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From Uttarakhand *Andolan* to Present-Day Socio-Political Realities: Historical and Contemporary Dynamics of Identity

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Merriam-Webster defines identity as '*the distinguishing character or personality of an individual.*' The concept of identity may appear easy and straightforward, but there is more to it than what catches the eye, thereby making it complex and extremely dynamic. We shape the understanding of our identity and that of others through interactions within our close social circles, such as family and friends, as well as through engagement with institutions like schools, mass media, and encounters with various individuals. Formation of these ideas is primarily subconscious in nature. Identities formed because of these ideas are not constant but consistent frameworks that guide behaviour and perception.

Since time immemorial, the Indian subcontinent has been the harbinger of numerous distinct identities, including religious, caste, racial, cultural, and linguistic identities, to name a few. Although these identities have long been a matter of pride, they have also led to friction amongst various such groups. India has witnessed a history of such socio-political movements with demands centred on the reorganisation and demarcation of state boundaries based on religion, language, demography, and geographical features. These movements typically manifest in three forms: **demands for statehood, calls for greater autonomy, and secessionist movements.**

Owing to the diverse languages and dialects across the Indian subcontinent, one of the driving factors behind the demand for statehood in India has been linguistic diversity. The schedule of the Indian constitution recognises 22 major languages of India. In addition to the scheduled languages, the Indian census documented 1,576 rationalised languages and a further 1,796 mother tongues. One of the earliest linguistic movements of this kind began even before independence, circa 1895 in **Odisha**. The movement gained momentum over time, leading to demands for the creation of a separate Orissa Province through the division of the Bihar and Orissa Province on the basis of the language of the masses. In 1936, Orissa Province became the first province in pre-independence India to be organised based on language. In the immediate aftermath of independence, demand for a separate Telugu-speaking state, distinct

from the Madras State, gained momentum under the inspiring leadership of **Potti Sreeramulu**. Although he passed away prior to the culmination of the process, shortly after his death, on December 19, 1952, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru officially announced the formation of a separate Andhra State, and the Telugu-speaking districts were carved out of the Madras State to form the state of Andhra on 1 October, 1953. This movement inspired and emboldened multiple demands, not restricted to linguistic identities, for statehood all across the nation.

One such movement, known as the ***Uttarakhand Rajya Andolan***, led by the inhabitants of the hilly regions of the United Provinces, arose during the colonial era and continued in Uttar Pradesh after India's independence. The movement emerged as a response to interregional socio-economic disparities and institutionalised exploitation and systemic marginalisation of the *highlanders* by the economically prosperous dwellers of the plains. In addition, the movement was an honest attempt at bestowing the hill people with a unique socio-cultural identity with recognition of the challenges faced by the hill communities. Importantly, the movement emphasised the long-held dream of a marginalised people to drive the region towards economic and administrative independence. The movement has been instrumental in uplifting the region from a state of obscurity and economic despair to the state of Uttarakhand, distinguished by its natural resources, unique cultural identity, and dynamic economy.

The inherent demand for a separate and an autonomous administration had always been there amongst the sons and daughters of the mountains. In September 1916, the **Kumaon Parishad** was established by a group of young activists, including **Pt. Hargovind Ballabh Pant, Govind Ballabh Pant, Badri Datt Pandey, Indralal Shah, Mohan Singh Damarwal, Chandra Lal Shah, Prem Ballabh Pandey, Bhola Datt Pandey, and Lakshmi Datt Shastri**. The organisation was primarily formed to address the socio-economic challenges faced by the hill region. In the provincial elections of 1923 and 1926, candidates representing the Kumaon Parishad, including Hargovind Ballabh Pant, Govind Ballabh Pant, Mukundi Lal, and Badri Datt Pandey, secured decisive and seminal victories over their opponents. During the visit of Lt Governor of the province, **Malcolm Hailey**, to Almora in October 1929, a few pro-British *Kumaoni* people put forth their demand for autonomy for the hill region. A special meeting was held in Srinagar (Pauri Garhwal) in May 1938, where Jawaharlal Nehru endorsed the hill people's right to independently determine their cultural and economic affairs. In 1940, **Anusuya Bahuguna** advocated for the formation of Kumaon and Garhwal as distinct divisions. A special session was also convened in 1946 in Haldwani under the leadership of

prominent freedom fighter **Badri Datt Pandey**, during which a formal demand for special status for Uttarakhand was put forward.

