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CAG pulls up HRD Ministry on Aakash tablet project, unhappy with IIT role



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CAG today slammed the HRD Ministry for the shortcomings in the Aakash tablet project, raising questions over "arbitrary" selection of IIT, Rajasthan to launch the scheme without carrying out an assessment of its capacity to undertake the work.

In its report tabled in Parliament, the government auditor observed that IITR had told the Ministry that around 90 per cent of the tablets supplied by Datawind between August and November 2011 were rejected by it due to complaints in the devices such as heating and they being slow.

"The Ministry decided to launch the Aakash through the IITR without ascertaining their capacity to undertake the work. This adversely affected the project delivery. It also placed Rs 47.42 crore at IITR disposal without carrying out a prudent assessment," it said.

"This raises issues of financial propriety. This adversely affected the project delivery along with an avoidable expenditure of Rs 1.05 crore," the report said.

Under the Akash tablet project, the government has plans of distributing the low-cost access-cum-computing device (Akash) at a cost of Rs 1,500 or USD 35 to students and teachers for educational purposes.

CAG said documents suggest that the Ministry did not provide any justification for selecting IITR to execute the order and thus its selection was arbitrary.

"The audit view is further borne out by the fact that IIT Kanpur, Kharagpur, Madras, Bombay and IISC, Bangalore had participated. However, they were overlooked and a relatively new IITR was selected ahead of others," it said.

CAG said IITR was awarded the project when it was operating from a temporary premises but the "important observation of the Finance Division was ignored."

On the computing devices provided by vendor Datawind, the CAG said it could supply only 6,440 devices between August- November 2011 and according to details, 5,790 of them were rejected by the IITR and the rest were accepted conditionally for further field testing.

"Meanwhile, 366 devices were distributed to students for feedback and there were complaints with regard to the device getting heated up, device battery not lasting for three hours, devices being slow to operate and about its resistive touch screen," it said.

The report stated that in November 2011, the IITR informed the ministry about the under performance of the selected vendor Datawind and stated that giving them further extension would be a futile exercise.

"It further stated that as per the agreement, because of the delay and inability to supply devices as per the revised schedule, the order placed with datawind may be cancelled and the earnest money be forfeited," it said.

The report observed that in February 2012, IITR communicated to the HRD ministry that due to intractable issues with regard to the implementation of the scheme, the project may be transferred to any other appropriate organisation.

"Consequently, the Ministry decided to transfer the project to IIT, Bombay and requested the IITR to transfer the balance amount to IITB," it said.

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