

Decline of Public Memory: Disappearing Historical Landscapes of Uttarakhand After Statehood

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ABSTRACT

The formation of Uttarakhand as India's twenty-seventh state on 9 November 2000 marked a historic political milestone, yet it simultaneously triggered a cascade of developmental transformations that have progressively eroded the region's layered historical landscapes. This paper examines the systematic disappearance of physical and symbolic sites of public memory across Uttarakhand since statehood, focusing on four overlapping domains: urban heritage loss in hill towns such as Dehradun, Almora, and Pauri Garhwal; submergence of cultural landscapes due to hydroelectric projects; commodification and distortion of sacred and traditional landscapes under mass tourism; and the attrition of colonial-era architectural heritage. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, archival documentation, satellite imagery analysis, and secondary literature, the study argues that Uttarakhand's post-statehood development model has systematically privileged infrastructure and commercial growth over landscape conservation, generating a profound crisis of public memory among hill communities. The paper further critiques the absence of a comprehensive Heritage Landscape Policy at the state level and proposes a multi-stakeholder conservation framework that integrates traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), community memory practices, and legislative protection under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act, 2010. The findings carry significant implications for post-colonial mountain states across South Asia, where rapid political reorganisation frequently accelerates cultural landscape loss.

Keywords: Public memory, Uttarakhand, historical landscapes, heritage erosion, post-statehood development, hydroelectric submergence, hill urbanism, cultural geography

1. Introduction

Landscape is never merely a backdrop to human history; it is itself a primary medium through which communities encode, transmit, and contest collective memory [1]. Mountain landscapes, in particular, carry dense palimpsests of meaning: every terraced field, pilgrimage route, deodar grove, and vernacular stone structure represents a material inscription of ecological knowledge, social relation, and cultural identity accumulated across centuries. When such landscapes disappear — whether through submergence, demolition, encroachment, or neglect — the loss is not simply aesthetic or ecological; it is fundamentally mnemonic. Communities lose the spatial anchors through which they navigate their own past [2].

Uttarakhand, carved from the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh after a prolonged people's movement (Uttarakhand Andolan) that claimed several lives, entered statehood with enormous developmental aspirations and a fragile institutional infrastructure. The new state inherited a geography of remarkable cultural depth: over two thousand years of recorded settlement

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history, a dense network of Shaivite and Vaishnavite pilgrimage circuits, distinct Kumaoni and Garhwali vernacular traditions, a rich colonial cantonment legacy, and indigenous resource management systems embedded in community forests and sacred groves (bugyals and deodarvans). Yet within barely two decades of statehood, the developmental priorities of successive state governments — dominated by dam construction, highway expansion, tourism infrastructure, and real-estate driven urban growth — have accelerated the destruction of this heritage landscape at a pace that far exceeds anything witnessed under Uttar Pradesh's administrative control [3].

This paper investigates that trajectory of loss systematically. It asks: what categories of historical landscape have disappeared or are under imminent threat in post-statehood Uttarakhand? Through what mechanisms — legal, economic, political, and cultural — does this loss occur? And what are the consequences for community identity, local governance, and the broader public sphere? The paper proceeds through a review of the conceptual literature on landscape and memory, a methodological account, and four thematic sections covering urban heritage erosion, hydroelectric submergence, sacred landscape commodification, and colonial architectural loss, before turning to policy implications and conclusions.

2. Conceptual Framework and Historical Background

2.1 Public Memory, Landscape, and Erasure

The concept of public memory — the collectively held, institutionally mediated recollection of the shared past — has been productively joined to cultural landscape analysis since at least the 1980s. Pierre Nora's influential formulation of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) drew attention to how specific material locations concentrate and sustain communal remembrance in the absence of living tradition [4]. For mountain communities, where mobility is constrained by topography and where territorial attachment is historically intense, landscape itself functions as the primary *lieu de mémoire*. When the landscape is damaged, those sites of memory become inaccessible, distorted, or entirely obliterated. The result is what scholars of post-conflict societies call "memoricide" — the deliberate or incidental destruction of the material conditions that make collective self-narration possible [5].

