

## Kalapani, Cartography, and Karma: A Vaiśeṣika Interpretation of the Nepal–India Border Dispute

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### Abstract

The Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute constitutes a persistent point of contention in Nepal–India relations, shaped by the intersection of colonial cartographic legacies, competing territorial epistemologies, and evolving geopolitical conditions. This article analyzes the dispute through the philosophical framework of Vaiśeṣika, with particular attention to the interaction of *dravya* (material and geographical conditions), *guna* (knowledge systems and interpretative practices), and *karma* (political agency and state action) in the production of territorial claims. Drawing on historical treaties, colonial-era maps, diplomatic records, and contemporary political developments, the study argues that the dispute originates in structural ambiguities embedded in the Treaty of Sugauli (1816), which were subsequently reinforced by British cartographic reinterpretations of the Kali River’s headwaters and later consolidated through post-colonial administrative practices. These historical contradictions were further shaped by asymmetrical power relations between Nepal and India, strategic security concerns following the 1962 Sino-Indian War, and the growing salience of territorial nationalism in Nepal after the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990. The constitutional incorporation of Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura into Nepal’s official map in 2020 represents a significant moment in which historical memory and state sovereignty were formally rearticulated within constitutional and symbolic state practice. By applying Vaiśeṣika philosophy to border analysis, this study reframes the Nepal–India territorial dispute as a historically evolving process rather than a fixed legal disagreement. It demonstrates that the border question is produced through the continuous interaction of material geography, contested knowledge systems, and political decision-making. In doing so, the paper contributes to border studies and South Asian geopolitics by offering an indigenous philosophical perspective that highlights how historical contradictions continue to structure contemporary territorial disputes.

**Keywords:** Nepal–India border, Vaiśeṣika philosophy, cartography, territorial dispute, sovereignty, geopolitics, border studies.

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#### Introduction

Borders are not merely political demarcations; they are dynamic constructs shaped by historical contradictions, material conditions, and human agency. Nepal’s borders with India and China, two of the largest and most historically significant powers in Asia, have developed through centuries of treaties, conflicts, and negotiations. The processes that defined Nepal’s territorial identity are rooted in the interaction of opposing forces expansion and contraction, assertion and accommodation, sovereignty and dependency. This study examines Nepal’s border history through the philosophical lens of Vaisesika thought, particularly its explanation of contradictions as the driving force of change.

In Vaisheshika philosophy, the world is composed of *dravya* (material reality), *guna* (qualities/knowledge), and *karma* (human actions). The interaction between these elements creates union and separation, stability and transformation. Nepal's historical borders have been shaped by this dialectical process. The Nepal-India border has been defined by both cooperation and contention—ranging from open-border agreements under the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship to disputes over Kalapani-Limpiyadhura and Susta, where conflicting British colonial maps, shifting river courses, and strategic interests create ongoing tensions. The Nepal-China border, once marked by fluid frontiers between Nepal and Tibet, solidified through military conflicts such as the Nepal-Tibet War (1855-56) and later diplomatic agreements, particularly the 1961 Nepal-China border agreement with the People's Republic of China. These historical contradictions define Nepal's geopolitical challenges today.

Existing scholarship on Nepal-India border relations has primarily examined territorial disputes through the lenses of colonial history, geopolitics, security studies, and international relations. Early historical works, such as those of Ludwig Stiller (1976), focused on the territorial consequences of the Treaty of Sugauli (1816), emphasizing the role of British imperial expansion in redefining Nepal's boundaries. Similarly, Leo E. Rose (1971) analyzed Nepal-India relations within a framework of political and economic asymmetry, highlighting the influence of the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship on Nepal's foreign policy and strategic autonomy. Subsequent studies by Lok Raj Baral (2012) examined the open border regime as a source of both economic opportunity and security vulnerability, while the extensive works of Buddhi Narayan Shrestha (1999, 2003) provided detailed analyses of border encroachment, boundary pillars, cartographic disputes, and Nepal's territorial claims in Kalapani, Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura, and Susta.

