

Question of Permanent Capital in Uttarakhand: Administrative Rationality, Regional Balance, and the Case for Gairsain

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Abstract

Uttarakhand's administrative and geographic preferences are not what determine the location of the state's permanent capital. Structural problems of spatial inequality, regional disproportionality, and the state's legitimacy is what determine the location of permanent capital. With the establishment of Uttarakhand in 2000, there had also been the establishment of the upland districts and there had been a historical neglect of the upland districts of the Himalayan region which had been part of Uttar Pradesh. Uttarakhand has a severe and historical plains-hills divide, which is a geographic imbalance. Although Uttarakhand was a newly established state, the choice of Dehradun as the capital led to the concentration of administrative facilities in the plains, creating geographic imbalance and centralizing access to governance for the remote hill districts.

Inspired by the literature spatial justice and administrative geography, this paper draws on the centrality of capital cities and their role as a locus for the spatial organization and configuration of state authority, resources, and the geography of political recognition. The paper also draws on state capacity and state legitimacy in the Indian administration to argue that being physically distant from administrative centers contributes to weak citizen-state relations, lack of bureaucratic responsiveness, out-migration, and institutional decay in the hills. The paper briefly addresses, with evidence from Indian and global examples, the relocation of state capitals and/or dual state capital arrangements, including Jammu and Kashmir, and the misconception of effectiveness as a governance determinant due to mere symbolic recognition. It

Key words: Uttarakhand, Capital City, Spatial Justice, State Capacity, Regional Equity

Administrative Geography and the Idea of a Capital

The location of a political capital is never a merely administrative decision. It is a spatial expression of state authority, a symbolic claim about collective identity, and a practical design for the everyday functioning of governance.

Capitals are in cities around the world for strategic reasons and administrative ease. They serve as the symbol of power and authority. The capital has many headquarters that work in synchronisation with the field agencies, much like the nervous system of the human body. Scholars of administrative geography have been arguing that capital cities are "institutional landscapes" shaped by history, power, and spatial logic (*Soja, 2010; Lefebvre, 1991*). They concentrate government institutions, bureaucratic decision-making, and public resources within a territorial core. As a result, the spatial location of a capital inevitably redistributes influence and opportunity—privileging some regions while marginalising others.

There has been a long debate in Uttarakhand, in the backdrop of the demand by hill-resident communities for Gairsain or Dehradun to serve as the capital, which must be seen against this conceptual backdrop. Uttarakhand was created on 9 November 2000 with the aspiration of reversing decades of administrative neglect in the Himalayan districts of the former Uttar Pradesh (*Srivastava, S. (2018)*). Dehradun, as the capital, was a surprise choice—a plains city—that reproduced a pattern in which lowland regions hosted the state's administrative, educational, and economic institutions, while mountain districts remained structurally disadvantaged. However, the arrangement was for a temporary purpose. The geography of the capital thus became central to the political imagination of the new hill state.

The literature on spatial justice provides an important prism for understanding this dynamic. Edward Soja argues that the organisation of political and administrative space shapes the distribution of rights, access, and opportunities (*Soja, 2019*).

Asymmetric spatial development produces Asymmetric citizenship—not only in terms of physical distance but also in terms of symbolic recognition. Henri Lefebvre's theory of the "production of space" emphasises that political authority materialises through spatial decisions (*Lefebvre, 1991*) and that the location of a capital city signifies the state's priorities.

Residents of the hill districts in Uttarakhand show a palpable sense of exclusion from the state's administrative edifice. Dehradun remains distant and difficult to access for people living in hill areas due to its far-off location, compounded by weather vagaries such as frequent floods, rains, and landslides that hinder smooth travel. Citizens in the hill districts of Uttarkashi, Chamoli, and Pithoragarh are affected by the physical distance, as government presence is thin and scattered. Most administrative headquarters were concentrated in the plains district, according to the Uttarakhand *Human Development Report* (2018), despite the state being formed to address this imbalance. The political claim for Gairsain as the capital thus emerges from this geography of exclusion during the Uttarakhand statehood movement. The political rationale for Gairsain as a capital city lies in its location between the Garhwal and Kumaon regions. Its geographical centrality gave it symbolic potency, but its political meaning derived from the aspiration for administrative presence in the mountain regions (Rawat, R. (2005).

To assess the expected impact, one should examine the outcomes of state capacity. Devesh Kapur argues that state capacity is a function of the continued existence of institutions within a particular framework that allows them to operate effectively (Kapur, 2005). According to Pratap Bhanu Mehta, the state's structural order is accompanied by the institutional order's legitimacy, which is a function of the fit between the state's order and society's moral aspirations and expectations (Mehta, 2003). Akshay Mangla's insights on Indian bureaucracy show that the "relational state capacity" of the state refers to the capacity of the state to foster relationships between citizens and the state, through the regular interface between citizens and local public officials (Mangla, 2015). When citizens have to travel long distances to access government services, proximity relations weaken, and trust deflates.

