

Open Source Has Potential with Solutions for the Disabled

Open Source India Week (OSIW), India's largest Linux and Open Source concluded its two-day activities in Delhi today after scintillating sessions that spanned three-cities, a week-long 17 events and 100-plus speakers, and was accompanied by the ManageIT Expo. OSIW, formerly held under the banner of LinuxAsia for four years at Delhi, showcased solutions for business, mobility and human welfare.

The highlight of the second day was a very interesting and topical special session on Open Source accessibility solutions for the disabled. Opened by the legendary Klaus Knopper (of Knoppix fame) who showcased the ADRIANE desktop environment for the visually-impaired. Continuing on the same theme, Steffen Franke of Ed-Media Education, Germany spoke of the challenges of accessibility in e-learning. Professor Arun Mehta of the Computer Engg Department at JMIT Radaur demonstrated computing for those with cerebral palsy and autism and Krishnakant Mane, researcher at the TIFR, [Mumbai](#) demonstrated accessibility features of the GNOME desktop.

Speakers at the Accesibility session highlighted a few key needs which they hoped the developers gathered there would solve in the future - some included software that speaks in the local language and local accent, eye-pointing technology (that can take inputs from the eyeball movements of profoundly-disabled people who can communicate only through eye movements), and adapting these technologies in a context that will help these people find employment. Krishnakant Mane showed how to make Firefox speak so that the visually-impaired can browse the Internet easily. *As Knopper commented, 'OSIW shows that there is no necessity to use proprietary software any more. You can do everything better with open source. Open source makes it better for everyone including users with handicaps to use modern technology on the Internet.'*

Another angle to the issue of accessibility to computing for people with special needs was brought in by Arun Mehta. 'Commercial software makers do not get into this area unless they see a marketing angle to it. But in the open source world, you will find that many developers themselves are specially-abled - they use it on a day-to-day basis and also contribute back to improve the software they use. This creates an ecosystem that promotes innovation in development of solutions for accessibility', said Mehta.

The Electronics Corporation of Tamil Nadu is working to find appropriate technologies for the visually impaired. At the CXO Summit, a parallel event of the OSIW, C. Umashankar, MD of ELCOT talked of the drive to train teachers for the visually impaired and mentioned the use of equipment based on open source equivalent of the iPOD Nano which the visually impaired use for storing audio-lessons. ELCOT has also worked on application software that are web-based and disability-enabled, two such solutions having already gone online, according to Umashankar.

As part of the commitment to recognize excellence in development of Open Source solutions that benefit mankind in some way, the organizers had, last year, initiated the FOSS India Awards - opening upto 20 challenges for the Open Source world. After an year-long exercise during which a myriad applications were submitted and evaluated, the FOSS India Awads were announced during the Conference this year. The lead Award was taken by 'Hindawi' a project submitted by developers Abhishek Chaudhary and Sweta Chaudhary. Hindawi enables system level programming in Indic languages shattering the myth that full-fledged systems programming is not feasible in non-English languages.

Other projects awarded were the 'Zmanda Recovery Manager', which simplifies the life of a Database Administrator with a simple-to-use yet robust recovery manager for MySQL Server; and 'Dhwani' - a framework to develop Indian Language text to speech systems - that works in Hindi, Kannada and Malayalam now.

The FOSS India Awards were sponsored by NRC-FOSS, a unit of CDAC. Said M.R. Rajagopalan, Director NRC-FOSS, 'Through such incentives, NRCFOSS expects to stimulate young minds, encourage innovative contributions to the FOSS ecosystem and address the digital divide.'

The Delhi programme of the OSIW included the **TechZone** - workshops and technical sessions, the **Software Development Talks** which update software developers with the latest trends, technologies and methodologies in the open source world; while **IT Implementation Talks** inform IT managers of latest open source solutions and best practices across a wide spectrum of business verticals and applications.

The OSIW has been put together by the **Forum for Open Source Innovation in India** (FOSII) and is supported through sponsorships by Microsoft, Novell, RedHat, NRCFOSS, Intel, naukri.com and others. The event continued through the week with a OSIW and the CTO Forum at Bangalore, followed by the CXO Forum at Mumbai, and now the OSIW at Delhi accompanied by the ManageIT Expo. India's biggest Linux & Open Source conference and expo, formerly held under the banner of LinuxAsia for four years at Delhi, has expanded across the three cities and now spans week-long 17 Events with 100-plus speakers and mainstream exhibitors showcasing solutions for business, mobility and human welfare.

The Conference speakers included such leading lights as Klaus and Adriane Knopper, co-developers of Knoppix; Dr. Anthony Wasserman, Executive Director of the Carnegie Mellon University's Center for Open Source Investigation (COSI), Louis Suárez-Potts of OpenOffice.org. Indian speakers and industry leaders include Nandkumar Pradhan, CEO of Red Hat India; Sandeep Menon, Head of Novell; Vikas Kanungo, Chairman - The Society for Promotion of e-Governance, India; and C Umashankar, MD, ELCOT. One of the star speakers was David Axmark, who is a co-founder of MySQL, a firm that was recently bought by Sun Microsystems for US \$ 1 billion.

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