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Awakening Rural Consumers towards Sustainable Consumption: A Micro Level Study

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Abstract: Developments in rural India have been replete with many contradictions. While the country has seen rapid growth in infrastructure development and various developmental schemes, rural people are still victims of poverty due to corrupt practices. The positive side of the development is that rural India has been well connected by roads under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. Power connectivity has been extended to BPL people even in remote villages under Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana. Sustainable earning provisions have been made through implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Though these developments have changed their life style, inadequate knowledge about their rights, duties and responsibilities as consumers seem to be a major concern. They are still subjected to harassment and exploitation in the process of sustainable consumption. Some of them also get involved in corrupt practices. The awakening programmes implemented by the government have not produced desired result. A more vibrant policy perspective with a strong implementation mechanism is the need of the time.

Keywords: Below Poverty Line, Consumer Awareness, Consumer Club, Consumer Protection, Consumer Rights, Educated Youth, Economic Empowerment, Sustainable Consumption.

I. INTRODUCTION

The consumer movement has taken a new direction after an Asian conference on “Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Consumer Movement” organized jointly by Consumer International (CI) Asia Pacific and UNCTAD in Kuala Lumpur on 23 August 2005. All the leaders of 21 Asia Pacific member countries of CI in the conference going beyond the legal definition of “consumer” have accepted a wider sense of the term to further the goal of “consumer movement”. The common understanding is, “we shall not be constrained by the legal definition of consumer found in many Asia Consumer Protection statutes. We shall serve the needs of all consumers, including those unable to consume and living below the poverty line as well as consumers who are victims of the inequality of bargaining power in the market place. We agree to adopt over-arching theme to our individual and collective efforts to achieve the MDGs and that these shall be *Pro-Poor, Pro-Rural, Pro-Women*. We realize that consumption must be equitable and ecologically sound and shall promote patterns of consumption and life styles that are sustainable and will not undermine the interests of the poor. We agree that the consumer movement needs to work with other civil society organizations to expose corrupt practices that deny consumers access to basic goods and services, equality and justice in their lives. We recognize that corruption is a scourge that undermines development and denies consumers their right to basic goods and services and call on our governments to take effective measures to end corrupt practices in the public and private sector” (Consumer International, 2005). This paper, based on the wider connotation of consumer and the commitment of the leaders of the consumer movement, explores the scope of awakening the rural consumers for sustainable consumption in a highly corruption prone environment.

II. RESEARCH ISSUES

Corruption is anti-consumer and anti-development; it hurts mostly the rural and hard core poor. It delays, distorts and diverts economic growth. The higher the level of corruption, the lower is the level of their development. Corruption both causes and thrives upon weaknesses in key economic, political and social institutions and the poor people have very few options (Michael Johnston, 2009). In the development process, people or the consumers get involved in corrupt practices while making their choice- even the daily routine administrative tasks cannot be performed without a bribe. This affects adversely the consumer awareness as well as protection programmes and consequently their sustainability.

The rural development strategies of the governments both at the states and centre, focus on seven major flagship programmes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP), Total Sanitation Campaign (TSP), Integrated Watershed Development Programme (IWDP), Pradhan Mantri Grameen Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) and Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY). These programmes are essentially meant for creating gainful employment opportunities and to improve the quality of the lives of rural masses. The positive side of these programmes is that rural India has been well connected by roads under PMGSY; Poor people have found *pucca* shelter under IAY; Power connectivity has been extended to BPL people even in remote villages under RGGVY; Safe drinking water has been provided under NRDWP; Women are being empowered through their self-help groups and their federated institutions for enabling them to increase household income through sustainable livelihood under NRLM. Sustainable earning provisions have been made through implementation of MGNREGS.

