SEELAMPUR
INDIA'S DIGITAL TRASHCAN

Seelampur: Life in India's Digital Trashcan

A Digital Empowerment Foundation publication

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India generates about 18 lakh metric tonne of eWaste annually

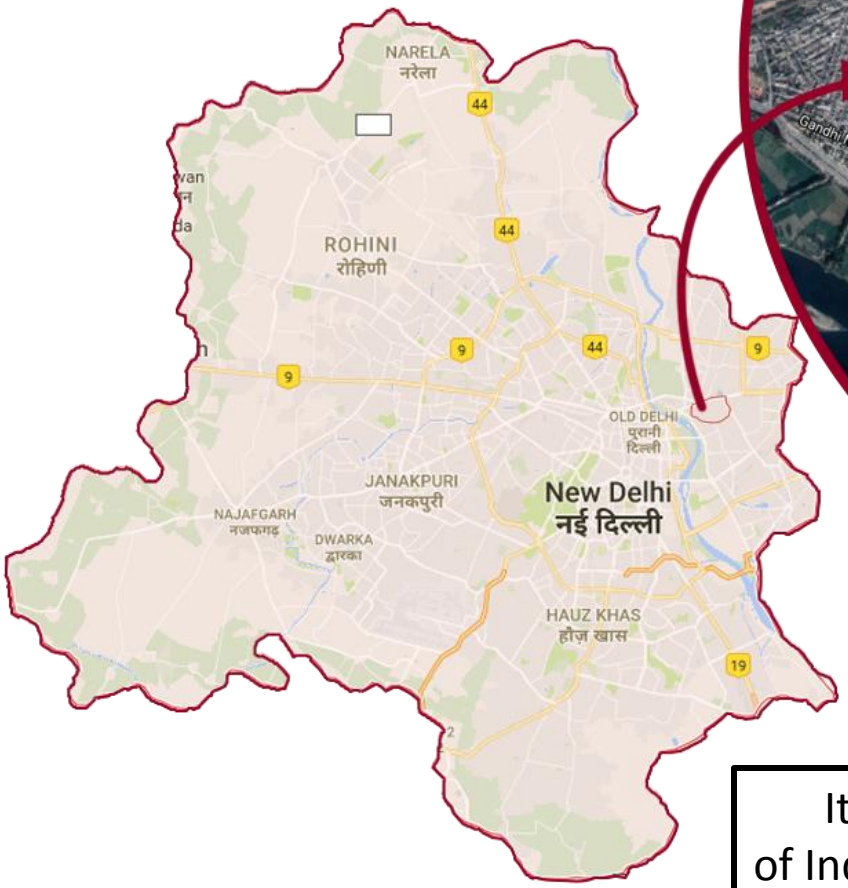
However, there are only 178 dismantlers and recyclers authorised in India to handle eWaste

As a few of us enter the narrow and congested lanes of Seelampur in North-East Delhi, we are immediately engulfed by a strong and pungent smell of burnt aluminum and other metals. It's almost unbearable to breathe for us "outsiders" but there's not a sign of discomfort on the faces of those that linger in the streets, stand against the wall on the pavements or sit amid a pile of metal scrap. The "insiders" have become immune to the odour and care little about the health hazards that hang over their heads like a dark cloud. These insiders work where they live and live where they work. Infants, too, are playing amid the same dump of metal scrap that reeks of chemicals and burnt metal.

As much as 90% of the country’s eWaste is dismantled and recycled in unorganised hubs

We ask one of the mothers sitting on the pavement that aren't they worried their children may step on a piece of metal or inhale the dangerous fumes. She says, as a matter of fact, *"Khelenge nahi toh seekhenge kaise?* (if they won't play, how will they learn)". The comment is not an attack at us but we almost feel silly asking that question. It makes us feel ignorant, not because we don't understand where we are but because we realise what other option do they have?

