

Urban Economic Restructuring in Anantapur: Growth Trajectories and Employment Transitions

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Abstract

Over the last five decades, undivided Anantapur district in Andhra Pradesh has experienced a gradual yet significant process of urban and economic transformation. Traditionally marked by semi-arid climatic conditions, recurrent droughts, and dependence on rain-fed agriculture, the district was historically associated with agrarian distress and limited industrialization. Since the 1970s, however, Anantapur has steadily diversified its economic structure through expansion of municipal boundaries, incorporation of peripheral villages into urban jurisdictions, improvements in road and transport connectivity, growth of educational and healthcare institutions, and the emergence of trade, construction, and service-sector activities. These changes represent not merely spatial urban expansion but a deeper structural shift in the district economy. This paper examines the long-term urban economic transformation of undivided Anantapur from 1971 to 2023, retaining pre-2022 district boundaries for longitudinal consistency. Using secondary data from Census of India reports, District Statistical Handbooks, and state Economic Surveys, the study analyses trends in urban population growth, workforce distribution, infrastructure expansion, and sectoral diversification. Findings reveal sustained urban growth, rising literacy, expanding infrastructure, and a progressive shift toward non-farm employment, highlighting the district's growing role in regional development.

Keywords: Urban Transformation, Employment Shift, Anantapur, Swarna Andhra 2047, Infrastructure, Structural Change, Economic Diversification, Rayalaseema, Economic Progress, CAGR, Urban Growth.

1. Introduction

1.1 Conceptualizing Urbanization

Urbanization is a multidimensional process involving the spatial concentration of population in towns and cities, accompanied by structural shifts in economic activity from primary agriculture toward secondary industry and tertiary services. It encompasses changes not only in where people live but also in how they earn, what skills they possess, and what infrastructure supports their lives. In developing economies, urbanization is often both a cause and consequence of economic growth, and its management determines whether such growth is equitable and sustainable.

In India, urbanization has progressed unevenly across states and districts. While metropolitan regions such as Mumbai, Delhi, and Bengaluru have attracted global attention, district-level transformations occurring in secondary and tertiary towns often carry equal significance for regional development. These smaller urban centres absorb rural-to-urban migrants, develop local service economies, and form the connective tissue of national economic development.

1.2 Why Anantapur ?

Anantapur district in the Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh presents a compelling case for the study of urban economic transformation. With an area of approximately 19,130 square kilometres, it was one of the largest districts in India, before Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation on April 4, 2022. Under the Andhra Pradesh Districts (Formation) Act, 1974. The district is characterized by a harsh semi-arid climate receiving average annual rainfall below 550 mm, making it one of India's most drought-prone regions. Historically dependent on groundnut, sunflower, and millet cultivation, the district's economy has faced persistent stress from erratic monsoons and fluctuating commodity prices.

Yet, Anantapur has simultaneously witnessed remarkable transformation. The growth of the educational sector, particularly engineering and medical colleges, has brought in students and skilled workers from across the region. Industrial estates, solar energy projects, and the expansion of road infrastructure have diversified economic activity. The district headquarters, Anantapur city, achieved Municipal Corporation status, while smaller towns such as Hindupur, Dharmavaram, Guntakal, and Tadipatri have grown into significant commercial centres.

Understanding this transformation is important for several reasons. First, Anantapur's experience illustrates how districts with adverse natural endowments can diversify economically through policy intervention and private investment. Second, the district's development contributes directly to the state government's ambitious Swarna Andhra 2047 vision of building a prosperous, developed Andhra Pradesh by its centenary of independence. Third, district-level analysis fills a crucial gap in Indian urban development literature, which tends to focus predominantly on metropolitan growth

2. Review of Literature

The literature on urbanization in India highlights its uneven regional spread and complex relationship with economic transformation. **Bhagat (2011)** examines emerging patterns of urbanisation and emphasizes the role of migration and reclassification of settlements in accelerating urban growth. He argues that urban expansion in India is not solely driven by natural population increase but increasingly by structural shifts and census redefinitions, a perspective relevant to districts experiencing rising census towns.

Similarly, **Kundu (2009)** analyses urbanisation trends and migration patterns in Asia, noting the growing importance of secondary and intermediate towns. He contends that regional development increasingly depends on smaller urban centres that absorb surplus rural labour and facilitate non-farm diversification. This insight is particularly significant for districts where growth is concentrated in emerging towns rather than metropolitan cities.

