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Battleground 2024: Apple may shape political landscape in Himachal Pradesh

Farmers expect resolution of issues like right price, expensive transportation



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Anti-Hail Nets Draped Over Apple Orchards In Kotgarh, Shimla. (Photo: Asit Ranjan Mishra)

Asit Ranjan Mishra | [Kotgarh, Shimla](#)

5 min read Last Updated : May 31 2024 | 1:59 PM IST

On the way to Kotgarh from Shimla, the sense of serene snow even in summer's warm embrace. But as this edge of the state, these pristine white expanses are in fact anti-hail nets draped over sprawling



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The orchards, now synonymous with the lush beauty of Himachal Pradesh, are all thanks to Samuel Evan Stokes, an American missionary who settled in the state in the early 20th century. In 1916, Stokes, who later became an Indian citizen and came to be known as Satyanand Stokes, imported apple saplings from the US and planted them for the first time in Kotgarh. This marked the beginning of apple cultivation in the region, leading to the economic transformation of the Himalayan state.

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Vidya Stokes (96), a prominent former politician in Himachal Pradesh, is Satyanand's daughter-in-law. "Many of his family members reside in the US and come during the apple season. Whenever they come here, they mingle well with the locals and attend functions and marriages. They are well respected and own 1,200 bigha (812 hectares) apple orchards here," says Surendra Kumar Kaul, a local at Kotgarh.

The tug of war

Apple is cultivated on 115,680 hectares across 21 Assembly segments of the state. Major apple-growing areas fall under the Shimla and Mandi parliamentary constituencies. Over 300,000 families are directly involved in apple cultivation, which makes the fruit a political hot potato, particularly during the election season.

ALL SET TO VOTE

Himachal Pradesh's four Lok Sabha constituencies

KANGRA (1)

Total electors (in 2024): 1,502,514

2024 contenders

- Rajeev Bhardwaj, BJP
- Anand Sharma, INC

2019 result

	Vote share in %
Kishan Kapoor, BJP	71.84
Pawan Kajal, INC	24.53

HAMIRPUR (3)

Total electors (in 2024): 1,432,636

2024 contenders

- Anurag Singh Thakur, BJP
- Satpal Raizada, INC

2019 result

	Vote share in %
Anurag Singh Thakur, BJP	68.81
Ram Lal Thakur, INC	28.54

SHIMLA (4)

Total electors (in 2024): 1,346,369

2024 contenders

- Suresh Kumar Kashyap, BJP
- Vinod Sultanpur, INC

2019 result

	Vote share in %
Suresh Kumar Kashyap, BJP	66.24
Dhani Ram Shandil, INC	30.45

Source: ECI

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On May 23, Himachal Pradesh Industries Minister Harshwardhan Chauhan and Revenue Minister Jagat Singh Negi, claimed in a joint statement that Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in the last elections, promised to triple the import duty on apples, but the duty was instead reduced to 50 per cent, causing significant losses to the state's apple growers. "Due to increased import of foreign apples, local growers are not getting fair prices and suffering losses." They blamed the central government's policies for jeopardising the state's Rs 5000 crore apple industry.

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The BJP has been clarifying that there has been no cut in import duty on apples. "In reality, the Narendra Modi government, to support domestic production and prevent dumping by other countries, has imposed a minimum import price of Rs 50 on apples. When the US imposed some sanctions, India imposed some retaliatory tariffs on agri products like apple. Now both countries, through mutual discussions, have agreed to roll back their tariffs. The same duty which applied to as the rest of the world is also applicable on American apples," Trade Minister Piyush Goyal said last year.

Adani in the net

The Congress has also tried to drag the issue on Saturday, Rahul Gandhi said Modi has not controlled the apple prices. “In Himachal, apple growers fail to get the right price because of the partnership between Modi and (Gautam) Adani. All storage facilities have been given to one person, who controls the apple price,” Rahul Gandhi said.



