

Bricks And Brickbats

A collection of articles written by Gajendra Haldea over the past decade, this book is replete with examples of where he has influenced infrastructure policies in the Planning Commission

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India's infrastructure world has two parts: those who love Gajendra Haldea and those who hate him. There are very few in the first part, while the second lot has three clusters — politicians, businessmen and babus. Politicians, because Haldea stirs their carefully-crafted crony-capitalist nests, irrespective of how high up they are. Businessmen, because of his "sab chor hai" attitude. And babus, because he talks down to them, and does so with elan and gusto because, they say, he is under Montek Singh Ahluwalia's *chhatrachhaya* (patronage). Wrote T.S.R. Subramaniam, former cabinet secretary, in *Journeys Through Babudom and Notaland: Governance In India*: "The nation would have been better off paying him (Haldea) a billion dollars and retiring him from its services."

So, it is not easy being infrastructure's conscience-keeper. For Haldea, it has been a lonely job fighting his demons. He is reputed to have single-handedly slowed down, in the early 1990s, the first lot of 'fast-track' independent power producers' (IPPs) projects as the terms, as per him, were against public interest. Haldea had challenged the privatisation process of Delhi's power distribution, filing a writ petition before the Delhi High Court, before it was privatised in 2002. The scathing judgement of the high court stopped at undoing the privatisation, as the clock could not be turned back. There is more. After two rounds of evaluation of the privatisation bids of Mumbai and Delhi airports, the consultants initially shortlisted only two bidders. As the Planning Commission representative, Haldea was the sole voice that expressed dissatisfaction. He alleged the selection was biased, neither fair nor transparent. Ultimately, this view was vindicated by the Supreme Court.

Well, it has not been only about fighting. His contribution to develop the warp and weft of infrastructure policy over almost two decades has not seen any parallel by any bureaucrat in any sector today. The comprehensiveness of his input is well-captured in *Infrastructure At Crossroads*, which is a collection of articles written by him over the past decade. The book is replete with numerous examples of where Haldea has influenced policy and designed operating paradigms — often loosely referred to as "model concession agreements".

Haldea has been an observer, participant and epicentre of many controversies in the infrastructure sector. In all these situations, there have been high stakes, high drama and the involvement of the top echelons of India's bureaucracy, politicians and powerful industrialists. Haldea has been considered intolerable by many. He is accused of trampling on toes, ruffling feathers, choosing not to appreciate a dissenting point of view. He acknowledges this trait in the prologue: "I have often been told that my stance is substantially negative." Infrastructure observers, generally weighed down with boring statistics and sleep-inducing commentaries, would no doubt enjoy some exposes as well as a little *mirch-masala* on all the shenanigans that happened from Enron to the 2G scam. But maybe we shall have to wait for another book when Haldea is no longer a government servant. Publishers should be willing to pay a hefty advance for that one.

In the January 2003 issue of *Seminar*, Haldea wrote an article, 'Salvage Reforms', in which he expounded the philosophy that makes him tick: "There is no dearth of instances where conflicts of interest are conveniently brushed aside, until a crisis or a scam forces some action." One fire alarm, evidently, is Haldea himself. He has been the nation's conscience keeper for infrastructure projects.

For those interested in our country's growth and development, this book is a must read. It widens one's perspective about public policy in India, infrastructure and the related issues of governance and implementation. It also teaches one about having a "spine". Probably, the last is reason enough for celebrating the book and this rather unique bureaucrat called Gajendra Haldea.



Author's Details:

Gajendra Haldea has been an advisor to the deputy chairman and principal advisor on infrastructure at the Planning Commission since 2004. He was head of the Centre for Infrastructure and Regulation at the National Council for Applied Economic Research, Delhi. His other book is *Indian Highways: A Framework For Commercialisation* (2004).

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