

Chapter - 2

Uttarakhand @25: Still in Search of a Permanent Capital: The Gairsain Dilemma

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When *Uttarakhand* was carved out of Uttar Pradesh on 9 November 2000, it wasn't just a political reorganization. It was the outcome of sacrifice of our *rajya-andolankaris*, emotion, and identity. From the streets of Dehradun to the remotest villages of Uttarkashi and Pithoragarh, the cry for a separate hill state was rooted in the desire for governance that understood the hills, respected its people, and reflected their aspirations. Yet, twenty-five years later, a basic question continues to echo through every valley and ridge that is why does Uttarakhand still not have a permanent capital?

The story of Gairsain is not just about geography or politics. It is about the heart of a state still searching for balance between its plains and its hills. It is about a people who fought for recognition but still await the fulfilment of their shared dream. The debate over Gairsain as the permanent capital is, at its core, a reflection of Uttarakhand's identity crisis where development and representation often drift apart.

Before the state was even formed, the demand for Gairsain as the capital had deep emotional roots. The early revolutionaries, including members of the Uttarakhand Kranti Dal, had envisioned a capital that would unite Garhwal and Kumaun. Gairsain's location between these two cultural regions made it not just a midpoint on the map, but a symbolic bridge between identities. Situated amid the Dudhatoli ranges, the region offered an ideal centrality and the possibility of a truly

representative capital. It was meant to be the heart of Uttarakhand, more so geographically central, emotionally symbolic, and historically justified.

Over time, the question of where to establish the capital became a political seesaw. The Kaushik Committee in 1994 strongly recommended Gairsain, arguing that a Himalayan state deserved a Himalayan capital. The committee found that more than 60 percent of residents supported Gairsain, underlining the people's trust in this decision. But the V.N. Dixit Committee, constituted after the state's creation, advised otherwise. It warned of seismic risks, inadequate land for expansion, and environmental fragility, recommending Dehradun instead. What began as a question of identity slowly turned into an argument of feasibility.

Dehradun, inherited as the provisional capital, offered comfort and connectivity. It had offices, institutions, and roads. But it also had distance from the hills, from the very people who had fueled the statehood movement. The residents of Pithoragarh, Chamoli, or Bageshwar still had to travel long hours, often through landslide-prone routes, to reach the seat of administration. For many, this physical distance also became symbolic of emotional distance. The plains flourished while the hills continued to grapple with migration, unemployment, and declining local economies.

Those who stand for Gairsain argue that shifting the capital there would do more than change a location rather it would change the direction of development. A capital in the hills could bring government offices, institutions, and investments closer to the neglected regions. It could revive small markets, encourage tourism, generate local employment, and give meaning to the dream of reverse migration. Over 85 percent of Uttarakhand's land is mountainous yet most of the state's infrastructure and administrative activity remains confined to four plain districts. Gairsain, if developed properly, could change this imbalance and make the hill development agenda central to policy planning.

Proponents also highlight practical and cultural benefits. The area around Gairsain connects nearly 5,000 villages, making it a natural hub for regional administration. Its centrality allows equitable accessibility from both divisions Garhwal and Kumaun. Unlike other regions, much of the land is government-owned, reducing the cost of land acquisition. A new capital here could open doors for road, rail, and air connectivity projects, providing a long-term boost to the state's economy. It could also reduce pressure on Dehradun, which is now choking under urban congestion, traffic, and population stress.

But Gairsain's argument is not free of challenges. Critics caution that the Himalayan terrain, while beautiful, is fragile. Chamoli district lies within seismic zone five, one of the most sensitive in India. Rapid construction and large-scale infrastructure work could disturb ecological stability and lead to environmental degradation. The region's rivers, slopes, and forests demand careful planning, not hurried expansion. The Joshimath land subsidence crisis still stands as a stark reminder of what can happen when development outpaces environmental caution.

Moreover, building a new capital requires enormous financial investment. Roads, residential quarters, hospitals, schools, government buildings, water supply, waste management etc. all must be built from scratch. For a small, resource-constrained state like Uttarakhand, this can strain the exchequer. Some argue that improving connectivity and governance in existing administrative centers might serve the purpose better than shifting the entire capital. Others fear that the emotional push for Gairsain might overshadow technical and practical assessments.

In 2020, the government under then CM Trivendra Singh Rawat declared Gairsain as the summer capital and conducted its first assembly session there. It was seen as a gesture of respect toward public sentiment, yet many felt it was only a symbolic step. While funds were allocated about Rs. 350 crores in 2021–22 for its development, visible progress has been slow.

Essential facilities like advanced healthcare, reliable water supply, and year-round transportation remain limited. During winters, the severe cold and snow make official functioning difficult. Critics worry that without comprehensive planning, Gairsain might become a seasonal showcase rather than a fully functional capital.

This debate, however, is larger than administrative convenience. It is about what kind of Uttarakhand we wish to build. Do we want a state whose heartbeat lies in the plains or one that thrives in its hills? The people who once protested in the state did not demand separation to watch their villages empty out or their youth migrate to cities. They demanded a governance system that was rooted in their soil. Every year, more villages in the hills turn into ghost settlements. Roads, hospitals, and schools remain sparse. A capital in the hills could symbolically and practically shift attention back to the people of the hills, simply where it belongs.

Questions naturally arise for every government since 2000. Why has this decision been delayed for so long? Why have successive administrations, despite acknowledging the people's sentiment, stopped short of final action? From N.D. Tiwari's era to the governments that followed, Gairsain has remained on the agenda but not on the map. Between political promises and bureaucratic caution, the heart of Uttarakhand has been left waiting.

At the same time, questions must also be asked of the current leadership. The 2020 declaration was an important start. Yes, but is it enough? Are we ready to move beyond symbolism toward structural commitment? Can we build Gairsain with sustainability, ensuring that development does not come at the cost of ecology? These are not confrontational questions but essential democratic ones.

Yet, hope remains. Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, one of the youngest leaders in the country to hold the office of CM of any state, has shown a consistent focus on decisive governance. After N.D. Tiwari, he stands as the Chief Minister

with the longest continuous tenure and, if he completes this term, will be Uttarakhand's longest-serving CM. His leadership represents a new generation which is rooted in tradition yet forward-looking. It is under such leadership that the long-pending dream of Gairsain can find direction and completion. Just as a fruit-bearing tree is expected to yield its harvest, the people now look toward Dhami's tenure with the hope that he will turn Gairsain from a promise into permanence.

A well-planned capital in Gairsain could serve as a catalyst for Viksit Uttarakhand 2047, aligning with the broader national vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. A capital that lies in the heart of the state, accessible to its remotest corners, can be the administrative anchor for inclusive development. By balancing progress with preservation, Uttarakhand can set an example for other hilly states where governance rises not by flattening nature, but by growing with it.

The idea of Gairsain goes beyond politics as it is about identity, belonging, and balance. It reminds us that the soul of Uttarakhand lies not in its offices of Dehradun, but in its hills, rivers, and the very people. The time has come for that soul to find its rightful seat.

As Uttarakhand stands at the milestone of 25 years and moves toward its golden jubilee in 2050, it must answer the question that has lingered for a quarter century. The answer lies not just in committees or calculations, but in the voice of every Uttarakhandi who once dreamt of self-rule amid the mountains. To honour their struggle and their hopes, Gairsain deserves more than a seasonal mention. Importantly, it deserves recognition as the permanent capital of Uttarakhand.

Because a state's heart must beat where its soul lives. And the soul of Uttarakhand still lives in its mountains, in Gairsain—the heart that waits to begin its rhythm.