

ROLE OF MEDIA IN CREATING CONSUMER AWARENESS IN RURAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Every individual is a consumer. Consumer rights and welfare are now an integral part of the life of an individual and we all have made use of them at some point in our daily routine. The Consumer Protection Act (1986) offers protection against defective goods, deficient services, unfair trade practices and consumer's exploitation. Every year 15th March is observed as "World Consumer Rights Day". Media in all its form, print or electronic, is a mirror of the time and society we live in. It connects us to the world and the world to us. Media plays a pivotal role in setting up good relation between traders and buyers. Rural markets constitute an important segment of overall economy. Rural products of India (handicraft items, embroidery, food products, agro based products etc.) are unique and innovative. Sustainable market linkages are necessary for promoting such products. Proper and adequate media coverage is required for this. Gone are the days when a rural consumer had to go to a nearby town or city to buy a branded product. The growing power of the rural consumer is forcing big companies to flock to rural markets. To accelerate consumer awareness efforts should be made such as :

- To publish brochures, journals and monographs
- To arrange conferences, seminars and workshops

In recent time the media has reached the nook and corners of the society and advertisements like 'Jago Grahak Jago' have become a household name only because of the media. A consumer can call National Consumer Helpline to seek information, advice for his queries, complaints and guidance. More the consumers aware, more they will be protected.

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The present paper discusses the prospects and problems of rural marketing and role of media in creating awareness among rural consumers. The paper contains mainly four separate sections. While section one deals with present scenario of rural market; section two concentrates on importance of consumer protection and the measures and initiatives that have taken so far by Govt. of India. Section three is discussed about role of media in creating consumer awareness. The final section offers some suggestive measures for improvement of the present loopholes and gaps of role of media in rural marketing in India by identifying areas where immediate intervention is necessary to attain the basic objective of rural development.

Key Words : consumer , consumer protection , rural market, consumer awareness, media

1. Introduction

"India's way is not Europe's. India is not Calcutta and Bombay. India lives in her seven hundred thousand villages",

Mahatma Gandhi (1926)

Rural markets constitute an important segment of overall economy. The overall growth of the economy has resulted into substantial increase in the purchasing power of the rural communities. On account of green revolution in India, the rural areas are consuming a large quantity of industrial and urban manufactured products. In this context, a special marketing strategy , namely rural marketing has taken shape. Communication is a process to achieve mutual understanding or to have an interaction or exchange of ideas, opinions, facts, information, etc among all human beings or communication is the act of information, ideas, knowledge from one person to another. Mass Media are viewed as mass media because their reach extends the vast heterogeneous masses of the population of the country at the same time. With the help of mass media messages can be sent and received in any part of the world may be rural or urban.

Power of media can transform the whole society. When there are so many channels and news papers we cannot ignore its importance in the society. Media has lots of responsibilities on its shoulder as today's society is very much influenced by the role of media. Media has the capability to empower the common man by spreading awareness and keeping the Govt. on its toes. The role of media as a force multiplier in creating awareness and informing general public is important as no country can progress if only a section of population is doing well. All sections

of the society should reap the benefit of progress and development. Communication plays a big role in bringing all people together. The strategies what media use is also very impressive. They use film stars and cricketers in bringing awareness, as it is more appealing. Since every individual depends on some media or the other for the latest news and updates this is the best way to bring awareness in the society.

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1.1 Objectives:

1. To know importance of consumer protection and different initiatives taken for this purpose.
2. To identify the role of mass media in creating consumer awareness.

1.2 Present scenario of rural market

- Most of the Indian corporate houses are already concentrating in a big manner on the rural market and are continuously devising new strategies to reach to this market. For example Hindustan Lever Limited (HLL) has achieved a great success in penetrating rural India with their successful rural marketing projects like 'Project and Operation Bharat'.
- Apart from HLL, it is Amul, which is also very aggressively involved, in the rural marketing for quite some time now. Aiming for a deeper penetration in rural markets, FMCG majors, including Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, are introducing products in low price points particularly in the Rs 5 category as part of their strategy to shore up volumes.