Although these studies have significantly advanced understanding of Nepal-India border issues, they largely interpret border disputes through the frameworks of political realism, national security, international law, economic interdependence, or historical treaty interpretation. As a result, borders are often treated as fixed territorial entities whose disputes emerge primarily from competing state interests. Comparatively little attention has been given to the philosophical foundations of territorial conflict or to the ways in which historical contradictions, competing forms of knowledge, and political action interact to produce and transform border disputes over time.

This limitation is particularly evident in studies of the Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura dispute. Existing explanations generally emphasize competing interpretations of the Treaty of Sugauli (1816), colonial cartography, security concerns following the 1962 Sino-Indian War, or the strategic significance of Himalayan transit corridors. While these factors are undoubtedly important, the dispute is also shaped by the interaction of economic interests, geopolitical calculations, historical narratives, and competing territorial imaginaries. Both Nepal and India continue to represent the disputed territory within their respective official maps, reflecting not only legal and historical claims but also broader strategic and economic considerations associated with border security, regional connectivity, trade routes, and geopolitical influence in the Himalayan region (Baral, 2012; Shrestha, 2003).

To address this gap, the present study employs the Vaiśeṣika concepts of *dravya* (material reality), *guna* (knowledge and interpretation), and *karma* (human and political action) as an analytical framework for understanding the historical evolution of the Nepal-India border dispute. By conceptualizing borders as dynamic products of historical contradictions rather than static territorial lines, the study offers an alternative perspective on the Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura dispute and contributes to broader debates in border studies, historical sociology, and indigenous approaches to international relations.

This study has two main objectives. First, it seeks to examine the historical evolution of the Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura border dispute between Nepal and India by situating

it within the broader contexts of colonial cartography, historical treaties, and post-colonial political developments. Second, it aims to interpret this dispute through the philosophical framework of Vaiśeṣika, with particular attention to the interaction of *dravya* (material reality), *guna* (knowledge and interpretation), and *karma* (political action) in shaping Nepal–India border relations. Correspondingly, this paper explores the two central research questions:- How have colonial cartography, the Treaty of Sugauli (1816), and post-colonial political developments shaped the Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute between Nepal and India? And in what ways can Vaiśeṣika philosophy, through the interaction of *dravya*, *guna*, and *karma*, provide a deeper understanding of the Nepal–India border dispute?

### Materials and Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research design based on historical and interpretive analysis. It draws on a combination of primary and secondary sources to examine official representations and interpretations of Nepal–India border knowledge, with particular reference to the Kalapani, Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura region.

Primary sources include the Treaty of Sugauli (1816), selected British-era Survey of India maps, diplomatic and governmental documents from Nepal and India, parliamentary records, and official publications such as Nepal’s revised political map issued in 2020. These sources are used to trace how territorial descriptions and administrative understandings have been recorded and reproduced across different historical periods. Secondary sources consist of scholarly works on Nepal–India relations, colonial cartography, border studies, and South Asian geopolitics. The selected documents are closely read and compared to understand how different institutional sources have represented the border over time. Rather than treating these materials as fixed descriptions of territory, the analysis focuses on how meaning is constructed through documentation, mapping practices, and state discourse.

Vaiśeṣika philosophy is used as an interpretive framework to guide analysis. In particular, the concepts of *dravya* (material conditions), *guna* (knowledge and interpretation), and *karma* (action) are used to structure understanding of how historical records and political decisions interact in shaping territorial narratives. Overall, the methodology emphasizes interpretation over measurement, allowing the study to examine how historical documents and philosophical ideas together shape understandings of borders without adding new empirical claims beyond the sources used.

### Results

The findings of this study indicate that the Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute has evolved through the sustained interaction of colonial cartographic practices, historical treaty interpretations, and post-colonial political developments. These factors have collectively produced competing territorial claims between Nepal and India, particularly grounded in differing readings of the Treaty of Sugauli (1815–16) and subsequent British-era administrative mapping practices.

