhānnu ho,

5　A similar but not identical source of the song is Lal Bahadur Singh of Bugatola, Bajhang, cited in Khatri (2017, p. 72).

6　Bajura is one of the remotest districts in the Far West, with one of the lowest human development statuses in Nepal. It is the least accessible district in the region and has limited agricultural production. By contrast, Bajhang, and in particular the southern part, Chhana, which is towards the Bajura border, is regarded as more affluent because of its water resources and agricultural production.

Bichai khela seth basyākā, namau lāj mānnu ho.

(We have milk in Chhanna, we have rice in Chhanna, a-plenty,

The rich people are sitting there for the play: You should feel shy to speak in front of them.)

The girls reply that one should speak the truth: without rail or motor facilities, no one qualifies as rich:

Asādhki asādh bhannu jethki jeth bhannu,

Rela chhaina, motor chhaina yānha kaiko seth bhannu.

(You should call the month of Asadh Asadh, and Jeth Jeth,

How can you say anyone here is rich when there is no railway and no motor roads?)

The difficulties and sheer physicality of living with remoteness cannot be denied. Professor Amma Raj Joshi, the VC of the Far Western University, reflected as follows in an email communication:

> For me, Far West was and still is a physical reality. It took me 16 days to reach the capital city via India. It used to be an 11 days' walk to Mahendranagar. I had that experience over six times when I was pursuing my undergraduate studies, and things have not dramatically changed as yet, despite some development in communication and transportation. I am searching for a Dean to lead a medical school and have not found any academic doctor ready to stay in Dadeldhura. Yet I do not disagree that remoteness is partly a construct owing to the interest of some groups. This duality makes your subject interesting.

Two schoolteachers in Bajhang, both males over 40, used the terms *soch and dristikon,* both implying that remoteness is a matter of perspective. They contested the perspective of outsiders, people from the 'east' *(pūrva)*, Kathmandu, the rulers. "Look at this area, it is fertile, there is water. We had very old irrigation channels. It is pleasant. What do we lack?" said the older teacher. He added, "We have plenty of water to drink here. Look at Kathmandu, there is always crisis. If one were to judge places by amenities, and then to us Kathmandu is *durgam*." The other teacher added that there are two dimensions. One is the physical site represented by the word *bikat,* inaccessible. This is a reality. The other one is *dristikon* or perspective. One perspective is the neglectful attitude of those in power at the 'centre'; the other is the 'inferiority' felt by local people. For this teacher, these two views were mutually reinforcing.

It is not only the people from the 'east' who view places on a scale of remoteness. Within the region there is a hierarchy of more or less remote, more or less developed. People from Darchula and Baitadi, thanks to their relatively easy access to India, where roads and other infrastructure are in place, have a tradition of looking down on people from Bajhang, Bajura, and Achham who have to come through their districts on their way to Indian markets. Access to India makes a huge difference to the experience of physical remoteness between the Far West and Karnali, as one FGD participant in Mahendranagar put it:

> One difference between Karnali and Sudurpaschim is that we have *chhori-beti* [marriage] relations with India, and once Uttarakhand was in Nepal. For this reason, we have the opportunity to go to India for education,… etc. But actually this [using facilities in India] is something we have no choice about; it is not because we have special connections there (*hāmro pahunch bhandā bādhyatāho*).

When schools were first opened in the region, it was necessary to hire schoolteachers from India. Until quite recently, teachers in subjects such as maths and science had to be recruited from Indian towns close to the border, such as Pilibhit.

It was only around 2008 (2065 BS) that Chainpur, the district headquarters of Bajhang, was connected by motor road. Starting in 1977 there were irregular flights to Bajhang, but then for many years they did not run. In 2021 flights resumed, but again on an irregular basis. There have been massive efforts to extend road connections to rural villages, and these efforts are still ongoing in the face of vertiginous terrain and frequent natural disasters. Old challenges continue to haunt people and may even have become worse in recent years. In 2020 there was a huge flood, causing loss of life and property as well as knocking out roads with landslides. Ram Giri, a resident of Kalukheti Chhanna was returning home with his family after celebrating the Dasain festival in the Tarai when disaster hit the whole region. They were travelling by an early bus from Dhangadhi and were hoping to arrive home late the same day. However, several segments of the motor road were badly damaged by the floods and landslides. It took them six days to arrive home, walking on some segments of the road where available, and taking detours when necessary. They had to search for abandoned trails through fields, forests, and other difficult terrain. Travelling with young children and elders with no prior arrangements for food or clothes and in the absence of hotels was a harsh reminder of the difficulties of travel in a remote region.

