

The Tangled Tale of Aakash, the World's Cheapest Laptop

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Parivartan Sharma/ReutersStudents use the Aakash tablet, after its launch in New Delhi, Oct. 5, 2011.

Last October, with [much fanfare](#), the Ministry of Human Resources Development unveiled “Aakash,” a new, \$35 computer built for Indian students. More than six months later, with tens of thousands of university students still waiting, the tale of the Aakash looks a bit like an Indian soap opera, complete with a convoluted storyline, multiple characters, and massive personality clashes.

Things started simply enough: In September 2010, the Ministry of Human Resources Development tasked the Indian Institute of Technology (I.I.T.) Rajasthan to procure and test 100,000 tablet computers at the lowest possible price. Five months later, DataWind, a Canadian company, won [the tender](#) and signed a contract for 227 million rupees, or about \$4.3 million. Production started in India a few months later.

Fast-forward to today: I.I.T. Rajasthan is no longer involved, having been replaced by I.I.T. Bombay. DataWind and the company’s India-based subcontractor, Quad Electronic, are having a financial dispute: [Quad Electronic](#) claims DataWind owes it \$1.12 million, which DataWind denies. Meanwhile, I.I.T. Rajasthan is claiming damages of nearly half a million dollars from DataWind, while DataWind says I.I.T. Rajasthan did not return its bid deposit of nearly \$100,000. Oh, and DataWind has [sent a legal notice](#) to the Indian Cellular Association, accusing them of defamation.

The Ministry of Human Resources Development, which was overseeing the project, is offering little explanation. Spokeswoman Mamata Verma said in an e-mail that the project had “some intractable problems.” Suneet Singh Tuli, the chief executive of DataWind, recently told India Ink that he thought I.I.T. Rajasthan had “gone rogue” and was “trying to sabotage the project.”

All this while thousands of Aakash tablets that meet the [government’s original specifications](#), gather dust

in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh.

So ... how did things get this bad?

For the past year, India Ink has been carefully tracking the progress of the project, which, if successfully completed, could enable millions of students to connect with the larger digital world. Aakash is also being closely watched outside India as the national government tries to attract foreign investment in public-private partnerships for everything from infrastructure to vocational training.

The original idea behind the Aakash seemed pleasantly simple. A cheap computer would benefit Indian university students by enabling them to watch lectures or get lecture notes and other class information online. In 2009, a team of government researchers developed the basic design for the low cost device.

The job of putting the project out to bid fell to I.I.T. Rajasthan, which by spring of 2011 had received 477 million rupees — about \$9.2 million — in government funds to pay for procuring and testing 100,000 low-cost tablets. In writing the tender, I.I.T. Rajasthan detailed the technical specifications for the tablet but did not specify the criteria for testing and approving the devices, according to a government source involved in the project. That omission was to prove disastrous.

Canada's DataWind won the project with the lowest bid and outsourced assembly to Quad Electronic, a manufacturer based in Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

DataWind executives say they built the tablet to the government's specifications, with a 366 megahertz processor and a 180-minute battery life. In August 2011, DataWind shipped the first 1,000 Aakash tablets to I.I.T. Rajasthan for testing.

This is where trouble cropped up: I.I.T. Rajasthan had not built a special lab for testing the tablets, although the funding was allocated for one, the government source says. Instead, testing was conducted on an "ad hoc basis," the government source said, meaning that testers could choose to reject the tablet for reasons of their own choosing.

And reject they did.

DataWind chief executive Suneet Tuli says a problem first arose with a slight buzzing sound that could be heard by a user wearing earphones. He said the noise disappeared when music or video was played and that the noise did not affect the functionality of the tablets. Approximately 4,000 tablets were already in production, but DataWind agreed to make changes to fix the problem.

India Ink made several calls to I.I.T. Rajasthan asking for an on-the-record discussion about what happened. The school's director, Prem K. Kalra, who until recently was in charge of the project, did not respond to dozens of phone calls. His assistant said he could not speak on the subject, and passed along several requests for an interview.

After the first rejection, all parties agreed that an independent lab should test the tablets, at DataWind's cost, before they were sent to I.I.T. Rajasthan. When DataWind chose BVQI, a subsidiary of Bureau Veritas, a French company, the school rejected the company, saying it was not qualified, Mr. Tuli and government sources say. The idea of a third party tester was quietly abandoned.

Weeks later, DataWind shipped a second 1,000 tablets to I.I.T. Rajasthan.

They, too, were rejected, because the tablet's screens got warm after the school's testers ran them for several continuous hours, and detachable screen protectors lifted slightly on some tablets, Mr. Tuli said. The company agreed to provide adhesive that would permanently fix the screen protectors to the tablets.

Then, DataWind shipped a third batch of 1,000 tablets to I.I.T. Rajasthan. Some of these were rejected because the battery made a slight rattling noise when testers shook the units vigorously, Mr. Tuli said. Others were rejected when testers hung them from their power cords and shook the cords strenuously, and some tablets detached from the cords, he said.

Suddenly, it was ten days before Aakash's scheduled launch in New Delhi of Oct. 5, 2011. The Ministry had promised to unveil its super cheap computer, but I.I.T. Rajasthan had not yet approved any.

Mr. Tuli and Mr. Kalra, the director of I.I.T. Rajasthan, were no longer on speaking terms, say several parties involved. DataWind executives weren't invited to speak at the news conference, or were mentioned in the [press release](#), but they attended. I.I.T. Rajasthan brought and distributed 500 tablets at the launch that they had never approved.

Despite the internal turmoil, the news conference was a big success, and Aakash attracted global attention. "[World's cheapest tablet launched](#)," the Economic Times newspaper wrote after the launch. "[India has unveiled the world's cheapest computer device, and hailed it as the 'anti-iPad'](#)," an article in Britain's Telegraph noted. Tech geeks from [Jamaica](#) to North Carolina to Silicon Valley [seemed enthralled](#) with the launch.

But behind the scenes, things were getting worse.

On Monday, we'll examine what happened [next](#), and where the project stands now.