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# India's Tablet Revolution

How a \$40 device is going to change the lives of billions.

BY VIVEK WADHWA | JUNE 24, 2013

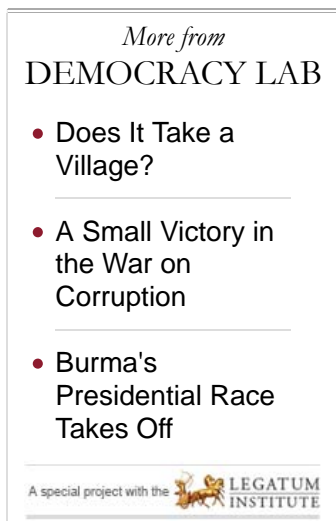


India's ruling Congress Party was stunned by the magnitude of recent public protests. For the first time in recent history, India's normally docile middle class and its youth are speaking up over everything from the country's recent rape tragedy to the Congress Party's corruption. Social media and technology have empowered these segments of society in new ways. The digital world has enabled similar rebellions in China and the Middle East.

This is just the beginning, though. As the cost of devices drops and Internet access becomes universal, we are witnessing a new kind of revolution.

Information used to be more localized. People were barely aware of the affairs of their own villages let alone in nearby towns or the rest of the country. Governments had the power to feed their citizens whatever propaganda they wanted them to know.

Now, however, people are more connected. Those in the poorest parts of the world are gaining access to an equivalent breadth of knowledge as those in the wealthiest parts. They are beginning to participate in the global economy, to learn from others, and to solve their own problems.



The first global communications revolution began with cell phones. Over a 10-year period the number of cellular subscriptions jumped from a few million to nearly 6 billion (or 87 percent of the world's population, according to **The International Telecommunication Union**). These made it possible for families to stay in touch when breadwinners travelled to cities and for workers to connect with employers. They allowed populations to discuss what was happening in different parts of the country and to exchange political views. And they allowed the disenchanted to organize demonstrations via text messages.

The next step in this revolution is cheap tablets. India recently launched the **Aakash tablet**, which provides all the features of more expensive tablets. It has a processor as powerful as the first iPad, twice as much RAM, and an LCD touch screen. One hundred thousand of these devices have been purchased by the Indian government from a company called **Datawind** for \$40 and are being provided to teachers and school children for a subsidized price of \$20. Meanwhile, Datawind has sold 1 million of these commercially at a price of \$60. **CyberMedia Research** says that within two quarters of its introduction, the Aakash tablet has leaped ahead of Apple in terms of market share in India.

To add to the increasing accessibility of technology and its benefit, India has **launched an initiative** to connect 250,000 villages via optical fiber cable. The fiber-optic lines will provide cheap, affordable Internet. Regardless of whether the government delivers on these plans, India's cell phone carriers already provide affordable **data plans**. Newer versions of Datawind tablets, or "phablets" as they are colloquially referred to, have cell phone capabilities and come with unlimited web access for Rs.100 (US\$1.75) per month.

India's population currently has around 900 million mobile phones, which typically cost \$30 or more. When the cost of the "phablets" reaches this price point, they will undoubtedly become the replacement device for cell phones. I expect that India, because of tablets, will have more than 100 million new Internet users in the next three years. This number will grow to more than 500 million within five years, and 1 billion by the end of the decade.

The Indian government has inadvertently started a revolution that will transform India and shake up the world. It has lowered the expected base price of tablet technologies to a range of \$35 to \$50. Chinese vendors are competing with Datawind to bring production costs below \$35.

Cheap tablets will make it possible for farmers to watch weather reports, for village children to access MIT courseware, and for artisans to sell their goods online. These will also enable the development of Silicon Valley-style apps to transact commerce, play games, and manage bus and train schedules. Don't be surprised to see villagers developing apps that solve their own unique problems.

Add some sensors that read a person's vital signs to these devices and connect isolated villagers to physicians over Skype, and you can provide desperately needed medical advice. This isn't wishful thinking. I asked **Alivecor**, which has developed an FDA-approved iPhone case that monitors heart rhythms, to test a credit card-sized version of their device with low-end Aakash tablets. Their founder Dr. Dave Albert told me it worked flawlessly. Albert's goal is to sell a version of this device in India for a cost comparable to the price of the tablet. This will provide the same functions as expensive EKG monitors. There are hundreds of such sensor-based medical devices in development all over the world.

It is only a matter of time before \$49 tablets are also commonly available in the West. This will wreak havoc on the global PC, laptop, and smart phone industries. It will decimate profit margins as the number of cheap tablets in use increases exponentially and prices continue to drop. There will be thousands of new uses for these inexpensive tablets. Expect to see them in your cars, houses, restaurants, schools, and even at church. There will be billions of interconnected devices.

