

*Extracts from “India Grows at Night” by Gurcharan Das (pages 115-117)*

After attending the literary festival in Jaipur, I went by road to Ajmer. The six-lane highway was a beauty and the potholed India of the Public Works Department (PWD) had soon become a distant memory. The wondrous colours of Rajasthan deepened as I moved south, and for an instant I thought I may be witnessing a paradise of sorts, which combined modernity and tradition, and world-class infrastructure with the ineffable loveliness of an older India.

My enjoyment was boosted somewhat by the knowledge that the Jaipur-Kishangarh segment of the Golden Quadrilateral had been built as a public-private partnership, through which the private sector had built the road under the stringent eye of a regulator and would recover its costs through tolls. This model of infrastructure development was based on the recognition of the limited capacity of the state. The Golden Quadrilateral was the name given by the previous government of Prime Minister Vajpayee, who had initiated this bold programme to connect with highways the four metros of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata.

The key to the success of this public-private partnership lay in transparent contracts which tried to get around the ever-present danger of crony capitalism. The contract for this one was based on a template drawn by my friend Gajendra Haldea, an unusual economist-lawyer at the Planning Commission. Such contracts had helped create a level of trust and enabled the country to access funds, skills and technologies from the best companies in the world to build and operate new roads, ports, bridges, airports and container trains, which were then transferred back to the state in fifteen to thirty years. As a result, Haldea was one of the most hated men in Delhi's infrastructure ministries. He had demolished opportunities for corruption. The ministry would have preferred building the highway through its own contractors and earning a cut on every substandard kilometre.