

A Study on Consumer Protection Awareness among Rural Consumers in Tlabung, Mizoram

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ABSTRACT

A vast market came into being due to the progress and development of trade and commerce. Consumers are often exploited by marketers in various ways. In India, to provide for better protection of the interest of consumers and that purpose to make provision for the establishment of consumer councils and other authorities for the settlement of consumers' disputes and for matters connected therewith, the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 was passed by the parliament. The study focused on the awareness of the Consumer Protection Act among rural consumers in Tlabung, Lunglei district, Mizoram. For the purpose of the study, samples were collected by using convenient sampling method. Spearman's rank correlation was used to prove the hypothesis. The study found that more than 90% of the respondents were aware of the Consumer Protection Act. The study also revealed that there is a significant correlation between the educational background of the respondents and the awareness of consumer rights. Therefore, the study recommended that the government, the concerned organization (i.e., Consumer Forum) and the educational institutions would give more awareness to the public especially among uneducated regarding consumer Protection Act and encourage the public to do their duty as consumers in order to protect them from buying unusual products and unfair marketing practices of the marketers.

Introduction

Consumer is an individual or group of individuals who buy the goods and services for consumption not for resale or commercial purpose. As per Consumer Protection Act, 1986, "Consumer" means any person who buys or avails of any service for a consideration which has been paid or promised or partly paid and partly promised under any system of deferred payment etc. Everyone is a consumer in one way or another.

With the development of international trade and commerce in India has led to expansion and diversification of business which brings a variety of goods and services for the consumer to satisfy their need. As the main objective of business is to earn a profit, the consumers are often exploited by the marketers to get maximum profits in various ways such as false advertisements, false weight and measures, more prices than MRP, duplicate products, sub-standard quality and so on. Therefore, to provide for better protection of the interests of consumers and for matters connected therewith, the Consumer Protection Bill, 1986 was introduced by the Parliament of India and came into form as Consumer Protection Act, 1986 (No. 68 of 1986). The present law relating to consumer protection is contained in the Consumer Protection Act, 1986, the Consumer Protection Rules, 1987 and the Consumer Protection Regulations, 2005.

The Act also provides for establishment of Consumer Protection Councils at the Central, State and District levels which are Advisory Bodies to promote and protect the rights of consumers. Besides the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC) at the national level, 35 State Consumer Disputes Redressal Commissions (State Commissions) and 618 District Consumer Disputes Redressal Fora (District Fora) are functional in the country as on 31.03.2014.

Consumer Right

The Consumer Protection Act, 1986 has provided the following Consumer Rights.

- (i) The right to be protected against the marketing of goods and services which are hazardous to life and property.
- (ii) The right to be informed about the quality, quantity, potency, purity, standard and price of goods or services as the case may be, so as to protect the consumer against unfair trade practices.
- (iii) The right to be assured, wherever possible, access to a variety of goods and services at competitive prices.
- (iv) The right to be heard and to be assured that consumer's interests will receive due consideration at appropriate fora.
- (v) The right to seek redressal against unfair trade practices for restrictive trade practices or unscrupulous exploitation of consumers.
- (v) The right to consumer education.

Consumer Responsibilities

A consumer has the following responsibilities as given in the Consumer Protection Act, 1986.

- 1) It is the responsibility of the consumer to exercise his rights properly. He should enquire about the product price, quality, after sale service etc. before making purchases.
- 2) A consumer should try to know the terms of sale, quality, warranty etc. before purchasing anything.
- 3) Quality marks such as ISI Mark, AGMARK, ISO, HALLMARK, GREENMARK, FPO, WOOLMARK, ECOMARK, BROWN MARK are some marks which consumers must see before making purchases.
- 4) In case consumers are supplied wrong or duplicate product, inferior quality product etc. he must file a complaint with the grievance redressal authority. This type of consciousness among consumers will deter the sellers from selling unsuitable goods.
- 5) While making purchases, a consumer should insist on getting cash memos. The cash memo becomes a basis of filing a grievance, if need arises.
- 6) Consumers should not be swayed by advertisements. They should compare the actual use of product with the use shown in advertisements and if there is any discrepancy it must be brought to the notice of the sponsors of the advertisement.

As a consumer, it is very important to know the rights and responsibilities of a consumer in order to make the Consumer Protection Act successful. Therefore, the present study is conducted regarding awareness of Consumer Protection Act among rural consumers in Tlabung, Lunglei district, Mizoram.

