
AWARENESS OF CONSUMER PROTECTION STATUTES AMONG CONSUMERS IN KERALA: AN ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Exploitation of the consumers is a common phenomenon in business. Consumers are not correctly aware of the available remedial measures and hence they feel cheated. Even, knowledgeable citizens are found to be reluctant to approach the redressal forums. The present study aims to ascertain the level of awareness of consumers about the various protection statutes, Dispute Redressal Forums, services of voluntary agencies and powers and facilities of Consumer Agencies. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from 1333 customers from the 14 Districts of Kerala adopting through survey method. The results of analysis indicates that there is difference in the awareness level among consumers regarding the protective measures, CDRFs, voluntary service agencies and the powers and facilities offered by Consumer Agencies.

Keywords: Consumer, Consumer perception, Consumer awareness, Consumer Protection Act, Kerala, Redressal of grievances.

Introduction

The second half of 18th century witnessed industrial revolution in England and it spread all over the world. The impacts of it led to the dynamic growth of industries and commerce. Through vast supply chains, merchandise is being made available to all sorts of consumers, all over the world as per their requirements. Obviously, retail business prospering.

When the trade moved from fair to maximum profit business became highly exploitative without any ethics. Such a situation paved the way for strong consumer movements and the governments were compelled to enact legislations against unethical trade practices. The Government of India came out with several Acts such as The Consumer Protection Act, 1986, Consumer Protection Rules, 1987, Consumer Welfare Fund Rules, 1992 and more.

The common infringements observed in business are: defects in goods and services, low weight and low quality products with high price, false advertisements, unscrupulous

competition, physical injuries and mental pain, monetary loss, time loss, dissatisfaction in enjoyment and such other unfair practices.

Statement of the Problem

In the study, the investigator tried to ascertain to what extent the consumers in Kerala are aware of the various statutes available for their protection, especially the major provisions of the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 and procedures.

Objectives of the Study

1. To ascertain the awareness level of consumers about the protection offered by various statutes, the agencies established and their functions.
2. To examine whether the location of residences of the consumers is correlated with their level of awareness regarding the statutes.
3. To elicit the opinions of the respondents' belonging to various educational categories for improving the awareness level of consumers about the statutes.

Hypotheses

1. H₀: The awareness level of protection statutes of consumers is not correlated with their place residence.
2. H₀: There is no correlation between the level of education of the respondents and their opinions for improving the level of awareness on consumer protection statutes.

Major Concepts

Consumer perception: Consumer perception is the overall impression that a consumer has regarding the worth, status and importance of a product. Consumers always rank one product with another. (www.answers.com)

Consumer awareness: It is a marketing term which means that the consumers are aware of the products or services, its characteristics and the other marketing P's (place to buy, price, and promotion) (www.businessdictionary.com).

Review of Literature

Gnanadesigan & Sudha. (2002) opined that consumer protection is a national problem, affects every person and awareness of Consumer Protection Act, 1986 is the alternative. **Rao (2002)** found that, even among the urban people the Consumer Protection Act remains only as a legend, and the consumer is yet to be a king of the commercial world. **Tangad & Basavaraj (2004)** found that the mass media do not give importance to creating awareness among the people regarding consumer statutes and protection offered. **The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (2006)** highlighted that nearly 66 % of the consumers were not aware of their rights. **Lokhande, (2006)** found that out of ninety respondents, only 33 complained against sellers

involved in unfair trade practices. 57 did not file any complaint, in spite of understanding that they were cheated because of lack of awareness of statutes.

Methodology

Facts and figures required for the study were collected through survey method. On the basis of the theoretical and the findings of an intensive pilot study, a structured questionnaire was developed and circulated among the respondents from all the 14 Districts of the State. Simple random sampling design was adopted. From among the filled up questionnaires, after editing, 1333 questionnaires were selected.

Analysis of Data

The demographic variables such as education and location of the residence have been considered as independent variables.

Statistical tools

The non- parametric tests such as One - Way ANOVA and Kruskal Wallis Test were applied.

