

A LONG CRUSADE TO INSULATE CONSUMERS FROM EXPLOITATION

The 50 years of independent India has witnessed the rise of several social elements, including the crusade to insulate the consumers from economic exploitation. Starting off as a body to ameliorate the grievances of railway passengers, the consumer movement has come a long way.

Though the consumer movement in India dates back to the times of Kautilya and Narada, some organized efforts were made only in the first decade of this century when a handful of railway passengers formed the Passengers and Traffic Relief Association (PATRA) in 1915 in Bombay and during the same year a few women established the Women's Graduates Union (WGU).

Down south, Dr Annie Besant and C.Rajagopalachari made some efforts to establish citizen groups like the Women's Indian Association and the Triplicane Urban Co-Operative stores.

According to P.D. Mukerjee, the Indian Association of consumer was established in 1956 at Delhi. However, the activities of these groups were limited to local areas and they failed to make a larger impact.

True to the cliché that necessity is the mother of invention, nine housewives established the Consumer Guidance Society of India (CGSI) in 1966 at Bombay to check the rising prices of essential commodities as a result of drought of the 60s. The establishment of CGSI gave a fillip to the consumer movement.

Only in the seventies did the consumer movement percolated down to the masses. Mr Vasant Kumar parigi, a noted consumer activist, established the Visaka Consumer Council (VCC) in 1973 at Vishakapatnam in Andhra Pradesh. This was the first association to take up the problems of ration card holders and the grievances of LPG customers.

The effect of the price rise spurred the people to spontaneous action in the 1970s and more than 50 consumer groups were formed. Notable among them are the Akhila Bharath Grahaka Panchayat in pune, Mumbai, Grahak Panchayat in Bombay, Trichy District Consumer Council and the now famous Consumer Education Research centre at Ahmedabad.

By now, the consumer movement had gained some strength and professionally managed groups started coming up like the Voluntary Organization in the Interest of Consumer Education (VOICE) at Delhi, Consumer Unity Trust Society (CUTS) at Jaipur and Calcutta and the Consumer Action Group (CAG) at Madras. Apart from handling individual complaints, these organizations started testing products, publishing comparative studies, conducting prescription audit, etc. For instance, VOICE has published report on TVs and cameras. The CAG's report on the status of blood banks in Madras is a remarkable achievement.

Ms Jajie Mandanna, who established the Karnataka Consumer Service Society (KCSS) in 1970 in Bangalore, was instrumental in formation of the country's first

consumer protection board. The society conducted the Asian seminar on consumer education in schools, and the second All India Consumer Conference. It published a monthly magazine 'Karnataka Consumer Voice' for over two years and held a workshop on consumers and public utilities in May 1978. Ms Mandanna's book 'The Indian Marketplace' is one of the earliest books on consumer protection.

On paper, there are nearly 65 consumer associations in Karnataka. Mysore and Shimoga have district federation of consumer organizations. The Karnataka State Federation of Consumer Organization at Mysore doesn't have enough representation to make it a federation. However it has failed several public interest litigations on the functions of consumer fora in the state.

The consumers forum at Basrur, Udupi Citizens Forum of Hubli, Mysore Grahaka Parishat of Mysore and Balakedarara Vedike of Sagar (Shimoga) have done excellent work in the past decade. A number of magazines have been published and surveys conducted by these associations. They have also taken up individual cases.

Bangalore city has nine consumer organization, including the oldest IICS, which is busy setting up the institute.

Nothing is known about the activities of ABGP, which has two branches. The Karnataka Forum for protection of Consumers at Jayanagar was established in 1989. It has published a book in kannada and the magazine 'Consumer Times'. Two years ago, the organization did an excellent job by taking up a resolution of the complaints against BDA on a large scale.

The Jayamahala Consumer Protection Society, which was established in 1990, held a training workshop in 1992. During 1993, three more organizations – Consumer Rights Education and Awareness Trust (CREAT), Banashankari Consumer Protection Society (BCPS) and Dakshina Bangalooru Balakedarara Vedike – were established.

In the last three years, CREAT has arranged a dozen talks on the subjects ranging from amendments to CPA to eco-friendly products. It has conducted four training programmes and five workshops. CREAT has published seven booklets in English and Kannada, including the list of banned drugs and patients' rights. CREAT represents consumers in the LPG consumer advisory committee and the textiles committee. Recently, it published its first quarterly magazine Consumer Update in English. It has established consumer clubs in schools and conducted debates and essay competitions on consumer protection for students. It has set up a consumer information centre with 700 books, reports and paper clippings and has been instrumental in setting up three consumer organizations in Kanakapura, KGF and Doddaballapura.

The BCPS has been arranging lectures and face-to-face programmes for the past three years. It has also filed several complaints in the fora.

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