- While global beverages firm Coca-Cola has introduced 'Fanta Fun Taste' powder sachet for Rs 5 targeting the lower end of the market, Pepsico had also recently brought out 200 ml bottle for Rs 5 for its popular lemon flavour drink 'Nimbooz' as part of a promotional offer.
- On other hand, to maintain its market leadership, biscuit giant Britannia has consistently focused on the lower end of the segment by bringing out products in small pack sizes and in low price points. According to analysts the company, which sells around seven biscuit brands like 'Tiger' and '50:50', has been able to enjoy a market share of 34.9 per cent because of its focus on the rural markets. (Economics Times, April 24,2011).
- In the field of mobile communication, Bharti Airtel also concentrated on expansion of rural marketing and To extend its reach in India's rural markets, Bharti Airtel is focusing on innovative initiatives, including efficient infrastructure deployments, expanding its distribution network via partnerships, and customized content and tariffs. Bharti Airtel also formed a joint venture with the Indian Farmers Fertilizer Cooperative Limited (IFFCO). Its joint venture, IFFCO Kisan Sanchar, uses IFFCO's wide rural presence (present in 80 percent of Indian villages) .
- e-choupal is now being regarded as a reliable delivery mechanism for resource development initiatives. Its potential is being tested through pilot projects in healthcare, educational services, water management and cattle health management with the help of several service providers including non-governmental organizations. As of July 2010, services through 6500 e-choupal across 10 states, reach more than 4 million farmers in about 40,000 villages. (www.echoupal.com).
- India's largest two wheeler company Hero Honda Motors is spreading its wings to capture the commuting bikers' imagination in rural India, Over 500 rural sales executives of Hero Honda dealers are now busy meeting the sarpanch, the headmaster and the anganwadi workers in villages all over the country. Har Gaon Har Angan seeks to build an ongoing

relationship with millions of households in rural India, given that penetration of two-wheelers in rural India.

- Inspired by purchases of buffaloes in villages through financing, the world's largest bicycle maker by volume Hero Cycles Ltd is looking to replicate the same for its products through micro finance firms to boost its rural sales. The company has tied up with Allahabad-based Sonata Finance for financing bicycle purchases, under which the micro finance firm will provide loans of Rs 100 per week to customers in the rural areas. The bicycle penetration in India as low as 18 per cent, with a total annual sales of 12.5 million units last year, there are lots of opportunities to be tapped, specially in the rural areas. Out of total sales of 5.3 million units in 2009-2010, 65 per cent came from the rural areas and still there is a lot of potential for growth. (Economics times, May 8,2011) .

2. Importance of consumer protection

Consumer protection has a wide agenda. It not only includes educating consumers about their rights and responsibilities, but also helps in getting their grievances redressed. It not only requires judicial machinery for protecting the interests of consumers but also requires the consumers to get together and form themselves into consumer associations for protection and promotion of their interests. At the same time, consumer protection has a special significance for business too. To know about consumer protection it is important to know different ways of exploitation of consumers.

2.1 Different ways of exploitation of consumers

There are many ways by which consumers are exploited .A few of them are :

1. Selling at higher price : The price charged for the product will not be proportionate to the quality.
2. Product risk
3. Adulteration : This is very common in food items and could prove prove to be highly injurious to one's health.
4. Sub-standard product

5. False claims : Manufacturers make false representations about their product in thje media with a view to mislead the consumers.
6. Warranty : In many cases , though the product will have a warranty , when a problem arises , the consumer is told that certain parts will not be covered and they will have to pay.

Media should reveal these facts in front of the rural as well as urban consumers so that they can be aware in future. Many traditional media like Puppet show, Folk Theatre, Demonstration, *Haats* and *Melas* , Wall Painting, Post card and posters , Booklets etc. will be beneficial to the rural consumer to create awareness.

2.3 Initiatives taken by Govt. on consumer awareness

In a world of information asymmetry the government has the responsibility to redress this imbalance. In the Government of India, the Department of Consumer Affairs is the focal point for different Departments and organizations to make the consumers aware of market realities as well as the rights of the consumers and the manner in which they can educate themselves and also enforce their rights. Accordingly, the “Jago Grahak Jago” campaign has become immensely popular and is now being used by several Departments to communicate with consumers.

2.3.1 Legislative measures taken by Govt. on consumer protection

2.3.1.1 Consumer protection Act, 1986

One of the most important milestones in the area of consumer protection/consumer movement in the country has been the enactment of the Consumer Protection Act, 1986.

The Consumer Protection Act, 1986 was enacted to better protect the interests of consumers. It is one of the most progressive and comprehensive pieces of legislation and is umbrella legislation covering all goods and services.

2.3.1.2 Consumer protection (amendment) bill, 2011

Consumer Protection Act was earlier amended thrice by Act no.34 of 1991, Act no.50 of 1993 and Act no.62 of 2002. Amendment made in 1991 was mainly to incorporate provisions for the

quorum of District Forum, appointing persons to preside over State Commissions/District Forums, in case of absence of President to enable the court function uninterrupted¹⁶. In 1993, the Act was again amended to address the inadequacies in the coverage of the main Act. It aimed to plug loopholes and enlarge the scope of areas covered and interest more power to the redressal agencies under the Act¹⁷. In 2002, Act was again amended to facilitate quicker disposal of complaints, enhancing the capability of redressal agencies, strengthening them with more powers, streamlining the procedure and widening the scope of the Act to make it more functional and effective.

