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## Open Source software: Taking on the giants...



New Delhi, Sept 20: Free and open source software is fast taking on licenced software giants worldover, and in India too, it is catching the fancy of IT industry.

"The war is already brewing between software majors and proponents of open source and free software, which is becoming popular in developing countries, where high costs of the proprietary software is the major cause of rampant piracy," says a new book "open source and the law" by legal counsel, Priti Suri.

The worldwideweb is the most successful example of open software. The Indian Institutes of Technology use open source software for research; and the government is also promoting its use in education and financial services and multiple E-governance projects, says Suri.

Unlike proprietary software, where every time a new user has to buy the software, open source allows the users to view and modify the source code, a set of instructions used in the creation of the software. When the source code is viewed by other users, who can make improvements to it, the modified versions of the same software are further redistributed to subsequent users to do similar things.

Technology research firm Gartner Inc has forecast that open source computing holds great promise in India and that the country's technology adoption is gaining momentum. It expects a growth of 20.8 percent for the next four years in business spending on computer hardware, software and communication products, notes the book.

Trade associations including Nasscom and Mait believe that Linux and open source products can play an important role in spreading E-governance in India, with low cost local language applications. Deployment of open source software is also considered critical in it education at school level where low cost software is to be the real impetus, says the book.

"In capital starved economies like India, Open Source Software (OSS) is one of the most viable way of tacking technologies to the people and ensuring that the disadvantaged section of society is also a part of the technology wave that is sweeping across the world," say Suri and her associates in the book.

The licenced software being developed by Microsoft and Oracle, is expensive and buying software at higher prices is the least of the concerns of the people who are more concerned with earning enough to support their livelihood, she says.

"OSS offers these people a better opportunity to avail the technology as it can be made available at a cheaper rate. Another benefit of this software is that in

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India, a large volume of rural population does not understand English, this software can be converted into local languages, as the source code of the software is made available along with the program," she says.

The governments of countries around the world like India, Brazil, South Africa, Vietnam, Malaysia and China have either started to adopt or feel the need for specific policies on OSS.

In India, though there is no specific legislation dealing with OSS, the free software foundation of India has submitted an opinion to the government. The OSS, however, has been able to make specific inroads into the country. President Kalam is also a supporter of OSS.

In one of his speeches, President Kalam called for the usage of non proprietary software especially by the military to ward off cyber security threat. The emphasis was on the fact that India should strive for self-reliance in software required for the development of critical weapons systems reminding that technology embargoes were imposed on India when nuclear devices were tested.

"The positives of OSS are immense for any country. However, these benefits can manifest only if a policy can truly capture the spirit of OSS, which has the inherent ability to give the right boost to the economy of any developing country," says Suri.

Bureau Report

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