Nayanika Mathur in Paper Tiger explains that Himalayan governance suffers from a weak institutional architecture, document dependency, and a sparsely populated bureaucracy, which gives rise to what she calls 'paper policies' that lead to ineffective governance (Mathur, 2016). Her work suggests that without a substantive administrative capacity, the state is unable to implement its rules.

The Dixit Commission (2020) states that relations might be enhanced through a hill-based capital, but we must first consider the feasibility issues. Foundation, connection, water, and a centre of control are required for a capital. Dixit, while recognising Gairsain symbolically, also warned of eco-sensitive areas and infrastructural weaknesses. A capital will not survive with mere symbolism.

Questions of Capital in Uttarakhand: The Case for Gairsain, Regional Equity, and Administrative Rationality.

II. The Plain-Hill Problem in Uttarakhand

The problem between the hills and plains of Uttarakhand is not simply a geographical one. It is also administrative, developmental, and profoundly political. The grievances of the hill districts during the first state of Uttar Pradesh were that they were peripheral frontiers—geographically isolated, economically neglected, and marginalized at the institutional level Mishra, S. (2000). And even after the formation of the state, these grievances were not addressed, and instead were still present within the prism of the new state's administrative geography.

Administrative Challenges of the Hills

The hilly geography of Uttarakhand poses specific governance challenges. Landslides, erosive forces, and snowfalls can wash away roads. During certain seasons, there is little to no connectivity. (Kala, 2014). Medical emergencies, law enforcement, land disputes, pension verifications, and simple bureaucracies may require citizens of Chamoli, Rudraprayag, Bageshwar, Pithoragarh, and Uttarkashi to travel to Dehradun. In these situations, these journeys can be tiring, and in the case of transport changes, can be difficult for the elderly, impoverished, and even those in remote mountain communities. Because of this, the centralization of administrative tasks located in the plains further perpetuates the imbalances this newly formed state hoped to remedy. In the Uttarakhand Human Development Report (2018), the border districts of the plains, Dehradun, Haridwar, and Udham Singh Nagar, show an outperformance of the district borders in the hills. In the hills, there is an increase in the out-migration of the population. The TERI-PIK Report (2021) notes that over 700 villages in the hills are completely uninhabited, and thousands of others are considered "ghost villages" because they are inhabited only

by the elderly. The socio-economic divide is also institutional. Mathur in *Paper Tiger* (2016) points out that bureaucracies in the Himalayas are understaffed and overworked and have to deal with complex legislation and a fragile environment. Bureaucrats who are stationed in the mountains deal with hollow infrastructure, empty homes, and other personal issues, which make them want to move to Dehradun. This creates a situation in which plains have a concentration of bureaucratic knowledge, while the mountains are administratively brittle.

Symbolic and Political Dimensions

Gairsain is a product of this imbalance. This was not a technocratic decision, but one made through popular mobilization. In the Uttarakhand movement, Gairsain stood for the geography and the values of the proposed hill state—decentralization, identity, accessibility, and the recognition of the mountains (Rawat, 2005). Its location in the middle of Garhwal and Kumaon made it symbolically neutral. In March 2020, the state government announced that Gairsain would serve as the summer capital. For many, this was the realization of their dreamed aspirations. However, some critics argued that without relocating the government offices, the Government's plan was only seasonal and therefore, a ritual with no real change. Pratap Bhanu Mehta states legitimacy is attained when the rationality of institutional frameworks aligns with the expectations of the surrounding social structures (Mehta, 2012). For individuals from the Hills, Gairsain expresses a strong ethical demand that the state be situated where it possesses, and suffers, a dominant portion of its territory and its considerable adversities.

The Parallel: A Dual Capital Model

In India, the nearest equivalent to Uttarakhand's dual-capital system is the Darbar Move of Jammu & Kashmir, which dates back to 1872. The Darbar Move entailed relocating the whole administration to Jammu or Srinagar on a biannual basis. The justification for this move was the climate of the region, as Srinagar was naturally cut off from the rest of India and the Jammu region, and the need to politically balance the two areas (Wani & Parray, 2024). However, this practice, over the years, has become administratively illogical. By the 2010s, 151 departments and approximately 5,000 employees were moved biannually, which resulted in:

- Enormous fiscal burden of the treasury (\approx ₹200 crore annually)
- Lost productivity during the moving period
- Logistical strain on the personnel
- Bureaucratic delays and loss of files
- Unnecessary environmental strain from transport

The J&K High Court in *Ismail Azra v. UT of J&K* (2020) highlighted the absurdity of this practice from a governance, constitutional, and administrative standpoint and stressed that modern forms of governance do not consist of the mere ritualized moving of offices. The government's response was to implement NIC's e-Office system, which allowed offices in both regions to work simultaneously. A significant improvement was noted in file disposal and general administrative efficiency (Wani & Parray, 2024).

