

Research article

CONSUMERISM & INDIAN CULTURE

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Abstract

India moves from a production oriented mixed economy to a consumer society; there is a need to understand the forces behind this transition. In this paper, I examine a number of cultural and social themes accompanying the consumerist trends in India. Although India remains in the bottom half of the world economies, there is every reason to believe that this is not likely to last long, for many structural changes are evident including the transformation of the middle class which is at the vanguard of the consumer revolution. This paper examines the changing consumer scene in India. Unlike some of the other Asian countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Taiwan, where the "consumer revolution" has already forged ahead, or is in progress, India has been a slow starter in this push for change. However, recent trends suggest that a wave of consumerism is spreading to India also. This paper is based partly on my ethnographic field work conducted in Madras, a Southern Indian city of approximately five million people, and partly on a reading of secondary sources. This should be considered work in progress and, therefore, only some initial ideas are presented here. The general presentation in this paper will be thematic or topical rather than analytical, or theoretical. That is, the paper explores several themes instead of a unifying set of research questions or a single. Thus this is a thick description of Indian culture and India as a consumer society.

Keywords: Economy, consumer society, Indian culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Consumer is the centre of all economic activities. In our Indian culture, Philosophers and Thinkers have thought consumer as a God. He is a kingpin of any democracy. But unfortunately the Indian consumer has always been neglected in our economy because of many reasons. Consumerism was thought of as a consumer movement first in mid 1960s. It was considered as another is like socialism and communism threatening capitalism. In simple words, consumerism is a protest of consumers against unfair business practices and business injustices. It is in fact a social force designed to protect consumer interests in the market place by organizing consumer pressure on business. Consumerism means that the consumer looks upon the manufacturer

as somebody who is interested but who really does not know what the consumers' realities are. He regards the manufacturer as somebody who has not made the effort to find out, who does not understand the world which the consumer likes, and who expects the consumer to be able to make distinctions which the consumer is neither willing nor able to make. Consumerism also means the organized efforts of consumers seeking redress, restitution and remedy for the dissatisfaction they have accumulated in the acquisition of their standard of living. Consumerism now-a-days includes many things within its compass. The term has come to mean many things to different people. The most common understanding of consumerism is in reference to protection of consumers privileges against clear-cut abuses by the seller. This includes cheating and other malpractices at the market place as well dangers to health and safety of life form various types of products. What is interesting is that consumerism is also considered to include protection of consumers against consumers. For example, smoking is prohibited in auditorium, trains and public buses to avoid nuisance to other persons from smokers. Now-a-days consumerism has become wide enough to include protection against environmental pollution and declining quality of physical environment. The people are greatly concerned maintenance of ecological balance and conservation of national resources.

2. CONSUMER PROTECTION

In a country like India, there is a very great need for consumer protection for a variety of reasons. Some of the important are a majority of the population is illiterate, ignorant and ill informed. In a vast country like India, it is very difficult to organize the consumer. The people are not only backward but also have linguistic, cultural and religious difference which makes the problem, still more intricate, the consumer is economically weak if compared with the producer or the seller. The producer is able to manipulate the price quality, size, weight, etc. of the product. He has to depend upon the trade practice of the seller. If the seller indulges in unfair trade practice, then the consumer needs protection against such malpractices, the advance of science and technology enables the manufacturers to produce myriad types of goods. There are varieties of same type of goods produced by different manufacturers. Though they provide a choice of selection to the buyer still they have made the goods more complex and complicated making selection difficult. In such a situation the consume needs guidance which can be provided by consumer organizations. Advertising is a potent device for sales promotion. But advertising to-day is highly deceptive. A consumer does not know the real qualities of the advertised goods. He feels confused and hence needs to be guided and protected. Thus to prevent ruthless exploitation, we need a forceful, well-organized consumerism of consumer movement coupled with Government support and patronage in the form of special legislation. Of course, legislation can protect consumers only when consumers themselves assert their rights and exert necessary pressure on the producers, dealers and the Government. Only then the prevailing malpractices like profiteering, black-marketing, hoarding, adulteration, short measures and weights, misleading advertisement, faulty packaging, mail-order frauds, etc. can be cured or reduced to the minimum.