Focusing on inclusiveness, **Mukhopadhyay (2017)** questions whether urban economic growth in India has translated into equitable outcomes. He highlights persistent inequalities in employment access and infrastructure distribution, suggesting that urban growth alone does not guarantee inclusive development without targeted policy intervention.

At the district level, **Swarna Latha, Nageswara Rao, and Warpa** provide a demographic review of urbanization in Anantapur, documenting changes in population structure, town expansion, and spatial concentration. Their study underscores the gradual but steady transition from rural dominance to an increasingly urban demographic profile.

Finally, **Reddy and Mishra (2010)** examine agrarian distress in India, emphasizing how drought-prone regions experience livelihood insecurity that pushes workers toward non-farm employment. Their analysis provides critical context for understanding structural shifts away from cultivation in semi-arid districts.

Together, these studies frame urbanization as a multidimensional process shaped by migration, structural change, inequality, and regional vulnerability.

3. Objectives

The present study is guided by the following research objectives:

- To examine the structural transformation of Anantapur district from 1981 to 2023 by analysing changes in population, urbanization, employment patterns, and sectoral composition of the economy.
- To assess the role of infrastructure development in supporting urban and economic growth in Anantapur and examine its contribution to the Swarna Andhra 2047 development vision.

4. Data and Methodology

4.1 Data Sources

This study relies on secondary data drawn from multiple official sources. Primary quantitative data is sourced from the Census of India reports for 1981, 1991, 2001, and 2011, as well as projected estimates for 2023 based on growth trend extrapolations published by the Office of the Registrar General of India. Supplementary data on infrastructure, educational institutions, and economic activity are drawn from the Anantapur District Statistical Handbook, State Planning Commission reports, and the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Andhra Pradesh. Where 2023 figures are projected or estimated, they are clearly identified with an asterisk (*) in the tables.

4.2 Analytical Methods

The study employs a combination of quantitative and comparative analytical methods:

- **Descriptive Statistical Analysis:** Summary statistics including means, proportions, and absolute and percentage changes are computed for each indicator across census years to describe the pattern and magnitude of change.
- **Growth Rate Calculations:** Decadal growth rates for population and urban share are computed using the formula: $\text{Growth Rate (\%)} = [(\text{Current Period Value} - \text{Previous Period Value}) / \text{Previous Period Value}] \times 100$. Compound Annual Growth Rates (CAGR) are calculated for selected indicators to enable inter-period comparison.
- **Trend Analysis:** Time-series data on urbanization share, workforce distribution, infrastructure measures, and literacy rates are analysed to identify consistent directional trends and turning points over the study period.
- **Comparative Sectoral Analysis:** The distribution of the workforce across cultivator, agricultural labourer, household industry, and other worker categories is compared across census years to identify structural economic shifts.

4.3 Limitations of the Study

- The study relies entirely on secondary data from the Census of India and District Statistical Handbooks, which may contain reporting gaps and time lags.

- Post-2011 figures for 2023 are based on trend projections rather than official census data, which may affect precision.
- The analysis retains pre-2022 undivided district boundaries for consistency, limiting comparability with newly formed districts.
- The study is largely quantitative and does not include primary surveys, restricting deeper insights into household-level livelihood transitions and informal sector dynamics.

5. Urbanization Trends in Anantapur (1981–2023)

5.1 Population Growth

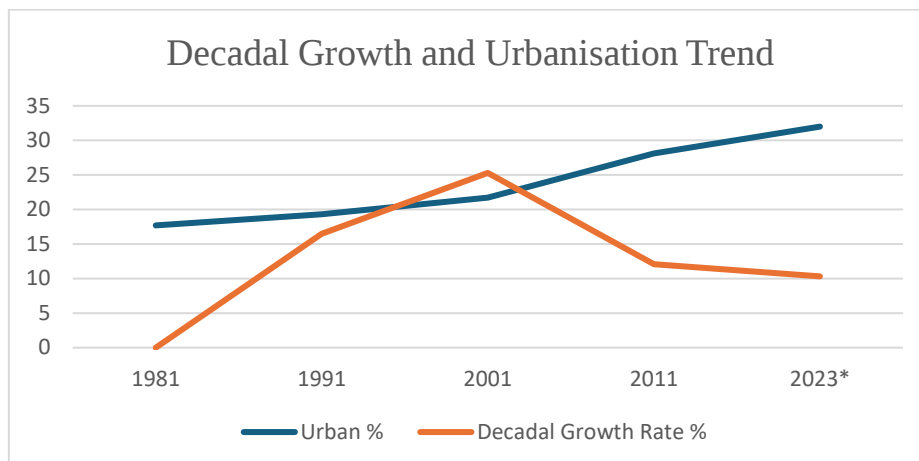
Anantapur district's total population has grown substantially from 2,492,300 in 1981 to approximately 4,500,000 by 2023, representing a net increase of over 80% across four decades. This growth has been distributed unevenly between rural and urban areas, with the urban sector consistently outpacing rural growth in proportional terms.

