

COLLOQUIUM  
ON  
ROLE OF SIRDS' IN CONSUMER PROTECTION

*(February 8, 2008)*

The Colloquium on Role of SIRDS' In Consumer Protection was organised by the Centre for Consumer Studies of the Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi on February 8, 2008. The Conference was attended by 15 representatives from various SIRDS. The objective was to explore the role of SIRDS' in organizing awareness and capacity building programmes for the panchayati raj institutions in the area of consumer protection and welfare. In light of the recommendations of the Standing Committee of the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha the need is to focus on rural consumers.

Welcoming the dignitaries, Shri B.S. Baswan, Director, IIPA highlighted the importance of consumer movement in the present era. He said that democracy is incomplete unless the local Government and the individual consumers are empowered. There was a time when consumer came last and was least important in the economy but now the consumer is the pillar of empowerment. He, however, pointed out that one of the major lacunae of the present movement is that it is restricted to the urban areas. The need of the hour is that consumer awareness and education should be taken to the rural masses as 75% of the population still resides in rural India. One way to empower the rural population is empowering the members of Panchayati Raj Institutions and through them the general masses. In this regard the SIRDS can play an important role as they are in touch with these institutions.

Shri P. Venkatesan, Director, DCA, Gol delivered the Opening remarks on the event. He reminded the participants about the growing market and its darker side of manipulation and exploitations which impairs the consumers' interests and rights. There is a need to build a new India where the consumer protection and business go hand in hand. He said that the universal emphasis of consumer protection needs to be promoted to discipline the market in the interest of consumers' satisfaction.

One of the objectives of Consumer Protection Act, 1986 is to provide better protection to the consumers. Consumer movement is as old as trade and commerce. However till independence this movement was only in name sake. It took momentum only after enactment of Consumer Protection Act in 1986. Before that also, we had a number of legislations to protect the consumers but CPA has in real sense given boost to the consumer movement. It's a unique Act providing for three tier structure from district to national level for the redressal of consumer grievances. No other Act has such distinctive structure. Every body is using goods or services in day today life and as such a consumer. However, the ground reality is that the conditions are not very favourable and conducive for the consumer. He is being exploited and cheated day in and day out. Ignorance is one of the prominent factor contributing in the exploitation of the consumers and is most prevalent amongst the rural masses. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment has established Panchayati Raj Institutions in all the villages. It is through this institution consumer movement can get a boost and consumer awareness can be spread among rural masses. The IIPA and SIRD can function in close coordination to attain the said purpose.

He quoted that recommendation/ observation contained in the Twentieth Report of the Standing Committee on Food, Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution which read as follows:

“With the enactment of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1992 elected Panchayati Raj Institutions exist in almost every State/ UT. The Department should take the desired initiatives to involve Panchayati Raj Institutions in various programmes related to consumer awareness. Besides, the publications of the Department specifically ‘Upbhokta Jagaran’ should be brought out in regional languages and distributed to the elected representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Committee further feels that the best forum to educate the rural masses about their rights as consumers as well as the techniques to redress to their grievances is the meetings of Gram Sabha, which are attended by almost every villager. The Committee note that 24 December has been declared as National Consumer Day since 2000. The Department in consultation with the Union Ministry of Panchayati Raj should take the desired initiatives to have the mandatory meetings of the Gram Sabhas on this day where the villagers could properly be educated about their rights as consumers.”

Speaking on the occasion Shri M. P. Singh, Vice President, IIPA said India lives in villages. CPA gives a clear picture and blueprint regarding consumer protection and education but it has not gone to the grass root level. How to educate the rural masses still remains a challenging task. In this regard cooperation from gram sabha and panchayats

can be useful. SIRDs are working in the rural areas and can take the consumer movement to the rural masses in a more effective manner. India's dream of achieving success in socio-economic front will remain unfulfilled unless the rural masses are brought to the forefront.

