

CONSUMER EDUCATION AND PROTECTION IN TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT

Article

ABSTRACT

Consumer education is a process that equips people to function as responsible consumers in a complex, technological society. Tamil Nadu State Society for Consumer Protection and Empowerment was formed in 2009 for undertaking consumer protection and awareness generation activities in a large scale under the Consumer Protection Act of 1986. State Consumer Helpline and Consumer Advice Centre have been established to support the consumers. The Scheme of Citizen Consumer Clubs in schools and colleges in Tirunelveli district was started in the year 2005 to enhance the level of awareness in students. It is important to note that only a few schools and colleges have consumer clubs. Creation of Hallmark, Agmark and Ecomark are found to be useful for standardization of products. Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 has been formulated to ensure safe food for consumers. District Consumer Disputes Redressal Fora have been established to meet consumer grievances. There are only five voluntary consumer organizations protecting the interests of consumers in Tirunelveli District and so it is concluded that the level of consumer protection measures is only at the initial stage.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer education is a process that equips people to function as responsible consumers in a complex, technological society. Consumer movement is an organized means of protection of the interests and rights of consumers. It aims at the protection of consumers from unscrupulous and unethical practices by the business environment such as overcharging, black marketing, misleading advertisements etc and to provide a just and speedy redressal of their grievances.

CONSUMER MOVEMENT IN INDIA

Consumer movement started in India during the British rule with the formation of the Passengers and Traffic Relief Association and the Women Graduates Union, Bombay in 1915. The laws passed during the British regime concerning consumer interests were the Indian Contract Act of 1872, the Sale of Goods Act of 1930, the Indian Penal Code of 1860, the Drugs and Cosmetics Act of 1940, the Usurious Loans Act of 1918, and the Agriculture Products (Grading and Marketing) Act of 1937. However, the Sale of Goods Act of 1930 [SGA] was the exclusive source of consumer protection in India.

The various consumer protection legislations enacted after independence include the Essential Commodities Act of 1955, the Prevention of Food

Adulteration Act of 1954 and the Standard of Weights and Measures Act of 1956. Industries (Development and Regulation) Act, 1951, the Standards of Weights and Measures Act, 1976, Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act, 1969, Prevention of Black-marketing and Maintenance of Essential Supplies Act, 1980 and Bureau of Indian Standards Act, 1986. National leaders like Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayanan, V.V.Giri and Lal Bahadur Shastri, expected the business community to regulate itself as an expression of responsibility to contribute to society. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumer_movement - cite_note-FOOTNOTE Brobeck1997312-313-21 The Consumer Protection Act, 1986 was enacted for the protection of the interests of the consumers by providing cheap, speedy and effective remedy for the redressal of the grievances of the poor consumers. It is found that India enacted this Act after the adoption of the UN guidelines as a mile stone

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in the history of socio-economic legislation in India and only then the Consumer Movement in India received a boost. Under this Act a three tier quasi judicial machinery, the Apex National Forum at Delhi, a State Commission at each state and the District Forums at each district headquarters have been established.

Several Seminars were organized by consumer movements and the Government on topics like consumer awareness, unfair advertisements and trade practices, which kindled Consumer Awareness as an Emerging Force in India. Promoting Research in the field of Consumer Welfare is another major scheme that has been funded by the Government of India. Online Complaint and Assistance also has been provided for the easy accessibility and reach of consumers. It was launched by the Government of India on World Consumer Day i.e. on 15th March, in 2005. The Department of Consumer Affairs also administers the Standards of Weights & Measures Act, 1976 and Standards of Weights & Measures Enforcement Act, 1985 for regulating all the weighing and measuring instruments used in trade and commerce. The Department also proposes to evolve a National Policy on Consumer Protection so that priority concerns of consumers are addressed systematically by all stake holders. Right to Information is recognized as one of the rights of consumers. The Right to Information Bill was passed by Lok Sabha on 11th May, 2005 and by Rajya Sabha on 12th May, 2005 and it received assent of the President of India on 15th June, 2005 and has come on the statute book as the Right to Information Act, 2005. The information sought under Right to Information Act by paying a fee of Rs.10/- and failure to furnish information within 30 days is treated as a deficiency in service covered by the Consumer Protection Act.

