

Gadgets-Updates

Is India's tech-showpiece Aakash 2, the world's cheapest tablet, made in China?

Documents reviewed by HT show DataWind founders and NRI brothers Suneet and Raja Singh Tuli may have procured these devices off-the-shelf from manufacturers in China for \$42 (Rs. 2,263 then), exactly the price at which they sold these to the Indian government.

DataWind bought more than 10,000 or more "A 13" made-in-China tablets from at least four manufacturers in Shenzhen and Hong Kong between October 26 and November 7.

These were shipped to India duty-free as they were meant for school students under an HRD ministry programme.

Last year, Canada-based DataWind won a bid to supply 100,000 low-cost computing devices to students. Aakash 2, which is meant to be India-made, is part of that agreement.

DataWind had no role either in the design or manufacturing of Aakash 2 tablets, a source said.

Suneet Singh Tuli, CEO of DataWind however insisted that the current Aakash 2 is designed by his firm.

"For the first 10,000 units for IIT, and for expediency sake we had the motherboards manufactured in one of our Chinese subcontractor's facilities And then the units have been 'kitted' in China at various manufacturers for expediency, whereas the final assembly and programming has happened in India. We finished this batch of 10,000 units and delivered them to IIT and will be starting another batch of 20,000 units for them in two weeks," Tuli said in an e-mail response to HT.

Documents with HT show that DataWind bought the tablets from at least four manufacturers, Dasen International Electronics, Shenzhen Shitong Zhaoli Technology, Kalong Technology and Trend Grace Ltd.

DataWind's manufacturing partner in Hyderabad --- VMC Systems---had not built any device over the last couple of months, said a source. Its manufacturing partners and facilities in Delhi and Amritsar, respectively, too, had not produced even a single tablet over the last couple of months, the source said.

"Instead of manufacturing these low-cost tablets themselves... DataWind has simply purchased these 'off-the-shelf' from China and supplied it to the Indian government," the source told HT, requesting not to be identified.

It now appears that Datawind handed over the China-made tablets to Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay for testing. IIT-B's role is limited to testing and installing apps.

These, it emerges, were subsequently unveiled as Aakash 2 on November 11. IIT-B did not respond to an emailed questionnaire.