

## The Aakash Project's Bitter Finish

By PAMPOSH RAINA and HEATHER TIMMONS



Pankaj Nangia/Bloomberg NewsA student shows the Aakash tablet during a news conference in New Delhi, Oct. 5, 2011.

*This is part two of India Ink's look at what happened to India's high-profile Aakash tablet computer project. [Read part one here.](#)*

After Aakash's [blockbuster press conference](#), the pressure was on to get tablets out, as quickly as possible.

In the weeks that followed, DataWind and Quad Electronic continued to make them, while trying to resolve issues with I.I.T. Rajasthan. They even enlisted a former I.I.T. graduate to try to smooth things over, to no success, Suneet Singh Tuli, DataWind's chief executive, said. Meanwhile, reports from the students who had the test tablets were filtering back to the Ministry of Human Resources Development: they wanted a longer battery life and a faster processor, among other things.

In November, hoping to get the project moving again, the Ministry called a meeting between all parties involved. During the meeting, it was agreed that DataWind would supply an upgraded tablet, with a longer-lasting 3200 milliamps hour battery, more sophisticated operations and a faster-acting 700 megahertz Cortex A8 processor instead of the 366 megahertz ARM 11 processor required in the initial specs. DataWind would be given up to March 31<sup>st</sup> to deliver the tablets, and I.I.T. Rajasthan would send specific testing criteria to DataWind.

After the meeting there was a sense that "finally things were back on track," a government source told India Ink.

But the differences only seem to have mounted in the months that followed.

I.I.T. Rajasthan's eagerly awaited testing criteria were not delivered until mid-January. When they arrived, DataWind executives were shocked.

The [criteria included](#) being able to withstand four inches of rain, enduring shock tests when "mounted in a vehicle," and when subject to "sudden acceleration, braking, or turning while transporting the units." These tests are commonly run on military-grade laptops designed to be used in battlegrounds that [retail for thousands of dollars](#). In fact, some of the criteria appear to be lifted from those [designed for Hewlett Packard's rugged notebook launched in 2004](#).

"You can't impose U.S. military standards on a Rs. 3,000 device," [Mr. Tuli said told Mint newspaper at the time](#). "Unless this issue is resolved, we won't be able to provide more devices." He registered a complaint with the ministry.

Also in January, DataWind's subcontractor Quad Electronic, without DataWind's knowledge, signed an agreement with I.I.T. Rajasthan to manufacture what Mr. Tuli said he believes is a rival low-cost tablet. DataWind executives were tipped off after they saw a senior Quad Electronic executive on the daily flight to Jodhpur, and the Quad Electronic executive tried to hide his face with a newspaper, Mr. Tuli said.

Quad Electronic confirmed in April it had signed a memorandum of understanding with I.I.T. Rajasthan, but denied it would be producing a competing tablet. "We have signed an M.O.U., but without spelling out a particular product. We have an agreement for technical expertise for products, services and IP [intellectual property] creation," said Raminder Soin, managing director of Quad Electronic in an interview with India Ink.

Mr. Soin said that his company was not working on low-cost computing devices like Aakash. Instead, it is developing "smart television boxes" and communication devices, he said.

In late February, a [committee headed by R. Chandrashekhar](#), a senior bureaucrat in the government's Information and technology department, met to discuss the project. In the weeks that followed, the government decided that the project should be transferred from I.I.T. Rajasthan to I.I.T. Bombay, with the consent of the director of I.I.T. Rajasthan, Mr. Kalra.

Aakash is now being led by Deepak B. Phatak, a professor at I.I.T. Bombay, who set up the [Affordable Solutions Lab](#) in 2003, which aims to develop low-cost technological solutions.

In a telephone interview, Mr. Phatak said the manufacturer and I.I.T. Rajasthan had "some intractable problems," which prompted I.I.T. Rajasthan to request the ministry that the project be taken away from them.

He did not elaborate on what exactly these problems were, but did say that the tablet never reached the field trial stage.

I.I.T. Bombay is optimistic about the future of Aakash, he said. "It is a tiny step for India, we want to take it confidently and without falling," Mr. Phatak said.

DataWind has now severed all ties with Quad Electronic, and is working with a new subcontractor. It is unclear whether DataWind will even be producing the Indian government's tablet going forward, despite winning the tender last year.

On April 13, I.I.T. Bombay sent a [single-party tender](#) to DataWind for 100,000 tablets.

But last week, Mr. Phatak said I.I.T. Bombay hopes to finalize details about procurement and testing of

100,000 tablets within the next ten days, which would include drawing up a new contract. He added:  
“I.I.T. Bombay wants to start from scratch.”

Mr. Tuli would not estimate how much money the company has lost to date working on Aakash.