

Towards a national consumer policy

Over the years the government had formulated and adopted a number of policy statements. For example the ministry of chemicals and fertilizers has issued the health policy. The ministry of environment and forests has policy statements relating to forests, abatement of pollution conservation etc. We have policy documents relating to housing, education, population, road safety etc. sometime back there was a move to have a cultural policy. Yet there is no separate document which could be called a consumer policy.

Given the illiteracy and poverty of the Indian consumers, the need for a separate consumer policy needs no explanations. Despite the fact there are a number of legislations, including the Consumer Protection Act (CPA) intended to protect the interests of the consumers, exploitation is the order of the day. Secondly, what the laws do not do is to provide the protection of the right to basic needs of consumers, particularly the have-nots.

This does not mean that consumer protection has no place in India. References to Protection of the consumers could be seen in various documents, though scattered. For example the Constitution of India, the Directive Principle of state policy and the UN Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by India, do contain policy statements. Yet some of them are not enforceable by law like Fundamental Rights. The UN Guidelines on Consumer Protection, to which India is a signatory, do contain policy statements.

The earliest reference to consumer policy in India could be seen in point 17 of the 20 point programme announced by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, in 1984, wherein it was said "expand the public distribution system through fairer price shops and to promote a strong consumer protection movement."

However unless a policy document exclusively for consumer protection is adopted, the interests of the consumers may not be protected. Protecting consumers' economic interests is as important as regulation to ensure that the goods and services are available at a reasonable price and are safe. Consumer policy is not only about legislation governing consumer interest nor restricted to redressal of consumer complaints. It is a document which will guide the government in maintaining the appropriate consumer dimension while taking any step or decision which will affect the consumers.

In this background, the Jaipur based voluntary organization, Consumer Unity and Trust Society (CUTS) has been campaigning for a consumer policy. Through an analysis of the implementation of the UN Guidelines for consumer protection in India, CUTS, has prepared a national consumer policy (NCP) statement.

The NCP which was adopted during the consultation held at New Delhi, in March 1998, describes in detail the objectives of the policy and the measures to be adopted to achieve the same. The objectives of the NCP are to:

Strengthen production and distribution patterns which are responsive to the needs of consumers.

Advocate and promote ethical conduct, transparency and consumer participation,

Promote adoption of Citizen's Charters and promote regional and international co-operation in the field of consumer protection, sustainable consumption and production patterns.

The NCP seeks to protect consumers from hazards to their life and safety through enhancement and adoption of national as well as international standards in goods and services. To help achieve this objective, the policy would like to build capacity of consumer organizations to carry out testing of essential consumer goods and disseminations of information.

In order to encourage people to act as discriminating consumers, the NCP suggests the government, business and voluntary organizations to develop consumer information programmes. One important objective of the NCP relates to adoption and wide dissemination of Citizen's Charters in all ministries, department and bodies of government, business and cooperative sector. This has been partly achieved with more than 40 departments publishing their respective Citizens' Charters.

The NCP further likes to strengthen measures to prevent restrictive and unfair trade practices. The document calls for a fair competition policy which can provide consumers with appropriate range of choice of goods and service.

Providing a strong representation to consumer organizations in the decision-making process of the government is another objective of the NCP. To this end in view, the policy wants to promote and encourage an independent consumer movement in the country.

The NCP addresses itself to other areas like consumer education, access of consumers to basic goods, sustainable production, international exchange of information etc. it also demands setting up of an apex National Consumer Policy Coordination Council with the Prime Minister as its chairperson, so that consumer protection issues receive the highest consideration in every area of governance.
