

CoverStory

have to create policies that make the wealth trickle down to the common man.”

But even when politicians say they're beefing up infrastructure, it rarely helps the poorest Indians. Agriculture is stagnant in part because of a lack of the most rudimentary of roads to get to and from fields. N. Tarupthurai, for instance, scratches out a living from a five-acre plot in Jinnuru, a village in northeastern Andhra Pradesh. But his fields are more than a

mile from the nearest paved road, so each day the 40-year-old Tarupthurai must carry his tools, seeds, fertilizer, and crops down a dirt path on his back or on his bicycle. "I have asked for a road, and the government says it's under consideration," says the mustachioed, curly-haired farmer. Then he shrugs.

One reason little practical help makes it from the seats of power to India's impoverished villages is that so much money gets siphoned off along the way. With corrupt officials skim-

CHANGE AGENTS

A Long and Winding Road



To understand why it's so hard to get things built in India, consider Ashok Kheny's quixotic quest. For 12 years he has sought to create a vision of modern India on the rolling, palm-dotted plains south of Bangalore. Along the way he has become entangled in India's unique blend of politics, bureaucracy, and corruption.

Kheny started off with high hopes. A native of Bangalore, he left home after college to get his master's degree in engineering at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, then stayed on in America to work as a transportation contractor. In 1995 he returned to Bangalore with a bold proposal: to build a limited-access toll highway between Bangalore and neighboring Mysore, a ring road around half of Bangalore, and a handful of new townships nearby. The Karnataka state government approved the plan, so Kheny moved back—never suspecting that dynamiting the rocky terrain would turn out to be a snap compared with breaking through India's intransigent bureaucracy.

Officially, Kheny and his Nandi Infrastructure Corridor Enterprise Ltd. have been held up by land disputes and government reviews and approvals. But he claims the real problem is that he refuses to go along with the traditional way of getting things done in Karnataka. He won't pay bribes, and he won't buy off landowners or redraw his maps to accommodate them. Landowners and state agencies have filed more than 300 lawsuits against the project, and so far all have gone in Kheny's

POTHoles
For Kheny, the engineering was a snap compared with the bureaucracy

rules, you may be delayed, but you can't be stopped."

At last, the political winds in Karnataka seem to be blowing in Kheny's direction. Some ministers in a new coalition government that took office last year have lined up behind him. "We want to encourage him," says Katta Subramanya Naidu, minister for major and medium industries in Karnataka. The state's chief minister didn't respond to repeated requests for comment on Kheny's allegations of corruption. Naidu, too, declined to address them, but he acknowledged that the problem is widespread in India. "Corruption should be eradicated," he says.

The area's poor villagers once regarded Kheny as a fast-talking schemer, but they have cast aside those suspicions. Along the highway, farmers in tattered shirts and loincloths invite him to a temple they're building to Nandi, the Hindu god of transportation and the namesake of Kheny's company. The new road "is beautiful," a villager named Govind says in halting English. "When we look at it we feel like we live in a foreign country."
—By Steve Hamm

favor, including an appeal to the country's Supreme Court. But the battle isn't over. "I get letters and phone calls threatening to kill me and my family," he says—one reason his wife and children have remained behind in the U.S.

Still, he loves nothing better than touring his construction sites in his silver Toyota Camry. In his dark blue pinstripe suit, the 56-year-old Kheny looks out of place among the huge yellow bulldozers and battalions of sweaty laborers. A drive on the 25-mile ring road is an arduous journey. Every few miles the pavement comes to an abrupt end, and the car must veer off onto rutted dirt tracks for several hundred yards until the highway picks up again. Kheny says he simply stops building when he gets to a spot where bureaucratic hassles have delayed the project. His approach is to let motorists use the paved sections as they are completed. "I tell people what's holding it up and they put pressure on the government," he says. The strategy is working: In the past three months, 7 of 10 bottlenecks have been eliminated. "Once this project succeeds, it will open up the whole country," he predicts. "It shows that if you follow the