

What is India doing with its 2 million tonnes of e-waste every year?

Jacob Koshy , JANUARY 13, 2018 16:15 IST



An estimated 80% of electronic waste processing happens in the unorganised sector that collects waste from households and establishments. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/ iStock

Last month, the United Nations reported a startling statistic: the world generated 44.7 million tonnes of electronic waste in 2016 — equivalent to the weight of some 4,500 Eiffel Towers. India's contribution to this was a significant 2 million tonnes.

And despite new rules that have come into place to safely process this hazardous material, close to 80% of e-waste — old laptops and cell phones, cameras and air conditioners, televisions and LED lamps — continues to be broken down, at huge health and environmental cost, by the informal sector.

Where are the orders?

In 2016, the E-Waste (Management) Rules placed responsibility on electronic goods manufacturing companies and bulk consumers to collect and channel e-waste from consumers to authorised re-processing units.

Laws to better manage e-waste have been around since 2011, mandating that only authorised dismantlers and recyclers collect electronic waste. But now, firms are required to set yearly collection targets linked to their production numbers.

The Rules also state that producers of electronic equipment must limit their use of hazardous heavy metals such as mercury, lead, cadmium. By 2017, the government hoped, manufacturers, who account for the vast majority of e-waste, would get a hang of life under the new Rules and outline targets as well as measures to collect their e-waste.

And so, in theory, business should be great for Amit Bhaduri*, who runs an electronic goods recycling unit in Noida. He had invested nearly ₹4 crore to set up the re-processing plant and hired 30 trained workers three years ago, and should be flush with orders today.

But despite the new Rules, “There has hardly been any increase in orders. Electronic companies don’t seem to have taken the government very seriously,” he says. In fact, 200 companies that manufacture electronic goods — from smart phones to laptops — got served notices in October by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) for not complying with e-waste procurement norms.

The list of companies, listed on the CPCB website, include some of India’s electronics majors in Bengaluru and Delhi. “Those who haven’t complied will be sent further notices in a month and if still not compliant, could be fined,” said an environment ministry official.

The network

The impact of e-waste on human health and environment is well documented. When electronic goods that are past their shelf life are broken down manually for precious metals or burnt or discarded in landfills, they contaminate land and water. The vast majority of electronic waste processing happens in the unorganised sector, which fills a glaring lacuna in the processing cycle, and collects waste from households and establishments.

On the outskirts of Uttar Pradesh, and amidst several of Delhi’s industrial belts, are rows of shanties that are at the heart of the e-waste recycling network. Many of the workers are children who work with their bare hands, dealing with enormous quantities of toxic metals. The heavy metals present in e-waste are known to cause neurological and skin diseases, genetic defects and cancer in workers who handle them.

Now, the tax

Bhaduri admits he cannot beat the unorganised sector in terms of price. “They make it hard for firms like ours to profitably sustain,” he says. The GST imposed a huge 12% tax on electronic recyclers, which has been an added blow.

Official records bear out the recyclers’ predicament. The number of registered dismantlers and recyclers increased from 126 to 148 between 2005 and 2014, according to data presented to the Lok Sabha, and together have a capacity of 4,55,059 tonnes per annum. But firms like Bhaduri’s are only able to process about 25% of their capacity.

Environment ministry officials, however, say they are trying to increase awareness about the hazards of e-waste. Under the Swachh Bharat Mission the environment ministry in association with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has initiated a nationwide capacity building programme on the implementation of six waste management rules, including E-Waste (Management) Rules, 2016. This awareness programme is being conducted in 68 major cities, said environment minister Harsh Vardhan.

The target group comprises officials of municipal bodies, hospitals, resident welfare associations, market committees, local industries, facility operators, bus depots, malls and railway stations. The ministry is also implementing a scheme called the ‘Creation of Management Structure for Hazardous Substances’, which includes an awareness programme about the new Rules and its implementation. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has initiated a pilot project ‘Awareness Program on Environmental Hazards of Electronic Waste’ that aims to provide training, tools and films aimed at creating awareness and reducing the impact of e-waste on the environment and health.

But for Bhaduri, the government schemes offer little relief unless they are implemented and they translate into profitable business. “Unless there is better enforcement and reigning in of the unorganised sector, there can be no real change.”

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