

CONSUMERS, A POORLY INFORMED LOT IN INDIA

President John F Kennedy, way back on march 15, 1962, while speaking to the US Congress, said, "Consumers by definition includes us all. They are the largest economic group in the economy, affecting and affected by almost every public and private economic decision. But they are the important group whose views are often not heard."

But in India even now they continue to be neglected. Legislations intended to protect consumers seem to have had little impact. Aptly this year's theme for World Consumer Rights Day is Consumer Protection: Where Do We stand?

President Kennedy's Bill of Rights included the right to safety, information, choice among a variety of products and services at competitive prices and a fair hearing by government in the formulation of consumer policy. Eventually, some more were added like redress, consumer education, and satisfaction for of basic needs and concern for environment.

In India, much of these rights are sought to be protected through legislations. For example, take the right to safety. We have a host of legislations like the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, the Household Electrical Appliances Quality Control Order, the Insecticide Act etc. Besides, we have the Environment Protection Act and the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act.

The Prevention of the Food Adulteration Act is one of the best pieces of legislations in the world. Yet, sale of unsafe food stuffs, edible oils, packed foods with expired dates continue to flood the market. The recent dropsy tragedy at Delhi and other places is one of those instances. A live electric wire falling on a pedestrian killing him instantly is conveniently pushed aside as a stray case.

This apart many of our laws have loopholes. The procedure for filing a complaint against a supplier is so cumbersome that no consumer would like to fight for his right.

The Drugs and Cosmetics Act and the Standards of Weights and Measurements Act make it obligatory on part of manufactures to provide certain information. We are about to get the right to information act. The real meaning of the right to be informed means to be given the facts needed to make an informed choice and to be protected against dishonest or misleading advertising and labeling. The UN guidelines on consumer protection says consumers are to be given information on proper use of and risks associated with consumer products and free flow of accurate information relating to consumer products should be ensured. But where does the consumer stand.

It is true that ward committees are to be formed by giving representation to consumer groups. Given the way in which the Bangalore Mahanagara Palike is

working on this issue it is doubtful if consumer groups will be able to get a berth in these committees.

Consumers right to redress is sought to be achieved through the establishment of Consumer disputes redressal forum and commissions as per the provisions of the Consumer Protection Act. Within 12 years consumers have lost their faith in this redressal machinery. In city forums it takes three years for a case to be heard. As per law complaint is to be disposed of within six days.

On the other hand, very few complaints are filed in the district consumer forums outside the capital city. For the government, the World Consumer Rights Day is an occasion to do some soul searching.
