

WHERE'S OUR E-WASTE GOING?

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

Do you remember where the Walkman you bought 20 years ago is? Or the CD player you upgraded to? The phone you changed six months ago? Chances are you won't — they are probably stocked away in that long-forgotten cupboard in the guest room. Or worse, lying in one of the city's dumping yards.

A recent UN report — A New Circular Vision for Electronics — highlights that the world produces as much as 50 million tonnes of electronic and electrical waste (e-waste) a year, weighing more than all of the commercial airliners ever made. And only 20% of this is formally recycled. And India continues to generate the highest amount of e-waste ([ASSOCHAM.ORG](http:// ASSOCHAM.ORG)) when compared to China, the U.S., Japan and Germany: and this comprises discarded headphones, desktops, keyboards, chargers, motherboards, television sets, airconditioners, refrigerators... the list is endless. The global volume of e-waste generated is expected to reach 52.2 million tonnes or 6.8 kg per person by 2021, and with India importing large amounts of e-waste, tacking the mounting issue is an important point of discussion.

Studying the consumption and disposal patterns of electronic giants — since the first e-waste rules were notified in India in 2011 — is New Delhi-based environmental research organisation, Toxics Link. In their 2019 report, Time to Reboot III (the first part of the series was out in 2014), 54 electronic brands were 'assessed and rated on their implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and did not find substantive change on ground'. The companies were rated on several criteria such as take back policy, RoHS compliance, e-waste collection target achieved, consumer awareness, and also their on-ground collection system. Only seven companies were found to have efficient systems in place, 13 were rated average, and 29 were below-average. Five brands are in the red for poor compliance of EPR policies. If the present scenario continues, global e-waste production is all set to reach 120 million tonnes per year by 2050.

Even if we look at the e-waste sent to recycling, only 20% is formally recycled, with the remainder 80% either ending up in landfills or being informally recycled. Says the UN report, "much of it by hand in developing countries, exposing workers to hazardous and carcinogenic substances such as mercury, lead and cadmium. E-waste in landfill contaminates soil and groundwater, putting food supply systems and water sources at risk." Many studies have proven the effects of high and prolonged exposure to such materials but our electronics makers continue to employ workers with no protective gear. In India, over 95% of e-waste generated is managed by the unorganised sector and scrap dealers who dismantle the disposed products rather than recycle them. Electronics are stored in open yards, further increasing the risk of electric leakages.

But we not only need to look into the health impacts of e-waste management, but also how it results in the loss of valuable raw materials such as gold, platinum and cobalt. The report states that as much as 7% of the world's gold may currently be contained in e-waste, with 100 times more gold in a tonne of e-waste than in a tonne of gold ore.

What you can do is identify ethical recyclers in your city and hand over your discarded electronics. Get your friends and neighbours on board too. Most importantly, be mindful of the products you buy and the frequency with which you do so — do you really need a new phone every year? Or a pair of earphones just because they are on sale? We're all mindful of our digital footprint today, so why not extend it to the number of devices we use?

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