2.3.2 Consumer grievance redressal

Consumers need an inexpensive and quick grievance redressal mechanism to ensure that manufacturers and service providers are accountable for the price and quality that the consumers are entitled to. Accordingly, it is necessary to provide several methods of grievance redressal including those which are available in accordance with the provisions of the Consumer Protection Act.

2.3.3 Consumers' Forum

Consumers' Forum is one the consumer organizations that existed in India long before the Consumer Protection Act 1986 was passed. The mission of the organization, at its start, was to promote consumerism by making aware, training and educating the consumers on their rights. This was particularly necessary when there were no stalwart laws in our country to protect the consumers. The forum provides free advice to consumers, conducts brain storming sessions on matters related to consumer protection and ensures the representation of consumers in national, state and district level consumer courts and legally mandated consumer protection councils. Consumer Forum has been a member of Consumers International since 1996.

3. Role of media and changing face of rural India

Over the past few years rural India has witnessed an increase in the purchasing power of consumers, accompanied by their desire to upgrade their standard of living. The steps taken by GOI to address the poverty have improved the condition of rural masses. As a result, rural consumers have upgraded their lifestyles through Making changes in their consumption patterns

by adding more nutritious food and are purchasing lifestyle products such as cosmetics, beverages, mobile phones etc. which have become necessities for them.

Role of media- print media as well as electronic media is to create awareness of people as well as society has increased enormously. Electronic media has more impact on society as compare to print media because it is visual aid of information The press in India has always shown its solidarity with the socio economic problems of this country. There are no two opinions about the significant contribution that press, journalists, and the media people have done good work in bringing to light the major issues of social concern. The press in India has always been responsive in performing its duties so that those who are involved in the matters of policy making can give justice to their duties.

Earlier the readership was the only criteria to assess the affectivity of media, as it was only print media that was its mark. The development of movies brought a big change. People now could see and listen what the communicator wanted to say. Literacy was no more a criteria to establish a link with audience and viewers.

Multiplicities of communication media have brought a sea change in the psychology of people. People became more awakened, well-informed and cautious. They could know different views of the same problem; they could perceive, understand and analyze a situation well. Further advancement of media and mass literacy has also changed the composition of our society. Now, people are becoming conscious and logical thinking and rational bent of mind. The role of media has also broadened. It has undertaken many ventures, along with entertainment, education and enhancement of social structure. Thus, the now media is a mirror of modern society expressing its needs, aspirations, expectations and failures.

3.1 Relationship of media and public

In the modern world of quick communication and quick information, media plays a crucial role. The original role of the media was or still is to give to the public all relevant information about occurrences in the country and the world. Now a written media includes a host of publications, dailies, fortnightlies, weeklies, monthlies- all giving information about events with supplement of suggestion and comments by learned people.

Today the print media has acquired such proportions that there is absolutely no avenue of knowledge or information that is left out. Multifarious avenues are being touched upon, whether it is local, national or international. The great advantage of this media is spreading of news, knowledge and information through the length and breadth of the world. Public implies openness community, citizenship, discussion and debates.

Multinationals such as Coca-Cola Co. and Cadbury (now part of Kraft Foods Inc.) are trying to crack this market with television advertisements specifically targeted at rural consumers. Yet product consumption remains low in rural India despite the fact that the area is home to half of the country's total disposable income, according to 2008 report from FICCI-PricewaterhouseCoopers.

There are televisions in an estimated 26% of India's 145 million rural households, according to a recent NSSO survey. Effectively pitching a global brand to a rural household requires more than just a catchy phrase or a Bollywood face.

3.2 Rural media

Rural media has a long history of evolution. Within this the tradition of wall painting may be traced to the Indian rock-art paintings that go back (according to various estimates) to 4000 BC.

Written forms went hand in hand with oral advertising. So powerful was this tradition that it gave birth to the field of phonetics in ancient India. Ancient Indians developed the scientific view of the physiological basis of human speech sounds. That included the conceptual foundation of the arrangement of letters in Indian scripts; for example, the Devanagari script bears witness to this concept.

Professionals ranging from snake charmers, magicians, and herbal medicine men to jugglers, ropewalkers, and vendors developed their distinct calls or advertising pattern, which can be witnessed in rural *haats* and radio ads to this day. Announcements made by video vans still remind one of the old oral traditions. Vocal calls were supplemented by a wide variety of art, and

music forms and instruments—e.g., musical instruments such as drums, *dafli* (a tambourine), *dabba* (a tin box), and *damru* (a small drum).