Analysis

It is observed that all the respondents considered for the study (1333) are of the opinion that they have faced problem in one way or other when they purchase goods and services.

Awareness of consumer protection statutes (AOS), details of Consumer Dispute Redressal Forums (CDRFs), knowledge about voluntary service agencies (VSA) and knowledge about the capacity and facilities of consumer agencies (CA) are highly necessary for the healthy consumer world. There may be difference in knowledge about the above said elements. In order to ascertain the differences in the opinions of the customers with reference to their place of residence, One way ANOVA test was done.

Table 1 Mean Scores of awareness of Consumers with location

Division	N		AOS	CDRF	VSAs	CAs
Panchayat	1043	Mean	3.7004	3.7095	3.7392	3.7756
		Std. Deviation	1.20584	1.20339	1.18231	1.15394
Taluk	138	Mean	3.3913	3.3913	3.3986	3.4058
		Std. Deviation	1.35859	1.35859	1.35377	1.35430
Corporation	152	Mean	3.3618	3.3913	3.3618	3.3618
		Std. Deviation	1.33496	1.33496	1.33496	1.33496
Total	1333	Mean	3.6298	3.6369	3.6609	3.6902
		Std. Deviation	1.24392	1.24247	1.22727	1.20778

Source: Primary Data

The Hypothesis is Stated as

H0: The awareness level of protection statutes of consumers is not correlated with their place of residence.

The result of the test presented in the following Table.2

Table 2 Level of Consumers' awareness

Division		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Awareness of consumer protection statutes	Between Groups (combined)	23.960	2	11.980	7.822	0.000*
	Within Groups	2037.088	1330	1.532		
	Total	2061.048	1332			
Awareness of CDRF	Between Groups (combined)	25.320	2	12.660	8.291	0.000*
	Within Groups	2030.944	1330	1.527		
	Total	2056.264	1332			
Awareness of VSA	Between Groups (combined)	29.489	2	14.745	9.920	0.000*
	Within Groups	1976.745	1330	1.486		
	Total	2006.234	1332			
Awareness of CA	Between Groups (combined)	35.166	2	17.583	12.257	0.000*
	Within Groups	1907.875	1330	1.434		
	Total	1943.041	1332			

Source: Primary Data.

***Significant at 5 percent level of significance**

The result of One way ANOVA proves that the **F values are 7.822, 8.291, 9.920 and 12.257 respectively, which are significant at 5 per cent level ($p < 0.05$)**. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected and indicates that there is difference in AOS, CDRAs, VSAs and CAs. To conclude, on the basis of place of residence the level of awareness of the above said elements vary. Among them, the consumers belonging to municipal corporation area have high difference in AOS, CDRFs, VSAs and powers and facilities of CAs than the area of panchayat and taluk (**mean score 3.3618**). Consumers belonging to Taluk area have better awareness of details of CDRFs than the consumers of Panchayat area (**mean score- 3.3913**). The respondents from panchayat area are in low level of awareness in all the four elements.

The investigation leads what is the alternative to improve AOS, CDRAs, VSAs and CAs. Questions have been asked to consumers regarding their opinions such as: consumer education to all (CEA), consumer awareness advertisements (CAT),

consumer seminars (CS), consumer adalats (CAL), consumer protection camps (CPC), consumer meetings (CM), consumer fests (CF), consumer education at schools (CES) and consumer education at colleges (CEC) and ranked in priority by using appropriate statistical tools. The collected information has been analyzed by **Kruskal – Wallis Test**.

The hypothesis is:

H0: There is no correlation between the level of education of the respondents and their opinions for improving the level of awareness on consumer protection statutes.

