



Rana Sanga's tale

Book Review | A policymaker presents an insider's view on infrastructure story

I've never been to a book launch where the anchor described the author as "insufferable", and got away! Only because the elegant lady echoed what some of infrastructure bureaucrat Gajendra Haldea's bosses felt in their abject dismay.

Others backed him big time. Yojana Bhavan boss Montek Singh Ahluwalia is one such believer. Little surprise therefore that Singh's economist wife Isher sat in the first row, flanked by a who's who of infrastructure, from Deepak Parekh to Vinayak Chatterjee. Surface transport and highways minister CP Joshi competed with Ahluwalia. The minister's predecessor had spewed venom on Haldea publicly, but Joshi didn't just come by to unveil the book, his meetings have the author as informal co-chair.

Either which way, the one emotion this former 1973-batch IAS officer from Rajasthan can't evoke is you being lackadaisical about him. Indeed, if a man is judged by the number of his detractors, bureaucrat Gajendra Haldea could well be running for the role of Vijay in our post-1991 infrastructure 'Deewar'.

Chatterjee of Feedback Ventures once summarised his influence, and such has been the power of Haldea's reports, critiques and notings: "the recent history of infrastructure in India is



Infrastructure at the Crossroads: The Challenge of Governance By Gajendra Haldea Oxford University Press, ₹575



Gajendra Haldea

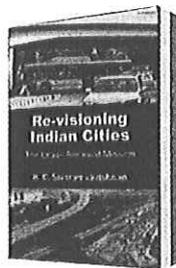
divided into two periods — BH and AH. That is, Before Haldea and After Haldea!"

Indeed, here's a civil servant who didn't mind, even relished, leaving many "gnashing their teeth and foaming at the mouth". Who else would start this book quoting TSR Subramanian, his then cabinet secretary, that the government would have been better off paying him, a mere joint secretary, a billion dollars, and retiring him from his services!

Before his own retirement in 1998, Subramanian suggested that the 'payoff' could have been five billion dollars. The superset of those 'upset,' starting with Subramanian and Enron's Rebecca Mark, continues to expand, now including ministries, governments, private developers, consultants and regulators, and a really annoyed Kamal Nath, once the czar of India's highways. Similarly, P Chidambaram, then finance minister, ran against Haldea during the privatisation of Delhi airport.

But as the author whispers with an enigmatical smile, he is a nobody. Nor is he here to be loved and cheered. His self image is one of an enabler. His critics would quibble and say, 'disabler'. Ports and airports, highways and railways, and power and overarching regulation have been Haldea's canvass. Among human beings, his loyalties are vested in one man, Ahluwalia, and through

From the Blurb



Re-visioning Indian Cities The Urban Renewal Mission By KC Sivaramakrishnan 278 pages, ₹695 Sage Publications

'Re-visioning Indian Cities' probes the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) right from its inception to its present-day avatar. The book significantly adds to the knowledge base of the urban history in India.

Commencing with a historical background of the JNNURM, the book traces the evolution of public policy in India on urban growth. In the process it provides an understanding of the complex urban issues and examines whether the JNNURM is a project response or a policy response to these problems.

The rationale behind the choice of the cities covered by the mission, the scope and coverage of the work undertaken and the progress till date are extensively discussed. The formidable problems of mega city governance and the difficulties of correlating rural and urban development at the district level are reviewed.



him, the prime minister himself. Without once defending his protégé in public, in fact likening him to 'Maharana Sanga' with a thousand cuts, Montek, to his credit, has discretely ensured that Haldea's dissenting voice isn't muzzled. Result? Subramanian hasn't found a post-retirement sinecure, but Haldea never had a retired day at home. He's back on reemployment, as Montek's advisor, shaking the tree, on a salary of ₹1 a month, that too so that the pay rolls don't stop reflecting him! A bit like Thakur of Sholay, it's the size of canvass that he cares for.

To the system's credit, a man who questions so much has authored the electricity bill, plus 12 model concession agreements for PPAs in different sectors, thus much of the private investment in India's infrastructure. But his carp, as stated in the book under review, remains that rather than becoming magnets for de nouveau private monies, public-private partnerships have become sophisticated excuses for diverting public funds. Even electricity reforms remain lamed because there's no open access. Here, with characteristic bluntness, Haldea doesn't just indict the engineer-contractor-politician nexus, but international development agencies too, for their preference to go via the government,

a machination incumbent ministries and departments are only too happy to abet with.

We notice hard questions on even marquee public projects like Delhi Metro. Haldea refers to it as an extraordinary example of project management, but then warns that it isn't amenable to replication. "Its CEO (the redoubtable E Sreedharan) is an outstanding project manager, who has been given an unprecedented tenure of over 10 years... the equity is held equally by the central government and the government of Delhi, which means that neither exercises direct control in any way... thus giving unparalleled freedom and authority to the CEO... above all, the first phase receiving ₹100 billion from the government at an average interest rate of 1.2 percent per annum and large tax waivers that imply substantial subsidies...with half of its operational costs being met out of sale or leasing of real estate."

Indeed, if Haldea were around, his notings may not have allowed the finance ministry to absorb foreign exchange risk for Delhi Metro, which it did after then finance secretary CM Vasudev acceded to Sreedharan, and ended a merry-go-round that had gone on for two years.

The jury is out on what Sreedharan, Vasudev, Subramanian, Nath, Chidambaram or Haldea look like after 10 or 20 years. Or if Haldea had it in him to run an infrastructure Godzilla like the NHAI rather than remote control it through CP Joshi, the highways minister after Nath. We won't even know if Haldea were around for Shah Jahan, whether a public project like the Taj Mahal would have come up! What we do know is that he's now busy setting the cat among the pigeons on the regulatory reforms bill and the public procurement bill.

Succinct and laced with data at the author's command, the one complaint one can have is that much of the book is a collection of recent articles, no doubt with an elegant postscript in each piece. A full-blown story may have to wait for Haldea to fall from grace. Rather than that sorry situation, this handy companion is our preferred option! ■

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Towards Financial Inclusion in India
By KG Karmakar, GD Banerjee, NP Mohapatra
575 pages, ₹995
Sage Publications

'Towards Financial Inclusion in India' is a treatise on 'inclusion of the Last, the Lost and the Least'. It provides an in-depth analysis of the various pillars of financial inclusion such as micro-remittance, micro-savings, micro-credit and micro-insurance.

The book stresses on the financial literacy and counselling, which are core to the achievement of financial inclusion. The authors dwell upon the difficulties faced by vulnerable groups like women, tribals, weavers and rural populace while trying to access financial services. The book also analyses inclusion measures like ICT interventions and post office model.

Striking a balance between pragmatic policy-making and a genuine social security mechanism, the book emphasises that financial services should be cost-effective and easily affordable to the vast majority of disadvantage and low-income groups.

The roadmap for financial inclusion drawn by the authors, if adopted, will go a long way in addressing the needs and demands of last-mile clients, especially the vulnerable groups.