

220M Kids Will Get Laptops, Says Education Minister

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BERKELEY, Calif. — Kapil Sibal, India's Minister of Human Resource Development and Education, revealed an ambitious plan to gift each one of India's 220 million children a laptop at a Sept. 22 talk at UC Berkeley.

Following his formal speech,

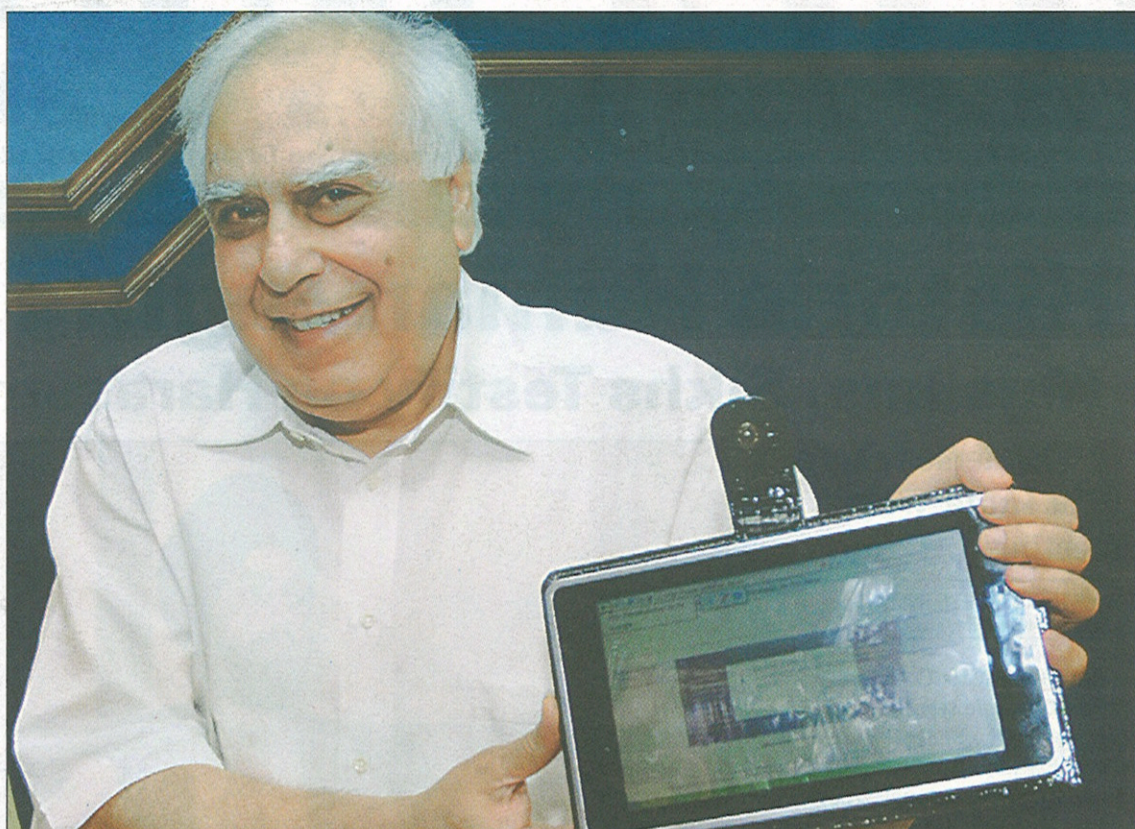
Adult education is also a priority, said Sibal, adding that his ministry has created an ambitious plan to educate 60 million adult women over the next five years.

organized by the Center for South Asia Studies, Sibal got down to specifics during a lively question-and-answer session.

The \$35 laptop, dubbed Sakshat and unveiled in July, will be manufactured in India by HCL Technologies and operate on Google's Android software.

The government will provide 50 percent of the cost of the computer, said Sibal, declining to state who will provide the other half. Early next year, 100,000 university students will receive a Sakshat, said Sibal, noting that the cost to manufacture the nine-inch computer will eventually come down to \$10.

The touch screen device sup-



File photo of Indian Minister for Human Resource Development Kapil Sibal unveiling the new \$35 laptop computer device in New Delhi July 22. Sibal spoke at UC Berkeley at an event organized by the Center for South Asia Studies Sept. 22. (Getty Images)

ports video, Web conferencing, a PDF reader to which text can be downloaded, along with other basic software.

Asked by **India-West** whether laptops for all schoolchildren was a vanity for a country which lacked many basics — such as potable water or even light to study by — Sibal answered, “We

need urgent solutions for a range of things. We can't say, ‘we need this, not that.’”

India rolled out the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act in April, which guarantees a basic education to all children from ages six to 14. Under the landmark act, the government shall pick up costs associated with

the education of underprivileged children.

About \$60 billion has been allotted to the Right to Education act, said Sibal.

Children cannot be denied education for a lack of documents, nor can they be expelled. All private schools must reserve 25 percent of their admission quotas

for disadvantaged children.

No admissions test will be required for school admission and disabled children will be enrolled in mainstream schools, according to the provisions of the Act.

All teaching institutions must be accredited, explained Sibal, adding that schools who do not meet accreditation standards will be shut down in accordance with the Education Malpractice Act.

The Act also mandates school infrastructure, with at least one classroom per teacher.

A January 2010 report issued by UNESCO reported that India still has the largest number of illiterate children and adults in the world. About 72 million primary

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A delegation of Indians accompanied Kapil Sibal (center), to UC Berkeley. From left to right, back row: Ved Prakash, vice-chairman of the University Grants Commission, and Ashok Kumar Sinha, Indian consul for community affairs in San Francisco. Front row, left to right: Debashish Chatterjee, director of the Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode; Raka Ray, chair of the Center for South Asia Studies; Sibal; Sanjay Dhande, director of the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur; Consul General Susmita Thomas; and Amit Khare and N.K. Sinha, joint secretaries in the Ministry of Human Resource Development and Education. (Sunita Sohrabji photo)

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school age children and another 71 million adolescents are not in school, noted the report.

Sibal also discussed a plan to increase college participation among India's 220 million children, noting that he aims to get 40 to 60 million into college by the year 2020. Currently, only 12 percent — 14 million — of India's children attend college, he said.

India will also need to triple its present number of colleges, said Sibal, adding that the country's 500 existing colleges cannot be scaled up to accommodate an additional 26 million students. He summarily dismissed a question on what percent of those students would come from rural India, saying only, “There will be rural students.”

The former Wall Street attorney

and poet, who led India's first Arctic expedition, said he was visiting UC Berkeley to initiate collaboration between the esteemed university and his ministry to create a theoretical blueprint for college development in India.

“We must create an environment for investment in higher education,” said Sibal, who also promised to streamline the application process for NRIs who wished to study in India.

Adult education is also a priority, said Sibal, adding that his ministry has created an ambitious plan to educate 60 million adult women over the next five years.

“Unless we get a critical mass of people into the (education) system, we will never grow as a country, asserted Sibal, who also spoke at a meeting of The Indus Entrepreneurs the following day.