

# British firm develops 'cheapest wireless tablet'

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The student tablet released in October costs \$35, but Datawind released an updated version of the Aakash computer tablet this month for the commercial market that costs \$50. It comes with more features.

Aakash is the Hindi word for "heaven."

The Aakash tablets reached their first users last fall under an information technology program sponsored by the Indian government.

The company provided 100,000 of the tablets, which were designed at its Montreal facility, to Indian students.

Customers have been contacting Datawind with "in the range of about 30,000 orders every day," said Suneet Singh Tuli, Datawind's chief executive officer, during a telephone interview with AFP.

"It is huge. We have already received over three million individual hand users pre-booking on this."

Datawind's market research shows sales are likely to continue rising.

In the late 1990s, there were 750 million people connected to the Internet and many others using mobile phones, Singh said.

Since then, "the number of mobile phone user subscribers has ballooned to almost six billion while the number of Internet subscribers was at two billion," he said.

He hopes Datawind's Aakash will help to fill the four billion person "gap," he said.

"We believe the gap primarily exists because of affordability," Singh said.

Other companies that offer [wireless Internet access](#) devices include Apple, Samsung and Research in Motion. The closest competing device to the Aakash is Apple's iPad.

Singh said they are not Datawind's competitors because they seek a different kind of customer.

"It is a totally different game," he said. "iPad people have laptops and computers and want multimedia devices for more mobility."

Among low-income people in underdeveloped countries, "they are looking for their first device," he said.

In India, where Singh traces his origins, only eight percent of 1.2 billion population is connected to the Internet, according to an Indian trade association that tracks Internet access.

Internet giant Google predicted in September that the number of India's Internet users could triple in three years if they were offered easier wireless access and more affordable smartphones.

Whether Aakash will be the breakthrough that provides access to the low-income customers is uncertain.

Some computer specialists say its shortcomings include dim screens, slow responses to commands, a limited number of applications and brief battery life.

Singh also acknowledges that it would be difficult for his company to dominate the market.

"I am sure there will be competition over time," he said. "Right now we are alone because nobody wants to focus on that market. The biggest players don't want to make devices at that level because it impacts their legacy products."

Nevertheless, Datawind officials say they are drumming up market

interest for their tablets.

They met recently with World Bank officials to discuss the potential of using the Aakash tablets as educational tools in countries where the cost of iPads is prohibitive.

After India, Datawind plans to sell its tablets in Thailand, Egypt, Brazil and Latin America.

"The whole attempt here is to create the right set of applications for the customer," Singh said.

For customers who do not need the Bluetooth system to connect different electronic devices, "the most important thing is the price," he said. "And within that price, they primarily want to get Internet access, want to have good multimedia ... and then basic applications."

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