

## STATE CONSUMER PROTECTION COUNCIL FORMED

After sleeping over the issue for four years the state government has reconstituted the State Consumer Protection Council as required under the Consumer Protection Act (CPA) 1986. The tenure of the earlier council was over by May 1995 and since then Karnataka was without a Council. Thanks to the present minister for Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs and the officials of the department for having taken several steps to promote consumer protection.

Recently the words 'Consumer Affairs' were added to the food and civil supplies department. Secondly a state level convention was held on the occasion of World Consumer Rights Day which brought together several consumer activists. An information booklet on consumer protection has been published. The Legal Metrology (Weight and Measures) Department under the ministry has been continuously conducting workshops and interactive meetings with consumers.

The formation of the State Consumer Protection Council is mandatory and the objectives of the council is same as that of the CPA, which includes protection of consumers against marketing of goods and services which are hazardous to life and property. Secondly the council will advise on the steps to be taken to keep consumers informed about quality, quantity, potency, purity, price and standards of goods and services. The other objectives include protection of consumers against unfair trade practices, provide consumer education and assure access to a variety of goods and services wherever possible.

The recommendations of the council are advisory in nature. However since the minister in charge of consumer affairs is the chairman of the council, it is expected that the state government would give due weightage to the recommendation of the Council.

The Act also provides for constitution of working groups by the council so that the relevant aspects are thoroughly studied by the council before making any recommendations to the state government.

However considering the composition of the present council one doubts whether it can execute the job effectively. The council consists of 46 members out of which 20 represent government departments like KEB, BWSSB, KSRTC, KHB, Drugs Control, BIS etc. The balances are non-official member. It is needless to mention that many of them are nominees of political parties.

The president of the State Consumer Disputes Redressal Forum and presidents of some District Forums have been included as members of the council. It is doubtful whether these persons who head quasi judicial bodies can be members of an advisory body.

The minister in his inaugural address called upon the members of the council to make use of the opportunity bestowed on them to serve the interests of the consumers and work for achieving the objects of the council. But this seems to be a

difficult task. Being political nominees, many of the non-official members are not exposed to consumer related issues. During the course of the meeting members expressed the feeling that they need to be trained and empowered to do justice to their post. A few of them were frank enough to accept that they were nominated for 'other reasons' but nevertheless would sink their political aspirations and work for protection of the consumers.

The first step to be taken by the ministry would be to organize workshops, seminars and training programmes for these non-official members and give them sufficient input about consumer rights, tools available for consumer protection and techniques of lobbying for consumer issues. Particularly members are to be made known that consumer protection is not merely filling complaints in consumer fora, but beyond that. The new dimensions of consumer protection like demand for transparency, right to information, accountability, good governance, citizens' charter and alternative dispute redressal systems are to be explained in detail.

If the council is to be effective, it is essential that some representation is given to consumer activists and consumer organizations. In states like Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, there are at least five nominees from consumer organizations. There are more than 80 consumer groups in Karnataka and a few of them are to be given a chance. During the meeting the minister and the secretary took note of this suggestion and have promised to look into the matter. One only hopes that consumer organizations will find a berth.

It is well known that much of the complaints of the consumers are against public bodies like KEB, BDA, LIC, etc. a lot of procedures in these agencies are evolved around a general mistrust of the consumer and therefore the service providers have built a far too many checks and controls thereby resulting in lack of transparency.

Now that the officials of these bodies are in the Council, it is hoped that consumers will get fair treatment and suggestions of the council are taken seriously. As a pre-requisite the minister should ensure that the officials attend the meeting regularly and be present throughout the meeting. In the very first meeting, except for two officials none of them were present after the exit of the minister. Is the message clear?

