

KALAPANI AND THE CHANGING CONTOURS OF INDIA-NEPAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

India and Nepal share a historically deep and multidimensional relationship, reinforced by cultural, religious, and geographic linkages, as well as an open border under the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. While fostering integration and interdependence, structural asymmetries have fueled periodic tensions, with the Kalapani dispute emerging as a symbol of contested sovereignty and shifting strategic dynamics. In this context, the Kalapani territorial dispute has evolved into a potent symbol of contested sovereignty and national identity, exposing the deeper structural issues in an otherwise interdependent relationship and signalling a shift in the strategic calculus of India-Nepal bilateralism. By situating Kalapani within the larger framework of India's evolving border relations, this article examines the historical roots, geopolitical significance, and regional implications of the Kalapani dispute, emphasising that border disputes profoundly shape bilateral trust and narratives. The study highlights the dual importance of Kalapani as both a site of strategic control over vital Himalayan passes and as a potent symbol in the politics of sovereignty and nationalism. The study further underscores the imperative of sustained diplomacy and institutionalised cooperation to resolve the issue and strengthen stability along the Himalayan frontier.

Keywords: *India, Nepal, China, Relations, Kalapani, South Asia,*

Introduction

India and Nepal share one of South Asia's most enduring and multidimensional bilateral relationships, rooted in deep civilisational, historical, and cultural linkages that date back centuries. Geographic contiguity is complemented by an intricate web of religious, linguistic, and familial bonds, reflected in shared Hindu-Buddhist traditions, intermarriage across communities, and overlapping ethnic identities in border regions such as the Terai and Indo-Gangetic plains. The open border framework, institutionalised through the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, has enabled restricted cross-border mobility, fostering social integration and mutual economic independence. Politically, India has exerted substantial influence over Nepal's modern state-building processes, from backing democratic institutions to supporting post-conflict reconstruction. However, structural asymmetries in size, economic capacity, and strategic leverage have periodically generated tensions, with Nepal often seeking to recalibrate the terms of engagement. In this context, the Kalapani territorial dispute has evolved into a potent

symbol of contested sovereignty and national identity, exposing the deeper structural issues in an otherwise interdependent relationship and signalling a shift in the strategic calculus of India-Nepal bilateralism. India-Nepal ties illustrate the broader transformation of India's societal interactions and border politics. While civilisational and cultural linkages remain a durable foundation, shifting territorial sensitivities, evolving geopolitical alignments, and the changes in perceptions are redefining the contours of engagement. The trajectory of this relationship will ultimately depend on whether both sides can transform borders from zones of contestation into platforms of cooperation, which will be essential for India and Nepal to sustain their unique relationship and contribute to stability in South Asia.

The origin and evolution of the Kalapani dispute are deeply rooted in the legacy of the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, a geopolitical settlement that reshaped the Himalayan frontier and delineated the territorial contours of the modern Nepali state. The 1816 Treaty was signed between the Kingdom of Nepal and the British East India Company following the conclusion of the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-1816). Nepal's defeat in the Anglo-Nepalese War culminated in the loss of nearly one-third of its territory across the eastern, western, and southern frontiers. This marked one of the most significant territorial losses in Nepal's history, reshaping its geopolitical landscape and diminishing its strategic depth in the Himalayan region. Following the British withdrawal, India and Nepal entered a new phase of engagement marked by the signing of the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which replaced earlier agreements but left unresolved the fundamental question of the Kali River's origin (Bhattarai, 2024). This ambiguity lies at the heart of the Kalapani dispute, encompassing approximately 35 square kilometres of contested territory. While the 1816 Treaty established the Kali River as Nepal's western boundary, it left its source undefined. Nepal identifies the river's origin at Limpiyadhura, claiming Kalapani, Limpiyadhura, and Lipulekh, while India locates it further upstream, placing the area within its jurisdiction. In both narratives, Kalapani is firmly projected as integral to their respective sovereign claims (Kumar & Thakur, 2024).

