

## AFFAIRS OF STATE COLUMNS

# Retaining Amaravati as an ancient town



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**The organic, historical linkages between the ancient town and the surrounding villages should be developed.**

India is on the cusp of a paradigm shift in the way its much-neglected heritage is to be conserved. The drought in funding has almost been broken with the launching of two new schemes by the Central Government: HRIDAY, focussing on heritage cities and PRASAD, enhancing pilgrimage destinations.



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Added to this, if the Smart City initiatives can locate culture as an integral fourth pillar, along with social, economic and environmental sustainability, then we will genuinely leapfrog into the 21st Century practice of sustainable heritage development. However, it requires appropriate capacity building to facilitate transformation.

As a potential demonstration project, the ancient town of Amaravati in **Andhra Pradesh** offers a triangulation of possibilities. HRIDAY and PRASAD schemes are coupled with the announcement by Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu to name the new capital of the State as Amaravati. Juxtaposition of the old with the new could salvage the much-neglected heritage town from oblivion. But this is a double-edged sword. The investment in infrastructure will come as a breath of fresh air and the planned capital city offers prospects of better access and increased weekend visits to the ancient town. But real estate speculation and enhanced recreational spectrum need to be regulated to minimise negative impacts. At stake is the complexity of heritage, both tangible and intangible.

There are several factors that could help minimise the negative impacts. A local governance mechanism could ensure community cultural leadership and deliver benefits to the primary stakeholders. There are layers of history in Amaravati, often reduced to minimal details like dates, kings and dynasties, with focus on only in-situ heritage 'relics'. In short, the layers of significance of the so-called Megalithic times of some 2600 years ago until now need to be shown, creating a contemporary understanding among both locals and outsiders, developing educational programmes and promoting experiential tourism.

All tourism is cultural. Even that which is natural is culturally perceived. The dichotomy of natural and cultural is a colonial legacy. In this context, heritage tourism is different as it uses non-renewable resources, both cultural and natural. Therefore, it requires responsible tourism development and must go beyond simple site visits to enable experiential visitation. The focus is no longer on the typical tourist. It is on visitors.

Visitors could be residents from the neighbourhood or the hinterland; school children and higher education students seeking a learning outcome; or domestic or international visitors paying for an Amaravati experience. An understanding of the demographics and psychographics of such target groups will assist the development of relevant experiences. Historical contextualisation of the heritage resources, informed by rigorous scholarship, openness to multiple interpretations of all forms of heritage and facilitating a plurality of visitor understandings, are essential for creating meaningful experiences in the revitalisation of Amaravati.

There are lessons to be learnt from other Asian countries that have demonstrated their own methods of safeguarding their diverse heritage against the backdrop of rapid economic growth. Hoi, an ancient town in central Vietnam, for example, is protected by the very people

whose ancestors built the houses there in the 18th and 19th Centuries. The district of Hoi An [known in the ancient times as Faifo] was also called Amaravati between the 7th and 12th Centuries during the years of the Champa kingdom. The Homeowners Association in Hoi An ensures responsible and relevant infrastructure development. The Hoi An case study is exemplary for bringing together culture, health and well-being where valuing heritage informs all walks of life.

Coming from Amaravati and having worked in Hoi An Ancient Town, I advocate grounded and locally developed pathways for the Amaravati ancient town, informed by new approaches on all fronts with a sustainable developmental action Plan. The organic historical linkages and relationships between the Ancient Town and the surrounding stakeholder communities and villages need to be taken up as a priority.

Investment of resources must assist conservation. The old ginning mill, historic houses in the Pujari street, Zamindar's house and other buildings from the past 200 years in Amaravati ancient town are in need of urgent protection. New attractions need to be developed in the hinterland. Environmental impacts need to be monitored with an increase in tourist visits and business activities.

Amaravati, the ancient Dhanyakataka, once the flourishing capital centre in the formation of Andhradesa, may yet again become the heartthrob of the lower River Krishna Valley. A local Amaravati Heritage Society could ensure civil society engagement and benefit-sharing. An Amaravati Ecomuseum, an open air spatial approach to all forms of heritage, including the ancient town and its hinterland, will ensure sustainable growth.

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