Free Software Foundation of India

Mar 9, 2012

To

    Selvi J Jayalalithaa,
    Hon'ble Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu

Subject: Proposal to adopt Microsoft's proprietary software in schools
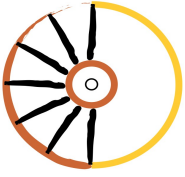
Dear Madam,

    We came to understand that Mr Jean Philippe Courtois, President, Microsoft Inc., met you on 6/3/2012. In the meeting he brought up the issue of an MoU signed in 2005 between the Tamil Nadu Government and Microsoft to implement IT literacy program for Government school teachers. Mr Jean had expressed his company's wish to make further investment in the state. It is not the first time such an offer is being made by Microsoft to a government. In 2002, during his India visit, the then chairman of Microsoft, Mr Bill Gates had made a similar offer. In this context, we would like to bring before you some related facts.

At the outset, we would like to point out that the proposed investments by Microsoft have no motive other than that of profit and we should not be under the illusion that these "investments" are being made for the betterment of society or for the development of India. On the contrary, the type of software developed and sold by Microsoft, proprietary software, -- software which is supplied without its underlying source code and without the freedoms to study, modify and redistribute it -- constrains indigenous development and divides society.

Microsoft's offer to get involved in school education is a matter of social concern. Proprietary technologies that Microsoft promotes and develops do not promote education and knowledge. Hence, it can not contribute to empowerment and local development. Its strategy is similar to that of tobacco companies. It tries to catch children young so that once they get addicted, company can make profit by exploiting them. It also offers its products as free samples. The offer made by the chairman of Microsoft is of a similar nature.

C11, Elenkom Gardens, Vellayambalam, Trivandrum -10, Kerala
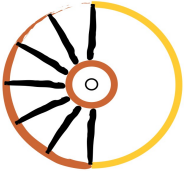
Free Software Foundation of India

As pointed out earlier, Microsoft software is proprietary -- it is supplied without it's underlying source code under a restrictive license which denies its users the freedoms to study, modify and redistribute the software, which means that the students and teachers under this proposal will not have the option of "looking under the hood" to see how the software works. If they find problems with the software or if they wish to customize it, they will not have the means or the right to make such corrections or modifications. They will have to depend solely on Microsoft to provide such corrections or modifications. They will be denied the right to share the software with others outside the purview of the project premises, leading young and impressionable minds to believe that sharing is wrong!

Way back in 2003, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, our former president, said that it is rather unfortunate that many in India believe in proprietary technology. Recollecting his meeting with the former chairman of Microsoft, he had said that they could not agree on the proprietary model of Microsoft and for the benefit of our one billion population Free Software should be used in a big way. Many state governments in India did realise the importance of Free Software in the area of education, with the state of Kerala being the torchbearer in India. IT@School project of Kerala is the largest computer education programme running in India. Though Kerala also started with Microsoft technologies, it soon realised the limitations and took the decision to move to Free Software for their school education programme. The Free Software community and organisations like Free Software Foundation of India, worked together to bring technology to schools. By moving to Free Software the state also saved crores of rupees, which was used to improve school infrastructure. Today other states like Karnataka are following the model set by Kerala.

At a time when governments, the public and the industry are realising the importance of Free Software and adopting it more, it is not surprising that companies like Microsoft go around with sops like 'investment' to buy support of governments. They made some success in states like Punjab by selling half truths and lies.

We request you to seriously consider formulating an IT and education policy based on Free/Swatantra Software. Free Software gives the users all the rights and freedoms denied by proprietary software. It gives the users the means and right to study how the software works and, as software educationists know, the best way to learn to write good software is by studying other peoples' work. It allows the software to be shared, both "as is" as well as in modified forms, in keeping with the ethical tradition of the free flow of knowledge.

Free Software Foundation of India

gnu@gnu.org.in, www.gnu.org.in M:094470 34795

We, the people in the Free Software movement, are willing to provide any support that you require in this regard. As the immortal verse of Tagore teaches us, let us make our country wake to a world "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high, Where knowledge is free".

Thanking You,

Yours Sincerely,

for Board of FSF India

About FSF India

     The Free Software Foundation Of India is a non-profit organisation committed to advocating, promoting and propagating the use and development of Free/swatantra software in India. Our goal is to ensure the long term adoption of Free Software, and aim for the day when all software will be free (swatantra). This includes educating people about software freedom and convincing them that it is the freedom that matters. We regard non-free proprietary software as a problem to be solved, not as a solution to any problem.

C11, Elenkom Gardens, Vellayambalam, Trivandrum -10, Kerala