A key finding is that the Vaiśeṣika analytical triad of *dravya*, *guna*, and *karma* offers a coherent interpretive framework for understanding this evolution. Material conditions (*dravya*), including geographical features, strategic location, and trade routes, have consistently shaped the strategic significance of the disputed territory. Epistemic constructions (*guna*), reflected in maps, historical records, and legal interpretations, have generated and sustained divergent claims over the same space. Political agency (*karma*) has varied across historical periods, with state responses ranging from administrative neglect to formal constitutional assertion, reflecting shifts in domestic political structure and bilateral relations.

The study further finds that Nepal’s internal political transformation after the 1990 restoration of multiparty democracy marked a critical shift in the articulation of the dispute.

The issue transitioned from a marginal administrative concern to a nationally recognized political and diplomatic agenda, indicating a significant expansion of state engagement and public visibility.

In addition, external structural conditions—including economic interdependence with India, security considerations in the Himalayan frontier, and broader regional geopolitical shifts—have significantly shaped Nepal’s policy space. These factors have influenced both the timing, intensity, and framing of Nepal’s diplomatic responses to the dispute.

In addressing the research questions, the findings demonstrate that Vaiśeṣika philosophy helps illuminate how material realities, knowledge systems, and political action operate in continuous interaction to produce and sustain territorial disputes. Rather than being fixed legal disagreements, borders emerge as historically contingent and dynamically constructed outcomes shaped by evolving relations among geography, interpretation, and state power.

Overall, the study concludes that Nepal–India border issues are better understood as evolving historical processes rather than static territorial conflicts, with their persistence rooted in the ongoing interplay of material, epistemic, and political forces.

### Discussion

The borders of Nepal with India and China have been shaped by a complex historical interplay of political, economic, and territorial dynamics, which is well-suited for analysis through the lens of Vaisesika philosophy. According to Vaisesika philosophy, the interaction of *dravya* (material conditions), *guna* (knowledge/skill), and *karma* (human actions) is the driving force behind societal changes. Kashyapa Rishi says that the contradiction between *dravya* (matter) and *karma* (human actions) leads to conjunction and disjunction (Sinha 1923, 142). These elements—material conditions and actions of both states and individuals—have continually influenced Nepal’s historical and contemporary border disputes and agreements. This analysis allows us to understand not only the geographical and political dimensions of Nepal’s borders but also the contradictions in thinking and transformations that these borders embody.

The early history of Nepal is rooted in the reign of the Gopals or Abhiras, as documented in the *Gopalaraj Vamsavali* and the *Kirata Mundhum*. One of the prominent figures of this era was Nepa, a cowherd who is credited with discovering the Shiva linga of Sri Pasupati Bhattaraka. According to legend, the sacred linga was revealed when Nepa’s cow began to release milk into a hole in the ground, signifying the divine presence (Vajracarya and Malla, 1985, p. 121). This event is emblematic of Nepal’s deep-rooted Shaivist tradition.

According to the *Kirata Mundhum*, the Gopals ruled Nepal for eight generations. Their last king, Bhuvana Singh, was eventually defeated by Yalamba, a Kirata king from Yalung in eastern Nepal. During their rule, the Gopals governed from their capital in Tistung, and their territory extended from the Trisuli River in the west to the Tama Koshi River in the east, and from Chitlang in the south to the snowline of the Himalayas in the north (Chemjong, 2003, pp. 5–6). Following their defeat, Yalamba shifted the capital to Thankot and expanded the kingdom eastward to the Teesta River (Chemjong, 2003, p. 6).

The *Kirata Mundhum* further narrates the divine incarnation of the goddess Yumasamang as Queen Suyenosuno Hangma. She is credited with unifying the hill region (*Shinyuk*) and the Tarai (*Muden*) into a single kingdom that extended westward to Kedarkhanda (modern-day Garhwal) and southward to the Ganga River (Chemjong, 2003, pp. 7, 16–17, 111–112). The Kiratas are believed to have ruled Nepal for 1,963 years, beginning around 1700 BCE, until they were succeeded by the Licchavis in the second century CE (Vajracarya and Malla, 1985, pp. 121–122).

