

PREFACE

As we continue to struggle against one of the most devastating pandemics ever to have struck the world, one of the major concerns that has started emerging is the growing quantities of what is called 'biomedical' waste – mountains of used PPE kits, face masks and gloves, vaccine vials, syringes, needles etc., the detritus of our fight against Covid-19. In the period April-May 2021, when the 'second wave' was raging across the country, India witnessed a humongous 46 per cent jump in the generation of Covid-19 biomedical waste.

According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), almost 20 per cent of the biomedical waste that India generates on any given day since the pandemics first wave is Covid-19-related. What is frightening is that much of these numbers and statistics could be a huge under-estimation. The actual numbers could be much more.

The question that we must ask is how is this waste being disposed of? Is it being segregated properly and destroyed in a safe manner? Or is it being dumped the way we usually dispose of all our waste, in our household dustbins, everything mixed together, from where it find its way to the neighbourhood dump yard, or a landfill? Because if that is the way we are disposing of our Covid waste, it's a potential time-bomb of infection that we are sitting on.

The world today is driven by market economies and consumption at a scale never witnessed before. As we consume more, so do we generate huge amounts of waste – more specifically, what is called solid waste. Our cities and villages, lands, water bodies and even oceans are being swamped by tonnes and tonnes of this material, and our Earth is getting choked by it. Impacts of this on our health can be severe, as this waste also contains enormous quantities of toxic substances, hazardous elements, and biomedical discards (such as Covid-19- related waste, as discussed above) that can easily enter our bodies and food chains through the environment.

For several years now, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has been striving to bring the question of solid waste and its management into the public spotlight. Through its publications and reportage,

it has highlighted the fact that despite the appearance of being a very well-researched subject, little is known about the actual quantity, quality or changing composition of the waste that is generated in the country. It is working with governments and local administrations to provide that much-needed cutting edge to urban solid waste management. And it has consistently advocated on sustainable management of waste by stressing on segregation, recycle and reuse, besides other measures.

CSE's Green Schools Programme (GSP) team has remained in step as well, by conceptualising a dedicated vertical on solid waste, which has begun working with schools, teachers and students to understand the problem and discover the solutions. Two path-breaking initiatives developed by Team GSP under this vertical have been its exclusive audit programme on waste, and the creation of the Forum of Schools that Segregate.

Keeping in line with the demands of the pandemic induced 'new normal', the audit programme has been re-imagined as an initiative that can be participated in by students and teachers within their homes, where they have been confined to for most of 2020-21. As for the Forum, this has emerged as a vibrant group of schools from across the country which is actively engaged in taking all possible actions to manage solid waste on and around campus as well as homes. In both these initiatives, Team GSP is close at hand, supporting the schools, teachers and students with knowledge, expertise, access to resources etc.

This primer is the latest in Team GSP's repertoire of content resources which are especially designed for schools and their teachers. The realisation that we needed a primer like this had emerged when we organised our first interaction with members of the Forum of Schools that Segregate. Forum members came up with extremely incisive questions and comments on the subject of management of solid waste, which set us thinking on whether we could offer a customised publication on the subject – something that will bring together the fundamental information, available resources, and good case studies from schools that were already a cut above the rest. The primer was born, as a result.

This is, of course, not the last word. We are hoping that as we – Team GSP and our extended family of schools, teachers and students — travel together on this journey, we will learn a lot more from each other, and share that learning consistently.

Team GSP