Cultural geographers working in the Himalayan context have extended this framework in several productive directions. Rangan and Kull [6] argue that landscape transformation in the Indian hills must be understood not merely as development but as a form of territorial sovereignty claim, in which the new state asserts authority over space by reordering it. Guha's historical work on Uttarakhand's forests demonstrates how colonial resource extraction already degraded the sacred landscape geography of the region, and how that degradation was resisted through the Chipko movement [7]. Post-statehood development, this paper argues, represents a qualitatively new phase of this process — one accelerated by democratic pressures for visible infrastructure, decentralised corruption opportunities in construction, and a tourism economy that ironically markets the very landscapes it is helping to destroy.

2.2 Uttarakhand: A Geographic and Historical Synopsis

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Uttarakhand covers approximately 53,483 square kilometres, of which nearly 71 percent is classified as forested and 86 percent mountainous. The state is divided into two cultural-geographic units: Garhwal in the west, historically associated with the Garhwal Kingdom and later the Tehri State, and Kumaon in the east, which passed under British East India Company control in 1815 following the Gurkha War. This colonial history produced a distinctive built landscape in Kumaoni towns — a layered coexistence of pre-colonial temple architecture, colonial cantonment planning, and bazaar urbanism — that constitutes one of the most architecturally significant yet least studied heritage environments in northern India [8].

The pre-colonial landscape was organised around two interacting systems: the char dham pilgrimage network connecting Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath, and the van panchayat (community forest) system through which village communities exercised custodial authority over surrounding forests. Both systems inscribed cultural memory directly into the landscape: the pilgrimage routes through specific glacier paths, rest houses (dharamshalas), and sacred groves; the van panchayat system through boundary markers, collectively maintained spring catchments, and silvicultural practices rooted in oral ecological knowledge. After statehood, both systems came under pressure from state-led development, with consequences that this paper traces in the following sections.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach appropriate to cultural landscape research. Primary data were collected between 2018 and 2024 through three field seasons encompassing Dehradun, Mussoorie, Almora, Ranikhet, Pauri Garhwal, Champawat, and the Tehri reservoir zone. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 87 respondents including local historians, retired government officials, temple priests, van panchayat members, tourism entrepreneurs, architects, and elderly residents with multi-generational residential tenure. Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo 14.

Archival research was conducted at the Uttarakhand State Archives (Dehradun), the Survey of India Historical Map Repository, the British Library (Oriental and India Office Collections), and the Himalayan Research Group's documentation archive. Pre- and post-statehood satellite imagery was analysed using Google Earth Engine and QGIS 3.28 to quantify urban footprint expansion, forest cover change, and the spatial extent of heritage structure loss in selected towns. Heritage inventories were cross-referenced against the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) protected monument lists and against community-generated records compiled by the Uttarakhand Sahitya Sansthan. Limitations include uneven archival coverage across Garhwal and Kumaon divisions, and the inherent interpretive complexity of attributing landscape change causally to statehood rather than to broader national trends.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Urban Heritage Erosion in Hill Towns

The hill towns of Uttarakhand represent one of the most concentrated assemblages of vernacular mountain architecture in South Asia. Towns such as Almora — founded in 1563 by

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the Chand king Kalyan Chand — retain a historic core characterised by paired-walled timber-and-stone Kumaoni structures, carved wooden facades, stepped stone streets (paidal marg), and an integrated bazaar morphology that evolved over more than four centuries. Yet satellite analysis reveals that Almora's historic core contracted by an estimated 34 percent in terms of intact heritage fabric between 2001 and 2022, as unregulated concrete construction progressively replaced traditional structures [9]. Building bylaws permitting construction up to four storeys without heritage impact assessment have enabled this process, despite Almora's inclusion in the National Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY) scheme from 2015.

