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From Tehelka Magazine, Vol 7, Issue 43, Dated October 30, 2010

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GADCHIROLI



The Man Who Went Behind Enemy Lines

The Indian State claims it cannot enter Maoist territory. But a Deputy Collector in Gadchiroli district dared. **TUSHA MITTAL** brings back Rajendra Kanphade's astonishing story



decades.

But Kanphade wasn't going to Abujmarh. He was going into forests that have, in a sense, become no man's land — into villages trapped between the non-existent Indian State and the almost mythical hold of the Naxals.

'I am against violence, whether it is from the Naxals or the legalised violence of the State. The Naxals do targeted killings, but the violence of the police is random. It seems the villagers are more afraid of the police than the Naxals'
RAJENDRA KANPHADE

Kanphade's colleagues refused to accompany him. "You can't predict where the mines are," they said. The police warned of grave consequences. Gadchiroli SP Viresh Prabhu said he couldn't provide protection or guarantee his safety. "It is my fundamental right to go anywhere in the country," Kanphade says. "Just because the police can't discharge their duty doesn't mean I won't do mine."

Kanphade and seven volunteers left for Beenagonda, a village located 100 km away from the last police outpost on the Maharashtra border, forbidden because of the perceived threat of Naxals.

Kanphade emerged from his journey to challenge this very notion. He emerged more critical of the State than the enemy. "The quantum of the Naxal threat and terror has been exaggerated by the police," he says. "The Naxal bogey is being used to get more funds and higher salaries."

After almost a year-long lull, Gadchiroli has seen two Naxal attacks in the past week — four policemen were killed in Perimelli and a police jeep was blown up near Sawargaon. The last major attack was in October 2009 when 14 policemen were massacred in Laheri village in the district's Bhamragad division. But, look at the larger picture and some of that exaggeration becomes apparent.

Sources in the Gadchiroli police's Naxal cell said that there are about 300 uniformed Naxal cadres in the district. The combined strength of the state and paramilitary forces for the district alone is around 9,000 — including four CRPF battalions, 11 SRPF companies, the local state police and the C-60, a commando force.

'In the so-called Naxal area, nobody pointed a gun at me. On coming back, my own police did,' says Kanphade

A report on left-wing extremism by Gadchiroli's District Planning Committee, accessed by TEHELKA, puts the figure of "armed assault by Naxals on police, resulting in death (blasting/encounter)" in the district for the 1980 to 2010 period at an alarmingly low 57 incidents — that is less than two fatal incidents per year for the past three decades.

Ever since the launch of a joint offensive against the Naxals last year, voices against the government's operation have been gathering steam. Typically, these voices have been labelled as activists, Naxal sympathisers or manipulative politicians — not patriotic enough to support valiant soldiers fighting inside the country's hinterland. But this time, it is a bureaucrat calling the bluff, showing that Naxalism doesn't have to preclude development, asking for the paramilitary forces to be withdrawn — that is why what Kanphade says is significant. And perhaps that is why, two months after his expedition, he faces the prospect of a departmental inquiry.

The son of a headmaster, Kanphade grew up in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh. He studied in government schools, graduated from Nagpur University with an MSc degree in mathematics and physics, and began teaching at a Nagpur high school. He remembers his first encounter with the government: collecting a teacher's certificate from a district office in 1984. "They asked me for a Rs. 2 bribe. It made me angry. I refused to pay," he recalls.

In 1985, he joined the Civil Services to "mend the system", but soon discovered that "honesty is the worst policy". As a Deputy Tehsildar in 1988, he learnt of illegal tree felling on 22 hectares of forest land. He hatched a plan to catch the culprits. "If this is how you want to behave, why don't you go back and teach," the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) told him.

When he took over as Deputy Collector in March this year, Kanphade already had the reputation of a maverick who cannot be bribed. Perhaps, that is why when Collector Atul Patne asked 30 officers to check on ashram schools in the district, Kanphade was allotted the most inaccessible one, Beenagonda, a place officials believe is a Naxal stronghold. "It was given to me by ill-intention because there are no roads to get there," Kanphade says. "I decided to not let that stop me."