A brief presentation on Market and the Rural Consumer-Need for Policy Intervention was made by Prof. Suresh Misra, Chair Professor, CCS. A number of aspects relating to rural consumer were highlighted through the presentation. Rural India is growing at fast pace and constitutes the future market for the products and services. The absolute size of the rural India is expected to be double that of urban India. Globalization, liberalization, rise in income, media penetration, women empowerment, improving infrastructure etc, were highlighted as some of the causes for the growth of rural markets. The problematic areas highlighted through the presentation were buying pattern of the rural consumer is different from the urban consumer; lack of education and awareness about consumer rights; menace of spurious and 'look alike' goods to deceive the consumer; malpractices like price more than MRP, faulty weights, etc.; deficiency in services; misleading ads; lack of knowledge. The need and ways in which consumer education can be achieved were also highlighted.

Prof S. S. Singh, Coordinator, CCS made a brief presentation on CPA, 1986 projecting the various aspects and prospects of the Act. He provided a complete overview of the Act, and clarified a number of concepts like consumer, goods, services, defects deficiency etc. which form the basis of CPA. He brought forward the salient features of the social welfare legislation and how it can be useful to the consumers. He explained the structure and functioning of the three tier quasi judicial redressal machinery. He also brought forward some of the lacunas of the Act and the changes the Ministry is proposing to bring forth by the fourth amendment.

Dr. Ashok Jaiswal, Associate Professor, SIRD, Chhattisgarh made a brief presentation on the series of activities which have been carried by the faculty of various colleges at the level of local bodies. The objective was to create awareness among the elected representatives of the ULBs regarding the Consumer Protection Act, 1986. It is the lack of awareness amongst the public regarding the CPA which has lead to their

exploitation. To start with a Training of Trainers in consumer protection was organized by SIRD in collaboration with IIPA to train the lecturers of Universities and Colleges. These trainers then organized various activities in their municipal areas for the representatives of ULBs to sensitize them on issues of consumer protection.

The last session was devoted to open house and action plan. In this session representatives from a number of SIRDs came forward with their action plans for organising various activities to generate consumer awareness among the rural masses. Some of the suggestions that emerged were:

- Shri V. K. Sharma, Dy. Director, SIRD, Arunanchal Pradesh agreed to organize District level sensitization workshop for which the action plan will be submitted.
- Shri K. Kalita, Director, SIRD, Assam proposed to include sessions on Consumer Protection in their regular training programmes organized for block development officers and heads of gram panchayats and for that he would be sending representative from the institute to attend ToT.
- Shri Choudhary, SIRD, Rajasthan suggested to organize ToT in the area of consumer protection and also to organize few sessions on consumer protection.
- Prof. J. George, HIPA agreed to extend his expertise in developing material on consumer protection for rural people.
- Shri Ashokanand, Director, SIRD, Mysore suggested that their organization can dramatise case laws on consumer protection and develop films of 5-10 minutes which can be shown through SETCOM to the Panchayati Raj institutions. Further the SIRD can act as facilitator and train the nodal persons at the Block level who can in turn help the consumers.

- Dr. Thirumeni, SIRD, Kerala said that STCs are under control of SIRD whose officials can be trained in this area through one day training programme. Further, this topic can be included in one session in other Training programmes of the institute.
- Ms. K. S. lungrei, Principal, SIRD, Manipur agreed to organize consumer awareness campaigns to educate the rural masses.
- Shri Longchar, Director, SIRD, Nagaland expressed the view that consumer education can be made part of all the programmes at Panchayati level. During the month of April-May three day ToT on consumer protection can be organized.
- Mr. Bishal Mukhia, Sr. Faculty, SIRD, Sikkim suggested that the block level officials and field facilitators can be trained through the ToT in consumer protection. The drama division of SIRD through some financial support can prepare skits which can be shown at mega fairs and would have an impact on the minds of people and educate them in this area.
- Mr. Joshi, and Mr. Upadhyaya, Joint Directors, SIRD, U.P. proposed that there are 50 institutions under SIRD and Training Programme can be organized for the officials of these institutions who can in turn organize programmes at Panchayati Raj Level. Further, session on CPA can be included in the existing training programmes. SIRD, Lucknow would be sending a list of courses to be organized,

The Colloquium concluded with a vote of thanks by Ms. Sapna Chadah. IIPA also expressed its willingness to render any help that the SIRDs' need in creating awareness and educating the rural masses regarding their rights and obligations relating to consumer protection.

(Suresh Misra)