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ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS EXPOSE DANGERS OF E-WASTE



Delhi, India: In the streets of Mustaffabad, a poor quarter of Delhi, children in sandals sit on top of piles of broken glass and twisted metal, smashing computer monitors. Men with blowtorches melt circuit boards, which are then passed to women, to be scrubbed with diluted acid. Charred fiberglass and copper dust litter the ground.

This is the world of the electronic waste (e-waste) recyclers, who make a living by tearing apart the toxic remains of old home computers, cell phones and printer cartridges from the United States and other countries. India imported about 50,000 tons of e-waste last year, and e-waste employs about 25,000 people in Delhi.

Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, an Advocacy Project (AP) partner based in Delhi, is working to organize the recyclers and lobby the Indian government for better safety regulations.

The group recently linked up with the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition (SVTC), a California environmental group, to profile the e-waste recyclers through a documentary film and improve their working conditions. The film is entitled "Citizens at Risk: How Electronic Waste is Poisoning the Path out of Poverty for India's Recyclers," and premiered at SVTC's 2008 Benefit on November 15 in San Jose, California.

"The usual story told about e-waste is... it's toxic," said Chintan Director Bharati Chaturvedi. "There's no mention of the people involved. There are not conversations about these human beings."

The film was directed and produced by Ms Chaturvedi and Arjun Bhagat of Chintan. They plan to use the film for advocacy in India, and will urge companies to improve their handling of e-waste.

About 95 percent of all e-waste in Delhi is handled by the informal sector, where recyclers work without safety equipment. This exposes them to lead, mercury, cadmium, dioxins, brominated flame retardants and other harmful chemicals. Chintan and SVTC want computer companies to start making less toxic products, but to also take responsibility for how those products are dealt with once discarded.

"I hope the manufacturers will remove all toxics from their products," said Sheila Davis, Executive Director of SVTC. "Someday, e-waste recycling will switch from being a hazardous job to a green job: not only in the US, but all over the world."

As a start, Chintan is bringing e-waste recyclers together so that they can enter into negotiations and apply for business loans. The group hopes to develop a business model where waste can be handled in a safe, responsible manner that avoids child labor and provides a livelihood for Delhi's poorest citizens. Chintan will also petition the government for regulations that reduce the impact of e-waste on workers and the environment.

Consumers who buy computers will play a key help the campaign to achieve its goals: "(They) have a bigger voice in environmental justice than they realize," Ms Chaturvedi said.

Ms Chaturvedi urged consumers to write to computer manufacturers, ask where the remains of their computers are going, and encourage them to recycle responsibly. She said that the aim is not to take away these jobs, but to raise standards and improve working conditions for those already dealing with the world's e-waste.

- View a [sneak preview](#) of images from the documentary
- Learn more about [Chintan](#)
- Learn more about [SVTC](#)