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TOXINS FROM E- WASTE ADD TO DELHIS NIGHTMARE

by Ravi Agarwal



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DELHI produces over 30,000 metric tonne (mt) of electronic waste (e- waste) annually. Besides being a large generator of e- waste, it is also the largest recycling hub of such materials in the country. The bulk of this, over 97%, is recycled in the informal sector.

Recycling of e- waste is done at far flung areas of the city, such as Old and New Seelampuri, Shastri Park, Mustafabad, Turkman Gate, Mandoli, Behta Hazipur and Loni. Possibly, the elite, who are the largest generators of such waste, may not have even heard of these places.

However, as per the DDA Master Plan 2021, such activities, though widespread, are not permitted in the city. The recycling operations are complex as well as distributed, with different parts of a single electronic or electrical product being dismantled in different areas. While some locations, like Seelampuri specialises in copper wire recovery, others like Mandoli extract metals from printed circuit boards, and plastics are recycled in Narela and Bhawana.

More than 1.5 lakh workers are employed here.

The sites are often contaminated since such products contain a variety of toxic materials.

Pollutants include lead from cathode ray tubes, strong acids used in metal recovery from the electronics, arsenic, copper etc. Burning of e- waste causes harmful emission of heavy metals and chemical emissions such as dioxins.

Large number of women and children are employed in these places, and the rudimentary practices are carried out without any protective gear. These practices have long term health impacts, particularly on the workers.

The leaching of toxics in the soil and groundwater can transport them over large distances. All these add to the already existing pollution in the city.

Sixteen new operators have been authorised for the collection of e- waste from actual users, after the collection and recycling was made mandatory in May 2011, through the issuance of the national rules (E- Waste Management and Management Rules 2011). The purpose of the law is to shift the hazardous activities of recycling from the informal to the safer formal sector, and to help the informal sector shift to less harmful operations of collection and dismantling.

However, despite legal requirements under provisions of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), producers are yet to set up collection systems for their own end of life products.

Also, not unlike other state pollution control boards, the Delhi regulator (DPCC) is yet to take any action against such blatant non- compliance.

Without the participation of the producers, it is hard to imagine how the large quantities of ewaste being generated in the city will be collected and disposed off safely.

Currently most consumers do not even know where to dispose of their used electronic products, despite the law being in place. Delhi needs to adopt a model of higher consumer awareness, a proper recycling infrastructure and stricter compliance to the new law.

(The writer is Indias top environmentalist and Director of Toxics Link)

