



October 14, 2019

SEMINAR NOTICE

Topic: “Doing it right: Conceptions and Material Arrangements of Honesty and Compliance in e-waste Recycling”

Speaker: Julia Perczel, University of Manchester

Chair: Professor Amita Baviskar, IEG

The seminar details are as follows:

Date & time: FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2019 AT 03.30 P.M.

Venue: A.M. Khusro Room
Institute of Economic Growth,
Delhi-110 007

All are welcome.


(Oindrila De)

Abstract:

This seminar talk will ask the question, what it means to do it right when dealing with electronic discards. I spent the previous nine months on fieldwork, seeking for an answer to this question at two places in Delhi, recording and trying to understand the processes that were set into motion by the E-waste (Management) Rules of 2016. The Indian legislation is a result of almost two decades of advocacy by local and international groups which campaigned for the official recognition of the hazards associated with the ever-growing volumes of electronic and electric discards—their components, handling and breakdown. While initially framed as an issue of environmental justice, as e-waste from the global north was dumped in places like India and China, the Indian laws are now directed to an exponentially growing local market and use, shifting the responsibility from countries in the global north to global and local companies. Producers, denoting any seller of electronic products, are responsible for a progressively increasing percentage of their obsolete products under the Extended Producer’s Responsibility (or EPR) framework. This duty of theirs they can fulfil either individually or by contracting Producer’s Responsibility Organisations (PROs).

My research follows the value chain of a recently founded PRO and its employees, as they establish processes to fulfil legal compliance, but also as they are struggling at the same time to go beyond what is mandated by the law for an environmentally and legally sound collection, transport and disposal of e-waste. So doing, they develop an everyday narrative claim to “being the only PRO that actually does work”, meaning actual material flows corresponding to the documentation required for EPR compliance. This is framed in opposition to the mushrooming PROs and certified recyclers, who are willing to operate at lesser costs but are suspected to do “paper ka kaam” only with no material basis. However, “doing actual work” by this PRO depends on suppliers who operate in the informal computer scrap market and under a different set of moral codes and conceptions of honesty, rooted in traders’ mores, kinship relations, and religion. Such informal claims about right and wrong provide an interesting counterpoint to the increasingly audited everyday logistical operations and their material arrangements that come to constitute the right way to recycle. Through these narratives, paying attention to the material arrangements in both the PRO company and the informal scrap market, I explore how the moral and the legal aspects of e-waste recycling contrast, but are also conflated and blurred, as kinship relations and religion come to bear upon the establishment of the value chain. I hope that my presentation would provide new insights into what is at stake in the process of regularising the handling of e-waste.