

Cloudy outlook for Aakash

PTI SYSTEM ERROR: Union Minister Kapil Sibal displays an 'Aakash' tablet during its launch in 2010 in New Delhi.

The government's plan to develop and supply an inexpensive tablet computer to schoolchildren is in a mess.

In September 2010, the Minister of Human Resource Development & Communications and Information Technology, Kapil Sibal, showcased a tablet computer called "Sakshat" which the Ministry was to distribute to higher secondary school students. He said the tablet would be launched in January 2011. However the company, HCL Info Systems, which, through a tender floated by the Ministry, had won the contract to source and distribute the computers initially, backed out.



So the Ministry floated a subsequent tender in February 2011, which the Canada-based DataWind Ltd. (DWL) bagged. This tablet, named "Aakash" by the Ministry, was to be designed and developed by IIT Rajasthan, manufactured by a local company selected by DWL, and marketed and sold by DWL.

Tests show poor performance

The Ministry then ordered one lakh "Aakash" tablets from DWL, which chose a small Hyderabad company, Quad Electronics Ltd. (Quad), through an unknown methodology, to undertake its manufacture. DWL then placed an order for 50,000 tablets with Quad. Quad produced only 20,000 in the first lot and DWL lifted only 10,000. Of the 10,000, DWL-HRD provided 2,000 to IIT Rajasthan for detailed testing a week before the formal launch of "Aakash" by Mr. Sibal on October 5, 2011. That evaluation revealed severe poor performance. Therefore, DWL immediately ceased lifting anymore "Aakash" tablets from Quad.

Despite this, Mr. Sibal went ahead with his pre-determined launch — that is, despite knowing the severe poor performance of "Aakash" as evaluated by the very institution that designed and developed it, viz. IIT Rajasthan — and 500 schoolchildren were made to buy dud "Aakash" tablets at a subsidised price. At a per computer subsidy of Rs.750, indicated in several public documents, the total wastage of public money on that sale came to Rs.3.75 lakh.

But this is not all. There is also a serious "material accounting" aspect. Five hundred tablets were given to students, and 2,000 to IIT Rajasthan for testing. What happened to the remaining 7,500? Were they also sold to more schoolchildren at the subsidised price by the Ministry? If so, how many? If not, are they

lying in some godown of the Ministry or DWL?

Case filed

There are other complex issues to be settled. Quad has filed a suit against DWL that DWL has not paid Quad even for the first 10,000 Tablets which DWL lifted from it. No payment has been made for the balance 40,000 of DWL's 50,000 order with Quad.

Then, 'Aakash' version 2

In its legal response, DWL has said that: (a) the supply contract of DWL on Quad was an indivisible contract for a total number of 50,000 "Aakash" Tablets, all for sale by Quad to DWL, and not involving any sale by Quad directly in the open market; and (b) it (DWL) owns the copyright of the tablet; though merely a contract manufacturer to DWL, Quad was violating DWL's rights by collaborating directly with IIT Rajasthan for development of the device.

Moreover, the CEO of DWL, Suneet Singh Tuli, told the media on April 23, 2012, that DWL is working on a second generation "Aakash" tablet on its own. This messy dispute has brought the supply of "Aakash" to schoolchildren — its avowed objective — to a complete halt.

For his part, Mr. Sibal announced in Parliament recently that DWL had since ceased its collaboration with IIT Rajasthan and will now be supplying the one lakh "Aakash" Tablets in collaboration with IIT Bombay! This appears to be in total contradiction of what he told the media on the sidelines of the inauguration of the World IT Forum 2012 on April 17. He said, "We have invited companies from across the world for manufacturing and many are ready to manufacture it here. Currently we are looking at the design and other parameters. After we freeze the design and technology, manufacturing will take place." More astonishingly, despite the huge work agenda listed by Mr. Sibal, he has concluded in Parliament that "the second version of 'Aakash' will be launched in May!"

Questions and violations

His confused and inconsistent statements apart, key questions, issues and anomalies arise in this case.

Irrespective of the type of tendering process adopted by the Ministry for the second version of "Aakash," DWL will get an order of one lakh tablets as per Mr. Sibal's announcement in Parliament. This, despite DWL's failure to meet its commitments on "Aakash 1."

How much money was paid by the Ministry to DWL for the supply of "Aakash 1"? Was it for one lakh tablets, or 50,000 or 10,000 devices? Or was it for a totally different figure?

If neither the specifications nor the vendor of "Aakash 2" had been decided by the Ministry as late as April 17, 2012, how can the device be available in the market just four to six weeks later, in May?

Furthermore, has DWL leveraged its knowledge of "Aakash" technology to develop the "Ubislate," its own tablet device, now being sold online to the general public? If true, was this permitted in its contract with the Ministry? Who, in fact, owns the international patent for "Aakash"?

Delays in the launch of "Aakash" have no doubt put off millions of interested people from buying this affordable tablet. But the Ministry projected "Aakash" as a tablet meant only for school students, and this is why public monies went into providing large subsidies for the project.

Many more inconsistencies and contradictions surround this project, and space constraints prevent a full

discussion here. However, from the few facts and analysis that I have presented, it ought to be clear that what we have here is a monumental mess perpetrated at considerable public financial cost in the name of a project that could have been a genuinely exciting and useful one. If it is not a mess, the Ministry, which is the policymaker and manager of the “Aakash” programme, must come out immediately with a public statement clarifying this matter before Parliament and the people.

(The author is former Science Adviser to late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and secretary of several major scientific departments.)