Post-independence, when different regions demanded separate states and administrative units, the Government of India set up the **State Reorganisation Committee** under the chairmanship of Justice Fazl Ali. The committee divided independent India into 14 states and 6 union territories at that time. But reorganisation of Uttar Pradesh was opposed by the chairman and other members, famously stating, '*The existing unit should, therefore, continue.*' Though Congress party members, such as **Badri Datt Pandey, Pratap Singh, Indra Singh Nayal**, and others, supported the formation of a separate hill state, the Congress party as a whole never backed the cause, making the **Communist Party of India** the only party to support the issue of the hill people of Uttar Pradesh. In 1952, the Secretary of the CPI, **P.C. Joshi**, raised the issue of autonomy for the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh. Joshi famously stated that '*the Paharis (mountain people) are not only unhappy but angry, and the demand for the autonomous regions is our only way out.*' Between 1966 and 1967, the Communist Party of India (CPI) initiated a campaign advocating for the creation of an autonomous hill state. As part of this effort, the party developed a detailed framework proposing a **three-tier governance system for Uttarakhand**, which included elected representation in an **Autonomous Council, the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, and the Indian Parliament**. In 1967, this demand was formally articulated at the **Ramnagar Conference**, resulting in the establishment of a new organisation, the **Parvatiya Rajya Parishad**. Later in the 1970s, many political and non-political workers established another organisation, called the **Parvatiya Sankalp**. Eventually, more organisations such as the **Uttarakhand Yuva Morcha** and the **Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini** came into being to mobilise students and activists. In July 1979, **Uttarakhand Kranti Dal (UKD)** was conceived as the first regional party, with the singular aim of creating a separate hill state. Furthermore, this movement transcended all social and economic barriers, uniting people across cities and villages, with elderly mothers, sisters, and young professionals taking to the streets to drive the change. In essence, it was a people's movement, driven more by social and cultural factors than political motivations. The spontaneous nature of the movement, in many ways, further contributed to its perception as being non-political.

Despite the presence of demands for a separate hill state within the region and in mainstream political discourse, a consensus or conclusive resolution had yet to be reached. Following the Mandal Commission's recommendations, in July 1994, the Uttar Pradesh government

implemented a 27 per cent reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in educational institutions and public sector employment, freshly triggering the *Uttarakhand Andolan*. The Allahabad High Court commented on this: “*Like the shot at Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary, which became the catalyst for the First World War, this reservation policy (27% OBC) was the shot that fired the agitation and the turmoil in the hill regions of the state, that is, Kumaon and Garhwal.*” The inhabitants of the mountainous districts of Uttar Pradesh were disgruntled with this decision of the UP government. In the same year, a hunger strike began in the Pauri region. The demands were to **revoke the 27 per cent reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Uttarakhand, refrain from altering the delimitation of gram sabhas and implement the pending hill cadre scheme.** Along with these demands, various issues regarding development and ecology boosted the *Uttarakhand Andolan*. Throughout 1994, students from across the region actively engaged in the collective movement advocating for separate statehood and reservations. The Uttarakhand movement gained further momentum following an anti-Uttarakhand statement by the then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav. In response, leaders of the UKD undertook fast-unto-death protests to reinforce their demand for statehood. Additionally, state government employees launched a three-month-long strike, further intensifying the movement through blockades and heightened confrontations with law enforcement authorities.