Literature Review

Some important studies concerning consumer protection awareness are reviewed here as under to highlight their findings.

Krishnakumar and Sakthiventhan (2012) conducted a study on consumer protection awareness among rural consumers in Cuddalore district based on 125 sample respondents. The study revealed that majority of the respondent's got some information of consumer protection through newspaper (60.8%) followed by Radio (53.6%) and out-door advertisement (52.0%). The study also found that there is a significant association between age and sources of consumer protection awareness. The study recommended that the government, voluntary organization and educational institute should come forward to educate the rural respondents towards important of their rights and responsibilities.

Sikka et al. (2012) in their study, assessed and compared the awareness about Consumer Protection Act among dentists - dentists in teaching institutions and dentists in private practice. The study found that 69.6% of dentist in teaching institutions and 76.8% of dentist in private practice reported to be aware of Consumer Protection Act. However, awareness about rules and regulations of Consumer Protection Act was found to be low in both the dentist group. No difference was seen in awareness based on gender, degree and type of practice. The study suggested that there is a need to raise the awareness of health professionals about such laws so that their increased professional concern and practice conforms to welfare of patients.

Arora et al. (2014) in their study of consumer awareness among teenagers, found that teenagers are not fully aware of quality assurance marks on different products. They generally check the information like price, expiry and manufacturing date, brand name, etc. given on the labels of the products. The study also indicated that male teenagers are more aware of consumer rights than female teenagers. Demographic variables like gender and age have no significant impact about the consumer awareness among teenagers. Brands, advertisements, and packaging play an important role in the shopping among teenagers.

Burna (2017) administered a study on awareness of consumer protection Act and its awareness on domestic appliances. The study found that 54% of the respondents are aware of the consumer protection act and 46% of the respondents are unaware of the consumer protection act. The study also revealed that only 8% of the consumers are complaining to the consumer forum when they purchased defective products or services and 92% of the people are not complaining to consumer forum.

Chaudhury (2017) conducted a survey on consumer awareness among college students in Tezpur, Assam. The study found that Checking of MRPs, manufacturing and expiry dates is a normal activity of most of the respondents but not all check the ingredients used and manufacturer's name on the product. Almost none of the respondents have the habit of checking the quality assurance mark on the product they consume which clearly indicate that they are little aware of the fact that there are many who offer duplicate and inferior quality products in the market which might be hazardous to the health and even the life of consumers.

Latha and Thamarai Kannan (2019) found in their study that Many consumers had awareness about redressal rights and corrective measures of the consumer courts like payment of insured sum, compensation and replacement of goods, etc. Consumers also approach Voluntary Consumer Organization and they were satisfied on its services. Consumer faces such problems like hesitation of obeying the orders and they suggested that the court have limited powers to penalize the malpractices.

Research Methodology

The present study is conducted to understand the consumer protection awareness among rural consumers in Tlabung, Lunglei district, Mizoram. Mizoram is located in the corner of North East India, having a total area of 21,078 square kilometres and situated between Myanmar and Bangladesh. Lunglei is the second most populous district in the state, after Aizawl as per 2011 Census. Tlabung is located in south-west corner of Lunglei district, near the border of Bangladesh, having a distance of 89 kilometres from Lunglei. As per the reports released by Census India 2011, Tlabung has population of 4,556 of which 2,267 are males while 2,287 are female. Tlabung is an important place for border trade between Mizoram and Bangladesh. A border trade facilitation centre is also established by the government.

For the purpose of the study, 50 samples were selected by using convenient sampling method. Primary data were collected by administering a structured questionnaire among the sample respondents. The hypothesis framed based on the study is "There is a significant correlation between the educational level and the awareness of consumer rights". The questionnaire was framed based on the literature review (Arora et al, 2014; Burna, 2017;). The survey was conducted during January 2018–April, 2018. Secondary data were collected from journals and websites. Simple percentage and Spearman rank correlation (SPSS) were used to analyse the data.

Results and Discussion

Demographic profile and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents

Table 1 shows the demographic profile and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. Among the respondents, 30.6% are male and 69.4% are female. In terms of age, 74% of the respondents belong to the age group of 21 – 30, followed by 18% of the respondents belong to the age group of 20 years and below.

