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Himachal's tightrope walk begins

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ML VERMA
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Ever since the Sixteenth Finance Commission unveiled its recommendations, Himachal Pradesh has been thrust into a fiscal storm, with public discourse converging on a single pressing question — how will the state navigate the twin blow of a reduced tax devolution share and the elimination of Revenue Deficit Grants?

For a hill state that has long prided itself on fiscal discipline, relatively strong human development indicators and consistent governance performance, the allocation places it among the lowest recipients in the country. The deeper unease stems from a perception that the evolving framework of federal transfers may be structurally disadvantaging smaller hill states.

On paper, the devolution formula appears balanced and data-driven. The highest weight of 42.5 per cent has been as-



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signed to per capita Gross State Domestic Product distance, followed by 17.5 per cent to population based on the 2011 Census. Demographic performance, geographical area, forest cover and contribution to GDP each carry

a weight of 10 per cent. The framework thus seeks to combine equity, efficiency and need. Yet its outcome has concentrated resources heavily in large, populous states. Uttar Pradesh commands over 17 per cent of the divisible pool, Bihar nearly 10 per cent, and several other major states account for substantial shares. In contrast, smaller and hill states remain clustered at the bottom of the distribution table.

The logic of income distance and population weightage inevitably favours states with larger populations and lower per capita income. However, critics argue that such a structure overlooks the distinctive realities of hill economies. Himachal Pradesh's modest population growth, relatively higher per capita income and substantial forest cover — often seen as strengths — appear to translate into fiscal disadvantage under the current matrix. Former senior adminis-

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US trade deal Are Apple growers protected or exposed?

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The quest is, if Washington apples begin landing in India at around Rs 100 per kilogram under the proposed India-US trade understanding, what happens to Himachal, Uttarakhand and Kashmir's orchard economy?

That question is now echoing across apple-growing belts after apple growers raised concerns over the reported reduction in import duty on US apples from 50% to 25%, coupled with a Minimum Import Price (MIP) of Rs 80 per kg.

Farmers argue that even with

safeguards, the new framework could alter market dynamics at a sensitive time for domestic producers.

The core concern here seems the price arithmetic. Apple growers point to basic calculations.

Historically, Washington apples have rarely landed in India below \$1 per kg. At current exchange levels (around Rs 92 per dollar), that translates to Rs 92 per kg as base cost.

Under the earlier 50% import duty, this would push landed cost

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US trade deal

Are Apple growers protected or exposed?

near Rs 138 per kg.

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With the proposed 25% duty and an MIP of Rs 80 per kg, growers estimate landed prices could hover around Rs 100 per kg.

"If imported apples land at Rs 100 and retail at Rs 140-150, where does that leave Indian apples?" a grower representative questioned.

Retail prices in many Indian cities currently range between Rs 200-250 per kg, and in some markets even touch Rs 300 during lean supply periods.

Farmers fear that lower-priced imports during peak domestic marketing season could depress wholesale mandi prices — where local growers are most vulnerable.

Government's position; Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has publicly stated that the arrangement includes a protective floor through the Minimum Import Price mechanism, ensuring apples cannot enter below Rs 80 per kg.

The government's argument is that the combination of quota restrictions and MIP safeguards prevents "dumping" and protects Indian growers while balancing trade commitments.

However, detailed operational guidelines — including quota size, seasonal timing, and enforcement clarity — remain key factors that will determine real market impact and which are not made public yet.

Now evaluating India's Apple demand vs supply. India's annual apple consumption is estimated at around 25-26 lakh metric tonnes.

Domestic production fluctuates between 20-22 lakh metric tonnes depending on weather conditions. This leaves a structural gap of roughly 4-5 lakh metric tonnes, which is filled through imports.

The question, therefore, is not whether India should import apples — it already does — but at what price and from whom.

In recent years, the largest apple exporters to India have been Turkey, Iran, Poland, Italy and Afghanistan.

The United States has not been among the top volume suppliers in recent years, largely due to earlier retaliatory tariffs.

