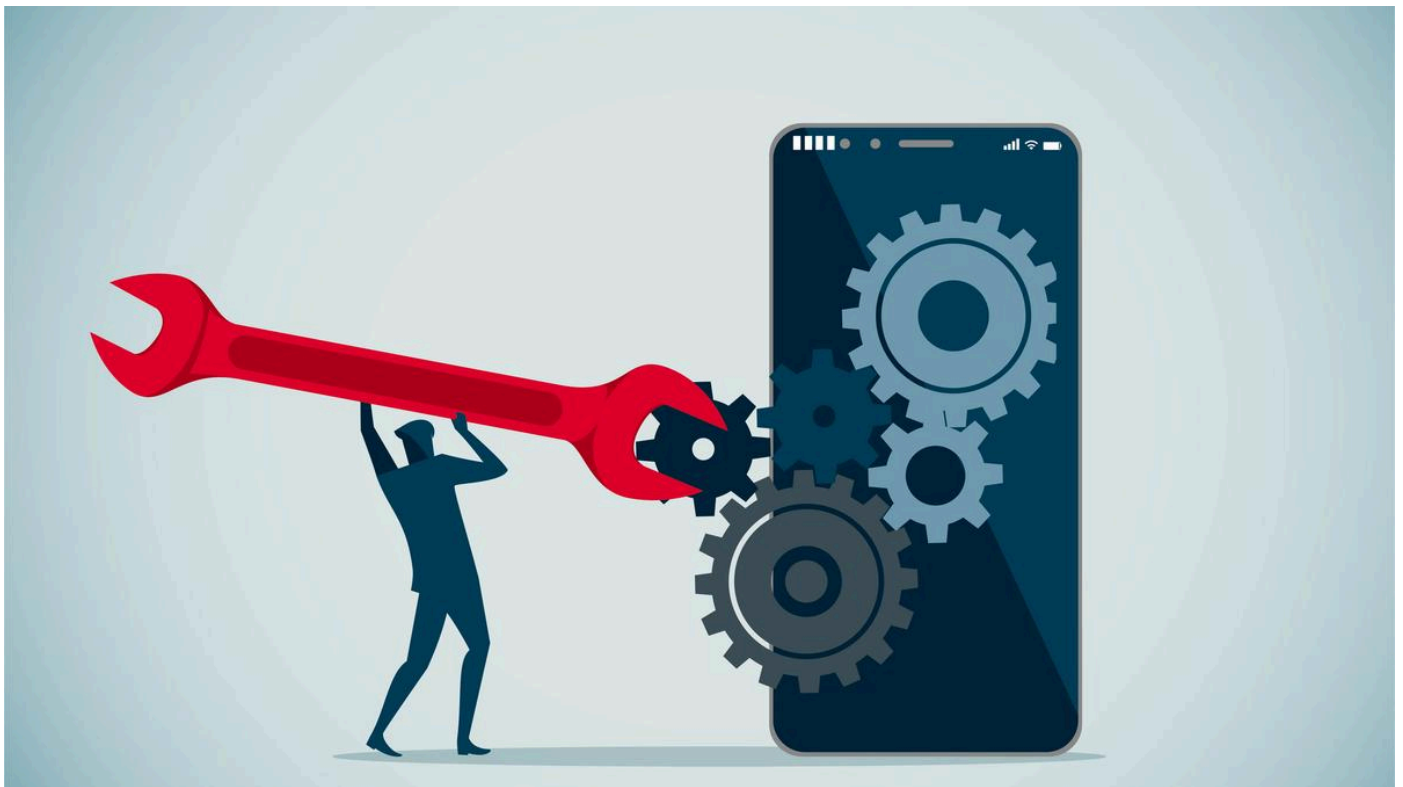


The right to repair movement in India | Explained

What is the Repairability Index? What does 'planned obsolescence' with respect to electronics mean? How different is the right to repair movement in the U.S. as compared to India? How are consumer advocates and electronic manufacturers responding to the Index?