The Licchavi period, lasting from the 1st to the 8th century CE, marked a significant phase of consolidation and cultural development in Nepal. A notable inscription from this period is that of Jayadeva II in 733 CE at Pashupati, which records his victory over Kamrupa (modern-day Assam) (Vajracharya, 1996, p. 554). This suggests that Nepal's influence extended from Assam in the east to Kumaon in the west (Khanal, 2005, p. 4). Historically, any territory governed from Kathmandu was regarded as part of the Kingdom of Nepal.

Following the decline of the Licchavis, Nepal fragmented into smaller principalities until the 18th century. It was then that Prithvinarayan Shah of Gorkha initiated the unification of Nepal. He successfully conquered central and eastern regions up to the Teesta River. His successors later extended the western frontier to the Sutlej River, laying the foundation of modern Nepal. However, the territorial expansion mainly in the southern plains, and restriction imposed on British traders not to trade with Tibet through Nepal brought the kingdom into conflict with the British East India Company, leading to the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814–1816).

The Treaty of Sugauli (1815), ratified in 1816 between the Kingdom of Nepal and the British East India Company, marked a decisive transformation in the territorial configuration of Nepal. As a consequence of Nepal's military defeat, the treaty required significant territorial concessions, including lands west of the Kali River (Kumaon and Garhwal), east of the Mechi River (including Sikkim), and extensive portions of the southern Tarai plains (Stiller, 1973, pp. 98–101). Beyond territorial reduction, the treaty also institutionalized British oversight in Nepal's external relations through the establishment of a British Resident in Kathmandu, thereby limiting Nepal's autonomy in diplomacy and trade. This arrangement introduced a structural asymmetry that would continue to shape Nepal's boundary relations and external engagements in the subsequent century.

In contrast, the Treaty of Friendship signed between Nepal and Britain in 1923 represented a significant diplomatic reconfiguration. Concluded on 21 December 1923, this agreement formally recognized Nepal as an independent and sovereign state in international law. It effectively superseded earlier restrictive provisions associated with the Sugauli settlement and reaffirmed Nepal's authority to conduct independent foreign relations without external interference (Rose, 1971, p. 39). This treaty marked an important shift in Nepal's international status, restoring diplomatic legitimacy while retaining the geopolitical realities shaped during the colonial period.

Taken together, these two treaties illustrate the historical process through which Nepal's territorial and diplomatic boundaries were constructed, constrained, and later renegotiated. They also provide the foundational context for understanding the later evolution of Nepal–India border relations, particularly in terms of how historical agreements continue to inform contemporary interpretations of sovereignty and territorial claims.

Thus, the territorial history of Nepal—from the Gopala and Kirata periods through Licchavi expansion, Shah political unification, and British interventions—reflects a continuous negotiation between spiritual legitimacy, political unification, and colonial pressure.

### **Nepal-India border dispute**

The historical relationship between Nepal and India, particularly concerning their shared border, has been shaped by a series of treaties, conflicts, and negotiations that reflect both cooperation and contention. A major milestone in bilateral relations was the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which established a framework for open-border relations and enabled the free movement of people, goods, and economic activities between the two countries, thereby strengthening longstanding social, cultural, and economic ties. The treaty also contained important security provisions. Article 5 stipulated that the Government of Nepal would be free to import arms, ammunition, and military equipment from or through the territory of India, with the procedures to be determined through mutual consultation between

the two governments (Treaty of Peace and Friendship, 1950, Art. 5). While this provision was intended to facilitate Nepal's security requirements, it later became a subject of debate regarding Nepal's strategic autonomy and defence procurement policies (Jha, 2024). Thus, the 1950 Treaty institutionalized both cooperation and interdependence, shaping the political and security dimensions of Nepal–India relations for decades.

Historically, Nepal–India border relations have been shaped by several territorial disputes arising from differing interpretations of historical treaties, cartographic records, and changing geographical conditions. Among the most prominent are the Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura and Susta disputes. The Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute gained renewed prominence in 2019 following the publication of India's revised political map, which depicted the disputed area within Indian territory. Nepal formally objected to the map, maintaining that the territory falls within Nepal's sovereign boundaries as defined by the Treaty of Sugauli (1816) and supported by historical maps that identify the Kali River's source at Limpiyadhura (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2019; Shrestha, 2018).