Which raises another question. Will reduced duty revive

US apple volumes significantly, or simply redistribute market share among existing exporters?

Moreover farmers also point to potential revenue implications. Lower import duty means lower customs revenue per kilogram.

More importantly for growers, mandi prices are determined by supply volume and timing. Even a modest increase in imports during peak domestic harvest could influence price discovery in wholesale markets.

Apple cultivation supports lakhs of families in Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, and Uttarakhand. The crop is not merely an agricultural commodity — it anchors rural employment, transport networks, packaging industries, and seasonal labour markets.

Any policy shift that affects mandi prices has ripple effects across the hill economy.

Experts believe that the real variable here is timing. Much will depend on whether imports are staggered or concentrated. Whether quota volumes are limited, whether imports coincide with domestic peak harvest months and how strictly the MIP is enforced

If imports enter during lean domestic months, impact may be limited. And if they overlap with peak supply season, mandi prices could face pressure.

At the heart of the debate lies a structural tension. India needs imports to meet consumption demand. Domestic growers seek price stability and income security. Trade negotiations require tariff flexibility.

The outcome will depend less on headline numbers and more on execution. For apple growers in the hills, the concern is straightforward "If imported apples retail at Rs 150, will traders use that benchmark to bargain down our produce?"

That is the uncertainty now facing orchard belts.

The trade framework may be designed with safeguards, but its real test will be seen in wholesale mandis during the coming marketing season. Until detailed quota mechanisms and seasonal controls are fully clarified, apprehensions among growers are likely to persist.

The debate is no longer just about duty percentages. It is about price signals, market timing, and the future stability of India's hill economy.

trators in the state have pointed out that while the formula claims neutrality, it does not adequately factor in structural disabilities arising from mountainous terrain, scattered habitation and limited economic diversification. Their critique is blunt: the framework risks "putting apples among oranges" by measuring fundamentally different states through a uniform yardstick.

The fiscal discomfort is compounded by the complete withdrawal of Revenue Deficit Grants (RDG) under the Sixteenth Finance Commission. Since attaining full statehood in 1971-72, Himachal Pradesh has consistently received RDG to bridge the gap between its revenue receipts and expenditure commitments. Over successive commissions, the grant expanded significantly, reaching over Rs 17,000 crore during the Fifteenth Finance Commission award period up to 2025-26. During that phase, RDG constituted nearly 13 per cent of the state's total budget. For a state with limited taxable capacity and high infrastructure costs, this was not an optional support mechanism but a foundational pillar of fiscal stability.

In contrast, for larger and economically stronger states, RDG formed only a marginal component of their budgets. For them, its withdrawal may be fiscally neutral. For Himachal Pradesh, it represents the removal of a critical compensatory instrument. The abrupt shift from substantial annual support to zero creates what many describe as a fiscal shock. A gradual tapering mechanism — linked to performance incentives such as improved tax mobilisation or demographic stability — might have allowed smoother adjustment. Instead, the sudden discontinuation forces the state to confront immediate fiscal compression.

The implications are stark. Without RDG and with a limited share of central taxes, the state may be compelled either to reduce development expendi-

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On paper, the devolution formula appears balanced and data-driven. The highest weight of 42.5 per cent has been assigned to per capita Gross State Domestic Product distance, followed by 17.5 per cent to population based on the 2011 Census. Demographic performance, geographical area, forest cover and contribution to GDP each carry a weight of 10 per cent

ture or increase borrowing. Both choices carry risks. Curtailing development spending can slow infrastructure expansion, social sector investment and welfare commitments. Expanding borrowing, on the other hand, adds to debt servicing burdens in future years, narrowing fiscal flexibility further. For a hill state already grappling with high logistics costs, climate vulnerabilities and infrastructure challenges, this balancing act becomes particularly delicate.

There is also a broader structural question. Himachal Pradesh bears a disproportionate ecological responsibility. Nearly two-thirds of its geographical area is under forest cover, contributing to national carbon sinks and environmental stability. The state shoulders environmental and social costs associated with hydropower projects, dams and conservation regimes that serve national pri-

orities. Infrastructure creation in mountainous terrain entails significantly higher per-unit costs than in plains. Even railway expansion — often a national asset — requires state cost-sharing.

