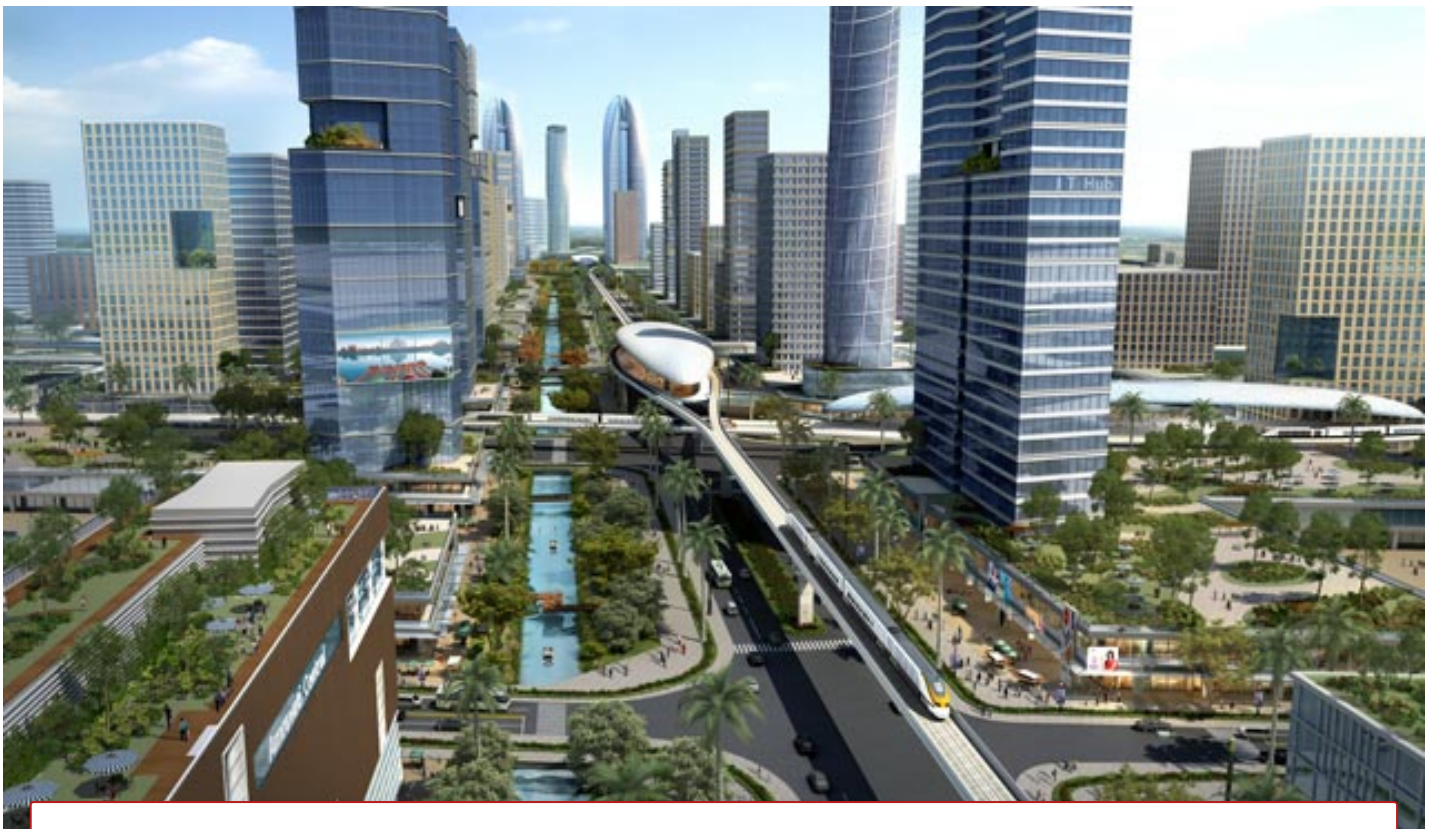


## POLITICS

# A Glittering New Capital City For Andhra Pradesh, But At Whose Cost?

Farmers who were asked to give up their land to build a new city are a disgruntled lot and questions remain about the environmental costs too



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**Hyderabad:** Come Dussehra, on Thursday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will lay the foundation stone of Amaravati, the new capital of Andhra Pradesh with expected religious ritualism and cultural pageantry to mark the occasion. Within the upper echelons of the Telugu Desam Party, jubilation, a marked fervor of righteousness and glee are all palpable.

