

Digitalization of Consumer Protection -An Evaluation of CONFONET Project

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Key Words:

1. CONFONET
2. Co-ordination

Abstract

CONFONET is the Government of India's digital program for consumer protection. This scheme's main purpose is to improve operational efficiency, co-ordination, accessibility and speed in judicial administration, to improvement in time bound justice to the consumers and also to the Department of Consumer Affairs. So this study has conducted to analyze whether this scheme is serving the targeted people, for this primary data has collected through convenient sampling method. The study found, there is a need to create awareness about this schemes through various government programmes

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the GOI has launched the digital India. This program has laid emphasis on National E-governance plan and to transform India into digital empowered society and knowledge economy. This program aims that the government services are made available to citizens electronically by reducing paperwork. The initiative also includes plan to connect rural areas with high-speed internet networks. Digital India has three core components. These include the creation of Digital infrastructure, delivering services digitally and Digital literacy. This program has been envisaged by Department of Electronics and Information Technology and will impact ministry of communications & IT, ministry of rural development, ministry of human resource development, ministry of health and others. The existing/ ongoing e-Governance initiatives would be revamped to align them with the principles of Digital India. The vision of Digital India is to transform the country into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. It would ensure that government services are available to citizens electronically. It would also bring in public accountability through mandated delivery of government's services electronically facilities like health, education, banking, commerce, entertainment, utility and

e-governance services to enhance their quality of life.

Even the concept of digital India is applied in protection of consumers' protection also and the concept of digitalization of consumer protection is called as CONFONET project. It's the computerization and computer networking of Consumer Forums in the country and is being executed on a turnkey basis by the National Informatics Centre. The project aims at improving operational efficiency, co-ordination, accessibility, and speed in judicial administration and to set Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure at Consumer Redressal Forums all over India. It aims at providing E-governance, efficiency, transparency, systematizing of working to achieve bound delivery of justice to the consumers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dr. Pratap Singh and Joginder Grewal (2013) made a study on 'Consumer Protection in India: Some issues and trends' and depicted that many Indian consumers are poor, illiterate, ignorant, passive, unaware and helpless due to illiteracy and unawareness. Even than several laws meant to protect consumers against unfair trade practices, false and misleading advertisements continue to exploit the consumers. Outdated laws, poor enforcement of them are some of the lacunas in order to control consumer exploitation. Sewand (2012) conducted a study on 'Consumer awareness and Consumer Protection Act', and concluded that, under the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 a three-tier system is working to safeguard the interest of the consumers. The consumers are well-versed with the terms 'Jago Grahak Jago' almost in all respect, but the quality

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parameters/standards like ISI, ISO, Agmarks etc., are almost new for them. The government is spending on the advertisements for creating awareness, but the procedural part is not being shown in the advertisements as to where to file complaint, when to file complaints, reliefs available etc.

Dr. P. Jayasubramanian, A. Valdeke(2012) made a study on 'Consumer Awareness and Attitude towards Consumer Protection Measures', states that, consumer protection measures are not aware to general public because of the lack of communication. He opined that government brings out lot of measures to protect consumers, but the consumers are not using it properly. A co-operative effort on the part of consumers, business and the government is necessary to protect consumers. Aman Chatterjee et al (2011) studied on 'Consumer protection: Problems and Prospects' and stated that the consumers are confronted invariably with the non-availability of effective and speedy machinery for redressal of their grievances in the marketplace. Whatever the remedies which are available in India for the protection of the consumers are by no means sufficient and the consumers find themselves helpless due to ineffective legal machinery for redressal of grievances.

Vetrivel and Mohanasundari made a study on 'Consumerism and its Implications', (2011) states that, the consumer laws may prevent some of the consumer mistreatments or consumer exploitations within a nation-state, but once national boundaries are crossed, their effectiveness is limited and consumers can hope for limited protection if online trade proliferates and consumer fraud becomes a major problem, nation-states and commercial illiterates that provide online access are fairly restricted in the action they may take to curb unacceptable and deleterious practices. Dr. A.K. Chandra made a study on 'Consumer Protection and Awareness about Consumer Rights and Consumer Protection Act', (2011) states that, the consumer's purchase behavior on the factors quality, price, guarantee and after-sales services are influenced by their location background education level and income level and occupation. It analyzes that rural people have little knowledge about consumer rights in comparisons with urban people.

Many other similar studies been done similarly related to the above subject, but no study is been done on the above topic based on its objects and scope. Hence, an attempt is made to fill the literature gap.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of the study is to evaluate the Digitalization of Consumer Protection through the case

study of CONFONET Project. And also study the awareness about the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 and the complaining behavior of consumers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

ØScope: This study is restricted to CONFONET Project with reference to Shivamogga. The study has also focused on the consumers' awareness about their rights, formalities and complaining behavior.

