

# Innovating a new Nepal

Mahabir Pun needs help to scale up his award-winning work in a remote Myagdi village to the national level

KUNDA DIXIT

**M**ahabir Pun won the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2007 for his project to bring wireless Internet to rural Nepal, but he found out last week that the Internet was also a great way to remotely get through to the prime minister.

Pun had met Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai a year ago to discuss his pet idea to set up a National Innovation Centre to promote creativity and generate jobs so Nepalis don't have to migrate abroad for work. Bhattarai had nodded, said it was a great idea and instructed his office to implement it.

As expected, nothing happened. Whenever he came to Kathmandu from his native village in Myagdi, Pun followed up with the ministries and all he got was smiles, pats on the back, and nodding of heads.

Last week, Pun vented his frustration with a direct Tweet to the Prime Minister's Twitter handle, @brb\_laaldhwoj, and through a message posted on the listserv of NNSD (Nepal Network for Social, Economic and Environmental Dialogue) whose members include Nepal's top academics, civil society activists, politicians, and bureaucrats.

'After talking to responsible political leaders, high level bureaucrats, development agencies, and educated elites in Kathmandu for more than a year, I have a feeling now that nobody cares about the immense need of one innovation centre in Nepal in order to uplift Nepal from a beggar nation to a well-to-do nation,' Pun began his passionate appeal.

He went on to lament that while donor agencies poured billions of dollars into Nepal, no one seemed interested in stemming the haemorrhage of working age people out of the country. He said he was shocked to read in the papers that the cabinet had sanctioned Rs 3 billion to buy helicopters for the Nepal Army.

'If the government has that much money to buy helicopters, how come it cannot provide half a billion rupees as loan to help start an innovation centre?' Pun asked.

Pun has registered a non-profit company called Nepal Abiskar Kendra with noted ex-bureaucrats like Rameswor Khanal, the man behind the Chilime Project, Dambar Nepali, and others in the advisory board. The plan is to build a 10MW hydropower plant, and sell electricity worth \$6 million a year to the grid.

That money will be used to service the loan and run the centre sustainably into the future. It will use information technology to help creative Nepalis with financing and know-how to launch businesses. Pun is seeking a soft loan of \$6 million for equity to build the hydropower plant, either from the government or a multilateral donor.

Pun posted his message on the NNSD bulletin board at 7:45PM on Friday, and within three hours there was a SMS from the Prime Minister's Office summoning him to Baluwatar the next morning. This was surprising because the all-party negotiations on setting up a CJ-led election government were reaching a critical stage.


Pun cleared security to enter Baluwatar, and within five minutes Bhattarai was there with Finance Minister Barsha Man Pun, Chief Secretary Krishna Hari Baskota, and the PMO Secretary Lila Mani Poudel. The PM began by saying he had read Pun's Twitter message and fully agreed with the concept of a Nepal Innovation Centre, and he asked the Finance Minister how the government could support it.

The meeting dragged on for an hour, and Pun remembers that as expected the minister and the secretaries had no concrete ideas about how the government could help finance the 10MW power plant. But before the entire PMO, including the prime minister, went off for a picnic in Godavari, the meeting agreed to invite the World Bank, ADB, and other multilateral agencies to push the idea.

"It will be a miracle if the Secretary finds a single donor to contribute a soft loan for the innovation," Pun told *Nepali Times*, "let's wait and see."

As a boy, Mahabir Pun used to graze sheep in the high meadows near the village of Nangi below the Annapurnas. Going to school, he had no pencil or textbooks. Most of his neighbours became British Gurkhas, but Pun got an education and a scholarship in the University of Nebraska.

Unlike most other Nepalis, however, Pun returned to Nepal. He didn't just come back to Kathmandu but went back to Nangi to see how Information Technology could help his community leapfrog into the Internet age.

With the Nepal Innovation Centre, Mahabir Pun is trying to scale up what he has done in Nangi to a national level. His plan may have a better chance of being funded under a technocratic government than under one led by political parties. Or better still, Pun should be a part of the technocratic government? 

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Mahabir's centre for Nepal Connection, #622  
Beyond the digital divide, #392  
Web pioneer, #360



KISHOR RIMAL



AAKAR ANIL GHIMIRE

## Crowd-sourcing in the cloud

Unique global communication project combines job-creation with commitment to the community

SULAIMAN DAUD

**I**n a country where nearly half the population is unemployed, any new opportunity that creates jobs and stops Nepalis from being forced to migrate has to be welcomed. CloudFactory, a Kathmandu-based technology start-up company, is doing just that.

CloudFactory already employs 600 workers, most of them are college-aged along with 80 staff members, and it aims to hire 5,000 more by the end of the year. The company is based around the twin resources of crowd-sourcing and the Internet. The organisation sources for large-scale digital projects from across the globe, and then breaks them down into simple tasks that are then distributed to its pool of workers.

"We are thrilled to provide work opportunities for so many people in Nepal by the end of this year," said Mark Sears, CEO



of CloudFactory at a company event called 'We LOVE Nepal' at City Centre Mall last week. About 300 of his employees were treated to a free screening of *Captain America* to thank them for their hard work.

CloudFactory has a lot to celebrate. The company's data entry services are in high demand and extra work has been coming in, including digitising receipts from the United States and collating medical records from Canada.

With the extra workload, CloudFactory can therefore afford to hire 5,000 more people by the end of 2013.

But Sears doesn't intend to stop there, his long-term goal is to 'connect' one million people in Nepal and other countries through the Net and generate income for people who could in turn do social service for their communities.

"There is so much potential in Nepal," says Radhesh Pant, the CEO of the Nepal Investment Board who attended the event. "But someone needs to step up to make the most of it, and it starts with people like those in CloudFactory."

Sushant Satyal, a 'cloud worker' who joined the company when it only employed 30 workers, says the organisation encourages young people like him to perform community work as a way of giving back to society what society gave to them.

CloudFactory's example is not just the usual corporate social responsibility, it hopes to integrate a sense of community in its workers, a new corporate model where its employees are not just workers, but also pillars of the community.

Sushant and others like him know the road ahead is not smooth, with power cuts and political disturbances, integrating their professional work at CloudFactory with community action will be difficult. But it is an example of the talent pool existing in Nepal, and an innovative way to create jobs and a sense of commitment to the community.   
www.cloudfactory.com



**HEADS IN THE CLOUDS:** Team Leader Sushant Satyal and 'Cloud Seeder' Jyotshna Thapa are just two young Nepalis who work at CloudFactory. Satyal says: "I like the fact that CloudFactory encourages us to give back to society what society gave to us, whether it is by volunteering our time or by donating some of the money we earn."