

Connecting the Unconnected

Inside the invisible e-waste economy of Delhi's Seelampur

Toxic debris from wealthier nations is redirected to informal settlements such as Seelampur under the guise of second-hand goods. E-waste markets flourish because informal, marginalised spaces allow hazardous, illicit economies to operate beyond regulatory oversight.



A worker at Seelampur's e-waste market DEF

Written by: Alfiya Azeem Khan, Raina Ghosh

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explores how technology can drive inclusion and governance in India. The column focuses on how the digital divide impacts communities differently and advocates for equitable, citizen-informed solutions that ensure technology empowers rather than excludes.

The afternoon air in Old Seelampur, in the Shahdara district of Delhi, smells of burning plastic and soldered metal. It feels like an empire of discarded technology – dead laptops, shattered phones, and obsolete monitors piled high, set against a relentless soundtrack of hammers clanging on metal, tools scraping, and barked orders echoing through the cramped, bustling lanes. This is the everyday rhythm of *Gali Number Chaar*, Lane Number 4, the oldest and commercially vital artery of India's largest informal e-waste market.

But the places in Seelampur cannot be studied in isolation. These are crucial nodes in the global economy of discard, with countries such as India, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Ghana long serving as the [outsourced backend of the world's digital economy](#). Cutting across scale and geographies, toxic debris from wealthier nations is redirected to informal settlements under the guise of second-hand goods. This is not a story of enforcement failure alone. It is one of organised irresponsibility, where Western producers offload the environmental costs of recycling, and India's regulatory vacuum absorbs the fallout.

Our visit to Seelampur was part of a circular economy project for DEF. We were mapping the informal e-waste clusters to understand how marginalised urban communities sustain themselves through precarious, undocumented livelihoods in Seelampur's informal economy. The



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involved in creating a hidden economy. The locality is often presented as the ugly face of East Delhi's Jamna-Paar region, absorbing the leftovers of global digital throwaways, steeped in poverty and rife with communal tensions. Yet, this area is actually a patchwork of distinct Muslim-majority neighbourhoods, including Shahdara, Old and New Seelampur, Jafrabad, and Maujpur, each with its own settlement history and divisions of social labour. Along the polluted and decaying banks of the Shahdara drain, once known as the Yamuna Canal, much of this hidden economy secretly unfolds. [Studies](#) estimate that 5,000 unregistered e-waste processing units operate here, without official authorisation, and are integral to India's waste management ecosystem.

Seelampur was established in the late 1960s as a state-sponsored resettlement colony for Muslim families uprooted by the Partition and later by slum clearance drives during the Emergency (1975–77). Located across the Yamuna, it was intended to contain populations deemed undesirable by the city. While some original plots have been regularised, subsequent informal expansions have ignored planning norms, resulting in a maze of narrow streets and improvised spaces. Many homes now serve as both residences and workshops. In one lane, littered with smashed hard drives and tangled wires, a shop transforms into a mosque for Friday prayers. Nearby, a junkyard dismantling old televisions borders a courtyard where children play cricket with broken remote controls.

While Gali Number Char functions as the commercial nerve centre, home to established traders dealing in bulk scrap sourced through government auctions, the rest of the market is a

maze of interconnected lanes, each specialising in specific components, such as plastics, circuit boards, and copper wire.



Discarded electronic waste at Seelampur DEF

The informal labour chain inside Seelampur is complex and highly segmented. At the base are pheriwalas (roving scrap collectors), who scour Delhi's residential neighbourhoods for discarded electronics. Mid-level dealers then sort and dismantle devices, extracting valuable metals and components. At the top, established traders in Gali Number Char handle bulk transactions, often acquiring government e-waste through Metal Scrap Trade Corporation (MSTC) auctions. These key players act as linchpins, distributing consignments to smaller workshops and informal yards scattered throughout the area.

India's 2016 E-Waste (Management) Rules prohibit the import of electronic waste. It mandates that the producers manage the disposal of their products under the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) framework. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) certifies formal recycling facilities and authorises imports of old equipment only for limited, regulated purposes. In reality, however, these rules

are barely enforced.

