

In which Haldea gives it those ones



BOOK REVIEW

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Gajendra Haldea, a 1973 batch IAS officer, is uniquely positioned to comment on the challenges of governance in infrastructure, having been close to the action on this front for nearly two decades. In the Planning Commission since 2004 as adviser to the deputy chairman, he also heads the plan body's secretariat of infrastructure. It is a vantage point that gives him the scope to view and review the plans of various infrastructure ministries. Few public servants have made so many significant contributions to infrastruc-

ture governance as he has. For instance, he drafted the model-concession agreements that decide the bidding rules and procedures for public-private partnership projects. He also drafted the seminal Electricity Bill, which was passed by Parliament in 2003.

As this compilation of 29 articles shows, Haldea's deep expertise in the subject is matched by a forthrightness that has attracted detractors whose numbers would easily outstrip his many contributions to the infrastructure sector. His penchant for stirring controversy has not, however, dissuaded him from airing his views via postscripts to each chapter that also update the reader on developments and through an Epilogue.

One of the most publicised controversies, which does not find mention in this anthology, was the friction with Kamal Nath when he headed the road transport ministry. In 2009, Haldea wrote an issue

paper, titled "Sub-prime Highways". The provocative title was just the start; the content of the paper amounted to a stinging criticism of Nath's style of functioning. It showed that the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) was heading towards bankruptcy because its debt was set to grow by five times in the next three years.

Nath's ripostes were hardly convincing. First, he branded the Planning Commission "armchair advisers". Then he went on to say that Terminal 3 at the Delhi airport, which was completed in a record 37 months, met its deadline only because there was no interference from the Planning Commission. Nath was later shifted to the safer climes of urban development ministry and NHAI's finances are on an upward track.

The broad point that comes through in this book is that ministers cannot be "players" (since the government plays

such a large role in infrastructure) as well as "umpires" in the infrastructure governance business. The subtext, of course, is that knowledgeable bureaucrats like him would be better placed to play the umpire's role. This becomes clear in the Epilogue, in which Haldea takes a dig at the government for converting the Committee on Infrastructure (CoI) to a Cabinet Committee on Infrastructure (CCI). The CoI was mainly run by the Planning Commission but the panel's authority all but ended when the CCI came into existence.

Haldea's considered view is that the failures that have dogged the implementation of infrastructure projects are related to governance or the lack of it. Private entrepreneurs may short-change consumers in pursuit of profit, he writes, but it is fundamentally within the purview of the governing bodies, he argues, to promote fair competition between private players and enforce performance standards to protect the rights of consumers.

He goes on to say that though the policy regime was liberalised in the early

1990s, conflict of interest and the reluctance of the government to "cede turf" obstructed the entry of competing private firms on a level playing field.

Haldea points out that such crony capitalism has meant that state power distribution units buy power from private power generation firms at exorbitant, unregulated tariffs, eventually harming user interest. Although he talks of the Electricity Bill, 2003, a beacon as far as reforms in the power sector are concerned, he leaves unanswered the question of what allowed the loopholes in a law that he had drafted in 1999-2000.

If the lively and occasionally scathing style makes these essays highly readable, they are also useful because they offer a nuanced portrait of the processes involved in conceiving and implementing infrastructure projects through diverse case studies — roads, railways, ports, airports, telecom and power. They also outline strategies to unblock current bottlenecks and suggestions for policy reform.

But two things stand out about this

book. One, Haldea has dedicated the book to the nation that currently has a huge infrastructure deficit. Two, Haldea has never been one for hiding his light under a bushel so he has thought fit to include opinions (mostly flattering) about him from eminent people. That includes Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's comment: "There are few persons about whose ability and integrity I have greater respect than I have for Shri Haldea."

Still, it would have helped if the editors of this volume had been more circumspect about Shri Haldea. The first paragraph of a postscript in Chapter 3 is all about the author before it goes into the nitty-gritty of the issue at hand. Since Haldea had already been introduced to readers at the start of the book, this extra promotion is surely unnecessary.

INFRASTRUCTURE AT CROSSROADS
The Challenges of Governance
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Oxford University Press; 232 pages; ₹575