Table 1: Population Growth and Urbanization Trends, Anantapur District (1981–2023)

Year	Total Population	Rural Population	Urban Population	Urbanization %	Decadal Growth Rate %	Density (per sq km)
1981	2,492,300	2,050,800	4,41,500	17.7	—	130
1991	2,904,378	2,344,000	5,60,378	19.3	+16.5	152
2001	3,640,478	2,850,000	7,90,478	21.7	+25.3	190
2011	4,081,148	2,935,437	11,45,711	28.1	+12.1	213
2023*	4,500,000	3,060,000	14,40,000	32	+10.3	235

Source: Census of India (1981–2011); *2023 projections based on trend extrapolation.

The Table shows steady population growth alongside a continuous rise in urban share from 17.7% to 32%. Population density has risen from 130 persons per square kilometre in 1981 to approximately 235 per square kilometre by 2023, reflecting both natural population increase and in-migration associated with educational and economic opportunities.



Source : Author's Compilation

The graph illustrates a steady rise in urban population share despite fluctuating and declining decadal growth rates. This divergence suggests that urbanization in Anantapur is driven more by structural shifts and spatial reclassification than by rapid population growth alone.

5.2 Urban Share and Town Growth

The changes in town classification and population size across major settlements in Anantapur district, illustrating the evolution of the urban hierarchy and the upgrading of towns into higher administrative categories over time.

Table 2: Town-wise Classification and Population Growth, Anantapur District (1981–2023)

Town	Class 1981	Population 1981	Class 1991	Population 1991	Class 2001	Population 2001	Class 2011	Population 2011	Governing Body
Anantapur	I	1,19,531	I	1,74,924	I	2,52,298	I	3,40,613	Mun. Corp.
Hindupur	II	55,901	II	1,04,651	I	1,25,074	I	1,63,079	Municipality
Dharmavaram	II	84,599	II	1,07,592	I	1,17,103	I	1,04,846	Municipality
Guntakal	II	50,969	II	78,961	I	1,03,357	I	1,17,024	Municipality
Tadipatri	II	52,774	II	63,078	I	76,252	I	1,05,191	Municipality
Kadiri	II	32,745	II	40,845	II	54,125	I	1,00,509	Municipality
Rayadurg	III	53,939	III	71,068	II	86,843	II	66,000	Town
Uravakonda	IV	29,302	IV	37,814	III	43,389	III	36,553	Town
Kalyandurg	IV	21,754	III	27,679	III	31,856	III	33,485	Town
Gooty	III	17,049	III	23,106	III	29,266	III	30,267	Town

Source: Swarna Latha, P., Nageswara Rao, K. & Warpa, V. (2016). Urbanization process in Anantapur district, Andhra Pradesh - A demographic review. Transactions, 38(2); Census of India Town Directories 1981–2011.Census of India (1981–2011).

The table 2 examines, the urban share of Anantapur's population increased from 17.7% in 1981 to approximately 32% by 2023. While this remains below the national urban average of approximately 36%, the pace of increase accelerated significantly between 2001 and 2011, when the urban share jumped from 21.7% to 28.1%, driven by the reclassification of several large villages as census towns and the organic growth of existing municipalities. The number of towns in the district grew from 8 in 1981 to approximately 22 by 2023.

Anantapur city emerged as the dominant urban centre, achieving Municipal Corporation status and housing a population of 340,613 as per the 2011 census. Secondary towns including Hindupur, Dharmavaram, Guntakal, and Tadipatri each crossed the 100,000-population threshold and were upgraded to municipality status, reflecting a maturing urban hierarchy in the district.

5.3 Urban–Rural Spatial Differentiation

The urban and rural demographic indicators including population distribution, sex ratio, and literacy levels, highlighting spatial disparities in human development within Anantapur district.