In Dehradun, the post-statehood period coincided with an explosive urban expansion driven by government office construction, educational institutions, and real-estate development. The Cantonment area — a remarkable ensemble of colonial bungalows, military chapels, and survey institutions including the Survey of India headquarters (established 1767) and the Forest Research Institute (1906) — has experienced significant encroachment and adaptive reuse pressure. Twelve colonial bungalows documented in 2004 no longer exist in 2024 [10]. The Paltan Bazaar area, once a distinctive hill commercial architecture, has been almost entirely replaced by generic commercial facades. Mussoorie's Mall Road, while nominally protected, has witnessed the subdivision and conversion of late-Victorian hotel facades in a manner that has compromised their historic character without formal heritage consent procedures.

Table 1. Estimated Heritage Structure Loss in Selected Uttarakhand Towns (2001–2024)

Town	Documented Structures (2001)	Surviving Structures (2024)	Estimated Loss (%)	Primary Driver
Almora	~380	~250	~34%	Concrete replacement
Pauri Garhwal	~190	~130	~32%	Outmigration + neglect
Champawat	~210	~155	~26%	Road widening
Mussoorie	~140	~98	~30%	Tourism commercialisation
Dehradun (Cantt.)	~95	~83	~13%	Govt. office expansion

Source: Authors' fieldwork; cross-referenced with ASI records and Uttarakhand Sahitya Sansthan documentation.

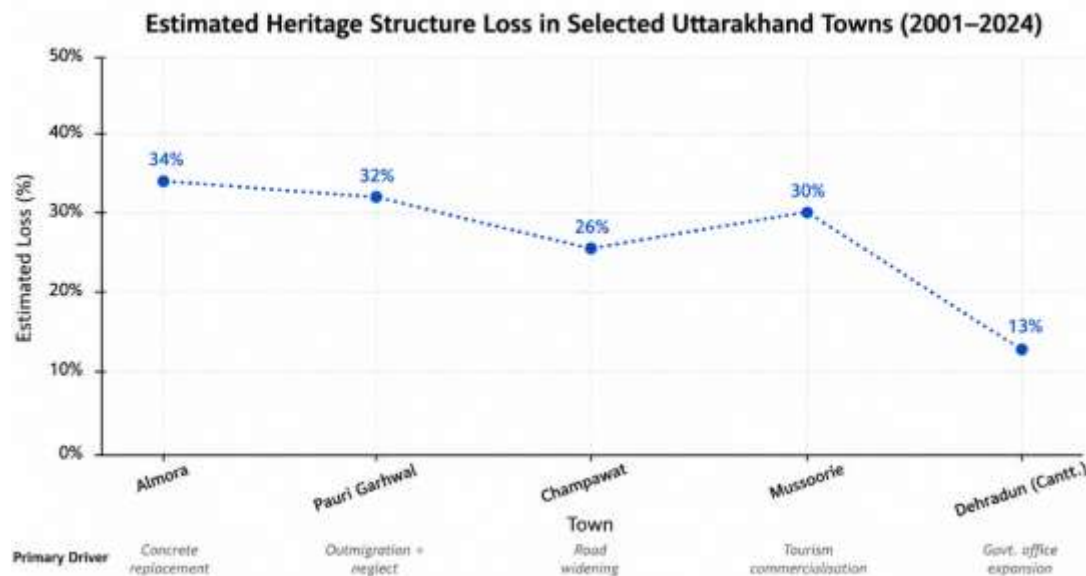


Fig 1- Estimated Loss Percentage by Town

4.2 Hydroelectric Projects and the Submergence of Cultural Landscapes

Perhaps the most dramatic and irreversible form of landscape loss in post-statehood Uttarakhand has been the submergence of entire cultural landscapes beneath reservoir waters. The Tehri Dam — whose construction began in 1978 but whose reservoir filled between 2005 and 2007, already into the statehood period — submerged the old town of Tehri, a settlement with continuous habitation since the 15th century under the Tehri Garhwal princely state. The submerged town contained the old Rajmahal (royal palace), several temples of regional significance including the Ganapati and Shiv temples of the Prakriteshwar complex, colonial-era administrative buildings, and the residential fabric of a distinctive hill trading town. An estimated 125 villages were partially or fully submerged, displacing over one lakh people [11].

