



CONSUMER RIGHTS AND CONSUMER FORUMS - EVALUATING THE DETERMINANTS OF LEVEL OF AWARENESS AMONG SELF HELP GROUP MEMBERS

Dr. M. V. Sathiya Bama

Associate Professor & Head, Department of Commerce (E-Commerce), NGM College, Pollachi, Tamilnadu

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Abstract:

We are very much aware that in any market "Consumer is the King". Products should be produced keeping in mind, the needs and requirements of the consumers. Tastes and preferences of the consumers rule the market. However, in countries like India, where the market is seller oriented, the buyers are often tricked and exploited. In order to protect consumers from such exploitation, the Government has taken various initiatives and devised Consumer Protection Act to educate and create awareness among the consumers. Even though there are number of Acts to protect them, it is mainly the duty of consumers to be aware and avoid falling victims to such practices. Hence this paper attempted to study the level of awareness among consumer about their basic rights and also examined the role of consumer forums situated in their area. Since the Self help groups which constituted women folks of the family, the focus is given to them. The study which is conducted in the Pollachi Taluk of Coimbatore District comprising 200 respondents reveals the status of the basic consumer awareness among the self help groups.

Introduction:

"Customers don't expect you to be perfect but they expect you to fix things when they go wrong" - Donald Porter

The growing interdependence of the world economy and international character of many business practices have made emphasis on consumer protection and promotion. Now, Consumers, all over the world, are demanding value for their hard earn money in the form of quality goods and better services. It is true that modern technological developments have made a great impact on the quality, availability and safety of goods and services. But the fact of the matter is that the consumers are still victims of unfair and restrictive trade practices adopted by traders or manufacturers. In today's business environment, consumers can be exploited in numerous forms such as adulteration of food, dubious hire purchase plans, spurious drugs, poor quality, high prices, deficient services, hazardous products, deceptive advertisements, black marketing and many more. In addition to this, with revolution in information technology, some new kinds of challenges have emerged like cyber crimes and plastic money etc., which affect the consumers drastically. Hence it is imperative to create awareness among the consumers about their rights and how to seek justice when they are exploited.

Objectives:

- The main objective of this study is
- ✓ To understand the Consumer Rights
- ✓ To evaluate the level of awareness among consumers
- ✓ To suggest solutions to the increase the level of awareness among the rural groups

Methodology:

For the purpose of the study, Pollachi Taluk of Coimbatore District was chosen. Using random sampling method, 200 respondents were selected as samples. The research is based on the primary data, which was collected using structured questionnaire. All the collected data have been reviewed and consolidated into tables for further analysis. Using the statistical tools simple percentage and chi-square, the consolidated data was analysed and interpreted.

Consumer Protection – An Overview:

Purushetham Rao, et. al (2004) conducted a study entitled, 'Consumer Protection in Andra Pradesh (A case study of Hyderabad District consumer voluntary organizations and consumer redressal forums) to analyze the role played by the consumer protection agencies and to suggest measures. The findings of the study reveal that: i. CVOs are handling the consumer complaints and are engaged in redressing the consumer complaints. Majority of CVOs are not maintaining regular / permanent office and accounts accurately as they are facing financial problems. The government has not provided sufficient financial support in time to the CVOs to solve their problems and to motivate them. Consumer redressal forums are maintaining proper records and disposal beyond 150 days. It shows the delay redressal forums are not appointed in time by the Government (in charge persons are working in 14 Districts).The Government electronic and print media is taking active part in educating consumer about their rights and duties.

K. Singh, et. al (2010) presented an article named, 'Awareness of Consumer Protection Act among doctors in Udaipur city, India' to compare the awareness of provision of Consumer Protection Act among dental

and medical professionals in Udaipur city, Rajasthan, India. In the study men had a slightly higher awareness about CPA was higher among medical professionals compared to dental professionals. Similarly, postgraduates showed more awareness in both the professionals and it was found that private practitioners significantly have more awareness than the academic sector. Though medical professionals have more awareness of CPA compared to dental professionals considering the present scenario, better knowledge of CPA is necessary for both professionals in order to be on the safer side.

Dr. N. Sundaram & C. Balaramalingam (2012) conducted a study entitled, ‘women awareness on consumer rights-A study with reference to Vellore city’. The aim of the study is the socio-economic status and the awareness about consumer rights among women consumers and also aims to explore the association between dependent variables and independent variables. This study described that low income group were least educated and have low awareness about consumer rights. The findings revealed that generally the women consumer having low level of awareness about consumer rights due to low education and low socio-economic status. Therefore the exposure of mass media, awareness training camps through Government, NGOs and other educational institution helps to improve the awareness level of consumer rights and thereby increase utilization of their rights.