One such hub is Seelampur in Delhi where almost every household's livelihood depends on eWaste



It is located in the most densely populated district of India, North East Delhi, at 36,155 people per sq km

Seelampur, one of India's e-waste dumping sites, alone deals with more than 30,000 tonne of e-waste on a daily basis. Most of what can be found in Seelampur comes from "Noida wale bade office ya bade sarkari office" (large firms in Noida or big government departments). Seelampur is a semi-urban pocket established in 1993 to relocate displaced families living in north and central Delhi after the Emergency in the 1970s. Today, almost every household deals with e-waste as their only source of income. Coincidentally, Seelampur also happens to located in the most densely populated district of India — North East Delhi — at 36,155 people per sq km.

It alone deals with more than 30,000
tonne of eWaste on a daily basis

While we were walking through the locality, a man from the community who was accompanying us told us that raids by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) are an annual phenomenon. Every time a tip-off is received about a raid, people scurry around and pull shutters down. When MCD raids Seelampur, some shops/houses are sealed while others keep their work under covers for a few days, and everything is back on track like before within a week.

The locality is perpetually engulfed in a strong, pungent smell of burnt metal and chemicals

Our guide introduced us to some of the people in the community who deal with metal scrap, but we soon realised that it's not a good idea of introducing us with the identity of our organisation. Our couple of conversations with some of them make it clear to us that they are extremely skeptical of NGOs "*jo hamari rozi-roti lena chahte hain*" (that want to take our daily bread and butter away).

Parents are not afraid of kids cutting their feet
on metal scraps or inhaling poisonous chemicals

As much as 90 per cent of e-waste in the country is dismantled and recycled in unorganised hubs (according to an Assocham study) like Seelampur where the efficiency of extracting metals is extremely poor due to lack of sophisticated equipment and formal training to gain expertise in the same. At the same time, lack of safety gear and proper guidelines to manage e-Waste significantly raise the risk of health hazards. Yet, thousands of men, women and children are employed and engaged in unorganised e-waste dumping and recycling sites where they hunt for lead, copper, aluminium and brass amid a pile of old smartphones, desktops, laptops, tablets, motherboards, circuit boards, air-conditioners, fridges and motors.

Thousands of men, women and children hunt for metal scraps from discarded electronic devices, gadgets and appliances

According to a study released by the Electronics Industry Association of India, Componex Nepcon 2009 had estimated the total e-waste generation of India at 4.34 lakh tonne by the end of 2009. With increasing per capita income and purchasing power, India's electronic market has become the largest in the world and is anticipated to be worth $400 billion by 2020. It is also likely to generate 52 lakh metric tonne of e-waste per annum by 2020, much higher than the current level of 18 lakh metric tonne — growing at a compound annual growth rate of about 30 per cent — as per an Assocham-Kinetics study. This waste is dumped at unorganised dumping and recycling sites such as Seelampur in Delhi, Moradabad in Uttar Pradesh and Andheri in Mumbai, Maharashtra.

None of them have proper training or safety gear to handle eWaste efficiently.

Already, India’s technological revolution and hunger for cheap phones have made it the fifth largest e-waste generator in the world. In the capitalist world, every device becomes outdated in three years and reaches its zero value, forcing firms to discard their old systems and buy new ones. Even we as individuals are being “inspired” to “buy new” and “buy updated”, the amount of e-waste generated per year is increasing at an alarming rate, with no proper measures or mechanism to deal with it in a structured and organised manner — not just on papers but in reality, too.

India’s e-market is anticipated to be worth $400 billion by 2020; generating 52 lakh metric tonne of eWaste annually

For a country producing nearly 18 lakh metric tonne of e-waste, there are only about 178 dismantlers/recyclers authorised by the government in India; and not all of them are equipped with end-to-end capabilities to recycle e-waste in an environment-friendly manner. e-Waste poses a massive threat to life of those that deal with it and those that live in areas that deal with it. Assocham states that 76 per cent of those that deal with e-waste are prone to cancer and suffer from weak immunity systems. Breathing problems are not rare in these areas. This is just its effect on health. Its consequences for the environment is equally scary.

Reports suggest that 76% of those that deal with eWaste are prone to serious health issues

There is, therefore, a need for electronic consumers to become conscious users of their gadgets, and for the government to take a more proactive role in ensuring that e-waste is dismantled and recycles under proper international guidelines, and those dealing with e-waste are supplied with adequate safety gear. India cannot call its Digital India programme a success unless it addresses these concerns.