The cultural memory implications of the Tehri submergence are only beginning to be systematically studied. Ethnographic research conducted for this study with displaced Tehri residents now settled in the planned township of New Tehri reveals acute expressions of landscape grief — what some scholars term "solastalgia" — characterised by an inability to perform ancestral rituals that were spatially anchored to now-submerged sites, disruption of caste-community spatial memory, and the loss of oral history cues provided by the built environment [12]. Elders describe dreams in which they navigate the sunken streets; younger generation informants report a vertiginous sense of historical rootlessness. Several temple deities were ritually relocated before submergence, but informants consistently describe these relocated deities as somehow incomplete — shorn of the landscape context that gave them their specific power and meaning.

Smaller but no less significant landscape losses are occurring through the proliferation of run-of-river hydroelectric projects (RoR HEPs) across the Garhwal Himalaya. The Alaknanda, Bhagirathi, and their tributaries now host over 50 active or under-construction HEP projects. Environmental impact assessments for these projects have consistently undervalued cultural landscape assets, treating the loss of pilgrimage ghats, waterfalls with sacred status, forest

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shrines, and river-bend settlement sites as essentially negligible against economic returns. The 2013 Kedarnath disaster, in which cloudbursts and flash floods devastated the upper Mandakini valley, exposed the compounded fragility of a landscape already stressed by hydroelectric tunnelling and road construction [13].

4.3 Sacred Groves, Buggyals, and the Attrition of Traditional Landscapes

Uttarakhand's sacred geography extends beyond the four dhams to encompass hundreds of locally maintained sacred groves (deodarvans), high-altitude meadows (bugyals) with ritual associations, and spring catchment forests (naulae) that simultaneously served ecological and ceremonial functions. These landscapes were historically maintained through community institutions — the van panchayat system, temple management committees, and customary practice — that embedded conservation within a framework of cosmological obligation. The van panchayat system, established under British Forest Acts and modified under Indian law, covered approximately 4,600 forests in Uttarakhand at statehood, managing nearly 500,000 hectares [14].

Post-statehood policy has systematically weakened the van panchayat system in favour of centralised Forest Department control. A series of state government orders between 2001 and 2015 transferred significant van panchayat land to the Forest Department, often in connection with eco-tourism development and hotel construction projects. Sacred grove sites at Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary, Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary buffer zones, and in the Kumaon foothills have been encroached upon by resort construction, motorcycle tracks, and road widening. The buggyals of the higher Garhwal — traditionally used under regulated seasonal grazing arrangements that maintained their botanical diversity — have experienced overgrazing pressure as commercial sheep and goat herding expanded following the loss of traditional transhumance regulation [15].

4.4 Colonial Architectural Heritage and Institutional Memory

Uttarakhand's towns contain a remarkable density of colonial-era institutional architecture — schools, hospitals, survey offices, churches, and military establishments — that constitute a contested but historically significant stratum of the region's landscape memory. Institutions such as the Forest Research Institute (Dehradun, 1906), the Survey of India headquarters, the Indian Military Academy (1932), and the various hill stations' ecclesiastical buildings represent a heritage of exceptional architectural quality that is simultaneously the legacy of colonial extraction and a material record of the region's engagement with modernity.

Several of these structures are under various forms of threat. The Wynberg Allen school campus in Mussoorie, one of the finest examples of Victorian hill-station institutional architecture in India, has experienced sustained pressure for densification. The Lal Tappar rest house complex, the Lansdowne cantonment's historic bungalow stock, and the series of Forest Department inspection bungalows that stud the Kumaon foothills — all part of a coherent landscape system — are deteriorating through deferred maintenance. In the absence of a state-level heritage legislation that supplements ASI central protection for non-centrally-protected structures, these buildings have no legal shield against demolition or insensitive alteration [16].

