

Ourview | Obsession with a \$35 machine

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At some point today, Union human resource development (HRD) minister Kapil Sibal is expected to launch the long-awaited \$35 “tablet computer from India”. The project is a part of the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (NME-ICT), which was set up with an outlay of Rs4,612 crore during the 11th Five-Year Plan period.

A January 2009 circular on Sakshat, the NME-ICT’s official website, states that the goal of the mission is to increase enrolment in schools, and to do this through the electronic transmission of “high-quality personalized and interactive knowledge modules over the Internet, intranet and through satellite communication”.

The mission’s goal, so far, seems to be embarrassing itself.

In 2009, the first Sakshat machine turned out to be nothing more than a souped-up USB memory stick. This despite the fact that the HRD ministry kept referring to it as a \$10 “laptop”.

The first Sakshat machine sunk without a trace. The second one hinted at last year, and due to be launched today, will be a rudimentary Android-powered tablet computer. Initially, a prototype looked remarkably similar to a product available in the Chinese market. But there is some hope that the actual device will be different, perhaps even original.

Even if NME-ICT gets this device right, the impact it will have on education remains to be seen. The evidence on the Sakshat website is less than inspiring. The HRD ministry and NME-ICT have said that this portal will be used to spread information to colleges and to help them network and interact.

Currently, there is woefully little content. Sections titled e-books and e-repository have little content. The Web page for the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL), which is supposed to host video lectures on science and technology, currently says it has 135 videos. NPTEL was established in 2003.

Even if this new device does launch on time and rolls out in large numbers, its impact will be severely limited by what students will have to do with it. Oddly enough, a most sound rebuttal of this kind of approach to infuse technology into education was offered by Union education secretary Sudeep Banerjee in 2006 while criticizing the “One Laptop per Child” programme. He said that the technology was pedagogically suspect and that India needs “classrooms and teachers more urgently than fancy tools”.



There is no reason to believe that this has changed.

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