These realities raise a fundamental federal question: should fiscal transfers primarily reward demographic weight and income distance, or should they more strongly compensate ecological services and structural constraints?

The debate extends beyond Himachal Pradesh. It touches upon the evolving character of India's cooperative federalism. As fiscal architecture becomes more formula-driven, there is a risk that performance-oriented and demographically stable states may feel penalised rather than rewarded. The challenge for future commissions will be to refine the balance between equity and sustainability, ensuring that national cohesion is strengthened rather than strained.

For Himachal Pradesh, the coming years will test fiscal ingenuity. Enhanced own-tax mobilisation, rationalisation of expenditure and innovative revenue models may become unavoidable. Yet structural realities cannot be wished away. If the current trajectory continues without compensatory mechanisms, the state could face one of its most demanding fiscal phases since statehood. The question is not merely about percentages in a tax table; it is about whether India's fiscal federalism adequately recognises the unique burdens and contributions of its hill states.

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Himachal's tightrope walk begins

Smallest district, strongest development story

MADHAAN VERMA
SHIMLA

Although Hamirpur is the smallest district of Himachal Pradesh in terms of geographical area, its contribution to the state and the nation has been exceptionally wide and impactful. The district stands as a powerful example that it is not physical size, but vision, leadership, public awareness, and collective resolve that shape a region's destiny. Over the decades, Hamirpur has emerged as a center of education, public service, defence contribution, and infrastructure growth, carving a distinct identity for itself within the state.

There was a time when Hamirpur and its surrounding areas were described as "Kala Pani" by the then Chief Minister of undivided Punjab, reflecting its remoteness and limited connectivity.

Resources were scarce, road networks were weak, and opportunities appeared distant. Yet the people of the region refused to let circumstances define their future. Through discipline, hard work, and a strong tradition of public service, they gradually transformed adversity into strength. The progress Hamirpur enjoys today is therefore not merely the outcome of government schemes, but the result of sustained public effort and democratic maturity.

A significant turning point in

Hamirpur's development journey came in 1998, when Shri Prem Kumar Dhumal, a leader associated with the district, became Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh. From that period onward, development initiatives in the district accelerated substantially. Administrative institutions, educational infrastructure, and road connectivity saw notable expansion, giving Hamirpur a new momentum of growth.

Hamirpur has long been known for its remarkable contribution to the armed forces. In proportion to its population, the number of youth joining the Indian Army from this district has remained among the highest in the state and the country.

This proud legacy earned Hamirpur the title of "Veer Bhoomi." To institutionalize this contribution and ensure welfare support, the Department of Sainik Welfare was established in the district, emerging as a key center for rehabilitation and re-employment of ex-servicemen across Himachal Pradesh.

Road connectivity became another defining feature of Hamirpur's transformation. The district achieved one of the highest densities of quality roads in the state. Almost every rural and urban habitation is now connected by all-weather roads. As a result, Hamirpur has virtually no pending link roads under schemes

such as the Prime Minister's Gram Sadak Yojana, while many other regions continue to seek such connectivity. The district has moved beyond basic road access and entered the era of four-lane highways and railway expansion, strengthening its integration with major economic centers.

Administrative decentralization also played a crucial role in reshaping the district's profile. The Himachal Pradesh Staff Selection Commission was shifted from Shimla and established in Hamirpur, enhancing its importance at the state level. The Regional Engineering College was upgraded to the National Institute of Technology (NIT), transforming the district into a center of national-level technical education. This upgradation was not merely symbolic—it expanded opportunities for students across the state and elevated Hamirpur's academic stature.

Education has remained central to Hamirpur's development narrative. During successive tenures of state leadership associated with the district, emphasis was placed on expanding school infrastructure, upgrading institutions, and improving academic standards. The establishment of Himachal Pradesh Technical University further strengthened this ecosystem by creating a dedicated framework for professional

and technical courses. An Institute of Hotel Management and a College of Horticulture and Forestry at Neri added diversity to higher education options. Over time, private sector participation also expanded, turning Hamirpur into one of the state's leading educational hubs.

