

Silently Reflecting on Twenty-Five Years of Uttarakhand's Journey - An Unfinished Promise

Gaurav Upadhyay*

Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, School of Social Science, Uttarakhand Open University, Haldwani, Nainital &
Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Kumaun University, Nainital, Uttarakhand

Naman Joshi

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Kumaun University, Nainital, Uttarakhand

Neerja Tripathi

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, SSJ University, Almora, Uttarakhand

*Corresponding Author Email: upadhyayji713@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article provides a critical analysis of Uttarakhand's (a state in India) 25-year journey since its creation in 2000. While conceived as 'Devbhoomi' (land of gods) with the promise of equitable, hill-sensitive development, the state's silver jubilee celebrations contrast sharply with the persistent ground realities. This article provides a critical analysis of Uttarakhand's 25-year journey since its creation in 2000. The study identifies some serious issues, such as towards education with widespread school closures and considerable youth unemployment which have been made worse by paper leaks. Hilly rural areas face an existential threat from huge out-migration, leaving behind 'ghost villages', while issues like rising drug abuse and an unresolved capital debate in Gairsain underscore unfulfilled aspirations. This article argues that the celebratory narrative is detached from the everyday struggles of the average citizen for respectable livelihoods and basic facilities. It concludes that to realign the state's trajectory with its original foundational ideals of identity, environment, and inclusive development, significant progress necessitates honest introspection from both civil society and the government.*

Keywords: Uttarakhand, Statehood, Silver Jubilee, Development Deficit, Migration, Governance

INTRODUCTION

As we very well know that Uttarakhand (a state within the Republic of India) often appears in public imagination as a spiritual landscape, a region that carries centuries of faith. People know it for the Char Dham Yatra (spiritual journey to four sacred places) or the Panch Kedar (five different places of worship of Lord Shiva) routes, where pilgrims still walk for days. Locals grow up hearing that the state is the land of the Gods or Devbhoomi, yet their everyday life is far removed from any divine ease.

After years of protests and suffering, the state was finally established on 9 November 2000 but everyone had quite different expectations. They felt that a separate state would ease the lives of people who had been walking on steep, crumbling roads for decades to access essential amenities.

Twenty-five years later, the government celebrated the silver jubilee of statehood. Official programs, colourful events, glossy advertisements, and speeches fill public spaces. However, one cannot help asking a simple question: is this celebration something the people can genuinely relate to, or is it largely an occasion for those in power?

What makes this question more significant is that Uttarakhand was not merely an administrative reorganisation but a socio-political aspiration rooted in regional identity and developmental justice. The demand for a separate state was driven by the belief that governance closer to the hills would naturally translate into more responsive policies and equitable growth. However, the persistence of structural challenges raises an important analytical concern: Is statehood alone sufficient to address deeply embedded geographical and institutional constraints? Therefore, this study does not view Uttarakhand's journey simply as a narrative of success or failure but as a case that reflects the broader complexities of regional development within a federal system.

GOVERNANCE DEFICIT AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Many families today are preoccupied with problems that feel far more urgent than any anniversary celebration. One can walk into villages and hear that young boys have slipped into drug habits, partly due to a lack of direction. Media reports have highlighted the growing drug problem in Uttarakhand. Easy access to drugs and lack of government attention are two elements that contribute to this issue. Substance abuse has been more common among young people in several sections of the state over the past few years. The most severely impacted area was Nainital (*India Today*, 2022). Therefore, when one asks who exactly will enjoy the silver jubilee festivities, the answer is not

immediately clear. Some might not have the time or money to attend.

Whenever residents of the hills pick up national or regional newspapers, they notice something interesting. The number of political advertisements often exceeds the number of real stories from the state. This leaves people wondering who these ads are for. The Common people? Investors? Or the migrants who left for work years ago and may never return?

