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Gajendra Haldea (1949-2021): Guru for a generation of infra project administrators



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At a time when the government plans to roll out a massive infrastructure project push in its Budget for FY22, to know that Gajendra Haldea, one of India's most respected names in the sector, is no more, brings back memories. Haldea, who passed away on January 15 at the age of 71, is survived by his wife.

It can be safely said that more than a generation of India's administrators have picked up their toolkit to administer infrastructure projects from this Rajasthan-cadre Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer. In an administrative structure that punishes rather than builds up expertise in any sector, Haldea doggedly stuck to building up one, extensively writing policies and contracts for infrastructure projects.

In the process, he not only helped build up India's ability to handle complex infrastructure challenges, he was also willing to share his formidable knowledge with anyone who cared. A good portion of the credit for the enviable score of India in 2020 holding the top rank in the World Bank database of countries with the largest number of public-private partnership (PPP) projects, must go to him. Among infrastructure projects, if engineering-procurement-construction can be considered the easiest, the PPP route stands at the other extreme. Yet it is necessary, if a government is serious about building the range of roads, ports and airports, railway line or power projects. It is a tribute to Haldea's ability to read among these huge numbers of projects that anyone he pointed out as a problem child was sure to end up as one.

Haldea served as joint secretary (infrastructure) in the 1990s in the union finance ministry warning the government against signing on the sovereign guarantee clause in the power purchase agreement with Enron. That signal service ensured the Government of India didn't land up in a costly arbitration, though it did not stop the Maharashtra state government from signing on to it and creating a subsequent mess. Around this period, he also authored the Electricity Act 2003 and the Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999. The former broke the monopoly rights of power distribution companies, the latter clipped the role of the state in victimising companies for transactions in foreign exchange. The offences were made into civil ones from criminal ones, a rare show of trust in government-business relationship in the early days of liberalisation.

He was, however, not done when he moved out of the ministry. He again came back to the erstwhile Planning Commission of India as head of the Secretariat for Infrastructure & PPP during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's two terms. He famously decided to charge only one rupee as his monthly salary and courted the ire of state governments for repeatedly pointing out flaws in their agreements with companies in their PPP contracts. Most of his apprehensions came true. Last year, he engaged in a discussion with this correspondent over the execution of viability-gap model with respect to the Hyderabad metro project. The trigger was a story that appeared in the *Business Standard*, which the almost to be army man appreciated as having asked the right questions. He never gave up on the sector having advised several state governments during the past two decades. While at the Commission, he wrote a 19-volume series on PPP in India, which also included his well-known standardised model documents to build private participation in infrastructure sectors. He was not unwilling to be feted, once asking for rights to the bidding documents, but more as a claim for authorship than to earn anything. It was a well-earned right to vanity.