Table 3: Urban - Rural Population Disaggregation with Demographic Indicators, Anantapur (2011)

Area	Population (2011)	Males	Females	Sex Ratio	Literacy %	% of District
Total District	40,81,148	20,64,495	20,16,653	977	63.57	100.0
Urban Areas	11,45,711	5,75,338	5,70,373	991	74.69	28.07
Rural Areas	29,35,437	14,89,157	14,46,280	971	59.21	71.93

Source: Census of India (1981–2011); *2023 projections based on trend extrapolation.

The spatial contrast between urban and rural Anantapur is stark. Urban areas occupy only 377 square kilometres, approximately 1.97% of the district's geographic area, yet house 28.07% of the population as of 2011. Urban areas exhibit significantly higher literacy rates (74.69% versus 59.21% for rural areas) and a more balanced sex ratio (991 females per 1,000 males in urban areas compared to 971 in rural areas). These differentials underscore the concentration of educational and economic opportunities in urban settlements and point to the need for policies that extend comparable benefits to rural communities.

5.4 Social Indicators - Literacy and Gender

The improvements in literacy, gender gap, and sex ratio across decades, reflecting broader social development trends accompanying urban and economic transformation in the district.

Table 4: Social Indicators - Literacy, Gender, and Child Sex Ratio, Anantapur District (1981–2023)

Year	Total Literacy %	Male Literacy %	Female Literacy %	Gender Gap (%)	Sex Ratio (F/1000M)	Child Sex Ratio
1981	30.1	42.5	17.2	25.3	940	—
1991	40.8	53.2	27.9	25.3	948	—
2001	55.0	68.4	43.3	25.1	958	959
2011	63.6	73.0	54.0	19.0	977	927

Year	Total Literacy %	Male Literacy %	Female Literacy %	Gender Gap (%)	Sex Ratio (F/1000M)	Child Sex Ratio
2023*	72.0	80.0	64.0	16.0	980	930

Source: Census of India (1981–2011); *2023 projections based on trend extrapolation.

Alongside population growth, Anantapur has seen remarkable improvements in social indicators. Total literacy rose from a low base of 30.1% in 1981 to approximately 72% by 2023. Male literacy has consistently outpaced female literacy, but the gender gap narrowed meaningfully from 25.3 percentage points in 1981 to approximately 16 percentage points by 2023, signalling progress in female education driven by midday meal programs, girl-child scholarships, and the proliferation of women's colleges.

The overall sex ratio improved from 940 in 1981 to approximately 980 females per 1,000 males by 2023, while the child sex ratio declined slightly from 959 in 2001 to approximately 930 by 2023, a trend consistent with national patterns and reflective of continuing gender preference pressures despite overall social development.

6. Employment and Structural Shifts

6.1 Overview of Workforce Transformation

The most dramatic dimension of Anantapur's economic transformation is the shift in workforce composition away from agriculture toward industry and services. This transition, visible in census data from 1981 onward, mirrors national trends but carries particular significance in a district where agricultural conditions are fragile. The shift reflects not only the pull of better-paying non-farm employment but also the push of declining agricultural viability amid recurrent droughts and rising input costs.

Table 5: Occupational Structure of Anantapur District Workforce (% of Total Workers, 1981–2023)

Worker Category	1981 (%)	1991 (%)	2001 (%)	2011 (%)	2023* (%)	Change 1981–2023	Trend
Cultivators	44.2	38.5	30.0	18.5	14.0	–30.2 pp	↓ Declining
Agricultural Labourers	30.1	30.8	32.1	32.1	28.0	–2.1 pp	→ Stable

Worker Category	1981 (%)	1991 (%)	2001 (%)	2011 (%)	2023* (%)	Change 1981–2023	Trend
Household Industry	3.5	3.1	2.8	2.8	3.0	−0.5 pp	→ Stable
Other Workers (Industry/Service)	22.2	27.6	35.1	46.6	55.0	+32.8 pp	↑ Rising
Work Participation Rate (%)	43.1	44.8	44.2	49.9	51.0	+7.9 pp	↑ Rising

pp = percentage points. Source: Census of India (1981–2011); *2023 projections.

6.2 Decline of the Cultivator Class

The most striking feature of Anantapur's workforce transformation is the precipitous decline in the cultivator share, from 44.2% of total workers in 1981 to approximately 14% by 2023, a decline of over 30 percentage points. This decline reflects several overlapping forces: land fragmentation reducing the viability of smallholder cultivation; repeated drought-induced crop failures encouraging permanent exit from farming; and the availability of better-paid employment in construction, trade, and services in growing urban centres.