Disputes over rivers in South Asia underscore their significance as both vital resources for survival and natural demarcations of territorial borders. Colonial-era treaties left ambiguities that continue to fuel contestation, as seen in the Indus and Teesta water-sharing issues with Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Kali River similarly occupies a central role in defining the India-Nepal boundary. The Kalapani dispute becomes more complex with the involvement of the Lipulekh Pass, a strategically significant corridor situated at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China. While India leverages the pass for cross-border connectivity and strategic depth, Nepal views its exclusion from related agreements as an erosion of sovereignty (Thakur & Kumar, 2022). Attempts at institutional resolution, such as the Joint Technical Boundary Committee (1981), failed to settle the issue, leaving Kalapani a persistent fault line in bilateral relations and a pressure point within the wider Sino-Indian strategic rivalry (Baral, 2018).

While the India-Nepal Joint Technical Boundary Committee resolved nearly 97% of the border, the remaining 3%, including Kalapani-Limpiyadhura (370 km²), Susta (24 km²), and several other scattered pockets, totalling roughly 606 km², remains unsettled. The dispute persists largely due to

the limited and contested access to historical maps and documents. Both India and Nepal rely on colonial-era cartographic records and treaties, such as the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, to substantiate their claims, yet the interpretation of these documents varies significantly (Nayak, 2020). This perpetuates mistrust, thereby obstructing a definitive settlement of the boundary question. This cartographic ambiguity is further entangled in regional geopolitics, as Nepal's territorial claims intersect with India's strategic concerns along the Himalayan region and China's growing influence, making the dispute not merely a bilateral issue but a wider geopolitical flashpoint.

The Politicisation and Resurgence of the Kalapani Dispute

Before the 1990s, during the Panchayat era, the Kalapani dispute remained largely absent from public debate, as foreign policy was managed by the monarchy with limited scope for scrutiny or public engagement. The democratic transition of the 1990s, however, reframed it as a sovereignty concern, with Khum Bahadur Khadka's 1998 parliamentary intervention politicising India's military presence. Since then, Kalapani has become a recurring theme in Nepal's democratic trajectory, shaping public perceptions and exerting a significant influence on India-Nepal diplomatic interactions (Kumar, 2024). In recent years, particularly since 2019, the Kalapani dispute has regained prominence due to three critical developments. First, following India's abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 and the subsequent reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir to Union Territories, New Delhi issued new political maps that depicted the Kalapani region as part of Indian territory. This move provoked sharp reactions in Kathmandu, where political leaders and the public viewed it as an assertion of unilateral cartographic control over contested territory. Second, India inaugurated a new road through the Lipulekh pass in order to facilitate pilgrimages and enhance connectivity with Tibet. While strategically significant for India, this development was perceived in Nepal as a direct encroachment on its sovereignty, sparking protests and deepening mistrust between the two countries. In retaliation, Nepal released an official map depicting the disputed region as part of its territory (Aryal & Bharti, 2022). Third, during the 24th round of the Special Representatives dialogue on boundary issues between India and China, the two sides reached an understanding to reopen the Lipulekh pass as a means of improving cross-border trade and connectivity. However, the decision carries implications beyond the India-China framework. For Nepal, the agreement was untenable as it was concluded without its consultation, despite the pass lying in a disputed territory claimed by Nepal. This development has been seen in Kathmandu as an infringement upon its sovereign interests, thereby adding another layer of complexity to the already contentious Kalapani dispute (Giri, 2025).

Kalapani and the Changing Contours of India-Nepal Relations

While Nepal's political landscape remains fragmented, territorial disputes, particularly over Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura, have emerged as a point of consensus among rival factions. The need to safeguard national sovereignty often overrides ideological differences, and Nepal is no exception, with political parties presenting a united front in the public sphere. Nepali media and civil society portray India as an encroaching power, continuously highlighting historical imbalances in bilateral relations. This interplay of political unity and public discourse further amplifies the prevailing anti-India sentiment (Behera et al, 2024). This dynamic has eroded

goodwill and undermined India's Neighbourhood Policy, reducing the scope for a stable, forward-looking bilateral engagement.

Moreover, the Kalapani dispute extends beyond a bilateral territorial disagreement as it carries wider regional implications for the security framework of South Asia. Situated at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, Kalapani occupies a strategically sensitive frontier whose importance was heightened in the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian War. India's continued military presence in Kalapani, originally sanctioned after the 1962 war, highlights its strategic utility as both a buffer against China and a control point over the Lipulekh corridor, reinforcing India's northern security calculus while intensifying Nepal's sovereignty concerns. Although Nepal has raised concerns over encroachments along other sections of its borders, the Kalapani dispute stands apart, as the continued presence of Indian military personnel in the area has significantly increased nationalist sentiments. For India, therefore, Kalapani holds strategic significance as it provides a critical vantage point for monitoring Chinese military movements along Nepal's border with Tibet, making it integral to its northern security arrangement. While for Nepal, the territory constitutes a core question of sovereignty and national identity, making its control not merely a territorial claim but also a matter of political legitimacy and national pride. Such contrasting interpretations have consistently exacerbated diplomatic frictions between the two countries (Kumar & Thakur, 2024).