The Hamirpur parliamentary constituency has also witnessed the establishment of institutions of national importance. Railway connectivity—unique in the state's parliamentary segments—has improved accessibility, with further expansion underway.

Major institutions within or closely linked to the constituency include AIIMS Bilaspur, IIIT Una, Hydro Engineering College in Bilaspur, and proposed advanced medical and skill development centers.

These institutions collectively strengthen the region's profile in health, technology, and professional education.

Recent years have seen renewed emphasis on healthcare and infrastructure. Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan Government Medical College is steadily expanding, with proposals for super-specialty facilities and a cancer institute poised to transform the district into a medical hub for northern India.

Large-scale bridge projects, administrative complexes, sports infrastructure, tourism facilities,

irrigation schemes, and drinking water projects are reshaping both urban and rural landscapes.

Politically, Hamirpur occupies a unique position. Leaders from across party lines—including those holding significant positions at the state and national levels—have roots in the district or parliamentary constituency. This representation has ensured that the district's voice remains prominent in policy discussions.

At the same time, the people of Hamirpur have consistently demonstrated political awareness, making informed democratic choices from the panchayat level to Parliament.

Ultimately, the story of Hamirpur is a story of people-driven development.

With a hardworking culture, farsighted thinking, and effective use of democratic institutions, the district has leveraged every opportunity to advance. From being labeled remote to emerging as a hub of education, healthcare, and infrastructure, Hamirpur exemplifies how limited geography can carry limitless potential. Its journey continues, with strong foundations.

Writer is a independent observer of the hill state's political, social and developmental issues. The views expressed are personal.

When Classrooms become formalities

VISHAL SARIN
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In Himachal Pradesh, a quiet but deeply consequential shift is underway in senior secondary education. Increasingly, parents openly acknowledge that their children have taken "dummy admissions" in Class XI and XII—remaining formally enrolled in schools while spending nearly all their time in private coaching institutes preparing for competitive examinations. What was once a metropolitan phenomenon associated with Kota or Delhi is gradually finding acceptance even in hill towns. The classroom is becoming a formality; coaching has become the real school.

This is not merely a cultural shift driven by ambition. It is a structural distortion of the education system. Senior secondary education is designed to be a critical phase of intellectual growth, interdisciplinary exposure, laboratory learning,

and personality development. Yet for a growing segment of students, these two years are reduced to an administrative requirement for board certification while the substantive academic effort is outsourced to coaching centres.

The data at the national level underscores how large this shadow system has become. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation's recent surveys, nearly one in three students in India now attends private coaching, and among higher secondary students the proportion is significantly higher, particularly in urban areas. Parallel to this, India's coaching industry has expanded into a multi-billion-dollar market, with estimates placing its value at over Rs 50,000 crore and projecting rapid growth over the next decade. Education, once a public good delivered primarily through formal institutions, is increas-

ingly mediated through a private preparatory economy.

In this environment, dummy admissions are not accidental—they are systemic. Competitive examinations for engineering, medicine, defence services, and other professional streams have become intensely specialised. Coaching institutes promise structured preparation, targeted test practice, and a singular focus that schools, bound by broader curricular responsibilities, struggle to match. For anxious parents seeking certainty in an uncertain job market, two uninterrupted years of coaching appear rational. The school timetable seems like a distraction; the entrance exam rank becomes the sole benchmark of success.

Yet this logic carries long-term consequences. When attendance norms are quietly diluted and schools tacitly accommodate absentee students, institutional credibil-

ity erodes. Senior secondary schools risk being reduced to certification bodies rather than centres of learning. Laboratory work, debates, extracurricular activities, and peer engagement—integral to adolescent development—lose relevance. Education narrows to problem-solving drills and pattern recognition exercises tailored to entrance exams.