Uttarakhand has Lessons to Learn.

The other regions' experience shows that representation does not have to involve physical duplication. The Government's presence can be symbolically kept without constant relocations of the administrative machinery. Digital governance enables capital to function virtually. This reduced the logistical and financial burdens of seasonal relocations. At the same time, arrangements with a seasonal or dual capital need to be more flexible. As was the case with Jammu & Kashmir, administrative restructuring and digitisation can develop "symbolic dualism" into a functional dualism, where each place has a particular, important use instead of being retained for political reasons. In the case of hilly states like Uttarakhand, the lessons become more specific. Structures of governance are highly climate sensitive. Areas, like Gairsain and Srinagar, have significant winter-time access issues. Symbolism should not be compromised. In the end, the juxtaposition of political representation and the structure of governance must be seamless. Gairsain in the hills may have a historical and emotional connection, but it matters only if the bureaucracy can work efficiently, consistently, and without disruptions.

Historical Context: From Calcutta to New Delhi

There are lessons to be learned from history to a greater extent. The transition of British India's capital from Calcutta to New Delhi in 1911 is a case in point. Metcalf (1989) notes that the move should be viewed through multiple frameworks, as the relocation of capital is never a passive act. Calcutta became the hotbed of anti-colonial nationalist movements, while Delhi was a more centrally located point from which the British could control the subcontinent. The British also desired a capital that could serve the empire permanently and display authority and prestige in a commanding manner. The new city was to be a masterpiece and was to be built to the plans of Sir Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker, combining urban and administrative planning with infrastructure development, to create an object of imperial dedication. This example also shows that the relocation of a capital is more than just a change of location. For it to be a relocation, there has to be a vision, the finances, long-term administrative planning, and organizational discipline. It has to go beyond a change of location, a new political slogan, and urban infrastructure development. The political focus is on the urban planning of a city, the change in institutions, and the governance of a city that will totally align with the new urban systems in order to create a cohesive system.

The Topography of Uttarakhand

The geography of Uttarakhand shares striking similarities with J&K, having sharp ecological contrasts, dispersed settlements, and harsh, fragile topography. Thus, the administration's logic should include the following.

- High disaster risk
- Dispersed population
- Limited land availability for big institutional complexes
- Water shortages
- Topographical isolation

However, none of these factors mitigates the moral urgency of the hill-capital movement. Instead, they suggest a complex hybrid solution: the administrative Model of Dehradun and the representational Model of Gairsain.

The Capital Question of Uttarakhand: Administrative Rationality, Regional Equity, and Gairsain

Indian and Global Experiences

The debates regarding the location of the capital are not new to Uttarakhand. These debates are repetitive throughout history as they capture a unit's struggle to integrate geography, political identity, administration, and the unit's aspirations for balanced growth. This is why it is crucial to analyze the Indian and Global experiences to understand the scenarios where the relocation of the capital succeeds or fails, and to understand the impact of spatial choices on long-term governance.

Using Indian Experiences with Capital Formation and Relocation

In the past, Indian states and polities have shifted their capitals for political, strategic, and geographical reasons. The transfer of the capital during the Delhi Sultanate period of Muhammad bin Tughlaq (1327) remains one of the most significant, albeit unsuccessful, events during the period. It has been accounted by chroniclers like Barani as a massive logistical failure characterized by forced movements of people, water shortages, and the collapse of administrative structures, showing that the failure of the shift of the capital from Delhi had a number of ecological and infrastructural realities (Barani, 1862/1999). The shifts of the Mughal capitals during the period of Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, and Delhi were also military and climatic during the imperial period. They also reflected the ambition of the empire (Richards, 1993). The colonial period has the most significant shifts of the period. 1911 witnessed the relocation of the capital from Calcutta to New Delhi. This relocation, according to historians Metcalf (1989) and Guha (2007), was primarily focused on the political turmoil of the Bengal region, the need for a capital that was located more centrally, and the imperial aspirations of the relocation. New Delhi was to serve as a planned city that would be the representation of British rule (authority). This shows that the relocation of the capital involves more than just a simple decision. There are a number of factors, such as long-term planning, a significant political compromise, and, of course, fiscal commitment.