India, however, advances a different interpretation of both the Treaty of Sugauli and the Kali River system. This interpretation draws support from several British-era cartographic records produced during the nineteenth century. While early maps prepared shortly after the Treaty of Sugauli, including maps published by the Survey of India in 1827 and 1850, generally depicted the Kali River as originating near Limpiyadhura, later British maps began to alter this representation. By the late 19th century (e.g., **1879 maps**), the British survey line was drawn further east, aligning the boundary along a ridge near Kalapani and recognizing the smaller Pankhagad/Lipulekh tributary as the source of the Kali. This effectively placed Kalapani and Lipulekh within British India. This was a cartographic reinterpretation that aligned with British strategic interests in controlling Himalayan passes and trans-Tibetan trade routes (Upreti, 2006; Shrestha, 2018). Over time, these later colonial maps became embedded in British administrative practice and were subsequently inherited by independent India as part of its territorial claim.

Despite this territorial re-representation of the British colonialism, Nepal's Rana rulers did not formally protest these changes, largely due to their limited administrative presence in the far-western frontier, Nepal's semi-dependent foreign policy under British paramountcy, and the regime's prioritization of internal political stability over active frontier diplomacy (Whelpton, 2005; Upreti, 2012). This pattern of silence extended beyond the Rana period. Following India's establishment of an Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) post at Kalapani after the 1962 Sino-Indian War, Nepal's Shah monarchs similarly refrained from raising sustained diplomatic objections, reflecting concerns about antagonizing India amid Nepal's continued economic and strategic dependence (Baral, 2008; Upreti, 2012).

Similarly, the Susta dispute illustrates how natural geographical changes can complicate boundary demarcation. Located in the Nawalparasi region along the Gandaki (Narayani) River, Susta has become contested due to the river's gradual westward shift over time. Nepal argues that the international boundary should remain based on the original river course recognized during boundary demarcation, whereas India maintains that the present course of the river constitutes the effective boundary. As a result, differing interpretations of riverine boundary principles, combined with changing physical geography, have produced overlapping territorial claims and periodic tensions between the two countries (Shrestha, 2003; Upreti, 2012). The Susta dispute demonstrates that Nepal–India border issues are shaped by dynamic environmental processes and competing interpretations of territorial jurisdiction. However, it is also important to note that, compared to Kalapani, the Susta issue has not been consistently, and prominently raised at the same level in Nepal's formal diplomatic or political agenda, and its articulation has remained comparatively limited and intermittent in Nepal's official discourse.

The Kalapani issue first gained prominence in Nepal's national political discourse during the democratic transition of the 1990s. Although the dispute existed earlier, it was the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) that elevated it into a national political agenda. During the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Adhikari, Kalapani was publicly framed as a question of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Subsequently,

governments led by the Nepali Congress incorporated the issue into formal diplomatic engagements with India, thereby transforming it into a central concern of Nepal's foreign policy (Baral, 2008; Upreti, 2012). Parliamentary debates in 1997 further institutionalized state attention to the matter by raising concerns over India's security presence in the area claimed by Nepal (Government of Nepal, 1997; Sharma, 2012).

Economic changes during the same period further intensified these dynamics. India's economic liberalization, combined with Nepal's structural dependence on Indian transit routes and markets, heightened perceptions of economic asymmetry. Alongside this, allegations of territorial encroachment, disputes over boundary pillars, and concerns regarding infrastructural activities in frontier regions contributed to the rise of anti-India sentiment within sections of the Nepali population, particularly in border areas (Giri, 2005; Upreti, 2016). In this context, anti-Indian sentiment has at times been translated into electoral advantage, as political parties strategically mobilize nationalist discourse to consolidate voter support and legitimacy.

The Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) added a significant security dimension to Nepal–India border relations. Indian concerns over cross-border mobility, arms trafficking, and ideological spillover led to increased surveillance and occasional tightening of border controls. From the Nepali perspective, these measures were often interpreted as inconsistent with the historically open-border arrangement established under the 1950 treaty, reinforcing perceptions of Indian interventionism (Adhikari, 2004; Rose, 2015). Such perceptions did not disappear after the end of the insurgency but re-emerged during subsequent crises, most notably the 2015–16 India–Nepal border undeclared blockade, and the renewed Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute following India's revised political map in 2019 (Upreti & Paudel, 2020; Whelpton, 2021).

A significant turning point occurred in 2020 when the Government of Nepal officially adopted a revised political map that incorporated Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura within its national boundaries. This decision, later endorsed through constitutional amendment, transformed the territorial claim into a formal state position and a powerful symbol of national sovereignty. The so-called “Chuche Naksha” reflected both rising public concern and the consolidation of territorial consciousness within Nepal's political identity (Government of Nepal, 2020). In the subsequent period, this cartographic assertion was further reinforced through its incorporation into official state symbolism, including its appearance on Nepali currency, thereby embedding the revised territorial representation within everyday economic and institutional life and strengthening its status as a marker of national territorial identity.

In a broader geopolitical context, Nepal–India relations have also been influenced by changing political configurations within India. Since the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in 2014, India's foreign policy has increasingly reflected a more assertive territorial and strategic posture in border regions, which has shaped the discursive environment surrounding Himalayan frontier issues. Unlike earlier phases of Indo-Nepal relations, which were often mediated through long-standing political and ideological networks between major Indian and Nepali political parties, contemporary relations are characterized by weaker ideological alignment and more issue-based diplomatic engagement.

Historically, Nepal's modern political movements were significantly influenced by cross-border ideological flows. The Nepali Congress, for instance, emerged in exile in Banaras in the late 1940s, while Nepal's communist movement developed under strong intellectual and organizational influences from Calcutta and other Indian cities during the mid-twentieth century. India also played an important facilitative role in Nepal's democratic transitions, particularly in the 1990 movement, the later People's movement of 2006, and the peace process that brought Maoist forces into mainstream politics. However, despite these historical linkages, Nepal's contemporary border disputes are no longer structured through party-level ideological affiliations but through state-centric strategic and territorial concerns. In this context, the absence of any party-to-party alignment between major Nepali political actors and India's ruling BJP has coincided with a more securitized and assertive framing of

border issues, contributing to periodic diplomatic tensions, including those related to Kalapani.

The Kalapani issue has also become an important component of Nepal's domestic political competition. Scholars note that questions of territorial sovereignty and Nepal–India relations often gain heightened prominence during periods of political contestation, when parties seek to demonstrate nationalist credibility before the electorate (Hachhethu, 2009; Baral, 2008). Consequently, border disputes such as Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura are frequently framed in political discourse as symbols of national dignity and sovereignty. Both left-oriented and centrist political parties have periodically adopted strong positions on these issues to mobilize public support and strengthen electoral legitimacy. In this context, anti-Indian sentiment has occasionally functioned as a political resource through which parties gain electoral advantage by positioning themselves as defenders of Nepal's territorial integrity and national interests (Muni, 2016; Jha, 2014). This indicates that nationalist sentiment can be strategically mobilized within electoral politics, particularly during periods of intensified diplomatic tension.

While such mobilization reflects genuine public concern regarding sovereignty, scholars also caution that the politicization of border disputes can complicate diplomatic efforts aimed at long-term resolution (Baral, 2008; Upreti, 2012). The adoption of Nepal's revised political map in 2020 further intensified this dynamic. By constitutionally incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura, the dispute shifted from a foreign policy issue into a matter of national consensus, making it politically difficult for any government to adopt a conciliatory position on territorial questions. As a result, the dispute now functions both as an instrument of international diplomacy and as a symbol through which political actors compete for nationalist legitimacy (Muni, 2016; Shrestha, 2018).