It is important to note that the absolute number of cultivators has also decreased substantially, not merely their proportional share, indicating genuine structural exit from farming rather than statistical dilution through a growing overall workforce. This has significant implications for agricultural productivity, food security, and rural social structures in the district.

6.3 Agricultural Labourers: A Persistent Category

Unlike cultivators, the share of agricultural labourers has remained relatively stable across the study period, hovering around 30-32% of the workforce through 2011 before beginning a modest decline toward 28% by 2023. Agricultural labourers are predominantly from scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities with limited access to land, capital, or education for formal sector employment. Their persistence in agricultural labour, despite declining agricultural viability, reflects structural barriers to mobility rather than voluntary occupational choice. Policies targeting this group through skill development, education, and social protection are particularly important.

6.4 Rise of Industry and Services

The most positive transformation is the rise of 'other workers' encompassing industry, trade, and services, from 22.2% in 1981 to approximately 55% by 2023. This growth reflects the expansion of construction activity associated with urban and infrastructure development; growth of trade and retail in district towns; expansion of educational and health institutions creating professional employment;

and the emergence of small-scale manufacturing and processing industries in industrial estates around Anantapur, Hindupur, and Guntakal.

7. Infrastructure Expansion

7.1 Physical Infrastructure

Physical infrastructure development has been a key enabler of economic transformation in Anantapur district. Road length expanded from approximately 8,000 kilometres in 1981 to approximately 22,000 kilometres by 2023, improving connectivity between villages, towns, and the district headquarters. The completion of national and state highway upgrades, including sections of NH-40 and NH-167, has reduced travel times and logistics costs, facilitating trade and labour market integration.

Electrification has progressed from approximately 38% of villages in 1981 to near-universal coverage at approximately 99% by 2023, enabling mechanisation of agriculture, powering small industries, and supporting household economic activities. The district has also benefited from major solar energy investment, with Anantapur hosting one of India's largest solar parks, contributing to the state's renewable energy ambitions and creating local employment.

Table 6: Urban Infrastructure and Spatial Expansion Indicators, Anantapur District (1981–2023)

Indicator	1981	1991	2001	2011	2023*
No. of Towns	8	9	12	18 (incl. CT)	22
Villages	1,200	1,100	1,000	949	870
Road Length (km)	8,000	10,500	13,200	16,800	22,000
Schools	1,400	1,900	2,400	2,800	3,085
Degree Colleges	8	14	25	38	42
Engineering Colleges	2	4	8	14	14
Urban Area (sq km)	120	190	270	377	520
Electrified Villages (%)	38%	61%	79%	92%	99%

CT = Census Towns. Source: District Statistical Handbook, Anantapur; Census of India; *2023 estimates.

7.2 Educational Infrastructure

Educational infrastructure expansion has been transformative. The number of schools grew from approximately 1,400 in 1981 to 3,085 by 2023, improving access to primary and secondary education across the district's villages and towns. The proliferation of degree colleges, from 8 in 1981 to 42 by 2023, has made higher education accessible locally, reducing the need for students to migrate to distant cities and retaining educated human capital within the district.

The growth of engineering colleges from 2 to 14 between 1981 and 2011 is particularly notable. While concerns have emerged nationally about engineering graduate employment, these institutions have created significant academic employment, drawn student populations that support local urban economies, and contributed to the emergence of a technically educated workforce capable of supporting industrial and service sector growth.

7.3 Urban Spatial Expansion

The physical urban area of Anantapur district expanded from approximately 120 square kilometres in 1981 to approximately 520 square kilometres by 2023, more than a fourfold increase. This spatial expansion has been accompanied by the growth of peri-urban zones around major towns, where land use transitions from agricultural to residential, commercial, and industrial uses are occurring rapidly. The decline in the number of revenue villages, from approximately 1,200 in 1981 to approximately 870 by 2023, partly reflects such transitions as villages are absorbed into municipal boundaries or merge into urban agglomerations.

8. Role in Swarna Andhra 2047

The Government of Andhra Pradesh's Swarna Andhra 2047 vision aims to transform the state into a diversified, inclusive, and globally competitive economy by the centenary of independence. Within this broader framework, Anantapur represents both a developmental challenge and a strategic opportunity. Its transition from a drought-prone agrarian district toward a more urban and service-oriented economy reflects the structural changes envisioned in the state's long-term strategy.