The result of Kruskal Wallis Test is exhibited in the Table.3

Table 3 Mean Ranks of opinion to improve AOS, CDRAs, VSAs and CAs. With educational qualification

Educational Qualification	UP – S.S.L.C	+2/ PDC	Degree	PG	Others
N – 1333	484	216	345	218	70
Consumer education to all (CEA)	668.42	698.74	662.70	621.49	722.12
Consumer advertisements (CAT)	639.85	587.52	660.44	777.39	788.54
Consumer seminars (CS)	657.14	630.51	698.49	671.11	679.79
Consumer Adalat (CAL)	669.77	559.69	709.19	668.90	765.11
Consumer protection Camp (CPC)	649.22	570.08	677.98	770.51	712.53
Consumer meetings (CM)	690.13	607.73	672.32	699.37	562.95
Consumer fests (CF)	751.63	586.05	646.93	611.02	596.62
Consumer educations at Schools (CES)	709.95	621.80	688.45	583.75	663.00
Consumer education at Colleges (CEC)	639.78	774.01	644.10	648.62	695.06

Source: Primary Data.

Table 4 Kruskal Wallis Test

	CEA	CAT	CS	CAL	CPC	CM	CF	CES	CEC
Chi-Square	7.661	43.07	5.023	27.039	33.412	14.459	43.358	21.502	22.210
Df	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymp.Sig	0.105	0.000	0.285	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Grouping variable: Education

***Significant at 5 per cent level of significance**

Source: Primary Data

Respondents having formal education up to SSLC opined that consumer education should be given in colleges (CEC) (mean score 639.78). The respondents in the category of +2/ PDC suggested Consumer Adalat (mean score **559.69**). Those in the degree category gives more preference to consumer education at college level (mean score is **644.10**). Consumers in the PG and other categories preferred consumer

education to all (mean score 621.49) and consumer meetings (mean score 562.95) respectively.

The null hypotheses regarding consumer education to all and consumer seminars, are accepted as their **p values are seen to be 0.105 and 0.285 ($p > 0.05$)** respectively. But the null hypotheses for consumer advertisement, Consumer Adalats, consumer protection camps, consumer meetings, consumer fests, consumer education at schools and consumer education at college are rejected as their **p values are 0.000 respectively where ($p < 0.05$)**. It proves that the opinion for imparting consumer education of respondents belonging to different educational category vary significantly.

Findings and recommendations

1. On the basis of their place of residence, the consumers have difference in the level of awareness regarding the protective statues, functions of CDRFs and the services offered by the voluntary agencies.
2. In respect of knowledge about the functions of CDRFs, respondents of municipal corporations and Taluks are better than the respondents of panchayats
3. The respondents belonging to corporation area have better awareness than the respondents of taluk and panchayat area about the consumer protection law.
4. The respondents from panchayat areas are in low level of awareness regarding consumer protection statutes, details of CDRFs, VSAs and power and facilities offered by CAs.
5. As per the educational qualifications of the respondents, it is found that there is difference of opinion regarding how to improve the AOS, CDRFs, VSAs and CAs
6. The Kruskal Walli Test to assess the difference of opinions among the respondents to improve the knowledge about AOS, CDRFs, VSAs and CAs proved that there is difference of opinion on consumer advertisement, Consumer Adalates, consumer protection camps, consumer meetings, consumer fests, consumer education at schools and consumer education at colleges except consumer education to all and consumer seminars.
7. The respondents are aware of the need for educating the consumers their rights as well as the services offered by the Redressal Forums in case they are cheated.
8. The awareness could be generated at the schools, colleges and through adalats and meetings not only for students but also for others.

Suggestions

1. The government should take necessary steps to impart consumer education from school level and upwards as a compulsory subject of their curriculum. In fact every citizen is to be properly oriented on their rights as consumers

2. Local administration should organize Consumer Adalats, Consumer Meetings, Consumer Camps and Consumer Fest regularly for creating and sustaining AOSs, CDRAs, VSAs and powers and facilities of CAs.
3. NGOs and Residents' Associations can promote AOSs, CDRAs, VSAs and CAs.
4. The mass media could voluntarily take strong steps to educate the citizens on the various aspects of consumer protection.

Limitations

In spite of strong efforts, Members of the Forums and the State Commission shared only a little of their experiences and viewpoints regarding the performance of the redressal agencies.

Conclusion

This study is focused on the awareness level of the consumers protection statutes, its effectiveness and the functions of the Redressal Forums set up as per law. For better utility of the services, the citizens have to be educated so that they know where and how to look for and get redressal.

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