The mountain regions produce limited crops and are food deficient. In the past (and at times even today), inaccessibility as a factor of remoteness posed challenges to food security. These regions are prone to frequent natural disasters, and even places as fertile as Chhanna experienced famine in the past. Disasters hit everyone hard but the poorest suffer

the most.

   A *deuda* song by Lal Bahadur Singh of Chhana captures the experience of the 1977 famine in Bajhang:

   Nahunelāi haijā āyo, hunyālāi bhok āyo.

   Tala hai tul pāki āyo, māthi hai bhok āyo.

   (The poor got cholera, even the rich went hungry,

   Down below the crops ripened, above there was hunger.) (Khatri, 2017, p. 70)

   In the not-so-distant past people had to go to Indian border towns, such as Jhulaghat or Banbasa, crossing rivers and the Mahabharat mountain range, including the infamous *Telyāko lek* (Telya pass). It was an extremely difficult, even life-threatening, journey. People recalled how cold the altitude passes were, with no water to drink. They had to put aside an entire month for the two-way journey to buy essentials, such as salt, sugar (*gud*), and clothes, from the border markets. They had to arrange their food (*sāmal*) from home. In mountain places where there was no rice grown, or where there was food deficiency, they had to go to India to buy basic food items as well.

   Dependence on India was/is not only for essential goods, but also for different types of labour migration. Until 1960 there were no schools locally, though public schools started to open around 1960, as in other places in Nepal.[7] While people in districts bordering India (such as Darchula, Dadeldhura, Baitadi, and Kanchanpur) did take the opportunity to go to schools, colleges, and medical facilities in India, others further away from the border were forced to rely on local medical treatment. The mountains of the Far Western and Karnali regions are well known for their herbs; still today, people from these areas travel as far as Mumbai to sell herbs. While basic health facilities are emerging in rural areas and district headquarters, and there are private medical facilities in regional centres such as Dhangadhi, people still often go to Indian towns such as Pilibhit to see a doctor. Some even go to Delhi, rather than to Kathmandu. "If we need to see a doctor, we feel it better to go to Pilibhit or Bareilly rather than to Kohalpur or Kathmandu," said one of the FGD participants. Some combine visiting India's health facilities with looking for work and/or visiting a family member already working there.

Remoteness as locals see it

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7   Satyabadi School in Bajhang, which is the oldest modern school outside Kath-

    mandu, and another in Doti are exceptions. See below.

The Far West bears two labels, both Sanskritic neologisms, which at first hearing may sound like synonyms, *sudūr* and *durgam*. The *Brihat Nepali Shabdakosh* defines the *dūr* broadly as something that is too far from a certain thing, point, or person based on the country, time, place, or relationship. *Sudur* means the furthest, very far, so Sudurpaschim is the furthest west region from the capital, Kathmandu. The dictionary defines *durgam* as a place that is hard to travel to or reach. Synonyms for *durgam* are *apthyāro, bikat,* and *kathin* (Nepal Pragya-Pratisthan, 2075 BS)*. Bikat* is the colloquial word most often used by local people to explain their remoteness.

A place can be *durgam* even when it is close by as the crow flies, if it is difficult to access, if getting there requires a lot of time and effort. A place can be *sudur*, far away, but at the time accessible. While *durgam* is regarded as a condition of underdevelopment in terms of connectivity and infrastructure, *sudur* is not necessarily so. The Far West of Nepal will always be *sudur* – unless there is some radical change in the political structure of Nepal – but the aim is to make it no longer *durgam*, by putting in place the right infrastructure.