N. Resina (2015) presented an article entitled, ‘A study on consumer awareness regarding public utility services’. Made an attempt to know i) awareness of consumers about their rights ii) to find out the consumer satisfaction regard of transport, electricity and postal services iii) to give suggestions to create consumer awareness.. The finding of the study revealed that the about 64% of the respondents have highly aware of their rights as a consumer and 36% of the respondents are not aware about their rights as a consumer. The consumer satisfaction is high in the bill paying facility as it scores the highest of 59.83. The next awareness is through advertisement as its score 56.93, and third and last one is public programme and through social organization, as its score are 54.67 and 49.03 respectively. The above study it is very well understand that findings are very clearly made by the investigator about the consumer awareness is their rights and it also describes the defects in transport and electricity services.

Consumer Protection – An Overview:

In India despite many laws, still the consumer is exploited. Post Independence the Government has enacted various laws to protect the unscrupulous trade practices. Despite several laws, the basic consumer rights were subjugated and the main objectives of those laws could not be fully achieved. Hence as a solution to all those issues, Government has devised a strong law, which is known as “Consumer Protection Act” in the year 1986 to protect the consumers.

The term ‘Consumer Protection’ refers to protection of consumers from unscrupulous, unfair and unethical malpractices as well as safeguarding the interests and rights of consumers through exercising the existing redressal mechanism. Consumer Forum established in India by Indian Government under Consumer Protection Act in 1986, for providing better protection of the interests of the consumers and save them from the evils of unfair trade practices and restrictive trade practices. Consumer forum protect the basic rights of consumers, such as Right of protection to life and property (against marketing of goods which are hazardous to life and property), Right to be informed (about the quality, quantity, potency and standard of goods and services), Right to choose, Right to be heard in the consumer forum if something goes wrong with the consumer, Right to redress and Right to education.

For the purpose of the speedy, simple and inexpensive settlement of consumers’ disputes, quasi-judicial machinery has been set up at the District, state and central level to defend the legitimate rights of consumer provided under the consumer protection Act. This Act proposes to set up the hierarchy of three redressed forum (1) District forum (2) State Commission (3) National Commission.

Hence we conducted this study to know the level of awareness among the consumers about their rights and functioning of Consumer Forum in the rural areas. Women of Self help groups from Pollachi Taluk had been interviewed for the same.

Determining Factors for Level of Awareness:

There are many factors like age, education, occupation, family, etc, might act as a determinant for the level of awareness. Since education, occupation and area plays a dominant role in creating the awareness, only those factors were analysed.

Table 1: Area of residence and level of awareness

Area of Residence	Level of Awareness			Total
	Low	Moderate	High	
Rural	16	80	16	112
	(14.30)	(71.40)	(14.30)	(100.00)
Urban	8	80	0	88
	(09.10)	(90.90)	(00.00)	(100.00)
Total	24	160	16	200

Df: 2

Table Value: Five per cent level: 5.991

Calculated χ^2 Value: 16.017

One per cent level: 9.210

Out of 200 members, 56% members reside in rural area. Of which, 14.30% members have low level of awareness; 71.40% members have moderate level of awareness and the rest 14.30% members have high level of awareness.

44% members reside in urban area. Of which, 09.10% members have low level of awareness and 90.90% members have moderate level of awareness.

The percentage of respondents with high level of awareness is found high among members who reside in rural area. The percentage of members with low level of awareness is also found high among members, who reside in rural area. As the calculated Chi-square value is greater than the table value at one per cent level, there exists significant association between area of residence and level of awareness.

Table 2: Educational Qualification and level of awareness

Educational Qualification	Level of Awareness			Total
	Low	Moderate	High	
Illiterate	8	20	0	28
	(28.60)	(71.40)	(00.00)	(100.00)
Primary Level	8	88	16	112
	(07.10)	(78.60)	(14.30)	(100.00)
Secondary Level	4	44	0	48
	(08.30)	(91.70)	(00.00)	(100.00)
Higher Secondary Level	4	0	0	4
	(100.00)	(00.00)	(00.00)	(100.00)
Degree / Diploma	00	8	0	8
	(00.00)	(100.00)	(00.00)	(100.00)
Total	24	160	16	200

Df: 8

Table Value: Five per cent level: 15.507

Calculated χ^2 Value: 53.194

One per cent level: 20.090

From the table it could be inferred that, the percentage of the respondents with low level of awareness is high with those who are illiterate and primary level. The percentage of the respondents with high level of awareness is high with Primary level people. Therefore, it can be said that primary level educated people are high level of awareness towards consumer protection act. However, as the calculated χ^2 value is greater than the table value at five per cent level, null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore it is concluded that there is a significant association between Educational Qualification of the respondents and their level of awareness towards consumer protection act.

