

Aakash may not help bridge the digital divide

While Jobs's gifts to humanity are not affordable to everyone, the \$35 tablet shows Indian politicians' desire to play to the gallery

Developments in the information technology world have been catching the headlines in the last few days. We lost "magician" Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple Inc., none of whose innovations I see being used by poor people.

The Indian government launched the \$35 (Rs. 1,700) tablet called Aakash, which Union minister Kapil Sibal called a "tablet for the poor."



Figure 1: By Bloomberg

Also, the government released a telecom policy that, perhaps belatedly, proposes to give infrastructure sector status to the telecom industry.

All these developments are related. While Jobs's gifts to humanity are not affordable to everyone, the \$35 tablet shows Indian

politicians' desire to play to the gallery.

Sibal, who is both information technology and education minister, says the product is targeted at the education sector and has hoped it will allow a large number of students to access a device at an affordable price. But the relevance of the \$35 tablet is questionable.

India has one of the lowest ratio of teachers—just 456 teachers per million people.

Seventy-two percent of our primary schools have only three teachers or less. Also, 25% of teachers were absent from school, and only about half were teaching, during unannounced visits to a nationally representative sample of government primary schools.

How is the \$35 tablet going to solve any of these problems?

In the business sector, more than 70% micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are not connected to information society to leverage opportunities of business and efficiency. How will the \$35 tablet help in the financial inclusion of MSMEs, which are largely situated in small towns and remote areas?

Most of India's 3.3 million non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also located in remote areas—70% of them lack any sort of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure or connectivity, and have no websites.

How can the \$35 tablet help these NGOs' global outreach efforts or aid the millions of people working with them in rural areas?

In governance, we have 250,000 *panchayats* (village councils), of which only 50,000 have computers—mostly non-functional, and almost all without Internet connectivity.

Among the 1,000-plus *panchayats* that we have been working with, we can assume that almost 99% are digitally illiterate.

Can the \$35 tablet help overcome this bottom-of-the- pyramid digital divide? Can it bring transparency in governance at this level?

Since a large population of our country communicate verbally, and cannot read and write with ease, their preferred medium of content consumption and content production is audio-visual, according to a study I conducted in 2005.

Particularly in schools, I saw that children's consumption of digital content is so rapid that within days or weeks, they are able to go through several hours of CDs and DVDs. But to make use of good multimedia content, you need powerful machines, not cheap and underperforming ones.

If information communication technology and gadgets and, in particular, the \$35 tablet, can do anything good to education in India, the only way is by handing them to each and every teacher and school management staff to monitor the workings and functioning of the school and its teachers, rather than assuming that each student will buy Aakash and India will become digitally literate overnight.

The only way Aakash can be successful is by creating a pool of millions of educational content apps, and if this could have been done by Sibal's education department, perhaps better available tablets could have been enough to adapt.

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