MM Pallam Raju sees silver lining in Aakash, improved version of the tablet on anvil

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NEW DELHI: Two days after human resource development minister MM Pallam Raju hinted he wanted to give game-changing computing device, Aakash, a quiet burial, he seems to have changed his mind.

Perhaps the strong words of support for the tablet from telecom minister Kapil Sibal who spearheaded the initiative during his tenure as HRD minister and a report of the HRD appointed evaluating committee helped him see the light.

Speaking to mediapersons on the sidelines of a function at the Kozhikode District Congress Committee on Sunday, Raju said, "It is a fantastic initiative by the ministry to develop Aakash Tablet, a mobile device that can be utilised by students anywhere. It was successfully tried out. The second and third versions have come out and the fourth version is on the anvil," he said.

When it was announced in October 2011, the $35 tablet came with a mission: to arm every student with a low cost computing device. The global spotlight notwithstanding, the Aakash tablet that students could procure at the subsidised rate of 1130 did not take off. But this was more on account of production woes rather than a faulty idea.

On Friday, Raju said, "Even if Aakash fails, others (low cost tablets from private companies) have cropped up, which is a good thing. We are not worried about the hardware, the utility depends on the student. They can use the content on any device of their choice."

But a day later on Saturday, Sibal seemed to suggest that there was no uncertainty over Aakash and that the joint working committee set up by him was working on next versions of Aakash 3 and 4. The committee consists of head of CDAC, IIT (Madras), IIT (Bombay) and some others.

"I spoke to Ashok Jhunjhunwala who is also part of the committee. He has told me about 18 vendors want to manufacture Aakash in India," the minister said.

Apart from Sibal, the report of the HRD ministry-appointed committee evaluating the National Mission on Education through ICT (NMEICT), also gave the low-cost tablet a thumbs up. Headed by National Research Professor and Chairman IIT Jodhpur Goverdhan Mehta, the report is categorical in its endorsement of Aakash.

"The success of the NMEICT strongly hinges around a low cost devise through which the content created can reach the learner. The concept of creating a $35 low cost access device is a game changer," the report reads.

Making it clear that the committee would like the Aakash project to continue, the report recommends that design should be "scalable and futuristic enough" so that users can upgrade their requirements. It has also suggested the tablet is available in two or three models so that users have a choice in terms of requirement and buying capacity.

With the Mehta committee supporting Aakash, the ministry is now waiting for the recommendations of a second panel headed by NIIT chairman Rajendra Pawar before taking a final call. However, informed persons said that evaluating the Aakash tablet was not within the committee's terms of reference. The Pawar Committee has been tasked with providing policy inputs for the broader issue of distance education, and the use of technology in promoting it.

Raju's intent will become clearer once the ministry moves a cabinet note, pending for the last four months, seeking nod approval to tender its biggest order till date for 50 million tablets. The first lot of devices was termed substandard by users.