ØData: The primary data has been collected through a structured questionnaire. The additional required data is also been collected from the advocates and the staff of Consumer Forum through personal interview method.

ØSample Size: 70 respondents (30 clients + 40 non-clients of consumer court) were selected through simple random sampling technique.

Analysis and Interpretation

The table no.1, indicates that, out of 70 respondents, 30 are complainants and rest of the 40 respondents are non-complainants, it constitutes 21 females and 49 males. Majority of the complainants aged between 41 to 60 years. More than 60 percent of the complainants are graduates and post-graduates. Majority of the respondents annual income is between Rs. 1,00,000 to Rs. 3,00,000.

The table no.2, reveals that the majority of the consumers are unaware of Act and the reliefs available against their complaints.

The table no.3, reveals that majority of the consumers in the district, have experienced fraud in the form of high prices and deficiency in services. It shows that, consumers are being cheated by charging high prices for the goods and services. Further, the consumers are not satisfied with the services provided by the service industries in the district.

The table no.4, states that majority of the respondents have not filed complaints in the Consumer Forum, even they have experienced fraud, because of lack of documentary evidences like purchase invoice, bills etc. Moreover, majority of the respondents assume that filing complaint and getting judgment in the Consumer Forum is risky and is a waste of money.

From table no.5, it is obvious that, the performance of the Consumer Forum in Shivamogga District is satisfactory in terms of speed services, easy access and transparency and simple steps for filing cases.

The table no.6, shows that majority of the users of the CONFONET project are having fair opinion about the all types of services provided by the CONFONET project.



Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Gender (Number of Respondents)		
Sex	Complainants	Non-complainants
Male	21	28
Female	09	12
Total	30	40
Age Group (years)		
Below 20	00	02
20 -40	11	16
40 -60	15	20
60 and above	04	02
Total	30	40
Occupation		
Student	02	09
Agriculture	03	12
Business	09	10
House hold	03	03
Profession	07	01
Other	06	05
Total	30	40
Annual Income		
Up to Rs . 1,00,000	07	09
Rs. 1,00,000 to Rs. 3,00,000	13	19
Rs. 3,00,000 to Rs. 5,00,000	06	10
Rs. 5,00,000 & above	04	02
Total	30	40
Education Level		
Below SSLC	08	10
PUC	03	07
Graduation	10	12
Post-graduation	08	11
Other	01	00
Total	30	40

(Source: Field Survey)

Table 2 : Awareness about Consumer Protection Act and reliefs available to Consumers against Complaints

Responses	Number of Respondents		Total Number of Respondents	Percentage
	Complainants	Non-complainants		
Yes	16	12	28	40
No	14	28	42	60
Total	30	40	70	100

(Source: Field Survey)

Table 3: Fraud experienced by complainants

Areas of fraud	No. of responses from		Total No. of responses	Percentage (%)
	Complainants	Non-complainants		
Adulteration of food	03	08	11	08.73
Substandard goods	03	03	06	04.76
Deficiency in services	16	05	21	16.67
High prices	09	17	26	20.63
Poor quality	08	19	17	13.49
Deceptive advertisements	04	05	09	07.14
Short weight & measurement	07	13	20	15.87
Hazardous drugs	07	03	10	07.94
Other	06	00	06	04.76
Total			126	100

(Source: Field Survey)

Table 4: Opinion of respondents towards reasons for not filing the complaint in Consumer Forum

Reasons	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
No Hope to get justice	05	14	17	04	00	40
Assume to be risky	09	22	09	00	00	40
Delay in judgment	12	14	12	02	00	40
Waste of money	16	14	08	02	00	40
Poor Services	04	14	18	04	00	40
Lack of documentary evidence	28	12	00	00	00	40

(Source: Field Survey)



Table 5: Opinion of respondents about the performance of Shimoga District Consumer Forum

Criteria	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good	Total
Simple procedure	00	00	07	22	01	30
Speed services	00	07	11	11	02	30
Easy access	03	09	08	10	00	30
Transparent	00	00	12	13	05	30
Economical	01	13	00	07	09	30

(Source: Field Survey)

Table 6: Opinion respondents regarding the services through CONFONET Project

Services	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good	Total
Information on Consumer Rights and Protection	00	00	01	07	00	08
Date-wise cause lists	00	00	03	05	00	08
Information on Judgment	00	01	01	04	02	08
Information of Case Status and Case history	00	00	01	06	01	08
Information in multi-languages	07	01	-	-	-	08

(Source: Field Survey)

Table 7: Opinion about the introduction of online filing of complaints

Responses	No. of respondents		Total No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
	Complainants	Non-complainants		
Its good	19	24	43	61.43
Its not good	11	16	27	38.57
Total	30	40	70	100

(Source: Field Survey)

Table no.7, depicts that majority of the respondents welcome the introduction of the online method of filing the complaints in Consumer Forum which will facilitate the large number of consumers in the Shivamogga District to file their complaints in the Forum.

