

Digital disaster

Little e-waste is processed, as there are no rules for disposal. Coming from 'green' companies, that's lame

SHARADA BALASUBRAMANIAN , ANURAG PRASAD

This one seems to have escaped health Minister Anbumani Ramadoss' notice. Indeed,

the Environment Ministry doesn't appear to be too concerned either. India faces a quiet, but growing, threat from the rising amount of e-waste in the country. The government—be it as a user, lawmaker or enforcer—doesn't seem to care enough. Neither does India Inc, which will flash its growing 'green' credentials, but won't direct the trash to safe custody because the law doesn't require it to do so.

Every day, thousands of computer parts, TVs, DVDs, mobile phones, music systems and other electronic items are junked around the country. This 'electronic waste' contains toxic metals like lead and mercury, and releases carcinogenic fumes when disposed off improperly. These hazards pose a great risk to the environment, and thereby to human and animal health.

India generated 330,000 tonnes of e-waste in 2007, says a study conducted by MAIT-GTZ. "Each year, only about 5-10% of the waste is disposed in a safe manner. The bulk of it, 90-95%, finds its way to *kabadiwallas* or informal recyclers, who pull out useful bits and simply dump the rest," says Ramapathy Kumar, Toxic Campaigner, Greenpeace.

Making matters worse, about 50,000 tonnes of electronic waste is illegally imported into the country. Although import of such hazardous waste into India is prohibited by a 1997 Supreme Court directive, the trade continues to be rampant. The high cost involved in recycling plays a big factor in this. For instance, it costs \$20 to recycle a single computer in the United States, while the same could be recycled in India for only \$2. Moreover, much of the e-waste entering India is imported as metal and glass waste.

Collective guilt

Satish Sinha, Chief Programme Co-ordinator, Toxic Links, a Delhi-based environmental NGO, has written in an article that about "70% of India's e-waste is generated by state-owned and private companies, while individuals account for another 15%".

Interestingly, when we approached private sector companies, all of them claimed to have a mechanism to handle e-waste in place, or slated to be in place shortly. But the study by MAIT-GTZ of IT/ITES companies shows that almost 94% do not have any policy on e-waste disposal. Most goes to the informal sector for processing. Clearly, a majority of these companies are guilty of improperly processing e-waste.

HCL, a supplier of IT and consumer products, is a notable exception. The company is already shipping e-waste collected in-house, as well as from customers, to recyclers. It has also been distributing pamphlets spreading awareness on the harmful effects of improper e-waste disposal, and encouraging users to send in waste.

As for government institutions, the most common mode of disposal is either direct sale to a scrap dealer or through an auction conducted once a year for different types of scrap. For instance, in an auction conducted in 2006, a leading bank disposed off 500 monitors that it had accumulated over a period of three years. Some bank officers revealed that it would not be very difficult to comply with existing e-waste regulations, including disposal to an authorised vendor. However, they claim to be unaware of any



DANGER: A MAIT survey shows that 94% of IT/ITES companies don't have a policy on e-waste disposal

such disposal channels, while expressing their willingness to comply with such a protocol.

"The entire effort of recycling has been driven by NGOs. They have acted as barking dogs and, at least, brought the problem to light," says Vinnie Mehta, Executive Director, Manufacturers Association of Information Technology (MAIT). But that's not enough. Industry and government have to start behaving like environment-conscious citizens, and route their e-waste disposal through safe channels.

No law, no crime

There are many reasons for the poor handling of e-waste, with lack of awareness being a major one. Another factor for the colossal build-up is the absence of any legislation regulating its generation and disposal by public and private companies. With no mechanism in place to deal with it, each entity finds its own way to process it. "A strong law will encourage investments and track what is being recycled and what is happening to the hazardous materials," says Ravi Agarwal, Director, Toxic Links.

Currently, manufacturers do not bother to create awareness or take steps for disposal. This 'extended producer responsibility' is not being undertaken as it is seen as an additional burden. If a manufacturer includes the cost of collection and dispatch for recycling of a product into its price, sales are sure to plummet—unless all manufacturers have a similar policy in place.

India generates around 330,000 tonnes of e-waste annually. Only about 5-10% of it is processed properly

And that is where a law will make a huge difference, by compelling manufacturers to build in the cost of collecting and dispatching e-waste. Apart from outlining the penalties for not recycling e-waste properly, a legislation will also clearly define how it has to be carried out. It would also make consumers aware and ensure development of the ecosystem. Moreover, the recyclers' grouse of having to bear collection costs on e-waste will also be addressed. However, no enforcement law is in place, and companies are under no pressure to give e-waste to organised recyclers. Given this, it's clear that the only way to ensure formal disposal of e-waste is through legislation that is stringently implemented. (Read [Recycling: Big Opportunity](#))

Since they can get far more for their junk from the informal sector, companies and individuals flock to *kabadiwallas*. For instance, an obsolete computer may fetch only Rs 225 if sold to the organised recycler, whereas someone from the informal sector will be willing to pay Rs 1,000-1,500 for it, depending on its quality.

Says Arun Senthil Ram, "Televisions constitute a large part of e-waste, but there is no collection happening. Which consumer would want to give away an old television to a recycler? These obsolete products never even get out of the homes."

"A large proportion of end-of-life products end up being recycled in the unorganised sector for a number of reasons—lack of awareness, inadequate organised recycling capacity in the country, extended life of technology in India, etc, says P Ravindranath, Director, Public Affairs, HP.

He adds: "The principles of 'extended producer responsibility', and 'individual producer responsibility' are the foundations on which laws and other solutions are built. Extended producer responsibility works well in the large corporate market where we can directly access the corporate who are large users of IT products."

The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) and the Central Pollution Control Board have come up with guidelines for efficient disposal of e-waste. The guidelines state that producers of all electronic and electric equipment should be allowed to levy an appropriate fee on a product at the point of sale to facilitate a buyback. A standard rate has to be fixed and the list should be made available to consumers. However, these guidelines are not mandatory, and do not have any penalty clauses. So they are largely ignored.

Many of the companies we spoke to claim to have begun voluntarily adhering to e-waste disposal before the enactment of a legislation. Nokia has stopped using poly vinyl chloride (PVC) in all its phones since 2007. Today, 60-80% of Nokia phones are recyclable. Many mobile-phone makers have made it easier for people to safely recycle their phones by providing more information collection points for used phones.

Samsung is piloting television take-backs and recycling programmes in 14 US states. However, in India, it has take-back programmes only for mobile phones.

Companies like HP and Wipro have a take-back programme for their equipment, but their experience thus far has not been very encouraging. Currently, only a few of their large customers adhere to the programme. The rest simply prefer to sell the equipment as scrap.

By the end of this year, LG plans to set up 50 collection centres at its retail outlets. LG has tied up with a recycler in Chennai and says it will not charge customers for disposal of used products. It also plans to handle in-house e-waste at the plant.

While these voluntary measures are laudable, the fact remains that more than 90% of Indian companies do not have a clear-cut policy to recycle waste. Voluntary measures are welcome, but far from sufficient. A strong and strict law forcing compliance to eco-friendly disposal of waste is the need of the hour. Until it is enacted, e-waste will continue to pose a health and environmental hazard. Are you listening, Mr Ramadoss?

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