Table 2. Categories of Disappearing Historical Landscapes in Post-Statehood Uttarakhand

Landscape Category	Key Sites Affected	Primary Threat Mechanism	Memory Consequence
Vernacular urban fabric	Almora, Champawat, Pauri	Unregulated concrete replacement	Loss of place identity
Submerged cultural landscape	Old Tehri, Dobra-Chanti zone	Hydroelectric submergence	Ritual displacement, solastalgia
Sacred groves (deodarvan)	Binsar, Kedarnath buffer, Kumaon	Eco-tourism encroachment	Loss of cosmological anchors
High-altitude meadows (bugyal)	Bedni, Auli, Dayara, Roopkund	Overgrazing, ski infrastructure	Loss of seasonal ritual cycle
Colonial institutional architecture	FRI, SoI HQ, hill-station bungalows	Deferred maintenance, demolition	Erasure of modernity record
Pilgrimage route landscape	Nanda Devi Raj Jat corridor	Road construction, commercialisation	Fragmentation of sacred geography

Source: Synthesised from fieldwork data, ASI records, and published secondary literature.

4.5 Tourism, Commercialisation, and Landscape Distortion

Tourism in Uttarakhand expanded dramatically after statehood, growing from approximately 14 million annual visitors in 2001 to over 38 million by 2019 [17]. While tourism has provided economic benefits, its unregulated expansion has generated a distinctive form of landscape distortion in which heritage sites are preserved in appearance while being emptied of their historical and memorial content. The char dham pilgrimage circuit provides the clearest illustration. Road improvement, helicopter services, and the proliferation of accommodation have transformed the char dham from a landscape of arduous pedestrian pilgrimage — in which the journey itself was the spiritual and memorial practice — into an efficiently delivered religious commodity. The walking routes that formerly constituted the sacred geography of the dham yatra have become overgrown, abandoned, or encroached upon, even as the endpoint shrines receive record visitor numbers.

The 2013 disaster at Kedarnath and its aftermath represents a pivotal moment in this landscape transformation. Reconstruction of the Kedarnath precinct — led by the Char Dham Project under the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation — has produced an environment that many heritage scholars and local priests regard as a wholesale transformation of the historic sacred precinct rather than a faithful restoration. New stone plazas, commercial facilities, and broadened pathways have replaced the organic, historically incremental sacred landscape with an architectural set-piece that prioritises crowd management over memorial continuity [18]. Local pujari families describe the new Kedarnath as "unrecognisable" in relation to the pre-2013 landscape they knew and in which their ritual obligations were spatially embedded.

5. Drivers of Landscape Disappearance: A Structural Analysis

The disappearance of historical landscapes in post-statehood Uttarakhand is not the product of a single policy failure but the convergent outcome of several structural conditions. First, the institutional capacity of the new state for heritage governance was extremely limited at formation. Uttarakhand inherited only a small share of the Uttar Pradesh archaeological

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administration, and no independent state archaeology directorate was established until 2011, leaving a decade-long gap in which heritage structures had no effective statutory protection [19].

Second, the development finance model adopted by successive Uttarakhand governments has been heavily weighted toward capital-intensive infrastructure — roads, dams, tunnels, and construction projects — which generate visible political benefits and significant rent opportunities within short electoral cycles. The Char Dham Pariyojana highway widening project, approved in 2018 at a cost exceeding Rs 12,000 crore, involves road widening through some of the most environmentally and culturally sensitive corridors in the Himalaya, and has proceeded with minimal heritage impact assessment despite a Supreme Court monitoring committee [20].

