

The electoral sweetness of bank & sugar co-operatives

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The Ahmednagar district co-operative bank boasted of ₹6,902 crore deposits in 2018-19, posting a net profit of ₹37 crore. It claimed that it returned

much of this as 9 per cent dividend to its member farmer co-operatives, making it one of the more efficient of its ilk in the entire state.

Outside the bank's expansive chandeliered boardroom — the hall occupies much of the third floor of a glass façade building in the heart of Ahmednagar city — is the memorial plaque with names of its past 'chairmen' and 'vice-chairmen'.

The list reads like the who's who of Maharashtra politics, mostly Congressmen, but also some who crossed over to the Nationalist Congress Party in the last two decades, and now to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"The success of the bank, unlike fail-

ure of half a dozen others on the brink of collapse, is that its board of directors leaves its political affiliations behind when it enters the boardroom," said a senior bank official.

This, the official said, has saved the bank, which was founded in 1958, from arbitrary decision-making in approving loans, and kept liabilities to a minimum. However, the rules of the game have changed of late.

Survival, as evident from the chequered political trajectory of some of the names on the list, is the name of the game.

Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil's is a familiar contemporary name on the plaque. His grandfather Vithalrao Vikhe Patil founded the first sugar co-operative of

Asia in Pravara in 1948. As locals remember, Vithalrao, who had studied only till class four, persuaded economist Dhananjay Ramchandra Gadgil to head the co-operative. When the economist dithered, Vithalrao got 300-400 farmers to travel to Pune, a distance of 120 km, to



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do a dharna outside his home.

If Vithalrao stayed away from electoral politics, and at least initially tried to make his institutions non-dynastic, it did not last long. His son Balasaheb Vikhe Patil joined the co-operative, also headed the bank and became a well-known name in state politics.

Balasaheb quit the Congress to join

the Shiv Sena in mid-1990s, was the Union Minister of State for Finance in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, and his son Radhakrishna a minister in the Manohar Joshi-led Shiv Sena-BJP government in Maharashtra. In the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha (LS) polls, Sujay Vikhe Patil, Radhakrishna's son, joined the BJP to win from the Ahmednagar

Lok Sabha seat. The father followed in the son's footsteps to join the BJP in June, was inducted into Devendra Fadnavis' Council of Ministers, and is now contesting on a BJP ticket from the Shirdi Assembly seat in the district, which he had won successively five times for the Congress from 1995 to 2014.

Other names on the bank's plaque are of Bhausaheb Thorat, whose son Balasaheb is now the state unit chief of the Congress, former LS member Yashwantrao Gadakh Patil and several others.

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The bank itself takes care of the money of a web of businesses and people — an estimated 700,000 farmers, 24,000 women self-help groups with over 400,000 members, sugar co-operatives, educational institutions, agriculture price-marketing committees, and loan money to sundry employees' associations. The Ahmednagar district co-oper-

ative bank has 287 branches in the district, and 11 extension counters.

The heat on the Maharashtra State Co-operative Bank, the apex of the 31 district co-operative banks, is yet to singe the one in Ahmednagar. Already under the scanner are Kapol Co-operative Bank, City Co-operative Bank, Karad Janata Sahakari Bank, Shivam Sahakari Bank, Youth Development Co-operative Bank, and Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative Bank.

If the Vikhe Patils are the co-operative czars of Ahmednagar, the Pawars, led by Sharad Pawar, are of the Pune-Baramati area. Several of Pawar's associates in the co-operative movement have joined the the BJP and Shiv Sena in recent years. Of Ahmednagar district's 12 sitting legislators, five are of the BJP, but four of these are turncoats.

The advantage of giving election tickets to politicians with control of co-operatives, say keen watchers of Ahmednagar politics, is their deep pockets. Political parties do not need to fund their elections, instead they contribute to party funds.

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