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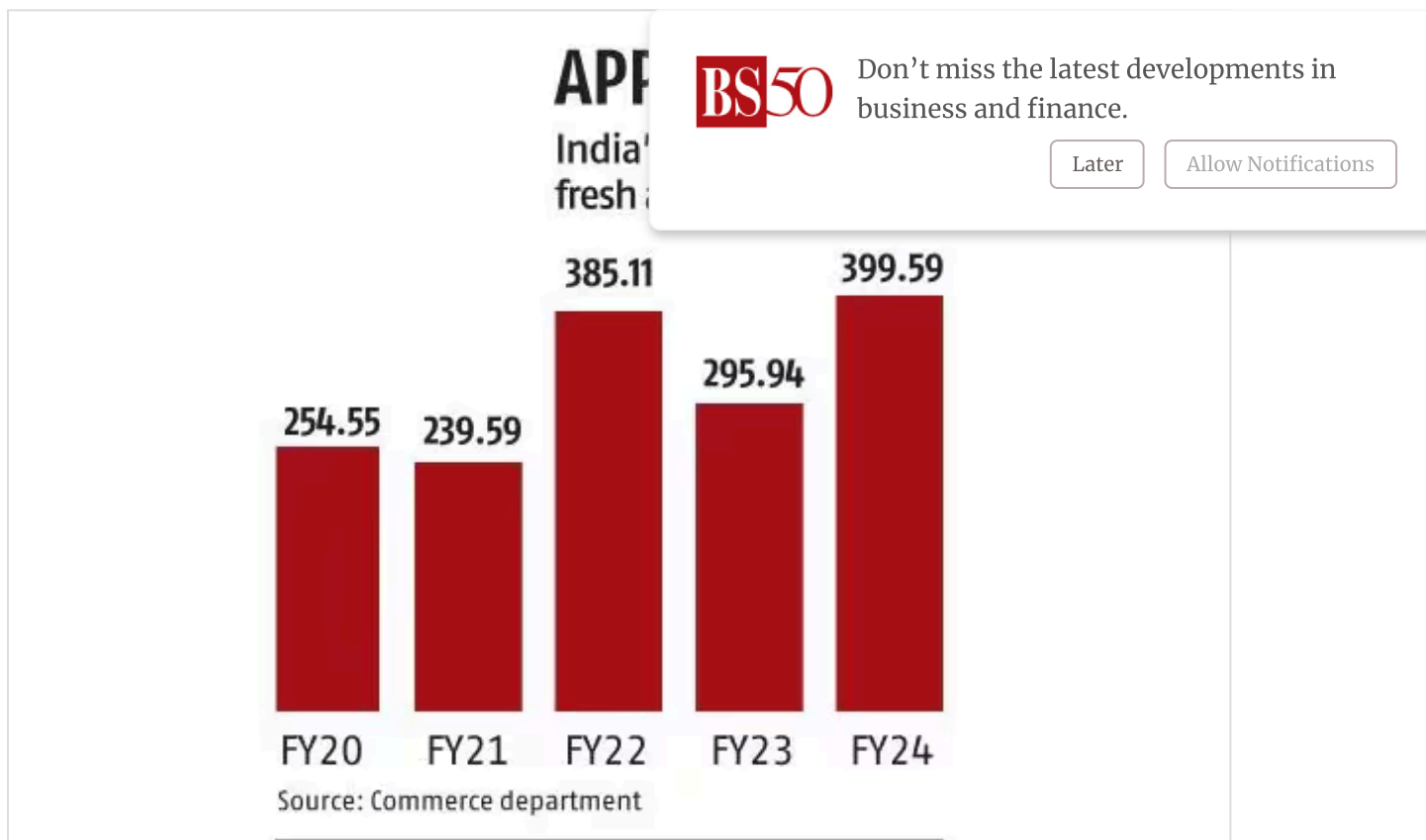
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ing a rally at Nahan in Sirmaur district to control the apple prices. “In

An email query sent to Adani Agri Fresh Ltd, which runs three cold storage facilities in Himachal with a capacity of 6,000 tonnes each, remained unanswered till the time of going to press.

Apples often become a political issue during the election season because farmers don't get the right price, carton rates vary, and transportation also becomes expensive, says a Kotgarh local. “Farmers spend a lot on fertilisers and sprays, and end up failing to recover their money. The government offers a subsidy on anti-hail nets and spray machines. The farmer has to invest upfront, but the subsidies come very late,” he adds.

The current Congress government in the state, led by Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, in April notified universal carton packaging for the upcoming apple season. The standardised packaging, with each carton containing 20 kg, is expected to prevent exploitation of farmers by middlemen who often stuff 35 kg in a carton and sell per kilogram in the market. This has been a longstanding demand of apple farmers.



An official at an Adani Agri Fresh cold storage facility in Himachal, who does not wish to be named, says the protests are politically motivated and common during the procurement season.

Denying accusations of price manipulation, the official says: “We give whatever price is prevalent in the market. Price is decided based on the colour and size of the apple. We reject apples if they don’t meet our quality standards.”

The official adds that the company doesn’t buy apples from lower elevations, harvested during June–July. “Such farmers go to the local mandi. We start procurement in September from upper elevation, above 7,000 feet. We don’t buy from lower elevations because of quality issues and lower shelf life. The higher the elevation, the more the pressure. That leads to more crispness in apples and higher price.”

Gaurav Gosain, an apple grower, says the substantial drop in apple production. “moisture was not enough as it didn’t rain



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diverse weather conditions leading to a high during March-April. Also,

Even as politicians battle to harvest political gains, apple farmers in the state remain at the receiving end.

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