Table 1: Demographic Profile and Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Description	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Gender	Male	15	30
	Female	35	70
Age	20 years and below	9	18
	21 – 30 years	37	74
	31 – 40 years	2	4
	41 years and above	2	4
Educational Qualification	HSLC and below	7	14
	HSSLC	35	70
	Graduate	5	10
	Post graduate	3	6
Monthly Family Income	Below Rs. 10,000	4	8
	Rs. 10,001 – Rs. 15,000	13	26
	Rs. 15,001 – Rs. 20,000	6	12
	Rs. 20,001 – Rs. 25,000	7	14
	Above Rs. 25,001	20	40

Source: Field study

The table also indicates that 70% of the respondents are HSSLC passed, followed by 14% of the respondents are HSLC and below, 10% are graduate, and 6% of the respondents are post-graduate. With respect to monthly family income, 40 % of the respondents' family monthly income is above Rs 25, 001, followed by 26% of the of the respondents are having monthly family income between Rs. 10,001 – Rs. 15,000, and 14% of the respondents' family have monthly income of Rs. 20,001 – Rs. 25,000. Only 8% of the respondents' monthly family income is below Rs. 10,000.

Awareness of Consumer Protection Act

Table 2 indicates whether the respondents are aware of the 'Consumer Protection Act'. Among the respondents, 92% are aware of the 'Consumer Protection Act', Only 8% of the respondents did not know about it.

Table 2: Awareness of the 'Consumer Protection Act'

Awareness of the Consumer Protection Act	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	46	92
No	4	8
Total	50	100

Source: Field Study

Awareness of consumer rights

Table 3 shows whether the respondents know the 'Consumer Right'. The table shows that 88% are aware of the consumer right. 4% of the respondents somehow knew it, and only 4% of the respondent are not aware of the consumer right. In overall analysis, more than 90% of the respondents are aware of the consumer right. Since 86% of the respondents are HSSLC passed and above, this indicates that the educational background of the consumer has importance in awareness of the consumer right.

Table 3: Awareness of the Consumer Right by the Respondents

Awareness of the Consumer Right	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	44	88
No	2	4
Somehow know of it	4	8
Total	50	100

Source: Field study

Awareness of consumer responsibilities

Table 4 indicated that whether the respondents are aware of consumer responsibilities. 85% of the respondents are aware of consumer responsibilities. 14% of the respondents are not aware of consumer responsibilities.

Table 4: Awareness of consumer responsibilities

Awareness of the Consumer Responsibilities	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	43	86
No	7	14
Total	50	100

Source: Field Study

Frequency of checking product information

Table 5 reveals whether the frequency of checking the product information. Among the respondents, 26% of the respondents were in the habit of checking the product information regularly before buying the product, 42% of the respondents checked the product information sometimes, 11% of the respondents hardly checked, and only 10% never checked the product information before buying the product.

Table 5: Checking Product information

Frequency of checking	No. of respondents	Percentage
Regularly	13	26
Sometimes	21	42
Hardly	11	22
Never	5	10
Total	50	100

Source: Field study

Checking Price, Expiry date, Weight/Size, and brand name of the product

Table 6 indicates the what kind of the information which the respondents usually checked before buying the product. 44% of the respondents usually checked the manufacturing and expiry date of the product, 36% of the respondents checked the price (MRP), 6% of the respondents checked brand name and 4% of the respondents usually checked weight/size of the product.

Table 6: Checking Price, Expiry Date, Weight/Size, Brand name of the Product

Information	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Price/MRP	18	36
Manufacturing and expiry date	22	44
Weight/ Size	2	4
Brand name	3	6

Source: Field study

The manufacturer gives the manufacturing and expiry date on the product information which is very important mostly for the health matters of the consumers. In the present study, more than 40% of the respondents were in the habit of checking the manufacturing and expiry date indicating that they were conscious about their safety and health.

Frequency of facing problems in buying a product

Table 7 indicates the frequency of facing problems by the respondents while buying a product. Out of the total respondents, 4% of the respondents were facing problems regularly while buying the product, 64% of the respondents were facing problems sometimes. Meanwhile, 28% of the respondents never faced any problems while buying the product.