Advertising is not an issue in itself. The problem arises when it hides the uncomfortable realities of life in the hills. Meanwhile, several schools and degree colleges operate more as daytime shelters than as actual sites of learning. A surprising fact is revealed in a government report published on March 10, 2025, by Uttarakhand's State Rural Development and Migration Commission: of the 17,787 schools in the state, 10,470 (59%) lack a principal, and approximately 3,504 schools rely on just one instructor for all subjects and grades (*Garhwal Post*, 2025). Teachers warm themselves in the sun while students wander around.

This situation reflects a deeper issue that goes beyond administrative inefficiencies. In many hill regions, governance is not absent but is unevenly experienced. Policies are often designed uniformly, without fully accounting for the geographical isolation and demographic dispersion of the region. Consequently, implementation becomes selective rather than universal. Schools exist but do not function effectively, healthcare centres are present but lack personnel, and infrastructure is created but not maintained. This creates a condition in which the state appears visible on paper, yet distant in everyday life. Over time, such gaps weaken public trust and normalise low expectations of governance.

Information obtained from the Directorate of Education indicates that 3,573 schools have seen a decline in student enrolment to 10 or fewer pupils, and 1,671 schools have been closed statewide owing to a shortage of students. Similarly, there are 102 schools with only one student enrolled. With an astounding 315 schools closed, the Pauri district has the highest school closure rate in the state (*The New Indian Express*, 2024).

A large group of young aspirants has been preparing for competitive exams for years. Paper leaks have become so common that failures are often blamed entirely on the system. Breaking this mindset is difficult but necessary. Without honest self-assessment, both individuals and the state lose out.

The recurring nature of such institutional failures has a cumulative psychological effect on youth. When competitive examinations lose credibility, they do not merely disrupt recruitment cycles; they erode faith in meritocracy itself. This has led to a dangerous shift in which effort is no longer seen as a reliable path to mobility. In such an environment, frustration often finds expression in either protest or withdrawal.

CRISIS OF YOUTH, IDENTITY AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

Most recently, during the UKSSSC (Uttarakhand Subordinate Service Selection Commission) Graduate Level exam on 21 September 2025 three pages of the question paper were purportedly leaked from a centre in Haridwar. This caused a stir throughout the state, and applicants led by the Uttarakhand Unemployed Union staged large-scale protests against the paper leak. The Chief Minister later

declared that the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), an agency of the Government of India, would look into the matter (*The Hindu*, 2025). The CBI has initiated an investigation.

One of the early demands of the statehood movement was the rejection of certain reservation policies: after the Mandal Commission introduced a 27 percent reservation for OBCs, in 1994 the Uttar Pradesh government implemented it throughout the state which fuelled Uttarakhand's statehood movement (Balodi, 2021).

Many protesters in the hills felt that a separate state would protect their identities and concerns. Ironically, the same groups now demand reservation benefits and pensions, and the state has introduced a ten percent horizontal quota for state agitators.

This contradiction is striking. This forces us to revisit the old question of why Uttarakhand was created in the first place. Was it really about reservation, or was it about culture, identity, representation, and a development model sensitive to hilly needs? Even today, many people who participated in the agitation have not received recognition because they lack documents or photographs to prove their involvement. They remain invisible in the state they helped create. They definitely cannot join the celebrations, partly because no one invited them and partly because daily survival leaves little room for festivities. Local politics continues to raise familiar questions. Who counts as a state agitator? Who is a native? What does *pabadi* mean in an official language? These terms are politically sensitive, and the absence of universally accepted definitions only fuels conflicts.

DEVELOPMENTAL IMBALANCE, MIGRATION AND STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

Sometimes, it feels as if these debates are less about identity and more about how identity can be used for political advantage. The jubilee celebration seems tailored mostly for those who earn well and benefit directly or indirectly from government schemes. A large section of the population still struggles to access basic services. For them, the jubilee is a distant event that does not touch their daily lives. It almost resembles a story they hear from a distance.

The debate surrounding Gairsain as the permanent capital still carries quiet tension in the state. People hoped that shifting the capital to the hills would correct the long-standing feeling that development decisions were being made far from the realities of rural Uttarakhand. However, the issue has moved in circles. Committees were formed, and sessions were held and are still happening once in a while in Gairsain, yet the final call kept getting pushed forward.