On 1st September 1994, the state police opened fire on the peaceful protesters in Khatima, leading to the death of eight innocent people and injuring many others. On the very next day, 2nd September, 1994, when people in Mussoorie were marching against the police brutality that took place in Khatima, police opened indiscriminate fire, killing six protestors and injuring at least 18 others. These incidents are now remembered as a **black day** in the history of the state movement. As part of the movement advocating for the creation of a separate Uttarakhand state, activists were travelling to Delhi to participate in a sit-in protest at Raj Ghat on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti. However, on the intervening night of October 1 and 2, ironically the day of International Peace and Non-Violence, an alleged unprovoked police firing at Rampur Tiraha in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, resulted in the death of six statehood activists. Furthermore, reports from various sources and activists present at the incident site indicated that several women were subjected to gruesome and despicable sexual violence and harassment amid the ensuing chaos. On October 7, 1994, a female activist succumbed to injuries following a violent police assault in Dehradun during a protest against the Rampur Tiraha firings. In response, demonstrators mobilised, stormed, and ransacked the local police station.

As a result, then-Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, leading the coalition Janata Dal-led United Front government, formally announced the creation of a new state, Uttaranchal, from the Red Fort in Delhi. In 1998, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition government took steps to actualise this announcement by introducing the “**Uttaranchal Bill**”, which was forwarded to the Government of Uttar Pradesh through the President of India. After incorporating 26 amendments, the Uttar Pradesh Assembly passed the bill and returned it to the Central Government. On July 27, 2000, the Central Government introduced the **Uttar Pradesh Reorganisation Bill, 2000**, in the Indian Parliament. The bill was passed by the Lok Sabha on August 1, 2000, and subsequently by the Rajya Sabha on August 10, 2000. On August 28, 2000, the then President of India, K. R. Narayanan, ratified the bill, officially enacting it into law. Finally, on **November 9, 2000**, the sun finally rose on the new state of Uttaranchal, the 27th state of India. The state would later be rechristened as Uttarakhand.

A significant feature of the statehood movement was the active participation across diverse demographic factions of the society. Similar to the renowned Chipko Movement, women were at the forefront of *the Uttarakhand Rajya Andolan*. Across various socio-economic strata, women played an active role in the movement, making significant contributions to its progress and impact, exemplified by the determination of those who, despite never having left their villages, were ready to march all the way to Delhi. **Kamla Pant**, a key activist of the movement and founder of the **Uttarakhand Mahila Manch**, asserts, “*We fought for our culture, our identity, our forests, our women, and the future of our children.*” Women stepped out of their homes to support the statehood movement, driven by concerns over their children’s education, job prospects, and future. However, Pant emphasises that the movement was much larger than these issues—it was, at its core, a ‘*fight for identity*’.

As seen in movements worldwide, student activism was a cornerstone of this movement, with active participation from young and energetic students across all segments of society. Their immediate and effective response to the increase in the reservation quota, casting clouds over their prospects, became the benchmark for advancing this cause. The students distinguished themselves by their conspicuous determination to not let the movement be turned into a game of petty vote bank politics by the shrewd and cunning political leaders masquerading as the leaders of the movement.

The share of Uttarakhand natives in the armed forces has always been significantly greater vis-à-vis its demographic share. The state even has the unique distinction of having two regiments

in the army, namely, **Kumaon Regiment** and **Garhwal Rifles** with troops primarily belonging to Uttarakhand. As a result, veterans and even active members of armed forces also participated in the statehood movement. A growing sentiment of their sacrifices, including of those who laid down their lives to defend the motherland, played a pivotal role in mobilising the uniformed *paharis*. Their ever-growing concerns about the future of their children, the dismal handling of the peaceful sit-ins and protests by the government of Uttar Pradesh and the potential threat of the movement not culminating in its logical conclusion further prompted them to be active participants of the cause.

The movement also encompassed a cultural dimension, with various cultural associations taking the initiative to influence its direction. Folk songs, street plays, poetry, posters, sloganeering and cultural processions were extensively utilised by these associations, which played a crucial role in mobilising public support across strata of the society and reinforcing the movement's objectives. One notable characteristic feature of the movement was the slogans used by the participants. A few widely recognised slogans of the movement were “*Koda-Jhangora Khayenge, Uttarakhand Banayenge*” and “*Badi-Madua khaayenge, Uttarakhand Banayenge*”, which literally translates to “**We will eat Koda, Jhangora and Madua (locally grown millets) and create Uttarakhand.**” The slogan symbolised the resilience and determination of the hill people, emphasising their connection to indigenous agricultural practices while striving for the formation of a separate state. Some public sector employees who actively participated in the movement voiced their demands through the slogan “*Vaiten nahin, Uttarakhand chahiye*” during processions, which translated to “**We do not want salaries; we want Uttarakhand.**” This slogan reflected their unwavering commitment to the cause, demonstrating a willingness to forgo personal financial security in pursuit of the greater good for the region, statehood. In response to allegations of secessionist intent made by opponents of the movement, activists employed slogans such as “*Bharat desh rahe akhand, le ke rahenge Uttarakhand; Bharat Mata rahe akhand, rakshak hoga Uttarakhand.*” These slogans reaffirmed their commitment to national unity while simultaneously asserting their demand for a separate state.