How did our FGD participants see these two things in relation to each other? They were more or less in agreement that *sudur* is just a name, which was appropriate because the province is indeed farthest to the west from the capital city Kathmandu. Given that the region had to have a name, Sudurpaschim was acceptable to everyone, regardless of culture. During the time of writing the constitution, Tharus in the south were asking for Tharuhat, as originally propagated by the Maoists as part of their attempt to use ethnic sentiment to fuel their 'People's War'. Opposition to the Tharu demand on the part of the hill people led to one of the largest and longest protest movements of the post-civil war period, calling for an undivided Far West, the Akhanda Sudurpaschim movement (Johnson 2021).

A minority of FGD participants were not happy with the name *sudur*, rather in the manner of some Dalits, who don't like that label. They thought the term epitomised the neglect by the state of the whole region. Some advocated for a more positive term, such as *manas khanda,* deriving from Hindu Puranic literature, which would also include adjoining parts of India and Tibet. Such an honorific term would capture the essence of their Hindu civilization very well, it was felt. On this view the Himalayas is the abode of the gods, and this part of the Himalayas is a holy centre, as well as an important trade route to Tibet, just like Kathmandu. The pilgrimage route through the region leads to the most holy mountain of all, Mt Kailash in Tibet, and a holy lake, Manasarovar. There were important kingdoms in this part of Nepal, with a deep history and rich culture, making it just as much of a *punyabhūmi* (sacred territory) as the Kathmandu Valley. This view of the FGD participants and of other people with whom we interacted suggests that remoteness also implies

sacredness, a place untouched or not tainted by external influences. In reality, of course, there is nowhere that is wholly untouched by modernity. There is a long history of migration and influences from outside. Most places now have access to the internet in some form. Modern education and the market, bringing industrially processed food and beer, have reached pretty much everywhere.

The FGD participants were certain that their region was the cradle of Nepal's dominant culture and language but felt that this has been a subject of neglect both by the state and the nation's intellectual community. Stirr (2012, p. 274) has nicely encapsulated this point: "It is ironic that the far west has been so neglected, insofar as it has long been thought of as a seat of cultural heritage and a source of basic aspects of Nepali national identity – most significantly the Nepali language."

The Hindi saying *Delhi dūr hai* [Delhi is far] is well known in Nepal too. In fact, viewed from the Far West, Kathmandu is even further. Kathmandu, which until the Rana time, and even long after in colloquial usage, used to be known as Nepal in the rest of country, and as *Nepālyā* in the Far West, is very far from Sudurpaschim in various senses of the word. Most people in rural Bajhang, including schoolteachers and NGO workers, had never been to Kathmandu, the nation's capital city. It is far and very expensive to travel to; and, in any case, there are usually no practical reasons to go there. In Chhanna, a Thakuri man in his sixties, told the first author: "I have never been to Kathmandu. I have been to India, more than once. I had no work in Kathmandu." However, he now sends his son to Kathmandu for his studies.

In the past, those who had to go to Kathmandu for various reasons, such as court cases or registering a *guthi,* had to spend days to do so, and had to take routes via India. Lakshman Adhikari, an FGD participant, who is a *deuda* singer, captured the reality in his heavy Bajhangi accent:

> *Lāmāgadā unākunā bāsin titari*
>
> *Nepāl najhānyā bhaiyā garbhe bhitari.*
>
> (In the corners of Lamagada the *titari* bird calls,
>
> If you haven't been to Nepal/Kathmandu, you haven't lived [lit. you are still in the womb].)

This is a quotation from a *bhāri khel* song. It signifies that Nepal (the Kathmandu Valley) was far away. Even though Nepal was in people's hearts, it was too far to visit. Those who managed to go, saw it as a once-in-a-lifetime achievement.

Past memories of Nepal, Kathmandu, were by no means always rosy. This undated *deuda* song, shared by another FGD participant, describes a man from Doti who took three months to reach there and spent six months seeking justice in a court case. It reflects his pain:

> *Naipāli chhatis dhārā pānike turukka*
>
> *Samjhanchhu gayāko dina runchha man dhurakka*
>
> (Nepal has 36 waterspouts gushing,
>
> I remember days gone past with my heart crying.)

