

The Demise of a Small Town: A Case of Talegaon Dhamdhere in Pune Metropolitan Region

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Abstract

What leads to the decline of a small town? A number of factors conspiring together operate in the process, which are being outlined in this short communication.

Introduction

The universal law of a beginning, growth and finally a decline is applicable to almost everything, and settlement geography is no exception to this cardinal rule. Since times immemorial, each city, town or village developed for some specific reason, be it a market place, an administrative centre or a break of bulk point – with changing fortunes and in keeping with the times these towns and villages adapted themselves to situations and survived, while others who were unable to cope, lost their *raison d'être* and lapsed into anonymity. The number of small towns which face extinction, partial decline or stagnation is far too numerous to recount, yet for each town that has fallen, there is a pattern – a combination of factors, operating in a particular sequence which brings about this decline.

The Context

In this study, Talegaon Dhamdhere, a market town of yore, in the vicinity of Pune found itself relegated to a village grampanchayat, after enjoying urban status for six decades. The core concern is to identify the reasons for this.

Methodology

Relying on primary data, collected from field work and based largely on interviews and testimonies of a cross section of residents, shop

owners and government officials, the loss of functions and services was documented to understand in a wider context, how the slide down from urban to rural came about. The intention is to figure out how this process operates.

Study Area

Using the example of a former small town, Talegaon Dhamdhere, in Shirur taluka, about 40 km from Pune, with a population of 11,329 souls, according to the 1991 Census, Talegaon's journey from small town to a non-descript village has been traced.

Assumptions

It was assumed that being in Pune's vicinity, a fast growing metropolis, Talegaon's population would grow rapidly. It was further assumed that it would develop into a satellite town receiving the spill over from the overcrowded Pune city. But fate willed otherwise. Talegaon grew at a snail's pace, recording a modest increase in its population since Independence. A number of questions thus crop up, the most pertinent being why Talegaon languished, when already a thriving horticulture and irrigated farming supported its economic base.

Population Growth

Let us first look at Talegaon's population, from around five thousand odd, it has merely doubled to 11,329 in the last fifty years. A closer look tells a different story. A process of hamletization, which started a hundred years ago at Talegaon advanced so rapidly that it gave rise to hamlets, which in time became independent villages. This set into motion the process of alienation. Starting as a compact settlement, Talegaon developed 12 hamlets by 1920, by a process of population dispersion, which gained momentum with the introduction of irrigation and a switch over to cash crops. In 1854, Talegaon had only one hamlet, but within a year, four new hamlets came up, as a result of increased acreage under sugarcane. All hamlets developed along the water courses (Vel river bank) with a maximum potential for irrigation. The setback for Talegaon came when the two largest hamlets broke away in 1962. Thereafter, another three. Sanaswadi, Kasarwadi and Vittalwadi separated. The first, Sanaswadi, was declared a D-zone for setting up an industrial estate, after no further industrial growth was being permitted at Pimpri-Chinchwad. After this Sanaswadi never looked back, and Talegaon never looked forward. The process of population dispersion away from the gaathan gives rise to hamletization, and as the population in the hamlets grows beyond a certain size, it can be granted independent village status - particularly with some political support, this can be easily manipulated. With the loss of five villages, it is not surprising that Talegaon recorded modest growth. The result of this amputation was loss of area and population, followed by a flight of functions, which was next on the list of casualties. Talegaon's fate was truly sealed when it was shorn off its administrative status, no longer the taluka headquarters, all administrative offices (even the lower court) moved en masse to Shirur - the new taluka place. Apart from loss of civic status and administrative functions, more was in the store for Talegaon to hasten the downhill journey.

Evolution of Functions

Even before Independence, after World War II, plans were afoot, to locate the civil airport at Talegaon - preparations were already made to construct the runway, some staff quarters were also built, but the airport never took off. At the last moment, it was decided to locate the airport at Lohegaon, where it stands today. Thus closing the door on any future urban development that could have come up at Talegaon.

