

India's \$35 Aakash Tablet Comes Apart

By Nidhi Subbaraman



A \$35 Indian Aakash tablet may turn out to be a pipe dream after all.

In the most recent twist in the development of the unbelievably cheap piece of tech, the Indian government is trying to break a manufacturing stalemate by taking the decision away from the Indian university that created tablet prototypes.

As we wrote in [early November](#), professors at Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Jodhpur, along with students at the institute, created the first models of the device, before handing over manufacturing responsibility to U.K. company DataWind. IIT is designing more advanced affordable prototypes, while concurrently testing the first batch of tablets that DataWind has made.

But over the past weeks, DataWind and IIT have disagreed on the final specs of Aakash 1. The difference of opinion, director of IIT Jodhpur [Prem Kalra](#) tells *Fast Company*, involves DataWind skimping on what IIT believed were minimum features. [Suneet Singh Tuli](#), head of DataWind, has rejected the proposed "[military grade](#)" specifications but Kalra says they're only insisting on basic necessities for a tablet meant to be used by customers in rural India. DataWind's Tuli says there's no need to build a tablet that can be [run over by a truck](#), while Kalra insists, in his own incendiary way, that his team's priorities are usability and safety. "If you drop it, it should not catch fire," he says. Meanwhile, several reviews of the device, including this [recent one from IEEE Spectrum](#), have dismissed it as clunky and slow.

The recent move by the government could prove to be a butterfingering attempt to break the stalemate. The Economic Times [reports](#) that the government's Department of IT could be responsible for picking

multiple manufacturers who'll take on production of Aakash 2. In a puzzling second twist, [government sources have told](#) the *Times of India* that two other universities--IITs in Chennai and Mumbai--will join the project as well. However, it is unclear what role they will play.

But there's a chance that the government's decision to hire a third-party tender writer, well-versed in the ways and wiles of commercial contracts, could avoid a future spat of the kind IIT and DataWind are mired in. In that case, this decision could actually streamline manufacturing of the Aakash 2, with the parties involved avoiding roadblocks like this one.

Kalra has been deeply involved with the Aakash project from its early days, and amid this recent fuss, he's keeping a brave face. He says that the decision will allow IIT to be involved, while letting it do what it does best--innovate at the early stage and continue designing. "Our main agenda is to come up with the new devices."

"As far as the first testing phase was concerned, we took that on because it was part of our research agenda," Kalra says. Now someone else has to handle the testing, supply chain, and whole manufacturing loop while IIT continues to research and develop low-cost devices. "That's a good step because we alone cannot do it. But, our research for improving the devices will continue."

In advance of its sales, demand for a souped-up commercial version of the tablet (costing about \$50) appears strong. In early January, Suneet Singh Tuli announced that DataWind had seen [1.4 million preorders](#) on its website. The question now seems to be, with all the added performers in this escalating Greek tragedy, what will it take for them to all agree so that Aakash can hit the market?

Nidhi Subbaraman writes about technology and the world. Follow on [Twitter](#), [Google+](#).

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