

One Man's Quest to Build India's Most Livable City

FROM FIRST BUSINESS PAGE

Foster, the celebrated British architect. The city is laid out in grids and includes about a five-mile stretch of government buildings.

At the center of it all will be a high-spined legislative assembly building surrounded by a freshwater lake. Administrative offices will operate from five high-rise towers, which will accommodate 16,000 employees. The tallest, where the state's chief minister will work, will have a helipad on its roof.

Sixty percent of the new city is expected to be covered by water or greenery, and it will include nearly 2,000 miles of cycling lanes.

Hundreds of millions of dollars have been committed for the 50-acre campus in the city's "Quantum Valley." Come January, the building will host a 156-qubit IBM quantum computer in the campus's anchor building, which has seismic protection against even the smallest vibrations. Eight towers that will house 88,000 engineers are planned by the end of 2029.

Mr. Naidu lives by the construction site.

When he leaves his residence and turns left toward the makeshift government offices, he sees piles of sewer pipes waiting to go underground, mounds of dirt and scattered machinery. The young bougainvillea flowers in the road dividers are abloom, signaling hope that his city will rise.

The challenges are many: There was a drop of as much as 15 percent in the labor force because workers returned to their home states to cast votes in elections, while fuel prices rose as a result of the war in the Middle East. Mr. Naidu's ambitions will also have to be tested against a routine reality in India — scandals around the failings of newly built infrastructure, from bridges collapsing to an airport flooding.

Vijay Rama Raju V, the official tasked by Mr. Naidu with overseeing the project, said the state is looking to showcase a new standard that modern India can deliver. "It's not that money is not there anymore. In India we cannot say that anymore," he said.

Redemption Project

For Mr. Naidu, Amaravati is at once about redemption and legacy.

In the late 1990s, he helped turn Hyderabad, then the capital of Andhra Pradesh, into a tech hub. He brought in giants like Microsoft and nurtured a local talent pool that has since produced leaders in some of the world's largest tech companies.

But in 2014, the state of Andhra Pradesh was cleaved into two. Mr. Naidu became the chief minister of the newly truncated Andhra Pradesh and Hyderabad went to the newly created state of Telangana.

He has described the loss of Hyderabad as the worst day of his political career. Andhra Pradesh was not only deprived of a major source of revenue, but also an aspirational symbol of technological prowess. The part of the state Mr. Naidu was left in charge of was steeped in debt and lacked a proper city to house its seat of power.

Mr. Naidu was not available to be interviewed during our visit. His son Nara Lokesh, who leads several key ministries in his father's government, described the period as demoralizing.

"You're just thrown out one fine morning saying 'get out, it's not yours anymore,'" he said.



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A digital blue print map of the Amaravati Quantum Valley and city, top, and workers at the construction site for the tech hub in Amaravati, above right. The government began pooling 35,000 acres of land from 30,000 farmers for the new city, which was named after a capital of the ancient Andhra kingdom. Quantum Valley is N. Chandrababu Naidu's play for an economic engine and tech identity to propel his new city — much as software did in Hyderabad.



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In 2014, the family left Hyderabad by helicopter and landed at the airport in Vijayawada, the region where work on a new capital would eventually begin.

"It was nothing but a tin shed. And I had tears," Mr. Lokesh said about the airport. "It hurt, but that's what gave us that fire, that energy to say 'I will beat them.'"

The government began pooling 35,000 acres of land from 30,000 farmers for the new city, named Amaravati after a second-century capital of the ancient Andhra kingdom. Mr. Naidu was bent on the project despite an expert committee advising him against establishing a concentrated capital and urging him instead to decentralize government. Critics accused him of chasing a vanity project and wasting valuable fertile land. Like many leaders in South Asia, Mr. Naidu admires the city-state of Singapore for its efficiency and productivity. So he sought help from its government on a master plan.

When he faced resistance from some of the farmers, he introduced modest annuity payments until they received smaller but more valuable plots of developed land. He arranged for small groups of them to go to Singapore and visualize his vision of a shiny city that they could not see in their banana groves.

But, for a while, it all fell apart: Mr. Naidu was voted out of office in 2019.

He was accused of corruption and nepotism by his onetime ally, Mr. Modi. While in opposition, the

state authorities sent him to jail for weeks in 2023, on charges that were dropped once he returned to power. In the five years that he was out of power, work on Amaravati stopped. His successor floated alternative ideas for a capital city.

Then, Mr. Naidu was returned to office in elections two years ago.

He made up with Mr. Modi, and attained the status of a kingmaker in the prime minister's national

coalition, giving him leverage. Mr. Modi helped him pass legislation declaring Amaravati as Andhra Pradesh's undisputed capital city. And Mr. Naidu is using the good graces of New Delhi to bring in billions of dollars in loans to finance the building of the new city's core.

His mantra is, "Speed, speed, speed."

A Leap of Faith

The nearby Quantum Valley is Mr. Naidu's play for an economic en-

gine and tech identity to propel his new city — much as software did in Hyderabad.

Late in 2024, months after taking office, he invited a group of scientists from South India's premier technology institution, the IIT Madras, to his residence. The institute's director, V. Kamakoti, appealed to Mr. Naidu's ambitions by pitching what he saw as the technological race of the future: quantum computing.

Classical computing would not be able to meet the demands of the finance, agriculture and pharmaceutical industries, he told Mr. Naidu. While market benefits could be a couple of years away, Mr. Kamakoti said, the world's major powers and largest tech companies were investing.

Mr. Naidu was sold. "He is taking a leap of faith," Mr. Kamakoti said.

Mr. Naidu wants his new capital city to be an ecosystem for quantum computing, including bringing in academic institutions to create a talent pipeline of quantum experts. He has drawn on lessons from Hyderabad that mastering software was not enough: India needs to start innovating hardware and to shape supply lines.

Last year, clicker in hand, Mr. Naidu gave a lecture that was broadcast to hundreds of thousands of university students across the state.

"Quantum offers India a rare chance to enter early, rather than catch up later," he told the students. "You are all thinking tomorrow. I am thinking next 20 years."



ANI, VIA REUTERS

Mr. Naidu, left, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May. The prime minister had once accused Mr. Naidu of corruption but they have reconciled.