With the loss of civic status, existing facilities at Talegaon either stagnated or further deteriorated. As demand declined, many shops and services moved to Shikrapur, a new weekly market which came up 5 km away from Talegaon, on the main Pune-Ahmednagar highway. In the old records, Talegaon's name is mentioned as Talegaon Peth, meaning a market town, but this function was soon wrested by Shikrapur, which took over 50 percent of Talegaon's trade, since it enjoyed direct connectivity with Pune, Ahmednagar and Shirur. Talegaon's traders soon set up permanent shops, agencies and showrooms for sale of agro-products, machinery, fertilisers, spares, two wheelers and autos here.

More setbacks were in store for Talegaon. Talegaon had a flourishing horticulture business of supplying citrus grafts, for which it enjoyed a near monopoly in a number of states: Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, besides Maharashtra. This business collapsed when the government declared its new policy, whereby only licensed vendors could supply these grafts. Overnight this affected a large number of farmers whose economy was ruined, the specialised skill of grafting slowly died out with lack of demand. In the overall assessment, Talegaon found itself by-passed when any new facility was planned, be it a degree college, which went to Shirur, though Talegaon could boast of a large high school, even 60-70 years ago. All new enterprises were being located at its former hamlet - Sanaswadi - the new industrial zone. Talegaon's potential for developing into a dormitory node for the new migrants in



Fig. 1. Former wadies of Talegaon Dhamdhere - now indepent villages

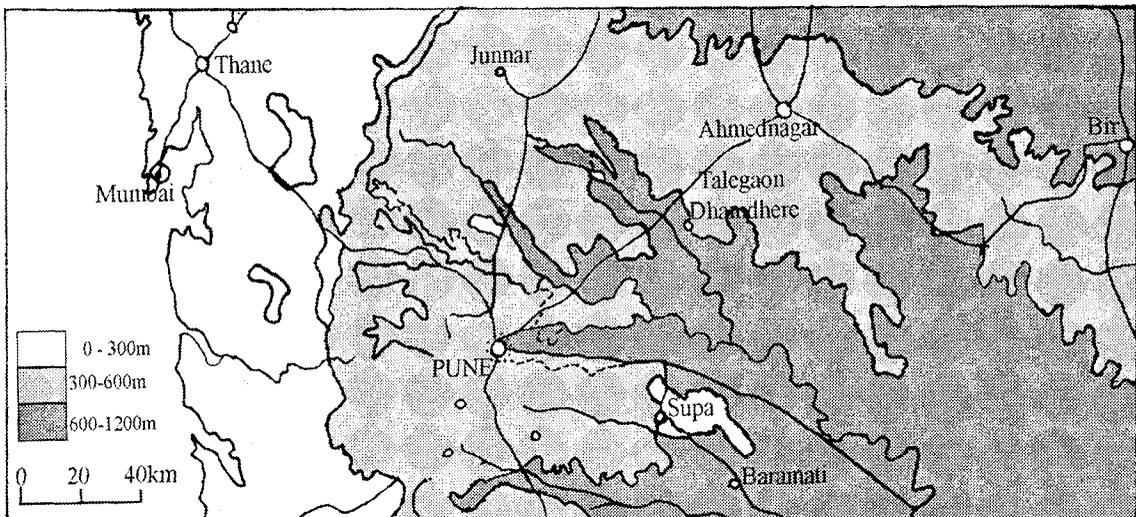


Fig. 2. Location of Talegaon Dhamdhere

the industrial areas in its vicinity, remains untapped. How successfully Talegaon can build the required infrastructure and amenities to project itself as an ideal residential suburb, only time will tell.

Conclusion

Summing up, the first ingredient which Talegaon lacked was strong political leadership, which failed to promote Talegaon's cause. The local leadership lacked vision, failed to see the big picture, they connived for small gains.

They engineered the split in the administrative area of Talegaon into several gram-

panchayats, mainly to gain representation in the Zilla Parishad. Thus civic status, administrative functions and the rest were all sacrificed at the altar of petty vested interests. Time and again, when it was necessary to lobby aggressively for Talegaon's development, the lack of a strong political leader to espouse its cause was acutely felt. Though a bundle of factors have brought about Talegaon's decline, absence of political support at the critical juncture has been the underlying cause for its overall stagnation.

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