

A case for separate Directorate for Consumer Affairs

May it be pricing of goods in the open markets or the paid services, both private as well as government, available to a common man the Consumer is always at the losing end. Take the case of pricing of goods of daily consumption like food articles, milk, milk products, bread, meat, vegetables, fruits and many other non-controlled hundreds of eatables both namkeen and sweets, available in the market, a consumer is absolutely not sure of the price, quantity or quality that he is being offered by the sellers for a price demanded from him. Except for a very very few businessmen who stick to their principles for carrying out fair trade, majority of the sellers including many multinationals are ever eager to exploit the consumer.

The consumer is not only charged higher price, he is also being cheated in as far as quality of the goods is concerned. The new trend in selling the packed goods is **reducing the weight instead of increasing the price** to hoodwink the consumer. There are no standard weights for packed items.

Similarly, other items of use like garments, foot-wear etc are being sold at exorbitant rates having no relation to the accepted rate of profit on investment made. This unchecked anarchy is not prevalent in sale of goods only; the paid services available to the users are also equally mismanaged and heavily biased against the User/Consumer. The services provided both by official/government agencies as well as by private entrepreneurs or professionals go absolutely unchecked by any government agency.

Even service/consultation charges fixed by the government for professionals like doctors are flouted with impunity by those government servants who are officially allowed to practice privately what to talk of private service providers. The nursing homes do not conform to any laid down standards and are allowed to function without even basic registration. Hospitals, both private as well as government are treating the patients like animals without any body exercising any control on their functioning. The position of other official service providers like PDD, PHE, Municipal Corporation, PWD, and Traffic Police appears to be no body's business. These government agencies are free to supply or not to supply, manage or not to manage, maintain or damage the jobs assigned to them.

Coming to think of it, the working of all these agencies which meet the common man's daily needs are supposed to be monitored and governed under established laws of the land by government agencies. Government of India enacted **Consumer protection Act in 1986 for the entire country except for J&K**. Our state followed suit by enacting their own **Consumer Protection Act in 1987** with identical provisions. Under the Act the Consumer has Right to i) Choose, ii) be Heard, iii) Redressal, IV) Personal safety/protection, v) Information, vi) Consumer Education, vii) Healthy environment. All these rights could be enforced through the Consumer Courts, one at the state level and two at divisional level.

Notwithstanding the enormous amount of work of providing relief to the consumers and users of services both private as well as government, the job of **consumer protection** was placed under the already over worked ministry of Food & Supplies and Transport. And Directorate of Food & Supplies was entrusted additional job of handling Consumer Affairs. Thus Director Food & Supplies who is a **supplier of goods to the consumer** himself was made a **Consumer Protector** as well. In fact the work of food supplies is so vast, complex and time consuming that it is practically not possible for the Director CAPD to spare time for the **Consumer Protection Work** which itself is so huge and diverse. Director who not only has to fix and keep an eye on the price, quality and quantity of goods sold to the consumers, has also to control and monitor functioning of the agencies responsible for enforcing the consumer laws. The handling **Consumer Protection** **Affair for Director CAPD is only an additional second priority work**. He hardly finds time for holding meetings for ensuring fixing rates, quality and supplies of the essential commodities to the public. He practically, can not afford to monitor the **working of the law enforcing agencies** that are so very essential to give effect to the Consumer Protection Laws. Under the circumstances, the agencies like drug controller, health officer, weights and measures wing and other inspection teams constituted for inspection/checking etc do not perform their duties effectively.

Similarly the work of paid services like Health, Electricity Supply, Water Supply, Municipal Corporation, PWD, Public Transport and traffic Management etc which directly affect the Consumer Rights go absolutely uncensored by the Directorate of Consumer Affairs who are supposed to be a watch dog for violation of all such services.

It is high time now for the government under the dynamic leadership of young Chief Minister to honestly ponder over the spirit behind the enactment of the Consumer Protection Act and seriously think of forming an independent Directorate of Consumer Affairs to protect the consumer, especially in the far flung rural areas from the clutches of the unscrupulous businessmen who take away the common man's hard earned money without providing him genuine goods and services.

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