

E-waste management: No space for workers' rights?



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The union Ministry of Environment proposed new guidelines and rules for e-waste management in May this year. Earlier, the e-waste management rules were introduced in 2011 and 2016.

India is producing electric and electronic waste on a large scale, second to China and the U.S. in the world. Against this background, we have to deeply analyze the changes and new features in the new e-waste management rules.

Affected workers

What's electronic waste? The electronic gadgets and their spare-parts, which are beyond repair and condemned, are considered as e-waste. Radio, all kinds of computer and its accessories, air-conditioner, air-cooler, camera, musical instrument, smart phone and its related instruments, pen drive, digital clock, digital toy, digital machineries in kitchen and instruments used for medical tests make up the e-waste. There are three types of workers in e-

waste management: collectors of e-waste; workers segregating parts of the collected condemned gadgets and workers recycling the scrapped electronic instruments, depending on their quality.

How do the new e-waste management rules affect these three types of workers?

The collection, segregation and recycling of e-waste happen only in the unorganized sector. According to some data, about 25,000 to 35,000 workers are involved in this trade. There are instances of some scrapped e-gadgets being repaired and brought into re-use. The utterly condemned electronic goods are sent for recycling. There is an allegation doing the rounds that child laborers are engaged in this trade.

Recycling possible?

An enterprise selling a large number of electronic goods must also identify e-waste, collect scrapped goods and take measures to recycle them. They must also have a certificate in their possession, which says that they have recycled the old electronic goods in proportion to those they have sold. However, there is a risk of fake certificates too. As e-waste piles up more, there are chances of recycling suffering a setback. Hence, there is no guarantee that the certificates that the organizations in charge of manufacturing give are genuine and honest. According to the new e-waste management rules, a manufacturer must recycle 60 per cent of the electronic goods sold by them, which have fallen into repair. This percentage is planned to increase to 70 in 2024 and 80 in 2025. But how far it is possible is not known.

Generally, recycling of e-waste takes place in unsafe places without any modern technology involved. In these circumstances, the experts in this field ask how the 60 percentage goal can be achieved without employing recycling technology and the required infrastructure.

In order to achieve the higher goals in e-waste recycling, set by the union government, the welfare of various workers in the unorganized sector must be ensured because it's they who are more employed in the recycling enterprises. How is it fair to expect to increase the rate of recycling while no facilities have been provided to the e-waste collectors, segregators and the recyclers?

The following question is also important: Should all condemned electronic goods or only some of them be recycled? The reason is that recycling of some e-goods is quite costly and detrimental to environment. The cost of recycling plastics, copper and glass is low. But recycling of some old e-goods is costlier and more time-consuming in terms of technology and manpower. Unfortunately, there are no clear-cut explanations on this count in the new guidelines.

Guiding committee

According to the new guidelines on e-waste management, the chairperson of the Central Pollution Control Board will be the chief of the guiding committee set up for e-waste management. Moreover, the committee will consist of a representative each from the union Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Information Technology and workers from the recycling sector. But e-waste researchers, scientific experts and members of the public do not figure in the committee.

At a time when electric and electronic waste is mounting in all states, the government and the public must ponder the ways and means to reduce e-waste. If the manufacturers avoid producing sub-standard goods and come out with goods of quality, e-waste can be reduced, to some extent, in the initial phase itself.

Before throwing overboard an overused e-good, the user must try to extend its life-span by repairing it. Laptop, smart phone and tablet can be repaired and reused. Thus, e-waste problem can be solved, to some extent.

The government must create sufficient infrastructure and modern technologies to recycle the piling e-waste. The newly introduced e-waste management rules must be reviewed and changed so as to benefit the environment and people. This measure will prove beneficial not only to the earth and the present generation but also to posterity.

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