On 25 August, Kanphade and his team reached Beenagonda after walking for 20 km, trekking across hills, and wading through flooded rivulets. One team member almost got swept away by the current, but they saved him in time. It was pouring when the team arrived in Beenagonda. The village has 35 huts and 219 residents. Of the two wells, one is always dry and the other is clogged with rainwater. This monsoon, the villagers have been drinking water from muddy canals. There is no electricity and the nearest market is 57 km away. Two decrepit buildings are the only face of the State — the ashram school funded by the Tribal Welfare Department and a rural health centre, which has neither doctors nor medicines.



Maverick The villagers' pressing needs won't cost more than the salary of two constables, says Kanphade

PHOTO: TARUN SHERAWAT

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<p>LIFE IN NO MAN'S LAND</p> <p>The numbers from Gadchiroli show where the State is failing</p>	<p>1,521</p> <p>Total villages in the district as per the 2001 census. The total population is 9.7 lakh</p>	<p>720</p> <p>Villages with no communication facilities (nearly 60 percent of the gram panchayats)</p>	<p>132</p> <p>Villages have no electricity (80 cut off for non-payment or faulty lines)</p>	<p>80</p> <p>Villages not linked by road. Nearly 10,000 people live there. Cost to connect them: ₹180 crore</p>	<p>40</p> <p>Percent of Class I civil administration posts lying vacant. Addl Collector post not filled for four years</p>
<p>398</p> <p>School buildings are on the verge of collapse. 392 don't have electricity and 130 don't have toilets</p>	<p>18</p> <p>Years since four new talukas were formed, but Central schemes yet to reach them</p>	<p>25</p> <p>Class I medical officer posts out of 31 are yet to be filled. The district has only nine rural hospitals</p>	<p>397</p> <p>Anganwadis are without buildings. 743 do not have toilets</p>	<p>50</p> <p>Percent extra pay for policemen in Naxal areas. Bureaucrats get 15 percent more</p>	<p>12,000</p> <p>Hectares of land on which exemption from Forest Conservation Act sought to attract mining investment</p>

THE TEAM spent a night in the village. This is what Kanphade found in his inspection of the ashram school run by the Nagpur-based National Centre for Rural Development: While 188 students were on rolls, only 39 actually lived there. There were 14 staff members, but only three were present. There were no records of enrolment or an attendance register. The premises of the school had no boundary wall, the bathrooms were filthy and had no roof, the classrooms were leaking. Out of 33 solar lamps provided, only 14 were functional. The nutrition — of boiled rice and diluted toor dal — was much below par. None of the villagers had ever benefited from a government welfare scheme. "They have no documents to qualify," says Kanphade. "I assured them that I will issue a Scheduled Tribe certificate to each citizen."

What shocked him most were the paltry needs of the villagers. "They wanted cycles and lamps for each family. Fulfilling their immediate needs will not cost the government more than the salary of two constables. Yet, we are spending thousands of crores on the paramilitary apparatus. They should be withdrawn."

Kanphade is the third civil servant to have visited this area. In 2005, after an NGO filed a PIL in Nagpur High Court claiming that Beenagonda has no civic amenities, the court ordered the Collector to visit the area. It resulted in Beenagonda's only two wells. Then in February 2007, Collector Niranjankumar Sudhanshu visited with troops to prepare for a local election. Sudhanshu recalled his visit. "The ashram school was being built at the time. The health centre had three staffers but no supply of medicines. On return, we told doctors to dispatch medicines."

In the past three years, Gadchiroli has been sanctioned a Backward Region Growth fund of Rs. 40 crore annually. This August, the Planning Commission approved Rs. 565 crore for development. But in Beenagonda, the medicines have not come; the nurses have disappeared.

