

With poll defeat, NCP leader loses control over co-op sugar mill

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BHAGIRATH BHALKE, the son of late NCP MLA Bharat, not only lost his directorship but also the control over the Vithal Cooperative Sugar Mill. Declared on Thursday, the results of elections of this cooperative mill located in Pandharpur taluka of Solapur saw its control land with the board led by rival sugar baron Abhijit Patil.

For Bhagirath, this is the second setback after losing in the by-elections for the Pandharpur assembly seat which fell vacant due to his father's demise. Bharat, NCP MLA from Pandharpur, had passed away due to post-Covid complications in 2020. Bhagirath, a joint candidate of the MVA, lost to BJP's Samadhan Autade in 2021.

A three-time MLA, Bharat had control over the mill for the past 20 years. Located in the cane growing Solapur zone, this mill

has been at the centre of politics of the region. Cane availability was never a problem for it and due to Bhima river, which runs across the area, the mill had assured availability of cane for many years. Bharat, a wrestler and a known party-hopper, represented the area for three terms from Swabhimani Paksha and Congress as well. Control over the mill was one of the key elements of his victory.

Trouble for the mill increased in 2014-15 due to bad debts. Bad debts led to its closure in 2019-20 and in the 2020-21 season, it crushed around 3 lakh tonnes of cane. It was shut again in the 2021-22 season. As on date, it is yet to clear Rs 30.30 crore worth of payment for the cane procured. This, despite it getting guarantees twice from the state government to raise capital.

During the elections, Patil, who runs two mills in Osmanabad and Sangola taluka of Solapur, had talked about ensuring payment and profit for the mill.

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