Scholars and environmentalists have noted that the absence of infrastructure was the primary reason Gairsain was not selected as the capital instead of Dehradun. Dehradun is still the temporary capital, but ceremonial sessions are now held in an assembly building in Gairsain (Nautiyal, 2025). Many residents feel that the promise of a hill capital slowly turned into a symbolic gesture rather than a structural shift.

If we look honestly at the past twenty-five years, each government, regardless of party, has fallen short of the expectations with which the state was formed. The dream was to build a model region known for transparent governance, solid infrastructure, quality schools, local

livelihoods, and development that respected the ecology. Governments came and went, policies changed, yet the issues at the heart of the state remained stubbornly similar. Migration continues. Nearly half of the migrants emigrated because they could not find work, 16-17% because there were no schools or educational opportunities, and an additional 10-12% because there were insufficient medical facilities. 350,000 people fled Uttarakhand between 2001 and 2011, leaving 1,048 villages entirely deserted. Locals refer to the additional 734 villages that have been abandoned since 2011 as “ghost villages” (*Garhwal Post* 2025).

Healthcare facilities in remote areas are still inadequate. Roads are broken every monsoon. Every rainy season, newspapers carry stories of yet another village slipping away because of landslides. Blaming a single political party is convenient but unrealistic. However, the reality is more complex. Governance is a continuous process. Systems, rather than individuals, shape outcomes. When the system hesitates to prioritise community-based development, progress slows down regardless of who sits in power.

A critical aspect that often remains under-discussed is the spatial imbalance in development within the state itself. The concentration of administrative, economic, and infrastructural resources in select urban centres has unintentionally reinforced the migration patterns from the hills. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle: as populations decline in rural areas, service delivery becomes less viable, which, in turn, accelerates further migration. Over time, entire regions risk being reduced to seasonal or symbolic spaces rather than living communities. In this sense, migration is not merely an economic choice but an outcome of an uneven state presence. Addressing this requires not only job creation but also a deliberate rethinking of how development is geographically distributed.

The National Health Mission, Ayushman Bharat, and Health and Wellness Centres are just a handful of the many programs that the government has implemented. Despite this, ensuring that everyone has fair access to primary healthcare is extremely difficult, especially for those residing in rural and hilly areas (Kumar & Negi, 2022).

Another question that is rarely asked is whether citizens themselves remain active and responsible participants in the democratic process. Did we consistently question our representatives in the past? Did we engage with local issues beyond the election season? If the answer is no, then the responsibility is shared. A state does not flourish only through policies. It flourishes when people insist on accountability. Looking ahead, Uttarakhand must be clear about its priorities. Education, healthcare, employment, corruption control, tourism regulation, water resource management, and disaster preparedness cannot remain at the level of slogans. They require concrete work. They demand it soon.

Political conversations often revolve around plains and urban centres. However, the real crisis unfolds in distant villages that still live in conditions resembling those of the early twentieth century. A fair question is, who will speak for them? The election manifestos of various parties highlight big ideas, yet rarely address these difficult realities. Such promises often vanish after the votes are counted. The core concerns of people remain more or less the same, such as migration, employment generation, recurring disasters, public services, and corruption.

When a state's discourse does not shift for decades, there is a serious problem. It is not harsh to point this out. This is a reminder that the state needs introspection. Political leaders must acknowledge their lapses. Simultaneously, society must reflect on its own choices and silence. Real development requires mutual honesty. If the silver jubilee is to be a genuine public celebration, it has to be visible in the eyes of the common villager who still walks kilometres for quality healthcare or education and not just a photo-op for the elite. The state's public health facilities have had minimal foot traffic due to inadequate infrastructure, a lack of medical equipment, and a large number of physician vacancies. In the plains, people are frequently forced to travel considerable distances to access better healthcare (Chhabra & Anand, 2024).