There is also the question of equity. Coaching is expensive. Families who can afford long-term residential or day-long programmes secure advantages that others cannot. If formal schooling weakens simultaneously, those who rely solely on classrooms may find themselves at a structural disadvantage. The education system then ceases to level opportunity and instead amplifies socio-economic divides.

Regulatory ambiguity compounds the problem. Attendance requirements for board eligibility exist, but enforce-

ment is inconsistent. Coaching institutes often function under commercial registration frameworks rather than academic oversight. Advertising claims about ranks and results are rarely scrutinised with academic rigour. The result is a parallel education track that is influential but insufficiently accountable. Recent judicial observations in other states have flagged the risks of dummy schooling, but policy responses remain fragmented.

For Himachal, the issue is particularly sensitive. The state has historically prided itself on strong public education indicators and relatively high literacy rates. Its geographic limitations make human capital development central to long-term economic resilience. If senior secondary education becomes hollowed out, the impact will not be confined to board results; it will affect the intellec-

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Village playgrounds that became parking lots

CHANCHAL SARIN
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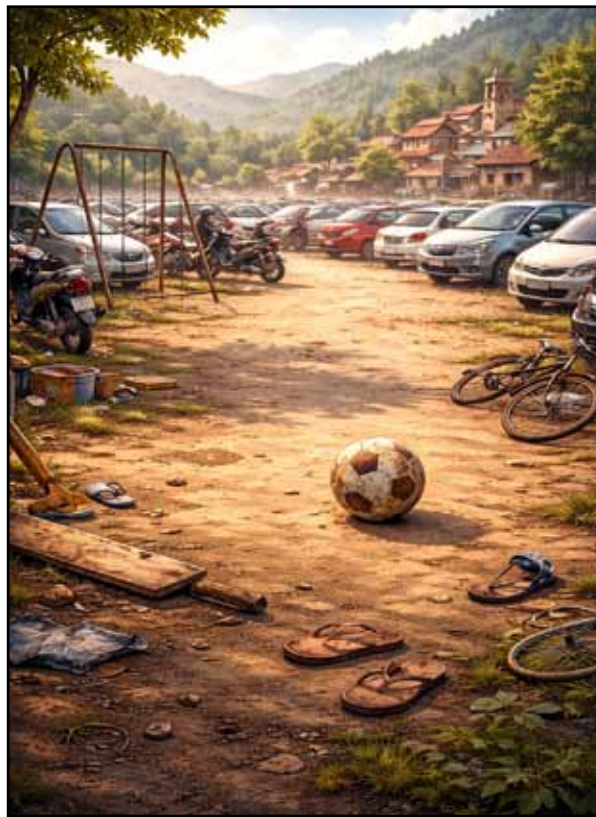
There was a playground where the shepherd boys used to kick a patched-up ball until dusk, and an old mango tree where the girls kept time with their skipping ropes. Those places held the secret calendars of childhood — Saturdays that smelled of chalk and rain, afternoons that let children invent games with rules only they knew. Now many of those open spaces in small towns and peri-urban villages have been flattened into rectangles of asphalt and painted lines for cars. A school ground that once hosted an inter-village kabaddi match is today a neat row of parked scooters and a vendor's temporary shed; the echo of running feet has been replaced by the click of central locking.

This is not merely aesthetic loss. Playgrounds and commons are where kids learn to fall and get up, to negotiate rules, to belong to a crowd that is not their family. Across India, the public arithmetic of space tells a worrying story: official education data suggests that hundreds of thousands of schools still lack a

playground, meaning many children never get a regular, safe place to play during the school day.

In cities the squeeze is starker. Dense redevelopment has eaten into green and play areas; some wards in metropolitan Mumbai report less than one square metre of accessible open space per person, far below international norms. Where parks remain, many are locked, monetised, or poorly maintained — effectively denying children free, everyday play.

The result is predictable: children are outdoors less and indoors more. Surveys comparing generations show that Indian children today spend far less unstructured time outside than their parents did. Screen time and supervised, scheduled activities—tuitions, coaching, private



classes—have crowded out free

play. This matters for physical and mental health; national assessments of child activity report worrying shortfalls in movement and outdoor play among school-age children.