At the regional level, the dispute complicates India-Nepal relations by increasing distrust and suspicion, thereby undermining the prospects for meaningful regional cooperation in South Asia, including the already fragile institutional mechanisms such as SAARC. Simultaneously, the dispute is also deeply embedded within the wider strategic dynamics of the India-China rivalry. Beijing's growing infrastructural and military presence along the Himalayan region has increased New Delhi's anxieties about potential territorial incursions, compelling India to reinforce its northern security posture. China's growing influence in Nepal has complicated the Kalapani dispute by altering its strategic context. Once a bilateral issue, it now intersects with Sino-Indian rivalry as Beijing's investments under the Belt and Road Initiative, political engagement, and infrastructure projects give Nepal greater confidence in asserting its claims. Although China avoids openly supporting Nepal, its influence reinforces Indian apprehensions and intensifies the strategic sensitivity of the trijunction (Thakur & Kumar, 2022).

Therefore, the Kalapani dispute has altered the trajectory of India-Nepal relations by shifting them from a cooperative framework rooted in historical and cultural affinities toward one defined by mistrust and strategic contestation. For Nepal, the issue has become a rallying point for sovereignty and national identity, uniting otherwise divided political factions and reinforcing anti-India sentiment. For India, however, Kalapani remains a non-negotiable security imperative tied to its broader China strategy. This clash of perceptions shifts the relationship into a more adversarial space, where territorial disputes overshadow cultural and economic ties. The dispute also internationalises the bilateral relationship, as China's proximity amplifies both Nepal's assertiveness and India's security anxieties. Therefore, these shifts reflect a move from predominantly cooperative and asymmetrical engagement to a more contested and strategically complex relationship, highlighting how bilateral ties adapt to changing domestic and regional contexts.

Conclusion

The Kalapani dispute, though strategically significant, remains constrained by structural limitations; the contested area spans only a few square kilometres of the trijunction of India, Nepal, and China, and holds limited economic value beyond its geographic significance. While symbolically powerful in Nepal's domestic politics, the dispute largely functions as a tool for nationalist mobilisation rather than as a practical foreign policy instrument. Moreover, Nepal lacks the diplomatic or military leverage to alter the status quo, resulting in a prolonged stalemate. However, if the dispute remains unresolved, it carries implications for India's broader regional and global ambitions, particularly its aspirations to be recognised as a credible regional and rising major power. As India envisions itself as a *Viksit Bharat* (Developed India) by 2047, unresolved border disputes pose a significant strategic challenge. At the regional level, India has long sought to use its Neighbourhood First Policy on the basis of trust, stability, and developmental partnerships with immediate neighbours. Therefore, persistent territorial tensions with neighbours such as Nepal, China, and Pakistan not only undermine India's regional credibility but also constrain its ability to project itself as a responsible and stabilising force in South Asia. At the global level, India's ability to project itself as a responsible power is linked to how it manages its immediate periphery. Unresolved disputes like Kalapani expose vulnerabilities in India's regional leadership and raise questions about its ability to effectively manage its immediate neighbourhood, a critical prerequisite for achieving the status of a great power. Furthermore, overlooking Nepal's concerns undermines India's traditional influence in Kathmandu, especially as China expands its footprint through infrastructure, trade, and political engagement. Therefore, addressing these issues through sustained diplomacy, confidence-building, and equitable negotiation is not merely a bilateral necessity but also a strategic necessity for India's broader ambition to establish itself as a leading power in the global order. Resolving the Kalapani dispute demands a balanced strategy rooted in historical understanding, mutual respect, and pragmatic diplomacy. Confidence-building measures such as joint boundary surveys, transparent map-sharing, and structured negotiations could build trust. A negotiated settlement would not only restore India-Nepal trust but also contribute to regional stability in South Asia, offering a precedent for constructive conflict management amid intensifying Sino-Indian competition in the Himalayas.

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