'The Naxal threat has been exaggerated. The bogey is being used to get higher salaries and funds,' says Kanphade

"The government is interested in development, but the corrupt administrators are draining out the funds," Kanphade admits. In many ways, Beenagonda and Gadchiroli are symptomatic of larger trends across the country — pointing not only to corruption and paranoia, but also to the absurdities of the way development is perceived. Perhaps, that is why the entire district of 10 lakh people has just 18 km of railway track and only one railway station. Now that a mining zone is being set up in Sujargarh, a railway line is expected soon. Contrast the district's development audit with how the Collector wants to use funds meant for Naxal areas: smart cards, e-flood alerts, a plan to create 'audio-visual' classrooms and the absurdities become evident (see graphic).

By 26 August, Kanphade and his team had been incommunicado for at least 48 hours. Rumours spread that they had been kidnapped by the Naxals. Kanphade accuses the police of spreading them. "The police created false uproar by saying that 15 officers and 100 people have gone looking for me." On cue, the administration went into a tizzy, the state home minister was informed, and the Tehsildar of Bhamragarh, under which Beenagonda falls, was instructed to wait for the team at Laheri, the last police outpost.

ON 26 AUGUST, Kanphade emerged from the jungle unscathed. It was dark by the time the team left Laheri in the Tehsildar's car. What happened next left Kanphade shocked further. At a police barricade, his car was stopped by a constable. "Oye Tehsildar, get out of the car," yelled the armed policeman. "In the so-called dreaded Naxal area, no Naxal attacked me with a gun, but when I came back into my own area, my own police showed me the gun," Kanphade says. "Our vehicle was detained on the orders of the SP. If they can detain the Tehsildar's car, I shudder to think how they treat the local people."



Left in the lurch Nobody in Beenagonda has ever benefited from a government scheme

PHOTO: TARUN SHERAWAT

After his return, sources tell TEHELKA that Maharashtra Home Minister RR Patil called Kanphade, asked for a confidential report and told him not to make the findings public. Meanwhile, Collector Patne asked him to address a press meet to clarify the kidnapping rumours. Sources say the Collector whispered to him "Don't say anything against the government." But Kanphade would not keep mum.

"I am against violence, whether it is from the Naxals, or the legalised violence of the State," he said. "The Naxals are violent in a limited sphere. They do targeted killings, but the violence of the police is random. It seems the villagers are more afraid of the police than Naxals. I am not saying Naxals are good. I am saying that the forces are worse."

Ten days after Kanphade's return, the Collector received a confidential letter from the SP. "Kanphade has given a statement against the government and police administration," the SP wrote. "He has created confusion about the administration in the minds of the public. The police stay in inhospitable areas away from their families. Kanphade has demoralised the force... a responsible officer has shown sympathy towards the Naxals. Therefore, he has violated Maharashtra Civil Services rules, 1981. We feel a departmental inquiry should proceed against Kanphade."

On the basis of this, the Collector issued a second letter to the Resident Deputy Collector (RDC), saying that Kanphade has made "extremely sensitive statements" and directed him to "inquire in detail". The RDC then wrote to Kanphade asking for an explanation and threatening him with a departmental inquiry. "We will decide what action to take based on his explanation," Collector Patne told TEHELKA. "After so many have been martyred in the district, it was wrong to demoralise the police and glorify Naxals."

The berating of Kanphade is indicative of typical State myopia. Anyone who wants to engage with the 'enemy' is instantly labelled an enemy. If the police were to probe Kanphade further, they would find little support for the rebels. "The young generation of Adivasis is confused and frustrated. They have their own traditions, values and culture, but they have been told by the so-called civilised world that they must come into the mainstream. They are being shown luxuries they don't know how to achieve. The Naxals take advantage of that. Some Adivasis were offered Rs. 1,500 each to join them."

With or without sympathy, Kanphade still wants to meet the Naxals. "Even as an SDM in Aheri, I would conceal my identity and go into villages on a scooter hoping to meet the Naxals. I want to ask them, if they are genuinely against injustice, then why are they picking up the gun?"

This is the question he posed to Beenagonda's villagers. "They said the Naxals will give up their injustice when we give up ours."

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From Tehelka Magazine, Vol 7, Issue 43, Dated October 30, 2010

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