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ROLE OF CONSUMERS FORUM IN CONSUMERS EMPOWERMENT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF BASRUR CONSUMERS FORUM IN UDUPI DISTRICT OF KARNATAKA

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ABSTRACT

The Consumer Forum at Basrur endeavor to build capacities amongst citizens and empower them to demand elevated accountability from both the government and private players. Through effective communication, particularly through letter-writing, wherein the forum guides the consumers in establishing contact with suppliers and officials and finding solutions to their problems in a cost effective and transparent manner. This paper being exploratory in nature, investigates the role played and methodology adopted by consumer's forum in the empowerment of consumers by taking Basrur Consumers Forum as case study

KEYWORDS

Consumer's empowerment, issue oriented, non-political, self-supporting.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer's forums being voluntary association are among the agencies which help in redressal of the consumers' grievances and are playing a very decisive role in redressal of the grievances of the consumers and spreading awareness about consumers' rights, etc. They are defending the consumers' rights related to both consumers' goods and users' services. Some people argue that producers and sellers can themselves protect consumers' rights by developing voluntary code of conduct to defend consumers' rights. But general view is that it is not possible for the buyers and sellers to develop a code of conduct. The traders and manufacturers are more bothered about the profit than the welfare of the consumers.

Besides, it is also a fact that since the consumers are mostly uneducated and unaware of their rights, the legislation alone cannot become the instruments of positive action. The most effective method, therefore, for safeguarding the consumers' interest is not only the state intervention, but active participation of the consumer's forums, voluntary consumer agencies and consumers themselves in the free market.

METHODOLOGY

The inherent limitations of the market, coupled with the inability of the State to effectively govern the market has created the need for alternative solutions to protect the interests of consumers. The desire and competence amongst groups of ordinary people to act collectively to achieve the greater good has led to the rise of consumers forums in providing alternative solutions where the market and the state have failed to deliver. The present study being exploratory in nature mainly based on secondary sources of information.

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the role of consumers forums in consumers empowerment.
 2. To examine the methodology followed and to suggest measures to strengthen such efforts.
- Thus the present study explores role of consumer's forums in consumer's empowerment by taking Basrur Consumers Forum as a case study.

PROFILE OF THE FORUM

In the 1980s group of youth in Basrur gathered to deliberate on possible strategies to solve the problems that were plaguing the people of the area. They identified the main problems faced by the people of Basrur: irregular or inefficient distribution of essential commodities, lack of information on facilities extended by the government, lack of proper service from public service departments and harassment from officers at the lower level. Their discussions culminated in the decision to start with the simplest issues and gradually move on to the more complex ones. Taking pointers from a Consumer Forum in Udupi, the Consumer's Forum at Basrur (CFB) was set up in 1981 by the youth group and was headed by Dr Ravindranath Shanbagh.

The fundamental objectives of the CFB are to:

- a) Educate the consumers about the need for protecting their rights and interests.
- b) Cultivate a sense of responsibility among consumers and suppliers.
- c) Support and guide the consumers in any disputes.

ROLE OF BASRUR CONSUMERS FORUM - AN ASSESSMENT

Consumerism is a process through which the consumers seek redress, restitution and remedy for their dissatisfaction and frustration with the help of their all organised or unorganised efforts and activities. Self-protection by consumers and voluntary consumer organizations engaged in organizing consumers and encouraging them to safeguard their interests are major element of the consumer movement. The role played by the Basrur Consumers Forum can be analyzed by looking into the ideology and methodology followed by it.

1. FINANCIALLY SELF - SUPPORTING

The CFB is financially self-supporting and has not received or accepted aid from the government or foreign donors and thus does not have to deal with external pressures. The work is carried out using usually consisting of small donations amounts made by people who believe in the Forum and its cause.

2. WORK WITH MINIMUM EXPENSES

The CFB is emphatic that that the work should proceed with minimum expenditure. Financial independence coupled with minimal expenses ensures that the CFB is free from external influences that often plague other voluntary organisations that tend to be heavily funded by donors.

3. NON POLITICAL

Further, the CFB has steered clear from engaging in any personal vendetta, politics, elections, and has never linked up with any political group or party.

4. ISSUE ORIENTED AND NOT PERSON ORIENTED

The CFB has also been against accepting any form of awards or recognition since they feel that those involved in the movement should work without claiming personal credit; and awards would most likely induce personal ambition thereby quenching the actual purpose. The CFB strongly advocates that the focus of all actions should be on issues and not on persons, and those working in the organisation should be disciplined and responsible since they should practice what they preach.

5. METHODOLOGY FOLLOWED

The methods adopted consist of guidance, letter-writing, publishing of articles in the newspapers, holding seminars and contact meetings for consumers and activists as well as public officials of various departments and police officers.

- **GUIDANCE:** The policy of the CFB is that having given appropriate advice after carefully analysing the problem, the forum should leave the rest to the consumer as long as he or she is instilled with enough confidence to be capable of solving the problem or fighting the injustice.