Does that make India ‘Digital India’?

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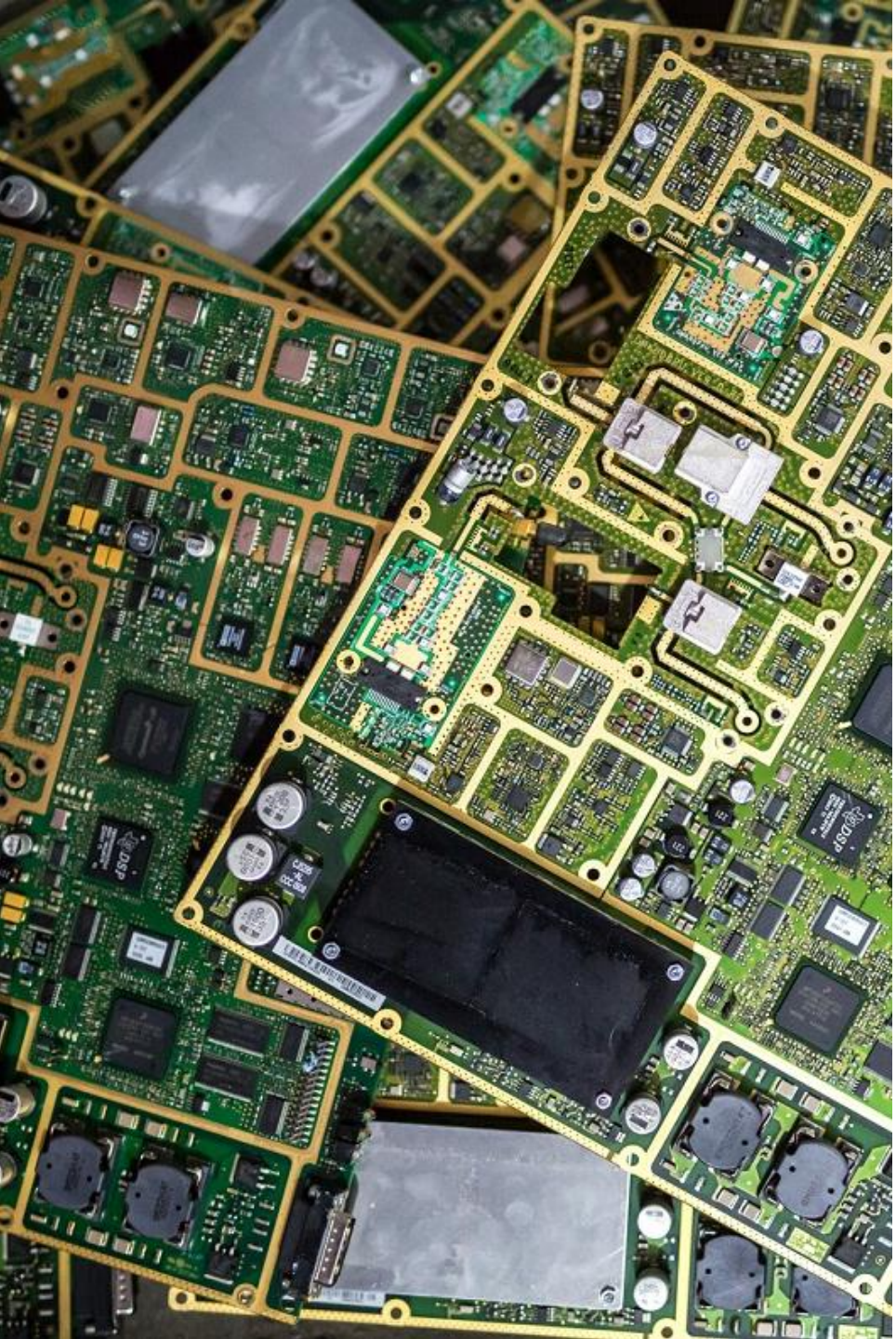

