

MAKING CAPITAL OUT OF POLITICAL RIVALRY

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After maintaining secrecy over the future of Amaravati for months and allowing confusion to prevail, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has finally revealed what is in his mind. By hinting at the establishment of three capitals, citing the South Africa example, Mr. Reddy has made it clear that he is not in favour of grandiose plans lined up for Amaravati by his predecessor, N. Chandrababu Naidu.

If Mr. Reddy means what he has announced in Andhra Pradesh Assembly about having Amaravati, Visakhapatnam and Kurnool as the legislative, executive and judicial capitals respectively, it is going to be a rather radical move that raises many questions. Can a capital city be divided into three or more pieces and spread across the State based on regional and other considerations?

Can the ruling party of the day play with the idea of a State capital, an enduring symbol of identity for people, and keep shuffling it on political grounds? Should a huge mandate mean a licence to tinker with anything, with scant regard to continuity in governance? And what if a rival political party comes to power later and reverses the three capitals proposal midway?

Such a move by Mr. Reddy would mean that people of Andhra Pradesh have to wait for more time to realise their dream of having a place that could be called a capital. When the Telugu-speaking Andhra State was carved out of the composite Madras State in 1953, Kurnool was made the capital and many people had to move out of the then-Madras city. Three years later, in 1956, the erstwhile Hyderabad State was merged with the Andhra State, including Rayalaseema, to form Andhra Pradesh with Hyderabad as capital.

And, just when people began settling down in Hyderabad, investing their time and resources, showing their enterprise and entrepreneurial skills, the agitation for separate Telangana State began, triggering a wave of insecurity. Following the creation of Telangana in 2014, just when people in Andhra Pradesh thought their search for a capital was over with Amaravati, Mr. Reddy tossed up the three-capital idea.

No one opposes decentralisation of administration and development. But in gravitating towards a three-capital idea, Mr. Reddy appears to be using it to settle political scores with his predecessor.

There could be no other reason as Mr. Reddy has floated his idea a full five-and-half years after the tumultuous bifurcation left a truncated Andhra Pradesh without a capital. As Leader of the Opposition in the previous State Assembly, Mr. Reddy did not oppose the location or structure of the capital, leave alone demanding three capitals. He avoided visiting Amaravati even when a section of farmers in the region protested. There was no mention of the three-capital idea in YSR Congress Party (YSRCP)'s manifesto either. So, to find fault with the choice and contours of the capital now looks belated and motivated. Further, thousands of farmers who gave away their land are now in a fix.

Yes, it is true that the Sivaramakrishnan Committee, constituted by the Central government to suggest choices for the capital, did not favour one 'super-capital' and pitched for decentralised development. But, the panel also never said that there should be a string of capitals across the State as is being interpreted now. Perhaps, it was for this reason that the government went in for

a fresh committee headed by former IAS officer G.N. Rao to get a report in sync with its thinking. It came as no surprise that the committee's report had all the points made by Mr. Reddy in the Assembly, two days earlier! This committee suggested that Andhra Pradesh should have a High Court in Kurnool, with a bench each in Visakhapatnam and Amaravati; and an Assembly in Amaravati, which also conducts a few sessions in Visakhapatnam. The proposal promises to be a logistical nightmare with officials frequently having to hop from one city to another.

At the same time, no one disputes the fact that Mr. Naidu had dumped the Sivaramakrishnan Committee report and its objections to locating the capital in the Vijayawada-Guntur-Tenali-Mangalagiri stretch of land — a fertile stretch. He bulldozed the panel's warnings and went ahead to build a 'dream capital' at the very place. Mr. Naidu's vision was that of a capital as grand as Singapore or any other contemporary capital city with characteristics like iconic public buildings and multiple cities within a city.

Mr. Naidu wanted the capital to be a robust growth engine that would attract investments, promote tourism and create innumerable jobs, like Hyderabad closer home, Bengaluru and Mumbai. Through Amaravati, Mr. Naidu thought his name would remain etched in public memory forever. In hindsight, Mr. Naidu seems to have gone for an overkill, pooling in a whopping 33,000 acres for the capital and taking his own sweet time to draw a master plan, for which he paid a heavy price and lost badly in the election. There is also a charge made by YSRCP leaders that lot of 'insider trading' happened and Mr. Naidu's supporters benefited.

The point here is, leaving aside Amaravati's scale and size, a centrally located capital has already come into existence with the completion of Secretariat, Assembly and High Court buildings. Should not a government that appears to be sensitive to extravagant public expenditure capitalise on this infrastructure, instead of creating something new in various cities at an enormous cost? At a time when political rivals of conflicting ideologies have come together to form a government in a neighbouring State based on a Common Minimum Programme, is it too much to expect something like CMP on a capital city?

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