

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ GAJENDRA HALDEA: ADVISOR TO PLANNING COMMISSION DEPUTY CHAIRMAN

Inconvenient truth-teller

I only serve the national interest, the former bureaucrat, whose contributions to infrastructure policymaking have been marked by controversy, tells Kanika Datta

Why me?" Gajendra Haldea asks suspiciously, when I invite him for *Lunch with BS*. Valid question, since Advisor on Infrastructure to Planning Commission Deputy Chairman is strictly not a designation that fits the profile.

I hopefully mumble something flattering about his seminal role in infrastructure policy since liberalisation and mendaciously avoid adding that he's the guy everyone in the public-private partnership (PPP) business loves to hate — ministers, bureaucrats, private companies....

He says he'll think about it. Several phone calls later, he grudgingly agrees, saying something about improving his reputation.

To this end, I receive ahead of our meeting: a copy of his 2011 book titled *Infrastructure at Crossroads: The Challenges of Governance*, dedicated to "the nation" and prefaced by four closely-printed pages of blurbs "On the Author"; a "Brief Resumé" that runs to eight pages of foolscap; a copy of a 2004 letter then Attorney General Soli Sorabjee wrote to then Finance Minister Jaswant Singh praising Haldea for crafting the government's counter-guarantee with Enron's infamous Dabhol Power Company.

All of which is unnecessary. Haldea, a 1973 batch civil servant, is a known devil, so to speak, as much for creating solid contractual and regulatory frameworks for infrastructure PPPs as his proclivity for taking on the establishment and highlighting inconvenient truths.

From the Enron debacle to initial bids for the airport projects for Delhi and Mumbai, to the manner in which road projects were bid out and Delhi's flawed power sector privatisation, he has proved irritatingly right and annoyingly honest while going about it. "Intellectually robust," a Haldea frenemy told me, "and clean as a bone."

Haldea left the choice of venue to me, and I settle on The China Kitchen at the Hyatt Regency, known for decent food and an unobtrusive ambience. He arrives neatly dressed in a light shirt and trousers and a sleeveless Jawahar coat, the telltale matt finish of dyed hair revealing an unexpected vanity. We choose wild mushroom soup followed by steam sea bass fillet in chilli and soy sauce and fried rice with smoked bamboo shoots and garlic and the "official" part of the meeting begins.

I ask him why he enjoys being unpopular. "Why would anyone want to be unpopular?" he

counters, disconcerted. For the joys of being righteous, I suggest. He answers slowly, "That's not how I see myself. If you are looking at the medium and long term and you get involved in something then you want to get it right. But if you are short term in approach and just want to please people and make gains for yourself then you are willing to compromise more. If you want to say what you believe is good for public interest and you are in pursuit of excellence, then you have an inner compulsion to say what is right."

The soup is ladled from a large tureen, a flavoursome broth with large chunks of chopped mushroom. My sources had told me Haldea has been somewhat sidelined in the infrastructure establishment of late, not least because of the many powerful interests he has challenged. "That happens all the time," he tells me cheerfully. But it is also striking, I say, that he did not suffer the serial transfers that is the lot of upright officers.

The question allows him to give full rein to his sense of self and take a dig at the bureaucracy. That is because, he replies, "I distanced myself from the pursuit of alluring offices. Who would want to push you out of the Planning Commission? If I wanted to be finance secretary, then there is struggle and compromise. But if you are happy to work in a productive environment without pursuing power and authority then you don't get thrown around."

His last "proper posting" was as joint secretary in the finance ministry where, fresh from the London School of Economics, he worked on with the counter-guarantee for the Enron project, that is recognised as saving the government millions of dollars.

Thereafter, he joined the government think tank National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER), a move he made, he admits frankly, to avoid returning to his state cadre of Rajasthan. "I had had a huge opportunity dealing with so many issues in infrastructure involving thousands of crores of investment. In my state cadre, the intellectual challenge would have been much less."

