

A FILLIP TO CONSUMER MOVEMENT

A poster issued by the Karnataka Tourism Department says, "When Edison was busy inventing his incandescent bulb, Karnataka was producing electricity." But today Karnataka has to beg for power in the neighbouring states. This analogy applies to consumer movement as well.

Karnataka was the first state to set up a Consumer Protection Board even before the Central government thought of Consumer Protection Act (CPA). But after 12 years, there is hardly any movement to protect the consumers, while states like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh have made significant progress.

Thanks to Mr Prahlad Mahishi, Secretary and Mr G.V. Krishnarao, Commissioner of Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs, Department of Karnataka, for their efforts to bring together some of the consumer groups on the occasion of World Consumer Right Day (March 15). This one-day conference attended by more than 40 consumer groups, has not only given a fillip to consumer movement in the state, but has also thrown up several issues which need to be addressed if consumer movement is to take roots.

There were four sessions at the conference dealing with important issues like consumer information, education, redressal of grievances and working of public distribution system. It was evident that consumer organization in the state do not have access to information. They are not professionally organized and lack the ability to lobby with government agencies and departments.

Many participants were not aware of the concept of Citizens' Charter, let alone about the means and ways to make departments implement them. Similarly few organizations had a knowledge of the Right to Information Bill. Since these two are essential for the consumer movement in the years to come, consumer groups have to start equipping themselves. It was evident that there is a need for an organization to act as a clearing house.

The consumer groups in Karnataka suffer from a peculiar limitation in that they have given a narrow meaning of consumer movement. Taking up individual grievances and filing complaints in consumer foray is seen as consumer movement. Working for changes in the system, lobbying for consumer oriented policies and such other broader issues are alien to them.

Unlike in other states, consumer groups in Karnataka do not have a strong central body based at Bangalore. Though a federation has been formed in Mysore, it has restricted itself to Mysore city. There is a need for an organization like Federation of Consumer Organisations of Tamil Nadu (FEDCOT) which has 200 consume organization as members.

Without such a body, the state consumer movement is lagging behind, particularly when it comes to larger issues affecting the whole state. For instance, Karnataka government is yet to establish the State Consumer Protection Council

under the CPA. But except one or two consumer organization in Bangalore, none of them have taken up this issue.

Though non-availability of sufficient funds is a problem being faced by all consumer groups, it is too serious in the case of Karnataka. Not a single consumer group has been able to get funds from the Central Consumer Welfare Fund precisely because organizations have not worked methodically and are yet to learn drafting project proposals, particularly in English.

All the participants expressed concern about the dissatisfactory working of consumer forums. It came to light that not all the districts of the state have a separate consumer foray. One president is in charge of a few district forums. Inadequate staff, non-availability of postal and stationery articles were highlighted. One district forum has stopped sending notices due to shortage of postal stamps.

However consumer groups were not aware that the Central government has released Rs 160 lakh to Karnataka for improving the working of consumer fora and Commission.

On this occasion the Department released a small booklet in Kannada which contains some useful information. This is the second publication of the government. On the other hand many consumer organizations have published booklets and leaflets, despite financial constraints. A point which the government should take note of.

Consumer activists were unhappy about the working of Public Distribution System in general and supply of kerosene. Activists urged the government to publish details of the Vigilance Committees and its working. They complained that the officials of various government departments do not respond to their letters or requests. They demanded that there should be periodical meetings with consumer activists at the taluk district level so that grievances could be sorted out.

The highlight of the conference was that both the Secretary and Commissioner were present throughout the day and promised to look into the problems of consumer groups.

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