

# Mr Rana Sanga



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If judged by the number of his detractors, bureaucrat Gajendra Haldea is the Rana Sanga in our post-1991 infrastructure story. As Vinayak Chatterjee of Feedback Ventures once wrote, and such has been the power of Haldea's reports and notings, "the recent history of infrastructure in India is 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 his new book, 'Infrastructure at the Crossroads: The Challenge of Governance (OUP)', quoting TSR Subramanian, his then Cabinet Secretary, that 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 'pay off' 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 privatization 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 first love is to be an enabler of infrastructure.

His critics would quibble and say, 'disabler.' Ports and airports, highways and railways, and power and overarching regulation have been his canvass. Among human beings, his loyalties are vested in one man, Plan Panel deputy chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia, and through him, the prime minister himself.

Without once defending his protégé in public, in fact likening him to Maharana Sanga with a thousand cuts, Montek has ensured that this dissenting voice isn't muzzled. Result? Subramanian hasn't found a post-retirement sinecure, but Haldea, a 1973-batch IAS officer from Rajasthan, never had a day at home.

He's back on re-employment, 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! It's the size of can-

vass that he cares for. To the system's credit, a man who questions so much, has authored the Electricity Bill, plus twelve 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 the 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 exercise 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 per cent 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 2 years.

The jury is out on what Sreedharan, Vasudev, Subramanian, Nath, Chidambaram or Haldea look like after ten or twenty 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 is that he's now busy setting the cat among the pigeons on the Regulatory Reforms Bill and the Public Procurement Bill.

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