CONSUMER PROTECTION IN TAMIL NADU

Consumer protection in Tamil Nadu seems to have emerged from the Sangam era. Silappathikaram speaks about Manu Neethi Cholan, who reigned the Chola country from Thiruvavur, for having implemented a novel system of notifying any grievance directly to the king, by ringing a bell kept in front of his palace. Even a cow could express its *grievance*. *Pattinappaalai* while telling the story of the hero who has to travel away from Puhar Port

in order to earn his livelihood, gives an idealized description of the merchants plying their fair trade in Puhar.

Article

In recent times, the Government of Tamil Nadu took the initiative and Tamil Nadu State Society for Consumer Protection and Empowerment (TANSSCOPE) was formed in 2009 for undertaking consumer protection and awareness generation activities in a larger scale. Tamil Nadu Government inaugurated a new scheme entitled State Consumer Helpline in 2009 as an alternative consumer dispute redressal mechanism to cater to consumers in rural and backward areas. Consumer Advice Centre was established in April 2010 as a pilot project with German technical co-operation under TANSSCOPE. In Tamil Nadu, during 2005-2006, Citizen Consumer Clubs were established in 500 schools under Phase-I program. An additional 500 consumer clubs were established during 2007-08 in Phase II. The scheme of Citizen Consumer Clubs (CCC) is a huge project and its implementation and sustenance mainly depends on active participation of teachers of schools/colleges who are nominated as co-ordinators of CCC with programmes such as orientation-cum-training programme, consumer festival, outreach camps, distribution of booklets and pamphlets, and State CP awards to CCCs. Tamil Nadu Government has constituted a corpus fund called Tamil Nadu State Consumer Welfare Fund and accorded sanction for a sum of Rs.50 lakhs as seed money for implementing consumer welfare schemes.

The formation of voluntary consumer organizations in Tamil Nadu plays a vital role in creating consumer awareness. CONFET was registered in 1991 under the Societies Registration Act, 1975. It focuses on creating awareness amongst all classes of consumers about their rights and duties and to empower the consumers. CONFET is imparting training to consumer activists, lead organizations, Panchayat leaders, NGOs, Government Officials and the Women SHGs. The Consumer Protection Council in Tiruchi is one of the oldest ones in India as well as in Tamil Nadu. It was established in the year 1974, after the consumer councils of Bombay and Calcutta. It has undertaken several consumer issues and faced them successfully. Various programmes such as consumer awareness programme, seminar on Gold – Concerns of

Consumer, consumer awareness programmes to electricity consumers, school and college students, conferences on environmental issues, organizing consumer awareness rallies and conducting quiz competitions. Voluntary consumer organizations (VCOs) offer substantial support to the Government for the cause of consumer welfare and checking rights violations. Currently, there are 112 general purpose VCOs that are registered with the Civil Supplies and Consumer Protection department.

CONSUMER EDUCATION IN TIRUNELVELI

Consumer education in schools and colleges in Tirunelveli district was started in the year 2005. It is important to note that only a few schools and colleges have consumer clubs. These clubs aim at educating children about the rights of the consumers by conducting seminars, conferences, consumer-fest, competitions, publishing articles on consumer issues, etc., and by celebrating National Consumer Day on every 24th December and World Consumer Rights Day on every 15th March. They could play a more significant role in terms of promoting consumer awareness among the students themselves and among the public at large. The citizen consumer clubs have to be formed in all schools and colleges. Women do almost all of domestic purchases including health care and sustain their family as a homemaker. But it is reported that women consumers showed low level of awareness about consumer rights because of lack of education and low socio-economic status. The upper class of women are least bothered about consumer issues.

CONSUMER PROTECTION IN TIRUNELVELI

In the context of standardizing of industrial and consumer goods in Tirunelveli district bottled water and water packets have been steadily growing over the past three decades. The standards for bottled water are subject to mandatory certification under the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, the law enforced by the Health Ministry in India. Rapidly increasing urbanization and industrialization activities along the banks of the river Tamirabarani in Tirunelveli district and adjoining areas have adversely influenced the quality of the water resource. Tamirabarani is the main receptor of domestic and industrial sewage discharges which consist of untreated

or semi-treated effluents and solid wastes. These increase the pollution incidence throughout the basin area.

