

Clouds of doubt over Aakash

A few months ago, Aakash tablet was launched with full fanfare and during its launch Union HRD minister Kapil Sibal said, "System of education in India would change dramatically due to access of low cost tablets to students. The tablet shall help enhance the quality of learning of children." This certainly was a giant step in improving of school and college education. However, days after the big bang launch of the Aakash tablet by the government, doubts were raised over its efficiency and durability. If experts of the industry are to be believed, technical flaws, no hands-on experience, and the total cost of procuring it make the much-hyped gadget a disappointment for the buyers.

There are issues such as the gadget may not be able to perform multiple tasks because the Android OS application would require enough memory to run a few applications and graphics. This can be understood from the fact that the cheapest Android mobiles from 'Spice' are equipped with 600 MHz processor, whereas the Aakash has just 336 MHz processor. So, half of it would always be kept on use for just running the OS; the tablet has low battery, 2,100 mAh and experts say that Aakash does not have a powerful battery backup either. A longer lasting battery is important for a hassle-free experience on a gadget like Aakash with a comparatively big screen; the screen resolution is also very poor, screen reflects the light, and at its maximum brightness too, the tablet's display is poor in bright conditions; it has resistive touch screen; moreover, with just Wi-Fi option, poor connectivity is a big impediment for users in rural areas. Even the major metropolitan cities in India struggle to provide Wi-Fi networks through the service providers, so one can easily imagine how will the users get the Wi-Fi network in rural areas?

The Aakash tablet is designed, developed and manufactured by a Canada-based firm called Data Wind in coordination with IIT Rajasthan. However, it seems that Data Wind, the manufacturer of the tablet is uncomfortable with the test standard of the IIT Jodhpur. In addition, the Data Wind has been on the receiving end of harsh criticism after it missed several delivery deadlines and also for providing poor customer support. The spat between IIT Rajasthan and Data Wind has already delayed the supply of the Aakash tablet. According to reports, the government is now taking away responsibility of the procurement of Aakash tablets from IIT Rajasthan and Data Wind is given an extension for supplying tablets only till March.

But that's not the end of the problems for Data Wind. It seems that the government is unhappy with the company after various faults were detected in the Aakash tablet. The HRD ministry now desires that the device is made more indigenous and the price should further reduce. IIT Mumbai and IIT Kanpur are likely to be involved to address these aspects. It is also reported that PSUs such as ITI or Telecommunications Consultants India (TCIL) are being considered for procurement of Aakash 2 tablets. Moreover, IIT Rajasthan will be no more involved in the drafting of specifications and features of the Aakash 2 tablets. It will be taken care by the department of IT, ministry of communications and IT. A special committee headed by the IT ministry is going to decide over the future specifications of the Aakash 2 tablets.

We must realise that the government is to invest billions of dollars for National Mission for Education through ICT. The next upgraded version of the Aakash tablet, also known as the UbiSlate 7 has various improved features such as Cortex A8 – 700 MHz processor and a 3,200 mAh battery. The UbiSlate 7+ would run on Android 2.3 Gingerbread platform; would have GPRS, Wi-Fi connectivity and support for 3G modems. It would have two full-sized USB ports that are integrated into the unit for connecting pen-drives, external keyboards, web-cams and dongles. The UbiSlate 7 is likely to see more usability in

the rural India. The Aakash 2 would cost Rs 2,999, which is certainly not a bad deal.

However, the larger issue is supply of content material for schools and colleges. Someone has to put in enormous time and money to create these in Open Source environment and the government has to address this issue on its own or bring in private education content providers in the picture. We need to establish such standards for these contents that would form a benchmark across India. All these tasks need well defined frame work for doing of bended contents and meticulous planning for creation of repository in cloud environment and also for last leg connectivity through tie up with various telcos.

It seems that the government is caught up on supply of Aakash tablets. It must quickly resolve the concerned issues and address aspects related to contents and their delivery to students. Otherwise, we would be doing the same mistake when we launched in September 2004 education satellite first and then started working on its usage.

arun.nigavekar@mydigitalfc.com

(The writer is a former chairman of UGC and former VC of University of Pune)