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Mahabir Pun of Myagdi bags prestigious Magsaysay award



Mahabir Pun: 2007 Ramon Magsaysay Awardee for Community Leadership.

Mahabir Pun of Myagdi, western Nepal, has bagged the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Awards, for Community Leadership.

The Board of Trustees of the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation (RMAF) Tuesday announced that seven Asians bagged this year's Ramon Magsaysay Awards, the Asian Equivalent of Nobel Prize.

Pun is among three Chinese, a Korean, an Indian and a Pilipino to receive the coveted award.

According to the RMAF, Pun, 52, is "recognised for his innovative application of wireless computer technology in Nepal, bringing progress to remote mountain areas by connecting his village to the global village".

Pun is the fourth Nepali to receive the Magsaysay award. He will receive the award amid a ceremony in Manila on August 31.

Here is Pun's profile:

Nangi Village, where Mahabir Pun was born, rests high in the Himalayan foothills of western Nepal. Here and in surrounding Myagdi District live the Pun Magar, whose men have soldiered for generations across the globe as Gurkhas. Yet, their worldly careers have done little to change their sleepy homeland, so far from the traffic patterns that knit together the rest of the world. Indeed, Nangi is seven hours' hard climb from the nearest road. No telephone lines have ever reached it. Despite this, these days the people of Nangi are definitely connected to the world outside. Wireless Internet technology has made this possible. Mahabir Pun has made it happen.

Pun passed his boyhood grazing cattle and sheep in mountain pastures and attending a village school that had no paper or pencils or books. Wanting more for his son, Pun's father moved the family to Nepal's lowlands, where, in Chitwan, Pun finished high school and became a teacher, working for twelve years to help his younger siblings through school. Finally, a timely scholarship led him to a bachelor's degree at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Then, in 1992, after more than twenty years away, Pun returned home to Nangi, determined to make things easier for other youths than they had been for him.

Nangi's leaders were busy establishing a village high school. Pun eagerly joined in. Once a month, he made the two-day trip to the nearest major town of Pokhara to check his e-mail and maintain his links to friends abroad. This led, in 1997, to the donation of four used computers from Australia. Powering them with hydro generators in a nearby stream, Pun began teaching computer classes at the high school. More computers followed, but it proved impossible to get a telephone connection to Pokhara and the Internet.

Pun e-mailed the British Broadcasting Corporation, asking for ideas. In 2001, the BBC publicized his dilemma and within a year volunteers from Europe and the United States were helping him rig a wireless connection between Nangi and the neighboring village of Ramche, using TV dish antennas mounted in trees. Some small grants soon led to the construction of improvised mountaintop relay stations and a link to Pokhara. By 2003, Nangi was online.

As word of Pun's project bounced around the World Wide Web, backpacking volunteers carried more and more donated computers, parts, and equipment into the hills. Meanwhile, Pun expanded the wireless network to embrace twelve villages-distributing a hundred computers to local schools, connecting them to the Internet, teaching teachers how to use them, and then tinkering and troubleshooting until everything worked.

Today, connectivity is changing Myagdi. Using the district's "tele-teaching" network, good teachers in one school now instruct students in others. Doctorless villagers use Wi-Fi to consult specialists in Pokhara. Village students surf the Net and are learning globe-savvy skills. Pun himself is using the Web to e-market local products such as honey, teas, and jams and to draw paying trekkers to campsites that he has outfitted with solar-powered hot showers. In parallel projects, villagers in Nangi have themselves added a library, a health clinic, and new classrooms for the high school.

Pun, now fifty-two, is both self-effacing and charismatic. "I'm not in charge of anything," he says. Yet, he seems to be the driving force of much around him. Eventually, he says, the people of Myagdi District will have to carry on for themselves. In the meantime, he hopes to play his unique role indefinitely. "As long as I can walk," Pun says happily, "I can do this."

In electing Mahabir Pun to receive the 2007 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership, the board of trustees recognizes his innovative application of wireless computer technology in Nepal, bringing progress to remote mountain areas by connecting his village to the global village.

(Source: Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation)

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