Osama Manzar is founder-director of Digital Empowerment Foundation and chair of Manthan and mBillionth awards. He is member, advisory board, at Alliance for Affordable Internet and has co-authored NetCh@kra–15 Years of Internet in India *and* Internet Economy of India*. Manzar tweets @osamamanzar.*

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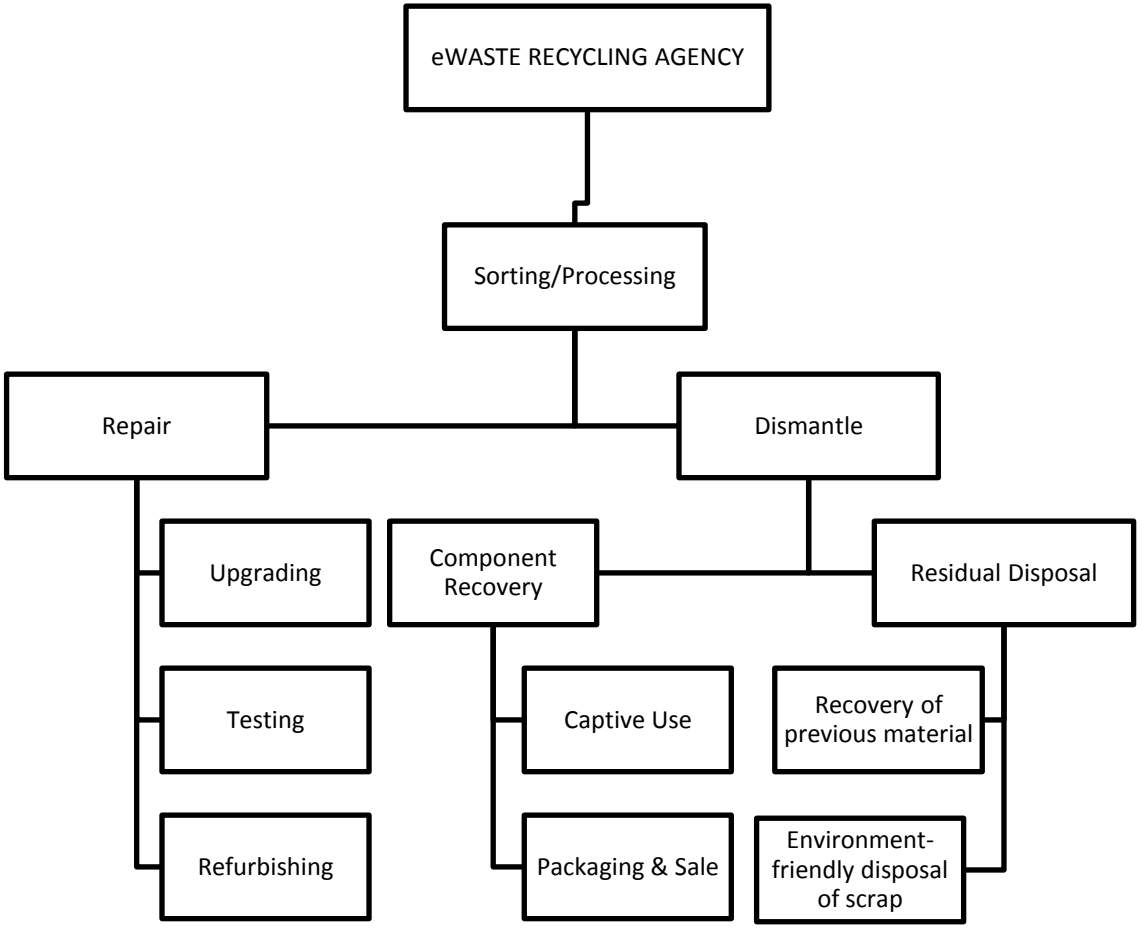
How can you be a conscious consumer?

- You can donate your old but usable mobile phones, tablets, laptops, and PCs to government schools and NGOs that are willing to reuse such devices
- You can return your out-of-order devices to manufacturers
- You can set up community collection points and sent your eWaste to authorised recycling centres

Understanding the process of recycling



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