

Government close to giving up on Aakash project



The original idea had been to supply Aakash tablets to students at 50% discount. Photo: Mint

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New Delhi: The government seems to have virtually given up on [Aakash](#), the \$35 tablet computer that was once billed as India's low-cost solution for bridging the divide between digital haves and have-nots. "Let's not get obsessed with hardware," human resource development (HRD) minister [M.M. Pallam Raju](#) said on Friday. "The overall (issue) is how we enable students. Let the students decide which device is useful."

It's up to the users to choose the device they want to access content with, said Raju, adding that the government's role is that of an enabler.

His remarks at a news conference in New Delhi seemed to have all but shut the door on Aakash, a device championed by his predecessor, [Kapil Sibal](#), now minister for communications and information technology, who proposed providing it at a subsidized price to students.

The Aakash project got off to a poor start from which it hasn't recovered. The first lot of Aakash tablets supplied by Canada-based Datawind Ltd in 2011 were criticized by students and experts for being low on performance, and the company hasn't yet been able to fulfil the HRD ministry's contract for supplying

100,000 of the devices.

Since then, states such as Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh have gone ahead with their own plans to supply laptops free to students.

Higher education secretary [Ashok Thakur](#) was non-committal about whether and when the government would go ahead with its earlier plan to procure five million additional Aakash tablets for distribution to students.

"The idea was once we receive the 100,000 Aakash 2 (revised version of the tablet), we will be more confident to proceed further," Thakur said. He said the last review of the procurement plan had shown "a lot of gap" in supply.

"Also, technology is not a stagnant thing," he said. "We had a setback, and since they have not been able to supply, there is no further action."

The HRD ministry put up a cabinet note on procuring five million more tablets in 2013, but the note has been returned to the ministry. The plan to float a fresh tender and have the device manufactured by some public sector companies has effectively been stalled.

Thakur said the ministry has asked Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay, which has been overseeing the Aakash project, to take appropriate action against Datawind if the company failed to supply the tablets contracted for. He said the government did not pay anything to Datawind for the first lot of tablets it supplied in late 2011 and early 2012 as they failed to measure up to the quality parameters. "We will see after the March 31 deadline (of supplying 100,000 Aakash tablets to IIT-Bombay) what action can be taken," he said.

Like his predecessor Sibal, Raju, too, talked about providing last-mile connectivity through the National Knowledge Network (NKN), a high-speed fibre optics network the government is building.

The minister said the government is reviewing its technology-enabled education efforts. It has linked several educational institutions through a local area network (LAN), and pays 75% of the cost; the remaining 25% is paid by the institutions, many of which have complained that they don't have the money to spend, and Raju said his ministry would take another look at the funding of the programme.

Providing LAN connectivity and connecting the campuses with NKN will help educational institutes share information, content and research.

Experts say Aakash was a futile exercise akin to reinventing the wheel because many low-cost devices are already available in the market.

But at a price point of \$50-75, the devices tend to fall short of acceptable quality standards, said [Jaideep Mehta](#), country general manager at research and consultancy firm [IDC](#) India. There is no point in the government trying to create such products, he said.

"The government has identified education as a key segment for empowering the economy. They are trying different platforms as a catalyst such as content, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, etc.," said [S. Rajendran](#), chief marketing officer of [Acer](#) India. "However, the hardware focus was not very well founded... The redeeming factor is that the industry and technology has caught up to provide devices which are very close to the affordable price band."

He said the government should focus on providing affordable and pervasive connectivity rather than the hardware.

Even before Aakash was unveiled in 2011, there were attempts to produce a cheap, disruptive device that would bridge the digital divide and transform education. One such effort was the Simputer, a low-cost portable alternative to desktop computers, which was introduced in 2002, but failed to catch on.

Such projects may have faltered, but Raju said the government's efforts had created a new market for low-cost devices accessible to those who couldn't afford expensive gadgets.

The last word on Aakash's fate is still to be heard. The government has set up two committees—one headed by [Govardhan Mehta](#), a former director of the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, and the other by [NIIT Ltd](#) co-founder [Rajendra Pawar](#)—to evaluate its technology-enabled learning mission and the Aakash project, based on which it will decide the fate of the project.

An email sent to Datawind elicited no response at the time of going to press.