Published - May 14, 2025 08:30 am IST

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For representative purposes. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

The story so far: The Department of Consumer Affairs (DoCA) last week announced that a report for a “Framework on Repairability Index (RI) in Mobile and Electronic Sector” had been submitted to the government. Under the RI, consumer electronics and electronic appliances would be assigned a score depending on how easy they are to repair by evaluating products under criteria like availability of spare parts, cost of repair, software updates, and availability of information.

Why is there a focus on repairing products?

The home appliance industry is full of examples of products like washing machines and air conditioners which if purchased several years ago work for a long time without any problems, while the newer ones face frequent failures. While “planned obsolescence” — selling consumers less durable products intentionally so that they come back to buy a newer model — is often cited as a reason for this, there is often a simpler reason: companies are cutting corners on raw materials and manufacturing, under the strain of increasing metal costs and price competition.

Attero Recycling CEO Nitin Gupta said in an interaction with The Hindu in 2023 that the “amount of metal content on [appliance] units” had come down, and that shortages in materials like copper have led to leaner engineering choices. India is a net importer of metals, Mr. Gupta said, increasing pressures to maintain existing electronic products.

These developments have made repair a much bigger issue in many electronics, and a looming factor for consumers to consider when purchasing a product. This isn't a uniquely Indian problem. U.S. lawmaker Marie Gluesenkamp Perez recently described a draft law she had introduced requiring appliance makers to display average annual maintenance and repair costs alongside the price of a product, and said that longer-lasting older appliances (and potentially newer ones built to last) like washing machines were a form of “durable wealth” as they last longer. Prolonging the life of an appliance ties into other priorities, like promoting e-waste recycling (part of what Indian officials have described as a “circular economy,” where parts and metals go back into a value chain, a long-held but inadequately achieved aim), and regulating the demand for “virgin” metals that have been freshly mined.

The main impetus, however, is likely the end-consumer benefit of having longer-lasting products. Since the processing power of smartphones and computers in particular have not grown as much in recent years as in the 2010s, ecological and economic imperatives align on making sure that consumers have products that last, or at least products that can be repaired cheaply and quickly.

What is the right to repair?

Consumer groups around the world have been fighting for the right to repair, a broad umbrella term referring to greater flexibility for a consumer in terms of how they can get their products repaired. In India, the DoCA has launched a right to repair portal,

which lists the authorised service centres of various manufacturers and repair literature published by them.

This is a non-confrontational interpretation of the right to repair. In the U.S., consumer groups have rallied around the term to resist companies that seek to monopolise the repair of their products, such as by restricting access to spare parts, and penalising customers who choose third party repair services. Protections for such customers have emerged from the American right to repair movement, but the Indian interpretation aligns closely with equipment manufacturers' insistence that the availability of authorised service channels are sufficient.

With the RI framework, the government indicated that it would work to pursue such scoring "without causing any impediment to the industry with regard to innovation and ease of doing business". Electronics makers have strenuously fought some right to repair legislations in the U.S., cautious of the business impact of losing repair revenue, which has emerged as a key revenue stream in some sectors. McDonald's ice cream machines are a commonly cited example, as they break down frequently and franchisees have only been permitted to have them repaired by technicians of the Taylor Company, which makes the machines.

The committee that drafted the RI framework was dominated in membership by industry groups and electronics manufacturers. However, that does not mean that the deliberations and the report's outcome will completely favour them, like the right-to-repair portal did. Pushpa Girimaji, a consumer rights advocate and lawyer who has closely tracked the intricacies of the right to repair, was part of the committee; Ms. Girimaji recently described a manufacturer's refusal to offer repair on an aging lift as "highly exploitative and a violation of the consumers' right to choice," and hit many of the key notes that consumer advocates elsewhere have advocated for, including accommodation of third party repair services.