

‘Right to repair’ key to circular economy

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The Union Budget 2022-23 talks of shifting to a circular economy. A circular economy recognises that economic activities are embedded in an ecological life-support system. A circular economy provides incentives for reusing products rather than discarding them. In a circular economy, waste generation is minimal and the goods of today become the resources of tomorrow.

The Budget includes several provisions to move to a carbon-neutral and circular economy. Rs 20,000 crore have been allocated to incentivise the production of high-efficiency solar modules. This is expected to facilitate the government’s 280-GW installed solar capacity goal. The use of biomass pellets in thermal power plants and setting up business models for energy conservation are promoted in the Budget.

The Budget document is spot on when it observes that the transition to a circular economy is expected to help enhance productivity and create new jobs. This is true for many sectors, including the booming electronics manufacturing industry. Electronic waste generation is a rapidly growing problem: The total global e-waste generation in 2022 is projected to approach 60 million metric tons.

In the absence of a circular economy, most of this e-waste will continue to end up in landfills. On the one hand, important metals will pollute the environment instead of being reused. On the other hand, more of the earth will be mined for these materials. Of the 53.6 million metric tons of e-waste generated globally in 2019, only 17% was collected and recycled. According to a UN study, global e-waste is surging at the rate of 21% every five years. This is alarming, since discarded e-waste can leach out toxic and hazardous substances like dioxins and mercury.

More than half the global e-waste is made up of equipment that can be repaired and reused. Some of these are discarded because it is more convenient to replace them than to get them repaired. It is common to find “planned obsolescence” and artificially shortened product lifecycles as practices by companies to retain customers. Many of the companies design their products in such a way that repairing them is simply too difficult. Customers are forced to buy a new product even in case of a minor fault.

Schemes such as extended producers’ responsibility, buy-back and exchange programmes have not been effectively implemented. As a result, e-waste constitutes nearly 5% of municipal solid waste worldwide. This figure is rapidly rising due to the increasing availability of electronic goods. Material extraction of e-waste takes place in hazardous ways without considering human safety or environmental health.

An important tool that can help solve the e-waste issue is a ‘right to repair’ law. Right to repair is currently a movement that calls for governments to formulate policies that allow consumers to repair electronic products on their own. For this to work, companies must design their products in a suitable way and provide instructions for making repair possible. Consumers should have this right embedded in the purchase process. It should be possible for consumers to fix all broken products either at home or by visiting a repair shop.

Manufacturing companies should provide spare parts to encourage the long-term use of electronic devices. Where repair at home is not possible, companies should provide adequate repair information so that repair shops can do the job. In this way, the right to repair will help extend the life of electronic items and reduce e-waste generation. According to the Budget, action plans for reusing e-waste, industrial waste and end-of-life vehicles are now ready. These action plans will receive a shot in the arm if strengthened with a right to repair law.

The first global attempt to create right to repair laws was made in the US in 2001. In November 2021, technology giant Apple announced that it will allow US customers to repair their iPhones on their own. After years of resistance, Apple agreed to make available phone parts, necessary tools and repair manuals to make repair at home feasible. The availability of genuine Apple parts will make the repair process cheaper and will prolong the life of Apple products.

Recently, US lawmakers have introduced right to repair bills to enable vehicle owners to repair their vehicles or have them repaired at independent repair shops. The objective is to make repairs easy and affordable.

Right to repair is a step toward achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 12 on responsible consumption and production. In India, there is already a culture of reuse and repair. Availability of genuine product parts and instructions from manufacturers will prolong product life and reduce e-waste. The right to repair must be enforced by the government. It can be a milestone on the path to a circular economy.

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