Nepal Digest

LIFE. CULTURE. PEOPLE & NEPAL

PEOPLE / AI & INNOVATION

# The Man Who Kept Building: Mahabir Pun's Search for a More Inventive Nepal

From improvised wireless links in Myagdi to the National Innovation Center and Parliament, Mahabir Pun has spent decades pushing Nepal to invest in its own problem-solvers.

SEPTEMBER 22, 2026

NEPAL DIGEST / PEOPLE

# The Man Who Kept Building: Mahabir Pun’s Search for a More Inventive Nepal

From improvised wireless links in Myagdi to the National Innovation Center and Parliament, Mahabir Pun has spent decades pushing Nepal to invest in its own problem-solvers.

**By Nepal Digest** - September 22, 2026 - Nepal

*Mahabir Pun began by connecting a mountain village to the internet. He went on to build a national argument: Nepal must learn to turn ideas into useful things of its own.*

In Nangi, a village above the Kali Gandaki valley in Myagdi, the internet first arrived through an improbable arrangement of donated computers, homemade antennas and relay stations placed on mountain ridges.

This was the early 2000s, when even Kathmandu’s connections were slow and unreliable. In the hills, electricity, roads and telephone lines could not be taken for granted. Mahabir Pun and a

changing group of volunteers still managed to send a wireless signal across the landscape.

The connection did more than place a computer in a school. It allowed teachers to exchange material, health workers to consult doctors at a distance, traders to communicate and families to speak with relatives abroad. A village that had been separated by walking time began measuring distance differently.

Pun became internationally known for that network. Yet the project also established the pattern of his life: identify a practical problem, gather whatever people and materials are available, and begin before the ideal institution or budget exists.

He was born in Nangi in 1955 and spent his early years grazing cattle and sheep. The village school had few materials and no reliable supply of trained teachers. For many local families, the familiar route to opportunity ran through foreign military service.

Pun’s father had served as a Gurkha. He moved the family to Nepal’s southern plains and invested his savings in his children’s education. The decision took Pun away from the village but opened a path that would eventually lead him back.

After school, Pun worked as a teacher for about 13 years. He taught while helping support the education of his younger brothers and sisters. The experience gave him a close view of how rural schools functioned when money, equipment and specialised

teachers were scarce.

In 1989, after repeated attempts to find a place abroad, he received a partial scholarship to study in the United States. He completed a degree in science education at the University of Nebraska at Kearney in 1992.

For many Nepalis, an American degree becomes the beginning of a life overseas. Pun returned to Nangi, 24 years after leaving it as a child.

He helped develop Himanchal High School with computer education and income-generating activities intended to support the school. The challenge was immediate: computers were useful only if students and teachers could connect with information and people outside the village.

Commercial telecommunications companies had little reason to build costly infrastructure for a small, scattered population. Pun’s response was to experiment with equipment that had not been designed for the Himalayan terrain.

Early links used small antennas assembled from locally available materials, including modified television dishes. Some were mounted in trees. Signals were bounced through relay points on high ground to reach neighbouring settlements and eventually a connection in Pokhara.

The system grew through trial, error, grants, donated equipment and the work of volunteers. The technical solution was inseparable from the community effort required to protect equipment, train users and decide which services mattered.

By 2006, the Nepal Wireless Networking Project had connected 13 mountain villages. It later reached more than 175 communities across 15 districts, supporting education, telemedicine, local communication, weather information and small businesses.

The achievement earned Pun the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 2007. In 2014, he was inducted into the Internet Hall of Fame and received the Internet Society’s Jonathan B Postel Service Award.

Recognition turned him into a symbol of rural innovation, but Pun’s focus was already shifting. Internet access could help a community use existing knowledge. Nepal also needed places where people could develop, test and produce new solutions.

He established the National Innovation Center in 2012. Its mission was deliberately broad: support research and invention that could contribute to Nepal’s economy and address practical needs.

The centre challenged conventional ideas about who is allowed to innovate. A proposal did not have to come from an established company or someone with an advanced academic title. What mattered was whether the idea addressed a real problem and

could be tested.

Finding long-term funding proved harder than describing the goal. Pun spent years asking the state and private sector to invest in research. When support did not arrive at the scale he sought, he turned to public fundraising and contributed his own land to the effort.

The campaign became part institution-building and part public protest. Pun was asking Nepalis to finance experimentation while also forcing a question into national debate: why should a country that spends heavily on imported products allocate so little to people trying to make things locally?

The centre eventually opened at Tribhuvan University in Kirtipur. Inside, projects have ranged across agriculture, medical equipment, software, electric mobility and tools designed for rural communities. Some ideas fail or remain prototypes. That uncertainty is part of research, though it sits uneasily in a culture that often expects immediate success from public spending.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered a clearer test. When hospitals and health workers faced shortages, the centre produced protective equipment and swab-collection booths and repaired ventilators and other medical machines.

The response showed what Pun had been arguing for years. Technical capacity built during ordinary times becomes national

capacity during an emergency. A workshop with engineers, tools and a habit of improvisation can respond while imported supplies are delayed.

It also revealed the less glamorous side of innovation. Repairing a machine already in a hospital may attract less attention than announcing a new invention, but it can be more immediately valuable. Pun’s work has repeatedly favoured usefulness over polish.

In 2024, he took that argument across Nepal through his autobiography, *Mahabir Pun: Samjhana, Sapana ra Abiral Yatra*. He travelled widely to sell the book himself and raise money for the centre.

The book tour turned reading into fundraising and public conversation. People bought copies at schools, municipal offices and community gatherings. Pun used his own life story as working capital for the institution he had struggled to finance.

His public role changed sharply in September 2025 when he was appointed Minister for Education, Science and Technology in Nepal’s interim government. The inventor who had spent years pressuring the state was briefly placed inside it.

The appointment brought a different measure of responsibility. Building a pilot project allows speed and personal control. Governing requires laws, budgets, civil servants and negotiation

with institutions that move more slowly.

Pun left the ministry to contest the 2026 general election as an independent candidate in Myagdi. In March, he won the constituency with 22,850 votes, a margin of 14,931, and entered the House of Representatives.

His election completed a striking return. The child who left Nangi for an education became the national representative of the district where he first tested his ideas about schools, communication and self-reliance.

Politics will test his reputation in ways a wireless network did not. A public figure associated with practical solutions must now work in a chamber where progress depends on coalitions, legislation and scrutiny. The expectations attached to his name may prove harder to manage than any mountain signal.

Yet the continuity in Pun’s journey is stronger than the change of office. As a teacher, he wanted rural students to reach knowledge. As a network builder, he connected isolated communities. At the innovation centre, he created room for Nepalis to experiment. In government and Parliament, he has carried the same argument into policy.

That argument is not that every idea will succeed. It is that a country cannot become capable without giving people the space, equipment and money to try.

The wireless equipment in Nangi was improvised because there was no ready-made system for the village. The National Innovation Center grew because there was no dependable institution for the people Pun wanted to support. Each project began with an absence.

Mahabir Pun’s career has been built in that gap between what Nepal needs and what its institutions currently provide. His answer has usually been to start assembling something: a school, a network, a workshop, a fundraising campaign or, now, a political mandate.

The tools have changed. The work remains the same—connecting people to the means to solve their own problems.

Featured image: Mahabir Pun at the Center for Nepal Connection in 2016. Photograph by Saroj Kumar Dhakal, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0. Resized for display; the photograph remains available under the same licence. View the original photograph.

---

Originally published by Nepal Digest - https://nepaldigest.com/mahabir-pun-building-inventive-nepal/