Although these forms of advertising are deeply rooted in Indian culture and its folk and literary traditions, they are neglected by the modern Indian advertising industry. Only small rural companies or self-employed rural advertisers make use of them, and some are in danger of becoming extinct. The use of animals such as elephants and camels is not restricted just to rural advertising. *Dabur*, one of the largest advertisers in India with more than 457 products ranging from hair oil to digestive tablets, employs two elephants—*Laxmi* and *Gulabkali*—for advertising purposes. The use of animals for carrying advertising messages is also categorized as a non-conventional advertising form.

4. Future scope of media in creating awareness among rural consumers

4.1 NGOs and consumer awareness

Non-Governmental Consumer Organizations are non-profit, non-political (in most cases), non-regulatory, independent advocacy groups promoting consumerism in India. Media should highlight their activities towards rural consumer so that they can be aware of their functions and contact with the required personnel.

Here are some NGOs which focus on consumer protection as well as consumer awareness.

Consumer Coordination Council (CCC)

CCC has made notable achievements in influencing the making of laws, governmental policy decisions, and providing administrative infrastructure for protecting consumer interest.

Consumer Guidance Society of India

It is one of the oldest consumer organizations in the country and has been instrumental in lobbying the government to pass a consumer protection act.

Citizen Consumer and Civic Action Group

Instrumental in running campaigns for greater access to information, improved functioning of public utilities, greater transparency and accountability in governmental and private sector functioning, and protection of our open spaces and natural environment, CAG plays a vital role in the growth of consumerism in our country.

Consumers Association of India

Consumers Association of India (CAI) was established on the world consumer rights day to be a powerful lobby for the consumer. It has successfully and determinately taken up the mission to spread awareness among consumers, educate them about their responsibilities and rights and to ensure that the consumers' voices can be heard.

4.2 Rural NGOs

Mumbai Grahak Panchayat

Mumbai Grahak Panchayat (MGP), or Bombay Consumer Forum, started as an agitation against the increase of consumer prices near festival season for fair and free distribution of consumer goods.

MGP promotes consumerism by bringing the consumer to the forefront of the logistics and supply chain of consumer goods as decision makers, executors and monitors. MGP's primary objectives include organizing the consumers for common causes, educating them and protecting consumer interest through legal and other means.

VOICE Society

Voluntary Organization in Interest of Consumer Education (VOICE) strives to be the voice of and for the consumer that the governments and other statutory / regulatory bodies of the country seldom hear. The primary focus of this NGO is to establish informed consumers in India.

Grahak Shakti

Grahak Shakti works towards creating consumer awareness by organizing various programs, street plays and on shows such as 'Hello Geleyere'. The organization has undertaken a number of surveys like the one on spurious drugs in coordination with the Drugs Control Department – Government of India.

5. Conclusion

Multiplicities of communication media have brought a sea change in the psychology of people. People became more awakened, well-informed and cautious. They could know different views of the same problem; they could perceive, understand and analyze a situation well. Further advancement of media and mass literacy has also changed the composition of our society. Now,

people are becoming conscious and logical thinking and rational bent of mind. The role of media has also broadened. It has undertaken many ventures, along with entertainment, education and enhancement of social structure. Different ways in which media can act as a mirror of modern society expressing its needs, aspirations, expectations and failures are given below:

1. Rural entrepreneurs, primary beneficiaries, SHGs – bridge with the community with the community, participating companies/industries and rural consumers have benefitted through a robust commercial relationship. These models of marketing linkages demonstrate a large cooperation which can play a major role in recognizing markets and increasing the efficiency of a rural product generation system. While doing so it will benefit farmers and rural communities. Media should focus on this fact.
2. The key role of Information Technology provided and maintained by the industry/company for building linkages, and used by local farmers – brings about transparency, increased access to information and rural transformation (because of sustainable market linkages, rural producers can participate in the benefits of globalization and will also develop their capacity to maintain global quality standard. Media should bring out the effect of globalization in rural market.
3. The involvement of private/ industry sector at the rural product and market development of new services and values to the customers, which will find application in the development markets. It will be worth mentioning that building a sustainable market linkage through industry's intervention will also empower the rural mass (producers, farmers and entrepreneurs) to cope with socio-economic problems in the rural society and will ensure economic self-reliance. Media has a wide scope to cover this field.

The exploitation of consumers is due to the absence of such a key role in providing right information at the right time for consumers. Ignorance about prices and price behavior of market structure and fluctuations in the economy changes is not understood by ordinary consumers and therefore are victims of exploitation and consumer malpractices. Therefore there is a need for greater role of media to regulate consumer protection mechanism for the betterment of

consumers in this changing era. Media plays a useful role in establishing good relations or friendship between the merchants and shoppers. The promotion of fair trade practices, the establishment of codes of conduct for businessmen is the task that the media should also play to protect and aware the rural consumers.

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