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Emphasis on Seamless Consumer Advocacy

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The mandate of the Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) is consumer advocacy. The DCA seeks to empower consumers through awareness and education; enhance consumer protection through prevention of unfair trade practices; enable quality assurance and safety through standards and their conformity; and ensure access to an affordable and effective grievance redress mechanism.

An open forum discussion was launched on www.mygov.in platform to create awareness amongst the consumers by involving them in discussions. The thrust of the efforts of the DCA has been on the key sectors that impact all consumers: agriculture, food, housing, healthcare, transport, financial services and education. Joint campaigns have been launched in partnership with the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the National Pharmaceuticals Pricing Authority (NPPA), and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to raise awareness on the rights of consumers. The campaigns reflect the government's determination to address issues that affect the common man such as food adulteration, food safety, quality assurance, misleading advertisements and unfair trade practices.

Asymmetry in market information, deterritorialisation of the market, and the explosive growth of advertising has constrained Consumer Sovereignty. The emphasis of the Department is on **seamless consumer advocacy on a government-wide basis** by which the common consumers are better protected. **An inter-ministerial Group on Consumer Advocacy has been established with the Secretary, DCA as the chair.** This group has now initiated several significant steps for consumer protection and welfare. These include specific actions to set quality assurance and safety standards for goods and services in diverse sectors under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan as well as the Make in India Campaign.

QUALITY ASSURANCE STANDARDS

Quality assurance and safety are facilitated by stringent standards laid down by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), the National Standards Body of India. The ISI mark of the BIS is synonymous with quality and safety. The BIS has developed over 19000 quality standards and over 28000 licensees who use the ISI quality mark in manufacturing their products.

The BIS Bill 2015 has been introduced in the Lok Sabha. The Bill seeks to strengthen the quality assurance regime for goods and services in India; prevent the entry of sub-standard goods; eliminate the dumping of poor quality products; provide for ease of doing business in India and make the market surveillance and testing of products more stringent. The list of products under mandatory certification will be expanded significantly to provide Indian consumers products of better quality. This transformation in our quality assurance eco system will catalyze the 'zero defect, zero effect' approach under the Make in India campaign.

A Trade Facilitation Cell has been opened in the BIS to facilitate trade with other countries. Simplified types of conformity schemes have been launched so that industry can adopt the quality standards with ease and manufacture standardised products in the country. For better enforcement of standards, a new scheme has been launched wherein common consumers can send the ISI marked products for testing in BIS labs or BIS recognized labs. A mobile App has been launched that will allow consumers to verify the genuineness of the BIS marked products.

GRAHAK SUVIDHA KENDRAS (GSKs)

Grahak Suvidha Kendras have been launched on six locations, on pilot basis, to serve as integrated consumer advocacy centres that will extend a host of services – information dissemination, counselling, grievance redress, mediation, class action, product testing, capacity building and training and mobilising popular support to the consumer movement. The Grahak Suvidha Kendras will be run and managed by Voluntary Consumer Organisations.

GRIEVANCES AGAINST MISLEADING ADVERTISEMENTS (GAMA) PORTAL

A dedicated portal <http://gama.gov.in> has been launched to monitor misleading advertisements. The DCA has partnered with the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) in tackling the menace of misleading advertisement through this portal. Consumers can complain about misleading advertisements through this portal and ASCI will exercise moral persuasion to prevent such advertisements. The DCA is working in close coordination with diverse sector regulators to effectively curb misleading advertisements and unfair trade practices.

CONSUMER GRIEVANCES AND DISPUTE REDRESSAL

To give a fillip to the effective consumer protection, dispute and grievance redressal mechanism, **Consumer Protection Bill 2015** has been introduced in the Lok Sabha. The bill seeks to ensure that the consumer disputes redress mechanism serves the consumers with quick, inexpensive and simple redress of their grievances, establish an institutional arrangement to prevent unfair trade practices, incorporate the concept of product liability in consumer protection and enable mediation as an Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR) arrangement. The Bill seeks to Establish the Central Consumer Protection Authority to investigate unfair trade practices; initiate class action in appropriate cases; order refund, recall or replacement of defective products; and withdrawal of misleading advertisements and carrying out of corrective/compensatory advertisements. The Product Liability class of the bill will enable consumers to sue for damages for injury caused by defective products/ deficient services. The pecuniary jurisdiction of the District Forum, State Commission and National Commission are being enhanced to provide greater access to citizens. The bill also envisages e-filing of cases which would do away with personal appearance of the complainant till the stage of admission. Cases not admitted within 21 days will be deemed admitted.

ONLINE MONITORING OF CASES IN CONSUMER FORA

A major initiative has been to fully digitise the operations of the consumer courts. The Consumer Forum Network (CONFONET) has linked the Consumer Fora in the country through a Computer Network and any citizen with an internet connection can access the cause list of a district forum or a State Commission, check the status of his case and read the orders passed in a case, online, from the comfort of his home.



ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES REGULATION & ENFORCEMENT

Urgent steps have been taken to moderate the price rise that had characterised the market for essential commodities. A National Consultation Meeting was held on 7th July, 2015 with the Food & Consumer Affairs Ministers of the States/UTs under the Chairmanship of Hon'ble Minister for Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution (CA, F & PD), to deliberate on the problem of food inflation and to evolve a common strategy on preventive measures to arrest price rise, particularly of vegetables, pulses and other food items of common consumption. To curb the rise in onion prices, the ban on holding of stock beyond the prescribed limit has been extended by one-year. The validity of the order empowers States to impose stock limits on traders for holding onion, and ban hoarding beyond the set limit. To control the raising prices of pulses, bids have been finalized for import of 5000 MT of Tur Dal and bids are being finalized for import of 5000 MT of Urad Dal from the international market



*The text of the Feature has been provided by the department of Consumer affairs