

Daily Editorial Analysis 4 August 2025

August 4, 2025 • vajiramandravi.com

The 'Right to Repair' Must Include the 'Right to Remember'

Context

- In May 2025, **the Indian government took a bold step by accepting a proposal for a Repairability Index for mobile phones and appliances.**
- This initiative, along with new e-waste policies incentivising formal recycling, **marks a timely push for sustainable electronics.**
- While these developments signal progress, **the path to a truly sustainable and inclusive digital future demands more than regulatory reform.**
- It **requires deep appreciation and support for the tacit**, cultural knowledge that underpins India's vibrant but often overlooked repair economy.

The Invisible Backbone of India's Technology Ecosystem

- **India's evolving digital and AI policies**, exemplified by initiatives like Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and the National Strategy on Artificial Intelligence (NSAI), **prioritise innovation and data-driven efficiency.**
- Yet, **the informal repair sector, composed of mobile and appliance fixers** working in bustling places like Delhi's Karol Bagh and Chennai's Ritchie Street, **remains largely invisible to digital and policy frameworks.**
- This **sector's knowledge is not written in manuals or stored in software**; rather, it is embodied in experience, intuition, and adaptability.
- The **work of these repairers extends the life of electronics far beyond planned obsolescence.**
- They diagnose faults through sensory cues, reuse components, and improvise solutions with modest tools.
- **Their significance goes far beyond mere economic contribution**, they sustain India's material resilience, often in the face of increasing consumer disposability and devices designed to be unrepairable.

The Value of Tacit Knowledge

- **Tacit knowledge**, passed through mentorship, observation, and hands-on practice, **is central to India's repair culture.**
- Unlike formal training, **it thrives on learning by doing, adapting to context**, and improvising.
- As AI systems continue to evolve, **drawing upon patterns shaped by this real-world problem-solving**, the contributions of informal workers become ever more crucial.

- Yet, **these communities typically receive little formal recognition** or policy support, exacerbating imbalances even as technology advances due to insights sourced from their labour.
- Globally, **the Right to Repair movement is gaining ground**. The European Union now mandates manufacturers to offer spare parts and repair documentation.
- **India, too, has made strides**, launching a Right to Repair framework and a national portal.
- Yet, **to lead effectively, India must recognise repair not merely as a service, but as essential knowledge work**.

Gaps and Blind Spots in Policy

- **In 2021-22, India was the world's third-largest generator of e-waste**. Rules emphasising Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) rightly pressure manufacturers to manage products at end-of-life, but rarely position repair as the frontline defence against waste.
- **National skilling schemes and educational policies**, such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, **praise experiential learning and traditional knowledge, yet seldom provide concrete pathways for passing on repair skills**.
- **This oversight illustrates a broader blind spot**: while policies tout repair and reuse principles, they risk marginalising the very workforce at the heart of these practices.
- **Sustainability initiatives like Mission LIFE champion environmental consciousness but must extend to supporting the informal economy** that makes such goals possible.

Unmaking and the Circular Economy

- A pivotal idea emerging from research is unmaking, **deliberately designing products with the expectation that they will be disassembled**, repaired, or repurposed.
- This **approach recognises every breakdown and repair as a source of learning and innovation**: a recovered circuit board becomes **a learning device, and a rescued phone part restores connectivity for someone in need**.
- **Repairers are thus not simply menders of material goods, but stewards of the circular economy**, embodying the principles of reuse and longevity that sustainability demands.

The Way Forward: Reimagining Policy and AI for Repair Justice

- **India's tradition of frugality and innovation**, seen in the everyday practices of jugaad, **predates digital reforms**.
- However, **new technology often prioritises compact design** and proprietary control over repairability.
- **A recent iFixit report showed that just 23% of smartphones sold in Asia are easily repairable**, largely due to design choices.
- To address this, **repairability must be embedded in design norms** and procurement standards from the outset.
- **Ministry of Electronics and IT**: Incorporate repairability into AI and procurement criteria.
- **Department of Consumer Affairs**: Expand the Right to Repair to include classification and community participation.

- **Ministry of Labour and Employment:** Formally recognize informal repairers through platforms like e-Shram, extending social protections and training.
- **Ministry of Skill Development:** Develop skilling programs tailored to the adaptive, non-standardised nature of repair work.

Conclusion

- **Supporting repair is not just about intellectual property** or technological efficiency, **it is about valuing the quiet, essential labour** that keeps society's electronics running.
- As philosopher Michael Polanyi once said, **We know more than we can tell.**
- **By preserving the tacit knowledge at the core of repair culture, India can build a just, repair-ready technological future,** one where sustainability, innovation, and human wisdom go hand in hand.

The 'Right to Repair' Must Include the 'Right to Remember' FAQs

Q1. What significant step did the Indian government take in May 2025 to promote sustainable electronics?

Ans. It accepted a report proposing a Repairability Index for mobile phones and appliances, ranking products based on ease of repair, spare part access, and software support.

Q2. Why is tacit knowledge important in India's repair economy?

Ans. Tacit knowledge, passed down through observation and hands-on experience, enables repairers to creatively diagnose and fix devices, sustaining India's material resilience beyond planned obsolescence.

Q3. What are some gaps in India's current policies regarding repair work?

Ans. While policies emphasize recycling and formal skilling, they often overlook informal repairers, the tacit nature of repair skills, and the need to integrate repairability into design and procurement.

Q4. What does the concept of 'unmaking' refer to in sustainable product design?

Ans. Unmaking involves designing products to be easily disassembled, repaired, or repurposed, making breakdowns opportunities for learning and reuse rather than failures.