That was 1999, when then Power Minister Rangarajan Kumaramangalam invited him to write the electricity Act. There were whispers about this because Kumaramangalam was a cousin of Haldea's wife. When I ask, Haldea refers to an "On the Author" blurb excerpted

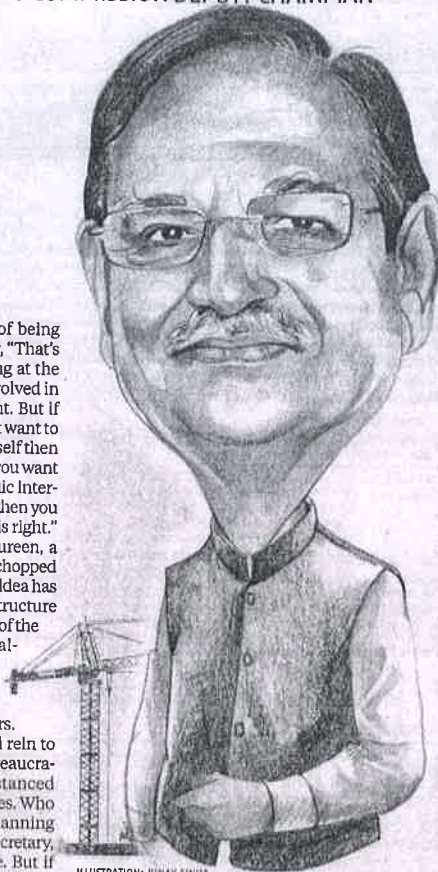


ILLUSTRATION: BHINAY SINHA

from former Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha's book highlighting how Haldea and Kumaramangalam clashed over Haldea's intransigence on several power projects. "But I saved the government 10 Enrons," he pronounces.

To avoid accusations of personal gain, he declined to be paid and, to make his position watertight, used all the earned leave he'd accumulated to write the Act. Finally passed in 2003, the Act was praised for progressive thinking. We're discussing why the power sector is still in the dumps and open access — one of the big-ticket reforms in the Act — all but a non-starter. He briskly attributes it to "various lobbies".

Since personal probity looms large in his life, I ask if, anyone, er, tried to, er, bribe him. "No, because of my reputation," he replies serenely. But there is, I persist, the question about model concession agreements (MCAs) and... "Copyright?" he pre-empts me. He laughs as he accepts more soup. "The issue never leaves me!"

"The point is simple. I wrote the first MCA when I was at NCAER. It was a priced document

and carried my copyright. Later, I wrote several MCAs for the government. You have no idea how complex that is — I sometimes work till 3 am. Whether it is the Hyderabad metro or an ultra-mega power project, I have to cover every contingency for the next 25 years. If you produce work like this, you don't want somebody in Daryaganj or Bangladesh to steal it. And, I got zero money out of it! The government has published these MCAs and the sale proceeds go to the Consolidated Fund of India."

But you must be earning royalty, I persist. He is irritated: "If you find I have made any money I will give you 99.9 per cent of it!"

He warms to the subject as the fish and rice are served. "I haven't even taken a salary for the past nine years — very few people know that." I provocatively say I had heard but didn't believe it. "It's true! All my salary goes into the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. I don't tell everyone because nine out of 10 people will think *kuch chakkor hai* [there are wheels within wheels], they are not willing to grant a selfless act."

So how did he live, I ask sceptically. "What do you need to live?" he counters. "A house — I live in a government house. Food — not much money is required for eating. God has given me greed in limited measure — I don't booze every day or smoke or have expensive habits." His wife, an IAS officer, has just retired, and daughter and son are well settled. Pension and rent from two apartments make ends meet.

Everyone knows his public persona but beyond the fact that he is the brother of Prithvi Haldea, chairman and managing director of PRIME Database, little is known about his background. "Who is interested?" he demurs. But his story is unexpectedly interesting with a family history going back some 300 years.

His father was a *Jagirdar* in part of the old Jaipur state. Things changed after Independence when fiefdoms were scrapped and his father tried his hand at various businesses that drained the family wealth. "So, I made a transition from a highly privileged life to an ordinary life, and I learnt many things the hard way." His original career path was army-bound, for which he studied at King George's Royal Indian Military School in Ajmer — earning him his family nickname of "General saab".

We have arrived at dessert and go with the server's recommendation of Jasmine Tea Tiramisu. It is the star of the meal, a delicate sweetness leavening the traditional heaviness of mascarpone. The conversation turns general as I ask him what he would do if a new government came to power next year ("not given it a thought, god and destiny will take care").

To round off, I ask a casual, pro forma question that everybody asks these days. What did he think of Narendra Modi, since he would have interacted closely with him in the Planning Commission? There's a long pause. "I'll discuss that off the record," he says finally and I switch off the recorder. Those who know Haldea will be able to guess what he said.

A longer version appears at mybs.in/d9e75