- **LETTER WRITING:** When people approaches the forum with a specific problem, are advised to write a letter to the concerned supplier or official, stating the nature of the problem along with the action expected from the authority. If after a specific period, as mentioned in the letter, the person does not receive any reply, then (in cases involving government officials) a letter is sent to the official next in the hierarchy and so on, and if need be even to the concerned minister. In certain cases, the CFB writes the letter on behalf of the consumer but usually the citizens are encouraged and assisted to do so by themselves.
- **PUBLISHING OF ARTICLES:** The movement has received a lot of support due to the weekly articles entitled **Bahujana Hithaya Bahujana Sukhaya ("In the Benefit of All, Lies the Happiness of All")** published in the Kannada paper Udayavani, which highlights the ongoing cases and issues involved therein. Many of the publications are not authored and there are no copyright restrictions on the material since the CFB believes that it is the issue and not the organisation that needs to be highlighted.
- **SEMINARS AND CONTACT MEETINGS:** The CFB also conducts consumers and suppliers contact meetings with regard to the cases brought before it. In such cases where a particular official of the local governmental authority is found to be absolutely unresponsive to the letters received from the consumer concerned, the CFB, through its newsletter, encourages citizens to flood that official with letters repeating the issue and their concern over the lack of action. This serves as a reminder to the officials, indicating the gravity of the problem and the seriousness of the people willing to voice their opinion and hence, these officials often relent and make attempts to take the required action.
- **LAST RESORT:** If and when all the above mentioned methods fail in a particular case, then the CFB guides the consumer to a lawyer in the field who will then take up the case in court. The statistics provided by the CFB show that only around 1per cent of the cases fall into this category. As per the booklet published by the CFB, an alternative is to take up peaceful satyagraha protests if the situation is appropriate for the same. However, there are no known cases where the need for this extreme measure was called for.

6. TOWARDS EMPOWERMENT

Two decades later, the success of the organisation saw the creation of an offshoot called the Human Rights Protection Foundation which concerned itself with human rights issues. This forum sought to empower the weaker sections of society, namely women, children and the backward classes so that they can stand up to fight for themselves. This move necessitated improvisation of the strategies that were developed and learned from the two decades of experience handling consumers, suppliers, employers and government officials.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The in-depth analysis of functioning of the Basrur consumer's forum helps to derive following findings:

1. The Consumer Forum at Basrur seeks to build capacities amongst citizens and empower them to demand greater accountability from both the government and private players.
2. Its key tool is effective communication, particularly through letter-writing, wherein the Forum guides the consumers in establishing contact with suppliers and officials and finding solutions to their problems in a cost effective and transparent manner.
3. It has sought to carry on its goal as the empowerment of the members of the community and hence is not associated with any particular issue but rather with a methodology that can be adopted across a range of problems faced by the citizens
4. The CFB's approach overall was characterized by non-political, financially self-supporting, issue oriented and not person oriented and work with minimum expenses.
5. The methods adopted consist of guidance, letter-writing, publishing of articles in the newspapers, holding seminars and contact meetings for consumers and activists as well as public officials of various departments and police officers.
6. The movement has received a lot of support, due in no small part to the weekly articles entitled Bahujana Hithaya Bahujana Sukhaya ("In the Benefit of All, Lies the Happiness of All") published in the Kannada paper Udayavani, which highlights the ongoing cases and issues involved therein.
7. This forum sought to empower the weaker sections of society, namely women, children and the backward classes so that they can stand up to fight for themselves.

POLICY SUGGESTIONS

The following suggestions can be made to strengthen the role of consumer's forum in consumer's empowerment.

1. The CFB may maintain formal links with national level voluntary organizations.
2. The network of such forums can be established at village level.
3. Since people lack awareness about consumer's forum, publicity can be provided through mass media.
4. The financial sources may be strengthened for further increased involvement of the forum.
5. There is need of study on whether Basrur Model' of consumer forum is replicable in similar situations elsewhere in the country.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the first year following its formation, the CFB received only 8 cases since the people in the area were not yet ready to trust a new organisation with their complaints and were not sure how their problems would be handled. This was probably because the CFB did not present itself as a legal aid organisation, but rather a forum for empowerment of the citizens through dissemination of information and spreading of awareness about the kinds of problems faced, and the means to tackle them. The reputation and effectiveness of the CFB grew gradually and within a decade the number rose to 412 and by the end of 1997, the total number of cases solved since inception was over 7000.

There are two uniqueness of the CFB that are useful pointers for all civil society initiatives. There are greater chances of success and sustainability of a pattern that favors a model which mobilizes ordinary citizens rather than depending upon the few trained professionals available and the problem-solving strategy must be put directly into the hands of the families and community members. It is also essential that such private organizations keep away from the traps of formalistic institutionalization and instead seek to improve their professionalism by learning from previous mistakes. One aspect that must be factored in is the fact that the CFB and the social entrepreneur behind it, Dr. Ravindranath Shanbag, have developed such a reputation that in certain cases that arise in and around the area, suppliers and officials alike respond favorably with just one letter from the CFB.

The initiators of the CFB did not intend the Forum to be a permanent organization since its purpose was to empower the citizens to take charge and hold the state and the market accountable. The role of the forum a understood clearly by referring to the words of its convener, "When we are convinced that consumers can take care of themselves and solve problems on their own without the help of our forum, then we will wind up the forum". Thus the 'Basrur Model' of consumer forum proved to be a success story in empowering the consumers and hence the consumers protection.

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Academically yours

Sd/-

Co-ordinator