

'THREE CAPITALS' IN ANDHRA PRADESH

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Farmers from Amaravati region stage a protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi. Farmers who gave lands for it allege that Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has been desperate to shift to Visakhapatnam just because he is loath to continue what his predecessor N. Chandrababu Naidu had initiated in Amaravati. File | Photo Credit: The Hindu

The Andhra Pradesh government's decision to have three capitals — Visakhapatnam as an executive capital, while Amaravati and Kurnool as legislative and judicial capitals, respectively — brought the development of Amaravati to a grinding halt three years ago.

Farmers who gave lands for it allege that Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has been desperate to shift to Visakhapatnam just because he is loath to continue what his predecessor N. Chandrababu Naidu had initiated in Amaravati. They insist that the three capitals are a failed experiment.

As a consequence of the decentralisation move which is intended to achieve balanced development of all regions, the infrastructure created at a huge cost in Amaravati, including villas for High Court judges and senior IAS officers, most of which neared completion during the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) regime, is now lying in the dumps.

What happens to this massive investment in the event of the government getting the clearance by courts to shift to the port city and the impact of such a shift on future land acquisitions are questions that are difficult to answer. Given the government's refusal to budge from its stand on the three capitals, the fate of Amaravati appears to be all but sealed.

The story of 'three capitals' started in 2019 when Mr. Reddy made the proposal in the Legislative Assembly much to the chagrin of about 25,000 farmers who gave 34,400 acres under the land pooling scheme (LPS) for the development of Amaravati. Before this, in 2014, the stage for Amaravati was set by Mr. Naidu, who wasted no time in shifting from the common capital of Hyderabad to Andhra Pradesh soon after the bifurcation of the unified State.

By choosing the Vijayawada-Guntur region as the location of State capital, Mr. Naidu went on to create infrastructure on a large-scale, starting with the laying of arterial roads and the construction of the Interim Government Complex (IGC). Within no time, Amaravati caught global attention due to some hard-selling by Mr. Naidu, who got the master planning done by U.K. - based Foster + Partners.

The Amaravati project was going on full steam till the 2019 elections when Mr. Reddy's Yuvajana Shramika Rythu (YSR) Congress Party stormed to power and soon after the change of guard came the idea of three capitals. It came as a shocker to the multitude of farmers who approached the High Court for justice.

The HC delivered its verdict in their favour in March 2022. However, the farmers' joy was shortlived as instead of implementing the writ of *mandamus* passed by the HC, the State government sought at least five years to complete the development of Amaravati by citing various excuses and went on to challenge the HC's judgment in the Supreme Court. The case is posted for a fresh hearing on July 11.

This is where the development of Amaravati is stuck as there is no change in the government's stand in favour of decentralisation, while the legal battle continues to rage in the top court.

If the government gets to move to Visakhapatnam, it has to put the infrastructure in Amaravati to use to not waste the money spent on it and may also have to pay a massive compensation to farmers for violating the agreements entered with them. Against this backdrop, Mr. Reddy keeps making statements that he will start functioning from Visakhapatnam in a few months.

Even as the whole project is entangled in the Supreme Court and the High Court, the government is providing house sites to economically weaker sections (EWS) in about 1,200 acres in the proposed R-5 zone in Amaravati. This is notwithstanding the High Court judgment dated March 3, 2022 in the three capitals case that no third-party interest can be created on lands given for development of the capital city.

After the High Court refused to impose a stay on the EWS housing scheme in Amaravati, the farmers filed a special leave petition (SLP) in the apex court, challenging the allotment of house sites to beneficiaries from the EWS hailing from across the State.

The government is going by its hunch that the people will reward it for taking up decentralisation in the form of votes next year.

Clearly, garnering votes is the underlying objective of the 'three capitals' plan and the government is sounding pretty confident about it. Will it actually pay off remains a million-dollar question.

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