“Dussehra marks the victory of good over evil. Naidu has led the fight against evil and has ensured Andhra comes out winning against all forces opposed to our state,” said B Satish Babu, a TDP leader in the area known as the New Capital Region. “Naidu is building the world’s greatest capital city for our people.” Babu is also leading efforts to build a temple in honour of chief minister N Chandrababu Naidu—on government land.

Business honchos turned leaders, who are ensconced in the Capital Region Development Authority (CRDA), and call the shots within the ruling TDP, are making arrangements to make it a big show, leaving nothing to chance. Cadre are being mobilised from across the state, and every leader has been given a target to achieve. The proposed capital is envisaged as a “world class” glittering new city near Vijayawada in coastal Andhra Pradesh. The state government is hoping to get a lot of assistance from Singapore for the project.

The personality cult of Naidu is getting shriller—“Sonia Gandhi and Y S Jaganmohan Reddy conspired to ensure we don’t have a capital, or a strong state. Babu garu has defeated all such conspiracies. He is nothing less than God for people of Andhra,” says Satish Babu.

But even as party men flaunt their invite to the inauguration on the social media, the frenzy and hyperbole hide disquiet and discontent, especially among farmers who are unhappy that their land is being used to build this grand new city.

### **Farmers' lands.**

Away from the self-congratulatory hurly-burly for the final arrangements, and the orchestrated political idolatry, a darker and angrier dimension of the narrative emerges, where Mallela Harindranath Choudhary, a farmer leading an agitation is seething with rage, and despair.

“Farmers are appalled that a leader who walked through their villages for votes before the elections, promising to be a true *Rythu Bidda* (son-of-the-soil) has once again betrayed them. When the AP Reorganization Act was passed, the Central government provided a provision to de-notify forests to provide the land. The State government, instead of taking the Centre’s permission to de-notify degraded blocks of forests, has decided to force land away from the farmers in the most fertile agrarian belt in the country,” Choudhary says.

According to him, the land is so fertile that farmers sow three crops a year in the region. “Why does Chandrababu Naidu want this land,” he asks.

For the past few months, the government has clamped Section 144 in entire Capital Region Area around Tullur to prevent agitations from farmers. In gross violation of norms, police has been used to enable farmers to ‘voluntarily’ surrender their land to the State for the development of the capital.

“Naidu has made a huge virtue of not following the land acquisition route for the capital or nearby special projects, like the airport. But the voluntary land pooling, which enables farmers to give their land, and in turn, get less but more valuable land is a big lie. The agreement is completely one-sided. There is no representative of farmers in the CRDA, only business tycoons. The presence of police in the area exposes how voluntary the exercise has been,” says Choudhary.

As per the land-pooling scheme, based on the fertility and location of the land, each acre would get a farmer an eventual 1,000, 1,200 or 1,500 odd square yards of land once the capital is completed.

“There is no obligation on part of the government to use the land for only the capital. It does not give the farmers a guarantee in terms of deadline. The issue of contract farmers and landless labour has not been addressed. The scheme promised to give workers who lose work after farm land is surrendered at Rs 2,500 per worker per month has not come into force,” he says.

### **Not green enough**

There are other troubling issues too. The National Green Tribunal (NGT), has expressed “concerns” over the lack of an Environmental Assessment being done and a report being submitted for clearance. Terming the Prime Minister’s decision to accept the invite to inaugurate the Capital City as “imprudent” in the absence of all statutory environmental clearances, E A S Sarma, former Union Finance Secretary, said that the State was “way behind” in following procedures and complying with environmental requirements for project of this magnitude.

“We are not against the Capital, in fact, as a responsible opposition we are willing to fully support the government in building the best capital city for Andhra Pradesh, which our people deserve, if it is done legally and following norms,” said Ummareddy Venkateswarlu, leader of the YSR Congress party. “Food security is a major national concern. Forcing farmers away from the most fertile land in the country strikes at the root of our food needs. Destroying huge tracts of forest to create land to give to corporates without taking care of people, uprooting people with proper plans of rehabilitation, is not the right foundation for a new capital.”

### **Jagan boycotts**

Leader of the opposition Y S Jaganmohan Reddy has refused to attend the inauguration, even as his indefinite hunger strike in protest against forced land acquisition was foiled by the police. “This is a contractor’s capital, not the people’s capital,” says the YSR Congress party’s spokesperson Ambati Rambabu.

“I will not be going to the ceremony because I have lost my land. I have nothing to celebrate. I have neither voice nor option,” says P Sanyasi Rao, a farmer in the Tullur district. “I am frustrated that my land is gone, I cannot protest or oppose the move and I live in fear for the future.”

*Sriram Karri is author of the best-selling, MAN Asian longlisted novel, Autobiography of a Mad Nation*



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