Q5. How can AI and government ministries support India's informal repair sector?

Ans. AI can help codify tacit repair knowledge into shareable formats, while ministries can incorporate repairability criteria into policies, recognize informal repairers formally, and create tailored training programs.

Source: [The Hind](#)

Another Slip Up by India in the Trade Pact with the U.K.

Context

- The **India-United Kingdom Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)** introduces **notable changes to India's approach toward intellectual property (IP)**, particularly in the field of access to medicines and technology transfer.

- Chapter 13, especially **Article 13.6, signals a significant shift in India's policy stance**, raising deep concerns about its impact on public health, affordable medicine access, and broader developmental goals.
- Therefore, **it is important to delve into the shift in India's policy stance and its broader implications.**

Shift in India's Policy Stance and Concerns About Its Impact

• Dilution of India's Position on Compulsory Licensing

- Historically, **India has been a staunch defender of compulsory licensing**, a mechanism that allows governments to authorise the production of patented products without the patent owner's consent, especially to address high medicine prices.
- **The new CETA provision, however, elevates voluntary licensing as the preferable and optimal route** for access to medicines.
- This **represents a move away from compulsory licensing**, which India had previously championed at both domestic and multilateral levels.
- **The case of Natco Pharma's compulsory license in 2012 for the anticancer drug sorafenib tosylate is illustrative:** the price for one month's treatment fell from ₹2,80,428 to under ₹8,800, making the drug vastly more affordable for Indian patients.
- **Such cases highlight how compulsory licensing can play a critical role** in counteracting the excessive rent-seeking behaviours enabled by strong patents.

• Legal and Policy Safeguards under Threat

- India's alignment with the WTO's TRIPS Agreement had **originally retained regulatory mechanisms for compulsory licensing within the Patents Act.**
- It **tailored to public interest grounds**, such as lack of availability or high prices of patented products.
- Periodic reporting on the 'working' (commercialisation) of patents was also a key safeguard, **ensuring patents actually benefit Indian consumers.**
- This **safeguard has been eroded.**
- **Changes brought about by India's prior free trade agreements** and now reinforced by CETA have extended the reporting period **reducing transparency and making enforcement of the working requirement more challenging.**
- This, in turn, weakens another pillar for compulsory license issuance.

Problems with Voluntary Licensing

- Voluntary licensing **relies on the consent and negotiating strength of patent holders**, which tend to favour powerful multinational pharmaceutical firms over domestic generic producers in developing countries.
- Organisations like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have shown **that voluntary licenses come with restrictive terms, such as supply controls and geographic limitations**, limiting their ability to

guarantee widespread, affordable access.

- For example, **when Cipla produced remdesivir under a voluntary license** from Gilead Sciences during the COVID-19 pandemic, **the resulting price in India, after currency adjustments, was actually higher than what Gilead charged in the U.S.**
- This example **underscores the inability of voluntary licenses to serve as a reliable mechanism** for affordable access to essential medicines.

Broader Implications: Weakening Demand for Technology Transfer

- Beyond public health, **CETA may also undercut India's long-standing demand for technology transfer on favourable terms** from advanced countries.
- This demand, **rooted in the 1974 United Nations General Assembly's New International Economic Order (NIEO)**, was designed to spur industrialization and environmental progress in developing countries.
- Yet, **despite decades of advocacy, significant barriers** such as slow technology transfer and **restrictive IP regimes persist.**
- India's 2024 update to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change explicitly noted that **IP and inadequate technology transfer remain obstacles to scaling up climate-friendly technologies.**
- By moving away from demanding favourable terms for technology transfer, as signalled in the new CETA commitments, **India compromises its leverage in global negotiations related to climate change and sustainable development.**

Conclusion

- **India's commitments under the CETA intellectual property chapter represent more than mere legal adjustments**, they reflect a shift in policy priorities **with profound implications for public health, affordable medicine access**, and the right to technology transfer.
- The **prioritisation of voluntary over compulsory licensing dilutes critical safeguards** that helped India protect public interest, while the weakening of demands for favourable technology transfer terms risks **undermining India's role as a leader among developing nations in international negotiations.**
- The **broader consequence is a potential reduction in affordable access to medicines** and slower progress toward industrialization and environmental sustainability.

Another Slip Up by India in the Trade Pact with the U.K. FAQs

Q1. What key shift does Article 13.6 of the India-UK CETA introduce regarding access to medicines?

Ans. Article 13.6 promotes voluntary licensing as the preferred method for ensuring access to medicines, moving away from India's previous support for compulsory licensing.

Q2. How did compulsory licensing benefit Indian patients in the case of Natco Pharma and sorafenib tosylate?

Ans. Compulsory licensing allowed Natco Pharma to offer the anticancer drug at under ₹8,800 per month, compared to the original price of ₹2,80,428 charged by the patent holder.

Q3. What risk is posed by favouring voluntary licensing over compulsory licensing?

Ans. Voluntary licenses can come with restrictive terms set by patent holders, limiting affordability and access,

especially for generic manufacturers in developing countries.

Q4. How has the patent “working” requirement changed under recent trade agreements?

Ans. The reporting period for patent “working” status has been extended to at least every three years, reducing transparency and making enforcement of compulsory licensing grounds more difficult.

Q5. How does the CETA affect India’s position on technology transfer in multilateral forums?

Ans. By shifting away from demanding technology transfer on “favourable terms,” India weakens its ability to negotiate for climate-friendly technologies and support industrialization.

Source: The Hindu

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/daily-editorial-analysis-4-august-2025/>

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