One participant commented, "… we feel like being in *durgam* is the combined effect of the physical distance and treatment of the rulers [in Kathmandu]." His views clearly capture how remoteness is both a physical reality and a consequence of political negligence. Despite not liking it very much, the same man usually travels abroad via Delhi, because it takes only 10 hours to reach Delhi from Mahendranagar, whereas it takes 2-3 days to travel to or from Kathmandu. Another FGD participant had a similar view: "In 21 generations since our arrival in Nepal, I am the first person to visit Kathmandu. For generations our ancestors have been going [instead] to India for pilgrimage and employment."

Indeed, labour migration to India continues to be ubiquitous throughout the far-western hill districts. For many India is a place for *roji-roti*, earning their bread. Moreover, for many in the border towns it is also for *cheli-beti*, finding wives and sons-in-law. This latter fact is ignored in most discussions of Nepal–India relations. They tend to focus on *roti-beti* relations between north India and Nepal's Tarai-Madhesh, while ignoring the deep *roji-roti* and *cheli-beti* relations between the Far West and neighbouring northern India.

Conclusion

These remarks are preliminary and are intended to stimulate discussion. Insofar as we have methodological solutions to approaching the question, it is simply to recommend a bottom-up anthropological research ethic, listening to diverse voices on the ground and recognizing the simultaneously culturally constructed and embedded social structural and spatial nature of remoteness. Therefore, we argue that the very notions of *'sudur'* and 'remote', which are so often linked, are imposed political and cultural constructs, symbolizing (more than spatial position) the fact that the loci of power are elsewhere. Such constructs can have detrimental consequences, for example, persistent neglect, the reproduction of marginalization, and increasing dependency.

Many of the papers in the Sudurpaschim conference of December 2022 addressed the same or similar issues. One key issue, raised by interlocutors in the focus group, was

about whether the region wants to define itself in relation to the self-appointed centre, the Kathmandu Valley, or whether it would rather have its own historical roots as the heart of its identity. One argument for the latter might be that defining oneself entirely in relation to the state generates a kind of dependency thinking, an expectation that the state is the sole and entire solution to every problem. The idea that Kathmandu is the centre of power and resources, combined with the idea of *durgam* as lacking and backward, tends to undermine the self-worth of those so labelled. Both governmental and NGO resources come from the east, particularly from Kathmandu, a place that exists largely in the imagination of the people.

Pushing back against the image of backwardness, people point out that Bajhang was once a centre of educational activities, thanks to the opening of the first modern Nepali language school outside Kathmandu established by the charismatic King of Bajhang, and son-in-law of Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher, Jaya Prithvi Bahadur Singh, in 1906 (1963 BS).[8] Students from as far as Dailekh flocked to the Satyabadi School. Moreover, Mid and Far West Nepal possess a rich history with important archaeological remains. However, school history books rarely teach students about them. Their textbooks teach them instead about Kathmandu-based culture, temples, and kings.

In the past, remoteness was explicitly and overtly an instrument for negotiation and a way to channel extra resources both to relieve the pains of deprivation and to pay for infrastructure building. Though these extra resources suffered from 'elite capture' at the local level and though there has been too little achieved through the remote areas development programme, at least remote areas were the object of special targeted development and national integration.[9] Today, the same strategy is seen by many as having been an act of self-denigration and some people assert openly that the Far West is no longer remote and no longer needs special assistance. Theoretically, the federal constitution 2015, which has removed the special provision for remote areas development programmes and empowered local governments with the resources to champion their own development affairs, is intended to provide some answer to this complex situation. However, the results are yet to be seen. While more research is required on this subject, it is clear that national, provincial, and local governments need to strike a balance between (a) mitigating the challenges of remoteness,

8   The school was first set up in Kathmandu in 1906 but was shifted to Bajhang six years

later.

9   See Pfaff-Czarnecka (2008) on the precise mechanisms by which 'elite capture' happened

at the local level (based on fieldwork in Bajhang).

(b) preserving 'sacred' landscapes and local cultures, and (c) mitigating the effects of climate change.

Acknowledgement

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