In hill districts of Himachal Pradesh the pattern has a local twist. Villages that once pooled land for a playground now subdivide plots to meet housing demand or to park vehicles for seasonal tourists. Narrow lanes and steep slopes make informal play risky; parents who once watched from doorways now worry about traffic and stray dogs. Where a school playground survives, it is often the one patch everyone defends — but increasingly the defence is a quiet battle against ad hoc encroachments and makeshift parking. The loss

is not only spatial but social: fewer shared spaces mean fewer inter-age friendships, less spontaneous community supervision, and a narrowing of childhood's horizons.

Fixing this is not simply about building playgrounds. It means treating open space as essential infrastructure — planned, funded, maintained and legally protected. It means insisting that school design guarantees safe play as a core function, not an afterthought. It means municipalities refusing to view public land as short-term revenue to be leased out, and parents reclaiming playtime from a commercialised calendar. Data and sentiment converge on one simple truth: if we keep turning places where children run into places where cars rest, we will pay later in health, creativity and neighbourliness.

When the bell that once summoned every child to a field goes silent, a whole set of social skills loses its rehearsal stage. The hills and towns of India must ask themselves whether the convenience of a parking slot is worth the quiet forfeiture of childhood.

When Classrooms become formalities

tual breadth and adaptability of the next generation.

The deeper concern is philosophical. Education at the higher secondary level is meant to widen horizons, not narrow them prematurely. When sixteen-year-olds are channelled into hyper-specialised exam preparation, alternative academic pathways shrink. Humanities, social sci-

store primacy to schools. Attendance verification must be meaningful. Transparency between schools and coaching centres must be strengthened. Public institutions may need to integrate structured competitive modules within the school system itself to reduce dependency on external ecosystems.

The popularity of dummy admissions reflects parental aspiration, not parental neglect. But aspiration cannot justify institutional dilution. If classrooms become symbolic while coaching centres become substantive, the state risks redefining education in purely transactional terms. Himachal—and India at large—must decide whether senior secondary schooling will remain a foundational stage of holistic development or quietly transform into a paperwork bridge to competitive exams.

The answer will determine not just examination ranks, but the intellectual character of an entire generation.

HIMACHALSCAPE DESK
SHIMLA

Himachal Pradesh is witnessing a disturbing shift in its climate pattern. What once seemed like seasonal irregularity is now emerging as a deeper ecological crisis. Declining rainfall and sharply reduced snowfall are early warning signs of mounting environmental stress. This winter, most regions recorded only one significant snowfall event, while overall wet conditions remain far below normal. Springs are drying, river discharge is falling, and drinking water shortages are surfacing earlier than usual.

A key reason is the weakening of Western Disturbances, which traditionally bring winter rain and snow to North India. Rising temperatures further reduce snow retention, disrupting the

Himalayas' natural water storage system. Experts describe this as a "snow drought," where low snowpack leads to reduced water availability in the months ahead, affecting agriculture, horticulture, hydropower, and rural livelihoods.

However, climate change alone is not responsible. Rapid urbanization, deforestation, unregulated construction, and neglect of traditional water systems like naulas, dharas, and kuhls have intensified vulnerability. Apple orchards face uncertain chilling hours, and rain-fed farming is under stress.

The crisis is still reversible. Strengthening rainwater harvesting, reviving traditional sources, promoting micro-irrigation, conserving forests, and ensuring community-led water management can restore bal-

ance. Decisive and coordinated action is urgently needed before temporary stress turns into a permanent emergency.

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ences, and creative disciplines risk marginalisation. The pressure to declare career intent at an early age intensifies stress and reduces exploratory learning.

None of this implies that competitive preparation is undesirable. Entrance examinations are a reality of India's higher education landscape, and structured preparation has its place. The problem arises when preparation supplants education rather than complements it. Regulation must therefore aim not to suppress coaching but to re-

Himachal's growing climate stress