The poets, lyricists, and singers of Uttarakhand sustained their creative expression, playing a pivotal role in shaping and strengthening the mass movement. A significant activist and supporter of this movement was *Garh Ratna Narendra Singh Negi*. He sang *Uttrakhand Andolan Maa (Utha Jaaga Uttrakhandu)*. In the song, Negi states, “*From the mountain peaks*

to the banks of the Ganga, from schools and offices to villages and markets, people poured onto the streets in overwhelming numbers. The roads were crowded, leaving no space to sit or move freely. When asked about their destination, they responded with unwavering determination that they were marching to join the Uttarakhand movement.” In another song, *Sou Uthola Ekattha Hola*, Negi sings, “Hundreds will rise and march toward Delhi as both Kumaonis and Garhwalis unite, joining hands in solidarity. Together, they will reclaim their rightful demand for statehood”, trying to mobilise the masses. He further tries to tell the experiences of the women participants and tries to motivate them to join the movement, asserting, “With faces radiant like blooming flowers, we will present our demands and express our desires (jobs for youth, better opportunities, and development) for statehood. Rise, O mother and sisters, pack your bags, as we march forward to Delhi.” Poets like **Balli Singh Cheema** and **Girish Tiwari**, fondly addressed as **Gir Da** (meaning elder brother), also contributed significantly to the cause. Cheema penned down a song for the movie *Teri Soun*, named *Le mashale chal pade hai*. In the song, youths have fire torches as they are participating in the Uttarakhand Andolan, singing, “The people of my village have begun their march, carrying torches that illuminate the path ahead. Now, they will rise together and overcome the darkness (exploitation).” One of the state’s greatest poets, Gir Da, composed the song “*Hum ladte raeyaan, hum ladte rulon*,” which translates to “**We have been fighting, and we will continue to fight.**” This powerful verse became a symbol of resilience and determination in the struggle for statehood.

The *Andolan* also influenced the regional cinema in the later years. One important film in Garhwali is *Aaj Do Abhi Do Uttarakhand Raj Do*, which deals with the subject of the Uttarakhand statehood movement. The narrative follows a young school-going boy named Beeru, who lives with his blind mother and whose father had made the supreme sacrifice and attained martyrdom while serving the nation. The story takes a tragic turn when a close friend of Beeru takes his own life due to the rising unemployment in the region. Deeply affected by this loss, Beeru finds himself drawn into the growing movement for a separate state. As the demand for Uttarakhand intensifies, the youth of the village, actively participating in the struggle, inspire Beeru to join their march toward Delhi in honour of his fallen companion. The film portrays the pivotal Rampur Tiraha firing, a defining moment in the movement, and depicts the tragic death of one of the youths at the hands of police brutality against the activists. One of Beeru’s comrades, Deepak, suffers memory loss due to the violence during the movement. The film then fast-forwards 15 years hence, post the formation of the state. As

Deepak regains his memory, he returns to his native village, eager to witness the changes brought about by the long-fought struggle. Upon reuniting with his fellow activists, he is confronted with a harsh reality: their conditions remain unchanged. Many of them, having lost their limbs during the violent clashes, continue to struggle for survival. Despite the promises made by the newly formed state government to provide employment and other benefits to the movement's participants, they are yet to receive any support. They recall the violent incident and tell how police brutally killed the young Beeru. Finally, Beeru's mother learns the truth about her son's sacrifice: that, like his father, he was martyred for the cause of statehood. With a heavy heart yet unwavering resilience, she emphasises that the struggle must not end with statehood alone. She urges the people to continue striving for the betterment of their state and to remain dedicated to its progress and development. The film serves as an apt representation of the persistent socio-economic challenges faced by the people, even after the attainment of statehood. Despite numerous promises made by political leaders and the government, many commitments remained unfulfilled, resulting in little to no improvement in the living conditions of the population. Furthermore, rather than curbing migration to the plains, statehood inadvertently led to its increase, highlighting the continued struggle for sustainable development and opportunities within the newly formed state.

