

India, the e-wasteland

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"It's cute, it has Intel inside, and it is cheap; at less than \$150 a piece with a color monitor." Advertisements like this inserted by the friendly neighborhood personal-computer assemblers operating out of a garage are found in almost all local dailies in India these days. Not that what these ads say are untrue but what they do not say is that these "cheap" machines are almost totally made out of phased-out parts like Intel central processing units, memory chips, hard disk drives, and others, extracted from cheap and obsolete personal computers and electronic equipment that are no longer in use on the other side of the Pacific and the Atlantic.

And for about 40 percent of India's first-time personal-computer users with shoe-string budgets, these machines are the cheapest way to own a piece of information technology making the "cute Intel PCs" hot in demand.

"Computers and electronic equipments which have completed their life cycle and are obsolete in the West have started arriving in India and the entire South Asian market in huge quantities," says Ravi Agarwal director of Toxics Link, a not-for-profit environmental group, adding that after China started clamping down on import of electronic waste by banning it last year, India has emerged as the largest dumping ground of e-waste for the developed world.

According to Toxic Links, "although hard numbers are difficult to come by since most of the imports are illegal," close to 40,000 tons of used electronic equipments are dumped in India every month, much of which,

according to Greenpeace International, end up contaminating the country's environment with toxic organic compounds and metals.

Indeed imports of obsolete electronic equipment that have been discarded for recycling in the "developed world" (read: the United States and Europe) have become a lucrative business in developing countries like India. But the problem is that with authorities paying no heed to the influx of tons of toxic e-waste along with lax local laws, India is also turning into a deadly dumping ground that is threatening to be catastrophic over the next few years if left unaddressed.

The main problem is that in the absence of appropriate recycling facilities for e-wastes, much of it ends up in local recycling yards. There, laborers working for about a dollar a day dismantle them using crude means like incinerating printed circuit boards in acids.

Environmental organizations say that Delhi's e-scrap yards alone employ more than 20,000 laborers who handle 20,000 tons of e-waste every year. Close to 100 percent of total e-waste processing activity in the country takes place in unorganized recycling and backyard scrap-trading outfits.

The two largest nations shipping their e-wastes out are the United States and Britain. According to a recent British Environmental Protection Agency report, Britain exported 25,000 tons of e-waste to South Asia last year.

The United States bought a staggering \$125 billion worth of electronic goods in 2005 and reportedly for every PC the country bought, one was discarded. BK Soni, the founder of Mumbai-based Infotrek Systems, an electronic equipment recycling company, claims that in 2005 the United States recycled just about \$2 billion worth of electronic equipment, "but that may be just 20 percent of the e-waste it generated, much of which

found its way to India, China and other South East Asian countries, and now, more recently in Africa."

So why do the discarded computers of the developed world find their way to the developing countries? Clearly, the poorer nations cannot afford to buy state-of-the-art electronics equipment and welcome the rejects of the rich countries.

"In the U.S. for instance, one hardly uses a PC for more than three years, but in India an antiquated PC (e.g. Intel 386) that is even 10 years old is welcome," says Ravi Agarwal of Toxic Links. "In fact the Indian embassy in the U.S. actively encourages donation of old PCs to government-run schools and other economically challenged institutions."

But the biggest reason for dumping is purely economic.

Toxic Links has calculated that it costs about \$20 to recycle a PC in the United States, whereas unscrupulous Indian importers pay up to \$15 each for buying them out. "That means a net gain of \$35 for a U.S. recycler," says Agarwal, "so why should a recycler in the U.S. even take the trouble of recycling PCs there?"

By extracting the usable parts and then dumping it to the backyard scrap-trading outfits an importer can generate about \$10 in revenues. "It's a win-win for both," Agarwal says.

Nevertheless, the rich countries cannot be blamed alone, say environmentalists. "The problem is that the governments of most developing countries lack resolve to fight electronic dumping," said Agarwal.

In India, although local laws do not allow import of e-waste, "it has not formulated a clear definition of what could be termed as electronic

waste," says Amit Jain of IRG, consequently electronic equipment finds its way in under the generic heading of metal scrap.

"I can cite many instances where unscrupulous importers fill in a container with electronic scrap and then top it up with metal scrap to avoid the customs' surveillance," he adds. "Moreover, the Indian customs department, being a pure revenue-generating outfit, lacks the wherewithal to scrutinize each imported container, and they are not bothered either."

Which is why IRG says that if the problem is not addressed immediately, it can end up in catastrophe in another six years, by when the e-waste generation figure from imports as well as internal generation could reach a staggering 1.6 million tons.

But hopefully India may not see that day after all. The Central Pollution Control Board of India has just constituted a national-level working group with representatives from regulatory agencies, state pollution control boards, ministry of Information Technology, industry associations, and experts in e-waste, which has the task of developing guidelines for e-waste recycling and formulating appropriate legalizations.

"May be India too would follow China's footsteps soon," said an optimistic Agarwal.

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