The e-waste market in Seelampur has flourished precisely because informal, marginalised spaces allow hazardous, illicit economies to operate beyond regulatory oversight.

“No one here wants to talk to people with notebooks anymore,” a scrap worker in his forties tells us.

“Everyone who comes here will write something, click photos, and make videos. When they go away, the police raids begin.”

The resentment is understandable. The market is constantly forced to navigate shifting grey areas, operating in a state of perpetual negotiation with law enforcement. Traders recount how trucks loaded with e-waste must arrive under the cover of darkness, to avoid daytime scrutiny. “Sometimes it’s from Maharashtra or Punjab, other times goods arrive from China and Dubai,” says one trader, requesting anonymity. “If the police catch the truck, they’ll demand Rs 50,000 or Rs 1 lakh to let it pass.”

Despite the 2016 law prohibiting imports, foreign e-waste continues to slip through India’s borders, its origins obscured by forged documents and an informal logistics network that stretches from the ports to Delhi’s industrial outskirts.

The statistics paint a stark picture. North-eastern and eastern Delhi, along with neighbouring Ghaziabad, have emerged as principal dumping grounds for India’s e-waste. Despite the presence of 178 registered recyclers nationwide, the informal sector still processes 95% of the country’s e-waste. Even formal recyclers have found discreet ways to circumvent regulations. Scrap dealers funnel 38% of the e-waste into informal yards, while producers, manufacturers, and showrooms contribute another

manufacturers, and show some contribute another 28%, often by diverting waste to unauthorised processors.

To address these challenges, the government amended the E-Waste Rules in 2016, introducing Producer Responsibility Organisations (PROs) – professional agencies tasked with assisting manufacturers in meeting EPR targets and coordinating recycling infrastructure. Yet, systemic gaps persist. PROs care is restricted to working only with authorised recyclers, who account for less than 10% of India’s total recycling capacity. This has resulted in a fragmented regulatory landscape, where PROs struggle to meet collection quotas, and informal markets such as Seelampur absorb the surplus.

An inspection by the Delhi Pollution Control Committee of 83 authorised EPR outlets revealed widespread non-compliance – an open secret among Seelampur’s waste workers. “Most big companies just want the certificate. Nobody cares what happens to the waste after that,” a local trader observes.

The Seelampur operations thrive on a mix of jugaad, skill, informality, and relentless manual labour. In dimly lit workshops, workers dismantle electronics using improvised tools: chisels made from discarded metal rods, repurposed screwdrivers hammered into shape, and even chunks of concrete as makeshift anvils. Salvaged parts are cleaned and repackaged to pass as new. Copper wires are burned in alleyways under the cover of darkness, their toxic fumes quietly merging with Delhi’s polluted air. Older monitors and CPUs – banned for import since 2016 – are smuggled in with legitimate goods, their paperwork doctored to pass through a loose network of middlemen and

pass through a loose network of intermediaries and transporters.

As a young worker put it while stripping a circuit board clean, “Your phones, your laptops, your air conditioners — they don’t disappear into thin air. They come to Seelampur to die or to get a shot at another life.”

It is therefore essential to ask who or what sustains Delhi’s e-waste trade? The answer is not located in poverty or failures in regulatory enforcement alone; it is rather a deliberate outsourcing of environmental risk and legal ambiguity to the margins of the city. It is a system, carefully designed to benefit from invisibilised labour, from the loopholes in policy, from the complicity of formal actors who look the other way as long as the waste vanishes. Underdevelopment is strategic here, as Seelampur fills the cracks that the system refuses to seal.

Until we address the systems that shift the burden of waste onto marginalised communities, no policy will truly erase the toxic legacy we leave behind. The need of the hour is a reckoning with the material flows of our digital economy, and with the fact that behind every recycled phone is a worker in Seelampur bearing the cost of our convenience.

Alfiya Azeem Khan, a Digital Swaraj Fellow, works for the Research & Advocacy Division at the Digital Empowerment Foundation.

Raina Ghosh, a Doctorate from Jawaharlal Nehru University, works for the Research & Advocacy Division at the Digital Empowerment Foundation.

Views expressed are the authors’ own.