8.1 Industrial Diversification and Economic Zones

Anantapur's gradual shift toward automobile components, food processing, logistics, and renewable energy aligns with the vision's emphasis on balanced industrial growth beyond coastal urban centres. Its strategic location near the Karnataka border and strong highway connectivity position it as a potential logistics and manufacturing node in the Rayalaseema region. However, sustained investment, cluster-based planning, and local employment integration remain critical for durable industrial expansion.

8.2 Human Capital and Educational Development

Rising literacy levels and expansion of higher educational institutions strengthen the district's human capital base. Yet, improving employability, technical skill quality, and rural female participation is essential to convert educational expansion into productive economic outcomes.

8.3 Sustainable Urbanization

Water scarcity makes sustainability central to Anantapur's urban future. Urban growth must be guided by water-sensitive planning, regulated land expansion, and climate-resilient infrastructure to prevent resource stress and environmental degradation.

8.4 Social Inclusion

Despite structural progress, agricultural labourers and marginalized communities remain vulnerable. Targeted skill development, financial inclusion, and social protection policies are necessary to ensure that urban transformation translates into equitable development.

9. Policy Suggestions

1. **Planned Urban Expansion Instead of Random Growth** : Urban expansion in Anantapur has been rapid but uneven. Peri-urban areas around major towns often lack adequate infrastructure. Preparing updated Master Plans for Class I and II towns, with clear zoning and early integration of merging villages, can ensure that growth is organised, serviced, and sustainable rather than fragmented.
2. **Industrial Clusters in Merged Villages and Peri-Urban Areas** : As cultivation declines near towns, these areas can be converted into planned industrial and agro-processing clusters. Strengthening hubs like Hindupur and leveraging Guntakal's railway connectivity can generate local employment while preventing distress migration.
3. **Skill Development Programs** : Many former cultivators and agricultural labourers lack skills suited to emerging sectors. A district-focused skill mission, aligned with local opportunities such as renewable energy, construction, healthcare, and logistics, can help workers transition into stable non-farm employment.
4. **Sustainable Urban Planning and Water Management** : Being chronic water scarcity area, urban growth must prioritise rainwater harvesting, wastewater reuse, and regulated expansion into aquifer-stressed zones. Water-sensitive planning is essential for long-term resilience.
5. **Smart Infrastructure and Digital Connectivity** : Improved broadband access, digitised municipal services, and transparent e-governance systems can reduce administrative delays and enhance service delivery efficiency.
6. **Strengthening Social Infrastructure for Inclusive Growth** : Urban transformation must remain inclusive. Expanding early childhood services, supporting women's self-help groups, and addressing gender disparities will ensure that development benefits all sections of society.

10. Conclusion

This study has documented the substantial urban economic transformation of Anantapur district over four decades from 1981 to 2023. From a predominantly agricultural economy with limited urban presence, Anantapur has evolved into a district with a growing urban population approaching 32%, a diverse and expanding service and industrial sector employing over half the workforce, significantly improved literacy and infrastructure, and an emerging educational economy supporting human capital development across the Rayalaseema region.

The transformation has not been without tensions and vulnerabilities. Agricultural labourers, the majority of them from historically marginalized communities, have not fully shared in the benefits of structural change. Water scarcity remains a binding constraint on sustainable urban and agricultural development. The rapid but unplanned expansion of peri-urban areas around district towns risks creating infrastructure deficits that undermine quality of life and economic productivity. Gender inequalities, while narrowing in literacy and sex ratio, persist in workforce participation and child sex ratio statistics.

These challenges notwithstanding, Anantapur's trajectory offers grounds for cautious optimism. The district possesses significant assets: a strategic geographic location with national highway and railway connectivity; a critical mass of educational institutions creating locally available human capital;

demonstrated success in attracting large-scale renewable energy investment; and a population density and size that makes efficient urban service delivery financially viable in its major towns.

Realizing the potential of these assets and addressing the vulnerabilities identified in this study requires coordinated action across planning, industry, education, social protection, and environmental management domains. The Swarna Andhra 2047 vision provides a framework for this coordination at the state level; this study contributes district-specific evidence to support its implementation in one of Andhra Pradesh's most important and challenging regions.

Future research should extend this analysis using primary data from household surveys to better understand the livelihood transitions of displaced agricultural workers, the spatial dynamics of peri-urban growth, and the employment outcomes of Anantapur's rapidly expanding educational sector. Longitudinal tracking of key indicators through the 2026 census will further illuminate the district's development trajectory and the effectiveness of policies introduced in the Swarna Andhra era.

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