Table 7: Frequency of facing problems in buying a product

Frequency of facing problems	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Regularly	4	8
Sometimes	32	64
Never	14	28
Total	50	100

Source: Field study

Specific problems faced in buying a product

Table 8 shows the specific problems faced by the respondents while buying the product. Out of the total respondents, 36% of the respondents were facing the problem of buying the product at higher price than the 'Maximum Retail Price (MRP)', 18% of the respondents mentioned that they were facing the problem of the product which is insufficient weight. 16% of the respondents faced the problem of purchasing the duplicate product. 2% of the respondents purchased expired product.

Table 8: Specific problems faced by the respondents in buying the product

Specific problems faced	No. of respondents	Percentage
Buying at higher price than the Maximum Retail Price (MRP)	18	36
Insufficient weight	9	18
Purchasing duplicate product	8	16
Purchasing expired product	1	2

Source: Field Study

Complaining about the defective products to the shopkeepers

Table 9 indicates whether the respondents were complaining the defective products at least once. 38 % of the respondents were complaining the defective products at least once while 62% of the respondents were not interested in complaining.

Table 9: Complaining about the products to the shopkeepers

Making a complain at least once	No. of the respondents	Percentage
Yes	19	38
No	31	62
Total	50	100

Source: Field Study

Satisfaction regarding feedback from the shopkeepers

Table 10 shows the satisfaction of the consumer regarding feedback from the shopkeepers when they complained the defective products to the shopkeepers. Among the respondents who were complaining the defective products to the shopkeepers, 52.63% were not satisfied with the response of the shopkeepers regarding their complaint, only 31.57% were satisfied with the feedback/response of the shopkeepers. 15.78% were not sure about it.

Table 10: Respondents' satisfaction regarding feedback from the shopkeeper

Satisfaction of feedback from the shopkeeper	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	6	31.57
No	10	52.63
Not sure	3	15.78
Total	19	100.00

Note: 31 respondents did not make any complain

Source: Field study

In this regard, the shopkeepers or marketers will give importance to the satisfaction of the consumers by giving good responses to those who have complaints in order to build a good relationship between the customers and the marketers.

Complaining to the 'Consumer Forum'

Table 11 shows whether the respondents were making complaint to the consumer forum. Among the respondents, 94% of the respondents had never made complaint to the consumer forum in respect of purchasing the defective products and if the products are sold in an unusual way. Only 6% of the respondents were complaining to the consumer forum.

Table 11: Complaining to the consumer forum

Do you ever make complaint to the consumer forum?	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	3	6.00
No	47	94.00
Total	19	100.00

Source: Field study

Correlation between the educational background and the awareness of consumer rights

Spearman rank correlation was used to test the hypothesis frame. The calculation is shown in Table 12. As per the calculation shown in the table, the hypothesis is accepted and hence it can be concluded that there is a significant correlation between the educational background of the respondents and the awareness of consumer rights ($p < 0.05$).

Table 12: Testing of hypothesis

		Awareness of consumer rights
Educational background of the respondents	Correlation co-efficient	-.564**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	50

Source: Field study

Conclusion and Recommendation

The present study focused the awareness level of consumer protection among rural consumers in Tlabung, Lunglei district, Mizoram. The study indicated that most of the respondents were aware of consumer protection Act, and Consumer Rights. The study also revealed that while buying the products, more than 70% of the respondents faced the problems such as buying the expired products, buying the products at a price higher than the Maximum Retail Price (MRP), insufficient weight of products purchased, etc. In this connection, only 38% of the respondents complained to the shopkeepers and only 3% of the respondents complained to the consumer forum. Therefore, the study recommended that the government, the concerned organization (i.e., Consumer Forum) and the educational institutions would give more awareness to the public regarding Consumer Protection Act, consumer rights and responsibilities and encourage the public to do their duty as consumers in order to protect them from buying unusual products and unfair marketing practices of the marketers.

The study also revealed that only one-fourth of the respondents checked the product information such as expiry date, Maximum Retail Price (MRP) and other contents regularly. The study also recommended that awareness should be given to the public to check the product information regularly in order to prevent the exploitation of the public in buying the products at higher than MRP, unexpired products and encourage the public to be conscious about the weight and size of the products which they buy from the marketers to prevent buying the insufficient weight and size of the products. In this connection, the government, the consumer forum, and NGOs should encourage the marketers to market their products fairly for the welfare of consumers. As the Consumer Protection Act is enacted to protect the consumer, the consumer should be aware of the Consumer Protection Act. Even the Government and the Consumer Forum should also discharge its responsibilities according to the Act to protect the consumer.

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