Such environmental concerns are raised in the consumer awareness programmes of many different groups. The Tamirabarani Conservation Movement, a voluntary organization has been formed to protect the river from domestic and industrial pollution. It is yet to come out with a concrete plan of action. There is an Agmark office at Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli. People in Tirunelveli district seem to be aware of the markings of Agmark on the goods they purchase.

Creation of hallmark is an important step in standardization with regard to the sale of gold ornaments in Tamil Nadu and particularly in Tirunelveli District. Hallmarking of gold jewellery was launched in April 2000 on a voluntary basis. The scheme is operated through BIS network of Regional and Branch Offices all over the country. The scheme aims at providing third party assurance to consumers on the purity of gold or its fineness. Under the scheme the jeweller has to obtain hallmark licence from BIS to get his jewellery hallmarked from a BIS recognized Assaying and Hallmarking Centre.

In recent decades, numerous countries have introduced legislation restricting the sale of plastic bags, in a bid to reduce littering and pollution. The Tirunelveli district administration has ordered that non-recyclable and non-degradable plastic products should not be used within the corporation limits from January 1, 2010 and the Tirunelveli Municipal corporation has also decided to impose a ban on the manufacture, sale and use of such products under its jurisdiction. Therefore anti-plastic awareness rallies and raids have been conducted but the outcome in terms of non use of plastics remains yet a dream.

The consumer associations are an ideal set up to provide collective resistance against all kinds of issues. The main function of consumer associations is to educate and protect the consumers. In Tirunelveli district there are five registered consumer associations who play an important active role in consumer protection along with a number of associated volunteer groups spread throughout the district.

Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, Food Safety and Standards Rules, 2011 and Food Safety and Standards Regulations, 2011 have been formulated to ensure safe food for consumers. Of the six food analysis laboratories in the State one is located in Samadhanapuram, Palayamkottai. The scope of the Food Safety and Standards Act has been extended to marriage halls and caterers also. It is mandatory for every 'kalyana mandapam' and those who are engaged in the catering business to register and get a proper licence from the food safety wing. At the same time, the cooks employed by catering units should obtain medical fitness certificate to ensure hygiene. It is also reported that even temple prasadam is covered under the Act. At the same time, protests emerge from several quarters against the implementation of the Food Safety and Standards Act. Mushrooming of unlicensed shops and roadside eateries near bus stands and markets in different parts of Tirunelveli district has become a cause for concern as people through these eateries and consume unhygienic food. However, no samples are sent to the food analysis laboratory by the food safety officers as the Food Safety Act is not effectively enforced.

Public Distribution System (PDS) is a poverty alleviation programme and contributes towards the social welfare of the people. Essential commodities like rice, wheat, sugar, kerosene and the like are supplied to the people under the PDS at reasonable prices. PDS is a boon to the people living below the poverty line. PDS is the primary social welfare and antipoverty programme of the Government of India. The Government of Tamilnadu is implementing PDS since the year 1964. The goal of PDS does not restrict itself with the distribution of rationed articles. Making available adequate quantities of essential articles at all times, in places accessible to all, at prices affordable to all and protection of the weaker sections of the population from the vicious spiral of rising prices is the broad spectrum of PDS. The Government of Tamil Nadu is taking all efforts to ensure the availability, accessibility and affordability of essential commodities to the poor.

Under the Weights and Measures (Packaged Commodities) Rules, all packed goods should carry certain essential information on the contents of the package, such as its weight or volume, the name and address of the

manufacturer, the date of manufacture, and in case of food packages, the best before date and, of course, the maximum retail price (MRP). Under the Consumer Goods (Mandatory Printing of Cost of Production and Maximum Retail Price) Act, 2006, certain guidelines have been provided so that the consumer cannot be charged over the maximum price printed on the goods by the manufacturer. There are avenues such as the labour department and consumer courts to redress consumer grievances with regard to the problem of MRP. Consumers are becoming aware of this and it is found that the officials of the Consumer Protection Department recently conducted raids on private hospitals run by doctors, in Tirunelveli district on complaints that they were selling medicines without proper license, above the maximum retail price and issuing bills without mentioning the manufacturing date, batch number, expiry date and the MRP.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately cheating by way of overcharging, black marketing, misleading advertisements, etc has become the common practice of greedy sellers and manufacturers to make unreasonable profits. In this context, it is the duty of the government to confer some rights on consumers to safeguard their interests. Unless Consumer Movements are involved in creating consumer awareness, the efforts of the Government would be futile.

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