PREFACE

Even after sixty five years of independence, Indian consumers, largely poor, Illiterate, ignorant, apathetic or just defeatist, continue to be at the receiving end. The manifestations of consumer neglect are evident in the large scale adulterated food we eat, the spurious, unsafe and sub-standard products we buy, the repeated shortage of essential commodities accompanied by black marketing and profiteering, the hazardous drugs that are available over the counter, the glossy, unethical and manipulative advertisements that we are bombarded with, the humiliation, indignity and harassment that we are subjected to at the hands of public sector undertakings such as transport corporations, railways, telephones, nationalized banks and indeed in the polluted water and air we drink and breathe. And this despite the volumes of legislation holding the promise of consumer protection and the plethora of government departments specifically co-constituted to implement these laws.

The gap left by government sector and private sector is being filled by voluntary consumer organisations. These organisations have been working very hard even before the Consumer Protection Act 1986 was enacted and implemented. Rather major consumer organisations advocated very strongly to get separate courts established for the redressal of consumer complaints, which lead to birth of a vibrant consumer protection movement. It will not be exaggerating if it is said that the consumer movement in India has gained strength primarily through the consumer organisations only. Currently the roles that consumer organizations are playing in society can be grouped under five broad categories, viz., consumer awareness and education, product appraisal, networking with other consumer organisations, complaints settlements and consumer research.

The increasing role of voluntary associations in the field of consumer law and various other social spheres relevant to the law makes it desirable that there should be a detailed analysis of various facets of this role from the legal angle. Generally, it is taken for granted that initiating and conducting litigation is the only function worth study. However, the beneficial role of voluntary organizations could be much more wider than even expected.

These functions already postulated on the part of voluntary organization assume that the organizations themselves would be properly equipped to impart legal assistance, legal
guidance and legal literacy to others. They themselves will, therefore, have to take steps to ensure that their own knowledge is adequate in quantity, quality and upto date in accuracy. Generally, the quality of the legal efficiency would depend on good staff, library facilities and good access to the outside world to knowledge. A voluntary organization desirous of doing really independent work would, therefore, need a good library in any case. This brings in the question of finances.

Though over 1,300 consumer organizations exist all over India, it is regrettable that many of them are only paper organizations. The government having started a well intentioned scheme of Rs. 25,000 grants to registered consumer organisations, a number of paper organizations have sprung up. Again it is an ordinary consumer who is the ultimate victim on this front, too.

The present study has examined and analysed the functioning of these groups in the past. We could state that these organisations have done wonderful jobs in the past. The study has predominantly dealt with actuality of their working. The researcher had selected 10 leading voluntary consumer organisations in India and then collected relevant information on these consumer groups, such as their address, name of the head of the institution, number of personnel employed, thrust areas of work, publications, annual budget, sources like funding and activities like complaints handling, education, research, litigation, lobbying, boycotting, consumer advocacy etc. An attempt has been made to discuss and suggest measures for improvement in their working in future and what more role they can play in spreading consumer awareness and thereby strengthening the emerging consumer movement. The concept of 'voluntarism' has also been dealt with in the study. The study has also highlighted the adequacy or otherwise of the 1986 Act. Besides, it has focused on the problem of satisfying the consumer needs through non-legal ways.

A number of people have contributed directly and indirectly towards the completion of this research endeavour. Although, utmost care has been taken to acknowledge each one of them, anyone’s contribution missed through an oversight is deeply regretted. The law stated in the thesis is as it stood on 15 May 2013.

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