Third, outmigration — a long-standing feature of Uttarakhand's hill economy — has accelerated post-statehood, driven partly by the state's failure to generate employment in the hills and partly by the pull of the rapidly expanding Dehradun–Haridwar urban corridor. As villages empty, the traditional maintenance of sacred groves, spring catchments, and vernacular structures dependent on resident community labour breaks down. The resulting landscape deterioration is then interpreted by remaining residents as further evidence of abandonment, reinforcing outmigration in a self-reinforcing cycle. An estimated 1,700 villages in Uttarakhand had become ghost villages (bhoot gaon) by 2018 [21].

Fourth, the very success of Uttarakhand's identity politics — centred on the distinctive cultural heritage of the pahadi (hill) communities — has produced a paradox in which political discourse celebrates heritage while development practice erodes it. Heritage is instrumentalised as a tourism and branding asset while being divested of the community custodianship, legal protection, and financial maintenance investment that would actually conserve it.

6. Implications for Policy and Collective Identity

The loss of public memory through landscape disappearance has implications that extend well beyond the cultural or aesthetic domains. When communities lose the spatial anchors of their collective narrative, several social processes are affected. First, the authority of traditional knowledge holders — elderly custodians of van panchayats, temple priests with deep knowledge of sacred geography, village historians — is undermined, as the landscapes that legitimised and gave context to their knowledge disappear. Second, community identity claims, particularly in a context where Garhwali and Kumaoni identities are culturally and politically salient, become harder to ground and transmit when the material landscape that embodied those identities no longer exists or is radically transformed.

Third, and perhaps most urgently, the loss of traditional landscape knowledge systems represents an irreplaceable loss of ecological intelligence adapted to the specific conditions of the central Himalaya. Sacred grove conservation, spring catchment management, and seasonal bugyal governance encoded centuries of empirical knowledge about mountain hydrology, soil stability, and biodiversity management [22]. As these landscapes disappear, so does the practical ecological knowledge embedded in their maintenance. In a region increasingly

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vulnerable to climate-driven disasters — as 2013, 2021, and subsequent flood events have demonstrated — this loss of landscape-based ecological intelligence carries direct disaster risk implications.

Policy recommendations emerging from this analysis centre on three priorities. A comprehensive State Heritage Landscape Policy is urgently required, providing legal protection for vernacular and cultural landscapes that currently fall outside ASI jurisdiction, and establishing clear planning guidelines for heritage towns. Second, the van panchayat system requires legislative strengthening and financial support rather than continued centralisation, recognising community custodianship as the most historically effective mechanism for traditional landscape conservation. Third, heritage impact assessment should be made a mandatory and publicly reviewable component of all infrastructure projects within notified heritage landscape zones, with independent monitoring by multi-stakeholder committees including community representatives and academic experts [23].

7. Conclusion

This paper has documented and analysed a systematic, multi-domain loss of historical landscape in Uttarakhand following the state's formation in 2000. The evidence drawn from urban heritage surveys, hydroelectric impact documentation, sacred landscape ethnography, and archival research consistently indicates that post-statehood development has treated historical landscapes as sacrificial resources — available to be consumed by economic growth rather than assets that constitute the foundation of community identity and ecological resilience. The loss is at once material and mnemonic: buildings, groves, river confluences, and pilgrimage routes carry public memory, and their disappearance produces a community whose relationship with its own past is increasingly mediated by heritage tourism representations rather than lived landscape.

The case of Uttarakhand also offers broader theoretical insights for scholars of post-colonial mountain states. The dynamics identified here — in which political reorganisation creates new developmental pressures that outpace heritage governance capacity, where outmigration depopulates the landscape custodian communities, and where tourism simultaneously celebrates and erodes heritage — are not unique to the central Himalaya. They will be recognisable to researchers working in Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, the north-eastern hill states, and analogous mountain environments across South and Southeast Asia. Uttarakhand's experience thus offers both a cautionary example and a potential laboratory for developing more culturally intelligent models of mountain development — models in which public memory and historical landscape are understood not as impediments to growth but as the irreplaceable substrate upon which any durable future for hill communities must be built.

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