Since a major reason behind the mass movement was against the increase in reservation quota after Mandal Commission's recommendation, many rejectionists of the movement termed it an 'anti-reservation movement'. **Emma Mawdsley**, in her work *Uttarakhand Agitation and Other Backward Classes*, explains that the inhabitants of the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh were largely dependent on government employment due to the geographic constraints of the mountainous environment and the prevailing socio-cultural structure of small, relatively evenly divided landholdings. This reliance on government jobs was significantly challenged by the increase in the reservation quota, particularly in a region where 80 per cent of the population belonged to the unreserved category. Moreover, she asserts that while the increased reservation was a key factor, there were other contributing issues to the mass movement, including concerns over liquor and lotteries. The SP-BSP coalition government's policy of establishing liquor shops in the hill districts was widely opposed by the female population and activists of the regions. The implications of the 27 per cent reservation policy for OBCs in the hill regions became widely evident during the college admission process in June-July 1994. As the policy's impact unfolded, student-led demonstrations emerged, initially sporadic but intensifying

throughout July, highlighting the growing discontent and opposition to the reservation policy in the region.

While the movement successfully led to the creation of a separate hill state, Uttaranchal, the attainment of statehood, as depicted in the film *Aaj Do Abhi Do Uttarakhand Raj Do*, did not resolve the pre-existing challenges, despite being the outcome of a prolonged and arduous struggle. Instead, many of the older issues continue to persist while new socio-economic and administrative problems have emerged. Despite the government's efforts to manage inter- and intra-state migration to the 'plain regions', it has remained unresolved even after the formation of the hill state.

Since the formation of Uttarakhand, the administration has struggled to establish a robust industrial economy capable of generating large-scale employment opportunities. While the state's economy is primarily driven by spiritual tourism, owing to the region's rich cultural and natural heritage, the youth continue to rely mainly on public sector employment or joining the armed forces. In an interview with the Indian Express, Kamla Pant, an important activist of the movement, says, "*Jis soch se, jis vichar se yeh rajya liya tha, woh toh door-door tak nazar nahi aata*" (the idea of Uttarakhand has not been realised yet).

The recent developments in the state also tell us a picture of a conflict of identity, i.e., 'us (the natives of Uttarakhand) vs them (the outsiders and Muslims).' In June 2023, Muslim residents of Purola, Chamoli, had been urged by Hindu extremist groups to relinquish both their sources of livelihood and the homes they have inhabited for generations. The threats were issued in response to an alleged attempted kidnapping of a minor Hindu girl in an instance of "love jihad" by two youths in May 2023. Hindu groups, along with hundreds of supporters, held a rally demanding the expulsion of Muslims, raising provocative slogans and vandalising shops with Muslim names. Since then, most Muslim-owned businesses in Purola have remained closed, while the rest of the market remains active. The local native population, though scared, asserts, "This *devbhoomi* is our *janmabhoomi* and *karmabhoomi* also (the land of our birth and work), and we are not going anywhere." In some villages of Kedar Valley in the Devprayag district, signboards were put up prohibiting the entry of "non-Hindus and Rohingya Muslims." Pant further says, "*There was no religious divide back in the movement. And today, I hear people from right-wing outfits, ironically many of them from out of the state, saying Devbhoomi is only for us.*" There are many such instances where the non-natives or non-Hindus are termed as the 'others and outsiders'. The UCC has been challenged by various Muslim groups and

individuals in the Nainital High Court, claiming it violates the religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution. However, it is important to note that the formation of the state was not based on language or religion but rather on issues of regional underdevelopment, tribal ethnicity, and ecological concerns.