A hilly state cannot be understood only through policy documents or gross domestic product (GDP) figures. It must be understood through the lived experiences of those who walk long distances for basic things, those who worry every monsoon about landslides, or those parents who watch their children leave because the hills cannot promise them a stable job. These stories rarely appear in glossy anniversary celebrations, yet they define the real pulse of the state.

If one travels to villages in Pithoragarh or Pauri, one will notice something very common. People speak of development, but with cautious hope. They talk about new roads, but also about how quickly those roads crack after the first rains. They appreciate the schemes but quietly question why hospitals still do not have specialists. This mix of gratitude and frustration is the most honest reflection of Uttarakhand's reality. After all, progress is not a straight line in the hills; rather, it bends, slips, and often pauses.

A generational shift is also taking place. Older residents still remember the statehood movements. Their idea of “progress” is tied to dignity and recognition. However, younger people are thinking about digital opportunities, start-ups, solar entrepreneurship, and greener livelihoods. The government's push towards renewable energy and e-governance matches this new mindset, although the impact on the ground is still uneven. Perhaps the next 25 years will belong to this generation, the one that wants to stay in the hills without compromising their aspirations and dreams.

Another layer that often goes unnoticed is the changing social landscape of the country. Migration has not only emptied villages. It has changed family structures. Many households today are single-elder homes where aged parents manage farms, forests, and cattle independently. They do not demand much. Sometimes, all they want is a road for their village that stays functional throughout the year and a stable employment opportunity near their hometown for their sons or daughters so that they can rest. These needs are modest; however, they remain unmet in many areas.

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) conducted by the Union Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, India's unemployment rate decreased from 5.4% in the previous quarter to 5.2% during the July–September 2025 period. In the second quarter of FY 2025-26, Uttarakhand had the highest unemployment rate in the country at 8.9%, followed by Andhra Pradesh (8.2%) (*The Economic Times*, 2025).

The issue of disaster vulnerability also requires deeper attention. Anyone who has witnessed the 2013 Kedarnath floods or the recurring landslides in Garhwal/Kumaun knows that Uttarakhand has to balance development and safety with far greater care than most other states in India. The dangers of building on riverbeds were once again brought to light by recent tragedies in Tharali and Dharali in 2025 (Nautiyal, 2025).

There is growing anxiety regarding climate change. Springs are drying faster, and unpredictable weather has become a part of everyday conversation. In such an environment, the push for infrastructure must be accompanied by stronger environmental intelligence. People are ready to cooperate, but they expect the state government to plan responsibly and not repeat the mistakes seen in Joshimath or other fragile zones. Despite its claims to balance ecology and the economy, Uttarakhand still has problems with unplanned infrastructure expansion, resource stress, rising disasters, and climate catastrophes (Nautiyal, 2025).

The environmental dimension of Uttarakhand's development further complicates its policy choices. Unlike plains, where expansion can occur with relatively fewer constraints, hilly regions demand a far more calibrated approach. Infrastructure projects can intensify vulnerabilities rather than reduce them if not carefully planned. This creates a policy dilemma in which the urgency of development often clashes with the necessity of ecological preservation. Therefore, the challenge is not to choose between development and the environment but to redefine development in a manner that is compatible with the fragile Himalayan ecosystem. Without such a shift, short-term gains may continue to pose long-term risks.

CONCLUSION

Another thing that strikes most people is how deeply people here continue to trust the idea of the state, even when they criticise specific governments. There is a quiet belief that Uttarakhand can still course correct. Trust is a resource in itself. If leveraged well, it can transform governance from a top-down model to a genuinely participatory model.

After reflecting on Uttarakhand's 25 years, we realise that the story is not one of failure or success. This is a story of an unfulfilled promise. A state born out of a movement still carries the movement's questions. Perhaps that is what keeps it honest.