Table 3: Occupation and level of awareness

Occupation	Level of Awareness			Total
	Low	Moderate	High	
Agriculture	0	49	4	53
	(00.00)	(92.50)	(07.50)	(100.00)
Business	12	25	4	41
	(29.30)	(61.00)	(09.80)	(100.00)
Employee	12	86	8	106
	(11.30)	(81.10)	(07.50)	(100.00)
Total	24	160	16	200

Df: 4

Table Value: Five per cent level: 9.488

Calculated χ^2 Value: 19.687

One per cent level: 13.277

From the table it could be inferred that, the percentage of the respondents with low level of awareness is high with the respondents who are doing business and employed. The percentage of the respondents with high level of awareness is high with employees. Therefore, it can be said that most employees are high level of awareness towards consumer protection act. However, as the calculated χ^2 value is greater than the table value is five per cent level, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore it is concluded that there is a significant association between Occupation of the respondents and their level of awareness towards consumer protection act.

Findings of the Study:

The following are the finding of the study

- ✓ Out of 200 respondents, a majority of 56% respondents are residing in rural area and remaining 44% of the respondents are residing in Urban Area.
- ✓ 22% respondents belong to the age group of up to 30 years, 34% respondents belong to the age group between 31 and 40 years and the majority of remaining 44% respondents belong to the age group of above 40 years.

- ✓ 98% respondents are married and 2% respondents are unmarried.
- ✓ Education wise classification of respondents reveals that, of the total respondents, 14% of the respondents are illiterate, a majority of 56% of the respondents are educated up to Primary level, 24% of the respondents are educated up to Secondary level, 2% of the respondents are educated up to higher secondary level and remaining 4% of the respondents are graduate and diploma holders.
- ✓ Occupation wise classification reveals that, out of 200 respondents, 27% of the respondents are agriculturist, 21% of the respondents are doing business and remaining 53% of the respondents are employees. Thus, It could be inferred that majority of the respondents are employees.
- ✓ 56% of the respondents are belongs to nuclear family and 44% of the respondents are belong to joint family.
- ✓ 14% of the respondents are in the income group up to `5000, 74% of the respondents are in the income group of `5001- `10000 and remaining 12% of the respondents are in the income group of above `10,000. Thus, it could be inferred that majority of the respondents are in the income group of `5001- `10000.
- ✓ A majority of 66% of the respondents said that consumer forum is function in their area and remaining 34% of the respondents said that consumer forum is not functioning in our area.
- ✓ A majority of 58% of the respondents are members of Consumer Forum and remaining 42% of the respondents are not members of Consumer Forum.
- ✓ 51% of the respondents are unaware of the existence and its role is the reason for not joining consumer forum, 13% of the respondents are not joining due to the minimum publicity of association activities, 20% of the respondents said it was due to lack of time and remaining 16% of the respondents told that lack of interest was the reason for not joining consumer forum. It could be seen from the table that the most of the respondents mentioned they unaware of its existence and its role is the reason for not joining consumer forum.
- ✓ 30% of the respondents are having awareness on three tier consumer forum and remaining 70% of the respondents are not aware on the three tier consumer forum. Hence, it could be inferred that the majority of the respondents are unawareness on the three tier consumer forum.
- ✓ From the Chi-Square results, it is evident that there exists a significant association between education, area of residence, occupation and level of awareness.

Suggestions:

From viewing the study, we can suggest that

- ✓ The consumer forum should focus on the rural areas as the consumers in the rural area are not aware of their rights.
- ✓ Government should take steps to improve the functioning of consumer forums.
- ✓ More forums should be set up in the rural areas. Officials should be able to assist the rural consumers in the right direction.
- ✓ All consumer rights must be educated to all the levels of society. All the procedures related to the consumer issue redressal must be simplified.
- ✓ Steps should be taken to eliminate consumer hesitation in seeking justice.

Conclusion:

The study shows that consumer protection measures are not aware to general public because of lack of proper communications. So in this context it is necessary to say that information should reach that each and every individual consumer. Consumer awareness through consumer education and actions by the government, consumer activists, and association are needed the most to make consumer movement a success in the country.

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