

Andhra Pradesh must finalise a capital city by 2024. None of the current options work

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Aerial view of Amaravati | Commons

The unified state of Andhra Pradesh was bifurcated into Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in June 2014. As per the AP Reorganisation Act, Hyderabad became the capital of Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh had to find itself a new capital within ten years; until then, Hyderabad would serve as the capital for both states.

Even though Amaravati was notified as the capital city by the Andhra Pradesh government in 2015, there is still a sense of confusion that prevails in the state. That is because no one, including Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy, has a clear idea of what the state's capital is going to be at the end of the stipulated decade.

In January this year, he announced that Visakhapatnam is going to be the capital with no mention of it in any state assembly discussion or on any official documents, only for the Rajya Sabha to declare a week later that Amaravati was still the capital according to official records. All this came just a few months after the ministers of ruling party, Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP), announced their intention to reintroduce the three capitals bill. It was first presented in 2020 by the Reddy government and was knocked down by the high court for violating land procurement procedures for the capital region. The bill was subsequently withdrawn.



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The Andhra Pradesh urban development minister, Botsa Satyanarayana, claims that Hyderabad is still the capital of both states until 2024.

It was the erstwhile government of Andhra Pradesh, led by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) headed by Chandrababu Naidu, that named Amaravati, a small village between Vijayawada and Guntur, as its capital. There were tall claims made for developing this new greenfield city project as the next Singapore and many high-flying plans with massive public and private investments.

The land for this new city was collected from the farmers who were also promised developed plots in Amaravati. The city of Vijayawada acted as the temporary capital until the necessary infrastructure was developed. All this seemed reasonable, at least theoretically until YSRCP won the 2019 election. The new government proposed a system of three capitals for the state, separating its legislative, executive, and judicial functions to the cities of Amaravati, Visakhapatnam, and Kurnool. This bill was struck down by the Andhra Pradesh High Court in 2022, and the Supreme Court has refused to intervene. Now, one could understand the utter confusion of a resident as they don't know whether the capital is Hyderabad because ten years have not lapsed yet; Vijayawada, because it is still the operational centre for most activities; Amaravati, because this is where the assembly is located; Visakhapatnam, which the CM announced and partially uses; or whether all the three cities are the capitals.

In the long term, while the solution depends severely on the results of the 2024 election, there are three main ways in which this capital situation is likely to play out.

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Amaravati as the sole capital

This plan is a double-edged sword, both in economic and developmental terms. While Amaravati has its fair share of advantages as a greenfield project, in terms of pooled land, available space and dynamism, it also carries the baggage of failed greenfield

projects from India and across the globe. The region, while boasting its humongous amounts of public and private investment, also brings a bill of nearly Rs 1.09 lakh crore to a state with rising debts and near-empty coffers.

The agriculture-rich city would witness cultivation getting affected, with the threat of flooding rising along the river plains.

But the opportunities are substantial as well because building a 'world-class city', which can compete with metropolises of India and the world, would benefit Andhra Pradesh and the country. Amaravati is located in the centre of the state, well-connected with the cities of Vijayawada and Guntur.

Therefore, developing Amaravati as the capital city would be a high-risk, high-reward situation. But from a political point of view, there is no incentive for the YSRCP government as it has been proven time and again through the farmers' movement that Amaravati is a strong TDP support region and therefore the current government's success would always be attributed to Chandrababu Naidu.

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Three capital system

While the current bill proposing a three-capital system has been struck down, the Andhra Pradesh High Court judgment said that the central government holds the power to declare the state's capital. Despite varying levels of political friendship between the YSRCP and the BJP, the state government still seems attached to the idea so there is a possibility that they get what they want.

From a purely idealistic urban development point of view, this idea might seem wondrous given that there is no need for any one city or its infrastructure to suddenly become capital-esque and deal with the significant economic, spatial, and population booms it brings. We can even say that inter-connectivity and transportation might improve, especially between the three cities.

However, this might not play out well in reality, as institutional coordination will be hampered due to geographical separation.

Additionally, with Kurnool being designated as the judicial centre, there will need to be a shift of legal infrastructure like the high court from Amaravati to Kurnool. The biggest problems with this plan would be that Amaravati as a city would still need to be developed, and there is complete ambiguity on what happens to the land acquired.

The three-capital model might also lead to confusion among citizens and hamper justice delivery overall, expanding the bureaucratic hurdles enormously. This makes any work to be done across bodies of governance a herculean task.

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Visakhapatnam as the sole capital

This plan is the only one with a set framework as Visakhapatnam is the largest city in Andhra Pradesh, and very close to becoming a metropolis. It has adequate existing infrastructure, providing an excellent start to the development that needs to be done. This also means it is the cheapest of the three apparent situations.

It is also well connected due to the international port and airport. Making it the capital has the potential to bring an economic push to the region and shift into a metropolis with tremendous growth potential. The tourism sector will be a welcome bonus as the beaches and the close-by hill station of Araku Valley will both get a massive injection of revenue. However, all is not rosy. Due to the city's location in the northernmost part of the state, it would take almost 15-16 hours to travel to the southern end. The capital infrastructure push might cause significant ecological damage as evidenced by the illegal mining in hills near the city.

The space available in the city for expansion is also minimal, hindering future developments.

Visakhapatnam city area is also cyclone-prone. It has been consistently damaged by natural disasters.

The city's density and its capacity for residential expansion have a significant impact on the long-term viability of the city as a capital.

In this scenario, redirecting funds for the development of the city might affect investments in other parts of the state significantly. All the money accumulated for the purposes of Amaravati would also need to be redirected.

What can be done?

None of the three plans is ideal for Andhra Pradesh. Amaravati would become too heavy a burden to bear as the state is not in a position to take such a considerable risk. Visakhapatnam might not be viable as the state is looking for growth, and the city is very limited. The three-capital model is an unprecedented situation that doesn't solve the problems caused by the other options. That is why this problem needs an unorthodox solution that doesn't significantly help any one political party, but also doesn't harm anyone.

A possible solution is making Vijayawada the capital, and making the proposed city of Amaravati an investment region following the model of Sri City, an SEZ in the Nellore district.

Vijayawada doesn't come with ecological baggage. It also has space for expansion towards all four sides. It also fares better on other factors like drinking water availability compared to Visakhapatnam. Additionally, Amaravati is already well-connected to Vijayawada. The continuation of Amaravati as an industrial region would not only put to use the substantial foreign investments that have already been pooled but will also give the state the much-needed industrial and economic push that has been lost due to Hyderabad.

This way, the land that has been partially utilised can be put to industrial usage. The other pooled land could be redistributed and compensated accordingly along with developed plots for the farmers close to NH-5 near Tadepalli village, right across the river from Vijayawada where the CM currently lives.

This system offers a wide range of options for both current and future governments to adapt and evolve.

It is also a politically balanced solution as Vijayawada has support from both the major parties — it is no one's home turf. This would be a pragmatic and pareto-optimal solution to the capital problem of Andhra Pradesh.

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