In the middle of these concerns, it is fair to acknowledge that current CM Pushkar Singh Dhami has at least opened a conversation on some of the long-pending issues that earlier governments allowed to drift away. His tenure has seen attempts to tighten recruitment processes, push e-governance, and bring a degree of administrative urgency that people have been asking for. However, the gap between the intended and actual ground results remains visible in many places. Villages continue to demand stable services, better roads, and more secure living conditions. Yet, there is a sense that if the current leadership stays focused on these core concerns instead of momentary political debates, the next few years could bring the kind of progress for which the state was originally carved out. Parties will change, elections will come and go, but the priority must always remain the state itself. Uttarakhand deserves leadership that listens, corrects its course when needed, and keeps the everyday struggles of ordinary people at the centre of its decisions.

Ultimately, Uttarakhand's experience suggests that a state's success cannot be measured solely through institutional expansion or policy announcements. It must be evaluated based on the consistency with which governance reaches its most remote citizens. The gap between intent and outcome, repeatedly visible across sectors, points to the need for a more grounded and context-sensitive model of governance. This requires not only administrative reforms but also a shift in political priorities, where long-term structural concerns are addressed with the same urgency as short-term ones.

Citizens do not ask for much from their governments. A good school. A safe road. A reliable 24*7 public health centre. Opportunities that make it possible to stay. After all, no one leaves their home unless they feel compelled to do so. Uttarakhand deserves a future where equality, dignity, and genuine opportunities exist for everyone. A future where addiction loses ground, poverty does not dictate destiny, and distrust in leadership slowly begins to fade. Many residents now say that perhaps only "divine intervention" (*deviyya shakti*) can save the state. This remark carries a strange honesty. It simultaneously expresses both hope and frustration at the same time. However, states do not change because of miracles. They change because people and leaders decide that they have had enough. If we can gather that courage, perhaps the next twenty-five years will not be a repetition of the past but a renewal of the promise with which Uttarakhand was created.

REFERENCES

- Balodi, R. P. (2021). *Uttarakhand: An Encyclopaedia* (4th ed.) [Hindi]. Winsar Publication Dehradun.
- Chhabra, S., & Anand, D. (2024, March 16). India: Resolving Uttarakhand's persistent challenges in health services. *World Bank Blogs*. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/endpovertyinsouthasia/india-resolving-uttarakhands-persistent-challenges-health-services>
- Garhwal Post*. (2025, November 12). *Garhwal Post*. garhwalpost.in. Retrieved November 16, 2025, from <https://garhwalpost.in/how-education-failure-is-emptying-uttarakhands-mountains/>
- India Today*. (2022, January 2). Uda Uttarakhand: Easy access to substance, no govt attention creates drug problem in poll-bound state. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/uttarakhand-easy-access-drug-problem-government-polls-1895097-2022-01-02>
- Kumar, S., & Negi, S. (2022). Integrated community health service model (ICHSM): A new hope for primary care in hilly outreach areas of Uttarakhand, India. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 11(11), 6678–6682. https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmpc.jfmpc_999_22
- Nautiyal, A. (2025, November 8). *Opinion | Uttarakhand's Twenty-Five Years: A Time for Introspection*. News18. Retrieved November 17, 2025, from <https://www.news18.com/opinion/opinion-uttarakhands-twenty-five-years-a-time-for-introspection-9693601.html>
- The Economic Times*. (2025, November 10). India's unemployment rate dips to 5.2% in Q2FY26 as rural jobs rise; youth joblessness edges up. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/indias-unemployment-rate-dips-to-5-2-in-q2fy26-as-rural-jobs-rise-youth-joblessness-edges-up/articleshow/125231960.cms?from=mdr>
- The Hindu*. (2025, October 11). "Paper leak": Uttarakhand cancels graduate-level recruitment examination; to be held within three months. Retrieved November 16, 2025, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/uttarakhand/paper-leak-uttarakhand-cancels-graduate-level-recruitment-examination-to-be-held-within-three-months/article70151741.ece>
- The New Indian Express*. (2024, March 25). Over 1,600 govt schools ceased operations in Uttarakhand; nearly 3,600 on verge of closure. *The New Indian Express*. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2024/Mar/25/over-1600-govt-schools-ceased-operations-in-uttarakhand-nearly-3600-on-verge-of-closure>