There will be 3 billion more people coming online in this decade. Never before has humanity been connected this way. With ubiquitous access to Internet-capable devices, the poor and the rich will have the same access to information. The lower classes will be able to educate themselves, learn about the latest advances in agriculture and farming, find out the real value of the goods they produce, and take advantage of e-commerce. They will be able to tell the world about the bribes they paid and the abuses they suffered at the hands of corrupt government officials. They will be empowered just as the Indian middle class has been.

Most importantly, the rising billions will be able to participate in global discussions and exchanges of ideas. Imagine village-developed apps showing up in our app stores. Imagine young Einsteins emerging from the villages of Kenya, Columbia, and India -- offering solutions to medical and scientific problems posed by Harvard researchers. These geniuses do exist.

This is all going to be a reality sooner than you think.

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## Conversation on FP.com



**jodhajugraj**

How long have we been reading a story of this kind now from the pen of Mr. Wadhwa? 2-3 yrs? Stop fooling people now. The idea of a cheap internet device is great but Datawind and Aakash are not the answer.

Datawind and Suneet Tuli (its CEO) are frauds. The sales numbers quoted here by Wadhwa are blatantly false and there is no hype in India. All of it is created by the money Suneet Tuli is spending on PR and publications reporting on it without any crosschecking of facts. Cyber Media was also duped by Datawind and falsely made them proclaim the leader in sales. CMR never cross checked any numbers passed on by Tuli to them. He has been lying to the media and everyone since day one. His charm offensive works on lesser minions who really want to believe in this Cinderella story. New York Times did a detailed multi part investigative story to prove that all their claims are false. No working product was ever developed. They are just buying off the shelf A13 and A10 Android tablets from China and putting on their own stickers before passing them on to IIT and others in India. Go meet their staff in Delhi and Amritsar officer and get the real picture of visit the consumer court complaint boards in India to see the thousands of fraud complaints against them. Suneet Tuli has been using this inherent desire in Indians to feel proud about something to run this scam story. Indian HRD officers have now caught up to the game and have started to assert themselves against this Kapil Sibal/Suneet Tuli dream sequence.

Note to Mr. Mr Wadhwa - Please stop shamelessly promoting Suneet Tuli and Datawind with these writeups. It is lowering your respect whatever there is still left. The shares that he has offered you will never materialize. He has played this con game with multitude of people. Try contacting old Datawind employees and get a clue. They will elucidate in detail how Mr. Tuli has been using you and others like you.



**blahblah**

Yet another Indian writer, writing glowingly about this revolution and that revolution that's taking place in India, when in fact the truth is of all the places in the world, India is the one that's been the most stagnant. While China has moved on to join the world India, India is still stuck, fumbling around, while its economy deteriorates because of self inflicted wounds. Nothing more laughable than tis.



**whthfu**



blahblah "of all the places in the world, India is the one that's been the most stagnant"

sometimes its best to keep quiet and let people think you re an idiot than open your mouth and confirm it.

by the way, if you are turned on by stagnation you should visit europe especially greece, italy, spain, portugal etc etc ;)



**blahblah**

whthfu

blahblah

Perhaps you and likes of you can take your advice and shut up, if you don't have anything valid to refute the points I have raised. India is not competition with Europe, it is competition with China(although it's not really kind of competition at this stage). Indian writers like the one who penned this article having been hyping India like crazy the last few years, while the government there has done a really bad job delivering on all the promises. In fact they seem to be going out of their scare away any kind of investment by making it really hard to those of already invested or committed to investing. This is why the country is far behind China and rest of Asia and continues to fall further behind.



**mcccocode**

I agree with both comment from karma 24 and Anon Techie, however the idea of a cheap tablet, the new note book is something to be pursued



**karma24**

Yes..Anon is right..the Aakash tab is a big scam and there are lots of supply issues as well..btw its damn easy to write such stories devoid of substantial facts..I dont believe the tab research market share u are quoting.. .btw Aakash uses an outdated resolution..and Mr. Wadhwa,u make numerous 'copy and paste' statements in your story..my question is have you traveled to every nook and corner of the country to gauge people's mindset? Most people in India do not even have access to clean drinking water, sanitation, roads, affordable healthcare system, and Indians want a corruption free clean government and a strong and honest leaders who can govern and provide these basic things for which they pay their taxes but do not get it... Period.



**AnonTechie**

Whoever contributed to this article is smoking some high quality grass. Aakash tablet was a billion dollar scam that will be forgotten by the world soon. Only ones affected will be the Indian tax payers. None of the IP will be open sourced. Aakash 2, was shelved because it was unviable. Comparing numbers with apple iPad is like saying a country produces cheap cars, and has already sold more than the number of Ferraris sold This article just assumes way too many things, and paint a an extremely rosy picture. Agreed technology has to make inroads for development. But that does not mean do it using scammy ways by introducing an existing tablet as "100% designed in India" and contract it to a third party who buys it from china!

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