Again, post-independence India showcases exceptional examples of settlement planning. Along with Nehruvian nation-building, modern Chandigarh, as a partitioned capital of Punjab, was built (Kalia, 1999). Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh was built to assert dominion over a strategically sensitive frontier. Naya Raipur (now Atal Nagar) was developed to relieve congestion in Raipur and to distribute better the administrative functions in regional Chhattisgarh (Ahmed & Jain, 2023). Altogether, these opportunity captures the favorable correlation position, relocations, and the sustained political will, resources, integrated planning, and the urban socio-spatial realities are aligned.

Lessons from the Global South

Around the world, the movement. New construction of an advanced capital is an instrument of nation-building, administrative realignment, spatial control, and decongestion. Brasilia (Brazil). Designed by LION Costa and Oscar Niemeyer. The plan was to integrate the reduced coastal concentration of the Interior. It has to struggle with social inequality and urban segregation (Holston, 1989)

1. Canberra (Australia) was chosen as the capital as a compromise between Sydney and Melbourne. It shows how a capital can mediate regional rivalries. Success is attributed to careful planning, functional zoning, and long-term integrated planning (Hamnett & Freestone, Eds., 2017)
2. Abuja, built in the 1990s to replace Lagos, was designed to be ethnically neutral and centrally located. Abuja has reduced the congestion suffered by Lagos but still faces issues of inequality and rapid informal expansion (Agbibo, 2022).
3. Islamabad (Pakistan). The city was built under concerns regarding security and the centrality of the region, in combination with the wish to develop a new administrative city. Although the city has faced criticism regarding elitism, the planned institutional clustering was successful (Harper, 2010)
4. Astana/Nur-Sultan (Kazakhstan). Almaty's relocation was Part of a larger national identity project and a strategy for spatial redistribution. Many scholars recognize the success of the project in Part due to strong political will, and even more so, the significant investments made in the project (Rees, Webb, Williams, & Diener, 2021)
5. Nusantara, located in Indonesia, is currently under construction and is designed to escape Jakarta's infrastructural collapse (congestion, flooding, land subsidence). It capably represents climate-sensitive capital relocation in the 21st century (Chang & Ross, 2024)

The capital formation of the abovementioned countries is a testament to the evolving political processes that accompany the formation of a capital. Although the formation of the capital is highly symbolic, without the necessary administrative, urban planning, and local engagement to accompany it, the new capitals risk becoming isolated islands of bureaucracy.

The Lessons Relevant to Uttarakhand

1. Gairsain embodies the dreams of the rest of the state, especially the hills, where project Gairsain could be representative of the J&K Model, where imbalanced symbolic representation is a harmful juxtaposition to coherence functionality.
2. Gairsain in Uttarakhand can be a legislative and planning capital, while Dehradun can be an administrative and judicial hub. Examples of such selectively allocated functional responsibility can be seen in the Capital Cities of South Africa, where Cape Town, Bloemfontein, and Pretoria are dispersed; in Porto-Novo and Cotonou, Benin; and in the Capital Cities of La Paz and Sucre, Bolivia. All of these systems with multiple capitals efficiently balance functional complexity.
3. The use of the digital office in J&K is an example of the ability to overcome the middle of the office and the digital space. This means that Uttarakhand could limit travel to Dehradun for administrative purposes by citizens in the hills.

Conclusion

Concerns regarding Uttarakhand's capital are multidimensional and not merely administrative. This concern also touches upon the geographical parameters of democratic governance and its validity. Gairsain is a manifestation of the mountain's emotional ambition and a yearning for justice, recognition, and the presence of administrative authority, which has been a long wait for the mountains. Dehradun symbolizes capacity, connectivity, and institutional continuity. Empirical evidence suggests that imbalanced motivational exercises regarding governance functionality and the fragmentation of the associated symbolic representation constitute a pattern of neglect.

The difficulty is not choosing one or the other; rather, it is balancing the two. Uttarakhand's future should embrace a hybrid Model. Integrated Digital Governance, Sustainable Mountain Urban Planning, and Redistributive Administrative Reforms. Uttarakhand can build an efficient capital system, reminiscent in character of the Himalayas, drawing lessons from history and global best practices.

Ultimately, the question transcends the mere geographical parameters of determining the capital. It concerns the identity of Uttarakhand. A state that pays homage to the lofty hills and mountains structures its buildings, institutions, and governance in a manner that accommodates a geographical\ regional reorganization of its structures and achieves the operational balance of efficiency and equity in the distribution of its governance will achieve the utarakhand state movement's vision.

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