

Don't Waste Your E-waste

Pallavi.Chakravorty@timesgroup.com

The Global E-waste Monitor 2020 says the world generated a record 53.6 million tonnes of e-waste last year. India is the third biggest contributor to this dump with 3.2 million tonnes, after China and the US. While the environmental hazard is worsening, some companies are beginning to take e-waste management seriously. "Things are certainly looking up since 2017 with several brands doing their bit in responsible e-waste management," says Pranshu Singhal, Founder, Karo Sambhav, a PRO (producer responsibility organisation) offering e-waste solutions and EPR (extended producer responsibility) services.

For example, South Korean consumer durables giant LG has created a pan-India network of 40 recyclers, and collected and recycled almost 100 kilo MT of e-waste during 2017-2020. The company has also aligned its call centres to register take-back requests besides introducing exchange programmes. Hardware maker Dell, in a decade-long programme, has used plastic recovered from old computers to new make parts. "We provide free end-of-life management direct to the consumer in 75+ countries and territories," says Deepak Ohlyan, Dell Technologies' Vice President for global facilities across Asia-Pacific, Japan and China. "In India, we have set up e-waste drop-off points at 23 locations." By 2030, for every product a customer buys, Dell plans to reuse or recycle an equivalent product.

Smartphone market leader Xiaomi has introduced a Product Take Back & Recycling Programme, by which a customer's Mi account is credited with a Rs 100 discount coupon for every old product collected. The company has also tied up with Karo Sambhav to set up over 1,150 e-waste collection points – for old phones, batteries, accessories – at all Xiaomi Mi Homes and Mi Authorised Service Centres in over 500 cities. A company spokesperson said Xiaomi



ANIRBAN BORA

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collected more than 400 tonnes of e-waste over the past three years: "We recognise our unique potential towards promoting responsible e-waste management of our end-of-life products and urge everyone to join our cohesive e-waste movement."

While these efforts are laudable, several challenges are extant. "The sector suffers from lack of investment, infrastructure and consumer awareness," says T.J. Chang, Head of Customer Service at LG Electronics India. "Plus, existence of a large informal sector and consumers' expectation of high returns for their old product makes e-waste collection a costly affair in India." From a policy perspective, the Centre introduced the EPR framework in 2017, which has helped, but it doesn't set recovery targets for recyclers. "Unless recovery targets are set, it will be very difficult to monitor how much of actual recycling is happening," says

Singhal. In addition, the EPR must include the informal sector for better results, and more innovative technologies are needed for extraction of precious metals from e-waste, according to Shantanu Srivastava, Lead-Public Affairs, Thinkthrough Consulting.

There are 312 registered recyclers with the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), but the key challenge is that "most registered recyclers don't even have a working shed, forget about a plant. So, there is no monitoring happening while giving the licences", says Nitin Gupta, Co-founder, Attero, a recycling company. "If the licences are given by CPCB instead of the state pollution control boards, monitoring would be strict and the system more streamlined." Effective monitoring would also require data, but India's recycling data is just not there. "Can anyone say how much metal has been recovered from the recycling that has happened in the past two years? There is no data available," rues Satish Sinha, Associate Director with Toxics Link, an environmental research and advocacy organisation.

Currently, there are more questions than answers for the ever-increasing e-waste challenge, but the initiatives by companies do give us some hope for the future.

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