FINDINGS

Following are the major findings of the study drawn based on the study:

1. Majority of the consumers are just aware about the Consumer Protection Act, 1986, but they do not have thorough knowledge of consumer rights, procedure to file a complaint in the Consumer Forum, reliefs available to them

against a complaint etc.

2. The Government has enacted more than a dozen of Acts including the Consumer Protection Act, 1986, to protect the interest of the consumers at large, but, still large number of the consumers is being exploited in one or the other way.

3. A large number of consumers do not have habit of receiving purchase bills, invoices, receipts etc. Hence, the consumers fail to provide evidence to support their arguments in the Consumer Court. In case, though the consumers have received such purchase bills, invoices, receipts etc., they do not maintain those evidences properly.



4. Most of the consumers have wrong notion about Consumer Court and assume that they are like Civil Courts, hence, consumers do not have hope to get justice in the Consumer Court and also assume it is risky to fight in the court and is a waste of time, money and human efforts.

5. For the entire district, there is only one Consumer Court at Shimoga city to serve nearly 18 lakh citizens in the district. Therefore, consumers from far-away places find difficulty in travelling from their native place to the court frequently until they get justice.

6. The majority of the complainants have incurred considerably more cost (in the form of advocate's fee) to get judgment in the court, with the help of advocates.

7. The services provided by the Consumer Forum is little slow, therefore consumers are expecting little faster services.

8. Majority of the complainants in the Consumer Court do not have awareness about the CONFONET project services prior to lodging their complaint in the court and they have got known about it while/after filing complaint in the Consumer Court.

9. The complainants who have got CONFONET project services are satisfied with those services. But, they still expect some more online services from the project. They are CONFONET project should give an option to the aggrieved consumers to lodge the complaint online. And day-to-day updates about the cases should be uploaded to website project services must be given in multi-languages.

SUGGESTIONS OF THE STUDY

The following are the major suggestions drawn based on the study for different stakeholders:

1. The Government and other NGO's should make combined efforts to create awareness about the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 through proper advertisement, street plays etc. and educate the people about rights, complaining procedures, reliefs available etc.

2. A prompt attempt is required to remove the myths in the minds of consumers about the Consumer Court regarding case filing, facilities, judgment, cost etc.

3. In the CONFONET project, the online method for registration of complaint in adequate form must be facilitated. And this should provide for the submission of the scanned documents like purchase bills, invoices, receipts and other evidence of purchases, through online to the Consumer Forum.

4. About 65% of the total population of the nation is resided in the rural areas the improved CONFONET project services should be made easily available to the rural people to reap the benefits of such improved services. Thus, the Government needs to entrust the Atalji Janasnehi Kendras (formerly called as Nemmadi Centres) and the Gram panchayat offices to help the aggrieved consumers to lodge complaints in the Consumer Forum online and assist them to send the scanned soft copy of the supporting documents.

5. The Government should appoint technical experts in each of the District Consumer Forum for the proper maintenance and the operation of CONFONET project, and additional staff should be appointed in the Consumer Forums and in Atalji Janasnehi Kendras and the Gram panchayat offices (if necessary) to reduce the work burden on the existing staff and these staff should be given adequate training to operate the CONFONET project.

6. A Toll-Free Number should be given to assist the needy aggrieved consumers in getting the benefits of the improved services through CONFONET project.

7. The Government should enhance the infrastructure in the Consumer Forums as well as in Atalji Janasnehi Kendras and the Gram panchayat offices nationwide for the easy and smooth operation and execution of improved CONFONET project.

CONCLUSION

Under the digitalization of India, the CONFONET project was launched in the Consumer Forums nationwide with the objective of improving operational efficiency, accessibility of information and speed in judicial administration and to provide information to the consumers has not yet been popularized. In this modern era of technological advancement, the online mode of rendering services and selling the products through online mode have been provided by the widespread computerization of all types of industry. Even villages are not exception to this due to increase in literacy rate and developments in the rural areas. Thus, if the CONFONET project services are modified and better executed as suggested in this study would help the consumers even from remote areas to get protection against unscrupulous activities. The literacy rate in the rural areas is growing considerably and as above 60% of the total population resided in rural area, the improved and modified CONFONET project will play a significant role in attaining the objectives of the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 effectively.



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