3. CONSUMER MOVEMENT: ABROAD & INDIA

Consumerism or consumer movement is a social movement. In the past, all movements, such as, Independence Movement, Civil Rights Movements, etc. were the results of social conflicts. So also consumer movement which is likely to be with us till the conflict facing the consumer is resolved. The social conflict, in the case is largely owing to rising prices, poor product, shortage, deceptive advertising, etc. On the other side in USA greater education and affluence of the buyers, better communication, mass marketing and above all, the failure of business to implement the marketing concept resulted in consumerism raising its head in the 1960's. The Watchword for this new militant mood among the American consumers was simply "Let the seller beware, in comparison with the age-old caveat emptor" i.e. Let the buyer beware. Government's desire to protect the consumers and help them to arrive at rational decisions in their selection resulted in excessive control and insistence on adequate communication to the consumer such as the advertising pack the statement indicating that smoking may cause cancer. Thus increasing education and sophistication led to rising public standards of

business conduct and social responsibility through consumer unrest. This was augmented in 1966 by rising prices. In the West, consumerism has emerged after the countries concerned, reached a level of affluence which is the characteristic of what may be called the post-industrial society. There was adequate production and distribution of essential as well as luxury products. The objectives of consumerism under these circumstances were to seek more information about the merits of competing products and services and to represent the collective views of consumers in order to influence the producers. The consumer movement in India is in its infancy and is largely confined to metropolitan cities like Bombay, Ahmadabad, Hyderabad, etc. As regards the origin of the movement in India, that housewives and social workers got together and formed the Consumer Guidance Society of India (CGSI) to protect the consumer's interest, To-day the CGSI has five branches at Hyderabad, Dandeli, Pune, Kottayam and Trichur. There is also the Consumer Education and Research Centre(CERC) at Ahmedabad. Among other such organization Voluntary Organisation in Interest of Consumer Education (VOICE), Indian Federation of Consumer Organisations (IFCO) and the Society for Civic Rights are the most notable ones.

4. THE PROBLEMS OF CONSUMER PROTECTION

The idea that the consumer is the king in the market place has in reality been largely discarded and in its place the idea that he is a pawn in the hands of the business man is a major driving force of consumer movement. Some of the problems of consumerism are; first, rising prices of goods have created in customers an attitude to expect better quality and if it is not forthcoming creates dissatisfaction among them. Further, inflation in recent times has made purchasing more difficult. Secondly, there is a large variety of products with increasing element of complexity because of new and changing technology. This naturally makes the consumer to expect a perfect product. In the third place, the spread of education, especially higher education and rising incomes have tended to intensify consumer movement. The language of advertising making exaggerated claims about the products creates an expectation of better products. There are three agencies for ensuring consumer protection:



The consumer interest in the market place is the focus, rather the heart of enlightened marketing mix. The business and consumerism both aim at the protection of consumer business through self-regulation and consumer through self-help. Self-policing is far more effective and superior or advantageous than State-policing in the field of distribution. The business community must take appropriate steps to regulate its conduct and cultivate self-discipline and self-regulation in the larger national interests. Enduring and positive improvements in business practices can be brought about by the businessmen themselves and these changes should be based on the inner will or desire rather than from external force or discipline. More and more companies are now creating a consumer affairs department in charge of consumer adviser directly responsible to the head of the organisation. The department deals with the consumer problems. It also contributes to the development of corporate social objectives, programmes to implement or carry out these objectives and measures to evaluate the programmes.

5. CONSUMER PROTECTION: LEGAL FRAME WORK

In order to protect the consumer interest Government in the recent past have enacted several statutory legislations. These legislations are related to standardization, grading, packaging and branding, food adulteration, weight and measure, false advertisement, boarding, profiteering, unfair trade practices, etc. In fact, to the consumers problems, the Government passed a comprehensive legislation i.e. Consumer Protection Act. The Essential Commodities Act, it is one of the major consumer-oriented legislations of the country whose object is to control in the interest of the general public, the production, supply and distribution of trade and commerce in certain commodities declared essential. The Act defines essential commodities and lists a large number of products included under it. Whenever a company markets these commodities, the provisions of this Act apply to it and influence its product, distribution, and pricing decisions. The Act was amended with provision against hoarders, black-marketers and profiteers. It is made compulsory to display the prices of essential commodities. The Act imposes both civil and criminal liability on the person for the contravention of the orders made under it. The Trade and Merchandise Markets Act, it is also an important commercial legislation which influences company's products and advertising decision particularly with regard to the use of trade, and merchandise marks registered under this Act. The registration of trade-mark under this Act endows on its owner the right to its exclusive use and provides legal protection against infringement of his right on the person(s) infringing the rights of trademark the owner invites prosecution. The Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisement) Act, it is an equally important piece of consumer-oriented legislation the provisions of which influence the advertising decisions of companies marketing drugs for certain ailments specified in it. It aims to prevent advertisement tending to cause and ignorant and unwary consumer to resort to self-medication with harmful drugs and appliances. The Act prohibits advertisements making false claims for the drug.