Within Nepal's contemporary political discourse, a further narrative connects the dispute to wider geopolitical competition in the Himalayan region. From this perspective, Nepal's strategic location between India and China has attracted external attention, and some commentators argue that international actors have indirectly influenced the discourse surrounding Kalapani. This narrative often cites instances such as foreign diplomatic missions publicly sharing Nepal's revised political map following the 2020 constitutional amendment, including social media posts by the United States Embassy in Kathmandu. While such interpretations are widely circulated in public debate, they remain contested and are not firmly established in academic scholarship. Accordingly, they are better understood as part of competing geopolitical narratives rather than empirically verified explanations of the dispute.

In the contemporary period, under the government led by Prime Minister Balendra Shah in 2026, Nepal has continued to uphold its official position that these territories are integral parts of the country. While the dispute remains formally confined to a bilateral framework between Nepal and India, occasional political and analytical narratives have situated the issue within a wider geopolitical context involving major external powers, particularly China due to regional connectivity projects and historical Himalayan linkages. Nonetheless, neither China nor the United Kingdom has been formally involved in mediation or negotiation processes regarding the Kalapani dispute. The dispute therefore persists as a defining feature of Nepal–India relations, reflecting the interaction of historical legacies, strategic interests, national identity, and regional geopolitics (Government of Nepal, 2020; Baral, 2008).

From a Vaiśeṣika philosophical perspective, the Kalapani dispute illustrates the interaction of *dravya* (territory as material reality), *guna* (historical knowledge, cartographic interpretation, and competing narratives), and *karma* (political and diplomatic action). The contradiction between Nepal's constitutional territorial claim and the prevailing geopolitical status quo continues to generate political and diplomatic movement. In this sense, the dispute is not merely a territorial disagreement but an ongoing historical process through which contradictions continuously shape Nepal's evolving borders and national identity.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine the historical evolution of the Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura border dispute between Nepal and India and to interpret its underlying

dynamics through the Vaiśeṣika framework of *dravya* (material conditions), *guna* (knowledge systems), and *karma* (political action). The findings demonstrate that the dispute cannot be understood solely as a legal disagreement over territory, but as a historically produced outcome of interacting material, epistemic, and political forces.

Historically, the evolution of the dispute has been shaped by colonial cartographic practices, treaty interpretations, and post-colonial administrative continuities. These elements have generated competing territorial narratives that persist into the present. Rather than producing closure, successive reinterpretations of historical maps and treaties have reinforced ambiguity, allowing the dispute to remain open-ended within contemporary diplomacy. The analysis further shows that *karma*, in the form of state action and inaction, has been decisive in shaping the trajectory of the dispute. Different political regimes in Nepal have responded differently to the issue, ranging from limited articulation to formal constitutional assertion. These shifts reflect changes in domestic political agency, yet they have not fundamentally altered the structural asymmetry within which the dispute is embedded. At the same time, *guna*—the production and contestation of knowledge through maps, legal arguments, and historical narratives—has played a central role in sustaining divergent claims. Both Nepal and India rely on selective readings of historical evidence to legitimize their positions, demonstrating that knowledge is not neutral but politically situated and strategically deployed.

Finally, *dravya*, understood as geographical realities, strategic location, and economic interdependence, continues to constrain the possibilities of resolution. The Himalayan terrain, the strategic significance of border corridors, and broader regional geopolitical considerations ensure that the dispute remains embedded in wider structural conditions beyond bilateral negotiations alone. In addressing the research questions, the study concludes that the Kalapani dispute is produced through the continuous interaction of historical documentation, political decision-making, and material geography. Vaiśeṣika philosophy provides a useful analytical lens for understanding this process by revealing how borders emerge not as fixed legal outcomes but as evolving configurations shaped by the interplay of knowledge, action, and material reality.

Overall, the study contributes to South Asian border studies by demonstrating that Nepal–India territorial disputes are best understood as dynamic historical processes rather than static geopolitical disagreements. This perspective highlights the need for analytical approaches that move beyond purely legalistic or realist explanations and instead account for the layered historical and philosophical dimensions of border formation.

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