The Consumer Protection Act, this Act is the latest development in safeguarding the economic rights of citizens as consumers. It is based on the principle of self-help i.e. a citizen must help himself to protect his rights as a consumer. This is a welcome legislation and redefines the legal relations between consumers of goods and services and their manufacturers or sellers. The month of December 1986 can legitimately be considered as the Parliament's session for consumer protection when marathon race of legislative activity was undertaken to protect the interests of consumers. The most important features of the Act, which is certainly an improvement over other consumer protection legislations, are that it is applicable even to public sector enterprise, financial institutions and co-operative societies. Secondly, the Act applies to all types of goods and services and it extends to Government services like railway, postal, telephone, telegram, radio, doordarshan, electricity, banks, insurance, etc. Thus the scope of this piece of legislation is much, broader compared to the earlier ones. The Act establishes two council's viz. the Central Consumer Protection Council and the State Consumer Protection Councils comprising official and non-official members to provide a platform for discussing consumer problems and to advise the concerned Central or State Government on policies and programmes to safeguard consumers' interest. They have an advisory role to promote and protect the rights of consumers which consists of the right to be informed about the quality, quantity, potency, purity, standard and price of goods, right to be assured access to a variety of goods at competitive prices; right to be heard at appropriate forums; right to seek redressal against unfair trade practices; and right to consumer education. The Act provides for the establishment of adjudicator bodies at three different levels district, state and national. At the bottom, there is the consumer disputes redressal forum (district forum) in each district to be established by the state government with prior approval of the Central Government. The orders of the district forum and state and national commissions are enforceable by them in the same manner as a decree or order of a court; in case of their failure to enforce the order, the same may be sent to the court of competent jurisdiction for enforcement. An order of the national commission, in exercise of its original jurisdiction, is appealable to the Supreme Court within 30 days of its passing.

The whole objective of the Consumer Protection Act is to speedily redress the grievances of the consumer and not through long drawn legal practices. The Redressal Forum may give orders for removal of

defects from goods, replacement of the goods, refund of the price, award of compensation for injury suffered. The redressal machinery under the Consumer Protection Act, has been set in Bihar, Delhi, U.P., Rajasthan, A.P., Orissa, Pondicherry, etc. As said earlier it is a welcome legislation. However, the Act seems to have been enacted in a great hurry. Perhaps because of this, some significant aspects could not be covered. For example, there is no provision for giving interim relief or issuing interim injunction which may be necessary in some cases. Again, a large number of administrative and quasi-judicial bodies have been established under a large number of consumer protection legislations to exercise powers in many areas which would also fall within the purview of the present Act. Efforts should be made to harmonize the functioning of all these courts and authorities so that one does not hinder the functioning of the other so as to harm the consumer instead of protecting them. The Act acknowledges only six rights of the consumers as pointed out a little earlier. It completely ignores the right of consumers to a healthy environment. This is very important in case of pollution control hence; the right of healthy environment must be included for better environment. Whatever may be the lacunae in the Act, it is expected to ensure consumerism in the country, of course, with the support of the Government and the consumer's organizations.

6. NEW AVENUES OF CONSUMER ORIENTED MARKETING

Since a majority of the consumer problems (packaging, product testing and pricing, promotion and advertising policies, distribution policies and so on) directly involve marketing policies and practices, marketing is the one management area in which the question will often be raised "Is it good for the consumer?". Marketing decisions must now centre round the question "*How will they affect the consumer?*" Marketing deserves special study because of its very objective of reaching and selling to the consumer. It is time for business to discard the traditional mass-marketing concept of consumer and adopt in its place the new concept of consumer relations. Instead of viewing the consumer solely as sales prospect, it is now necessary for business to take a broader, wider look at the consumer to assess the full range of his genuine diverse needs and desires. Short-run sales and profits should be given secondary importance in such a consumer relations concept of the public. This is the demand of consumer movement today. In such areas as market research, media planning, advertising appeals, brand promotion, selection of distribution channel, etc., management policies and decisions must see that consumer interests are duly protected. The nature and objectives of marketing management will have become vastly more consumer-oriented and much less product and / or corporation-oriented for the maximum long-range benefits of the corporation itself.

7. CONCLUSION

Consumer is said to be the king in the market place. Unfortunately, the Indian consumer suffers from various dishonest practices of the traders and marketers. Poverty, illiteracy and lack of awareness necessitate for his protection. What is needed at present is a forceful, well-organized consumer movement coupled with Government support and patronage in the form of special legislation. The movement in India is in its infancy. There are three agencies for ensuring consumer protection viz. Self- help by consumer organizations themselves, self-regulation by business and the Government. In order to protect the consumer interest, the Government has enacted a number of legislations. All these legislations govern standardization, grading, packaging and branding, and to regulate food adulteration, weights and measures, unfair trade practices, etc. The future will call for far more effort in creating a reverse communications flow, carrying consumer (public) attitudes and opinions back to the corporation. Two-way communications are necessary for better flow of understanding between the corporation and the consumers. Management decision must be based on consumer viewpoint which is possible if we have two-way flow of communications in a balanced form. Consumer research, shareholder research, consumer- interest committees, consumer relations (for services) sections are some of the new avenues to consumer-oriented marketing management.

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