Thus, these development projects have changed the life style of many rural people. The increased government spending on rural jobs scheme, housing, health care and rural roads infrastructure has impacted the mindset of rural consumers who expect better quality of life by spending extra income in converting their *kuccha* dwellings into *pucca* houses, availing private tuitions for kids, and buying branded products (MART, 2012). However, due to increased income inequality, the developmental impacts of these programmes have shown adverse effects on people's quality of life leading to higher incidence of poverty, its impact on health and education and thus contributing to crime and ultimately threatening the political stability of the country (World Bank, 2010, ASSOCHAM, 2012). With poor knowledge about their rights, duties and responsibilities as sensible consumers, the rural consumers are still subjected to harassment and exploitation in the process of sustainable consumption and this is a major cause of concern. Some of them also get involved in corrupt practices. The awakening programmes implemented by the government have not produced desired result. (Kumar and Mohanty, 2012). The Working group of the 12th Plan on "consumer awareness and education" has found that consumer awareness level in the country is low and the main reasons are (i) vastness of the country with more population below the poverty line; (ii) economic inequality, and (iii) low level of literacy and ignorance. The situation in rural areas is dismal causing rural consumers subject to more exploitation of the trade, industry and service providers. Inclusive growth strategies of the government among others warrant for creation of national awareness programme at district and talukat levels targeting vulnerable consumers such as women and children, youths, farmers and rural families and middle and working class (Planning Commission, 2012). Hardly any independent research on consumer awareness at grass root level is found. This research gap triggers the present study.

III. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the paper are (i) to ascertain the magnitude of involvement of rural people in corrupt practices; and (ii) to suggest mechanisms for empowering the consumers with their rights, duties and responsibilities.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research work is based on a micro level case study covering two villages in Athmallik block in the Angul district of Odisha. The first village was a remote village with more tribal population, reasonable road connectivity under PMGSY

and power connection under RGGVY. The second village was having comparatively better infrastructure, education and awareness. The distance between these two villages was 4 kilometers. These two villages were selected for the reason that both were dependent on each other- first village one was dependent on the second village for consumption of essential commodities and for pursuing higher education of kids and the second village depended on first village for forest products for regular household consumption. Besides, “consumer clubs”, under a Government of India project to educate and mobilize students of middle/high/higher secondary schools to instill in them the spirit of consumer rights and protection and to strengthen the consumer movement in the country, were established in the schools of both the villages in 2007. Though these are now defunct, it was expected that the club activities might have impacted the villagers to gain some knowledge about consumer protection. A brief demographic profile of these villages was prepared to decide the suitable process of choosing the respondents to get as accurate feedback as possible. As such, impact evaluation guidelines provided by Baker (2000) for World Bank projects and successfully followed by Kumar (2005) were followed in this study to ensure relevance and accuracy.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, convenience sampling was adopted for this research as suggested by Zikmund (2003). Since corruption is a sensitive issue people were reluctant to reveal the facts. To make them comfortable with our approach, an interaction process was started with the villagers in the second week of September 2012 with a video show of film “Swades” and another on RTI Act 2005. These were followed by general discussion on government policies and strategies on rural development projects to make them aware and sensitize them about their role and responsibilities in the developments taking place around them. This helped in getting appropriate feedbacks in the next stage of the survey. The final round of interaction was completed in June-July, 2013.

It was necessary to understand the extent to which consumers knew about the development projects undertaken in these villages which could provide an insight into the magnitude of their involvement in corrupt practices. As such, to achieve the desired objective Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques, consisting of in-depth interview of individual respondents with semi-structured questionnaires, group discussions, community meetings with mapping techniques and observation methods were employed. For these purposes respondents were carefully chosen to include members of various categories like SHG members, MNRREGS job card holder, old age pensioners and educated unemployed etc. making the sample of 120 people from the first village which was 21 % of total adult population and 40 or 29% of adult population from second village (Table 1). In these cases the percentage of BPL category of respondents was 87 and 92.5 respectively. Besides, informal discussions were held with school teachers, Sarpanch, Panchayat Executive Officer, Anganwadi supervisor, Asha karmi, and Gram sathi. The field study was conducted during August 15-September 25, 2012.

TABLE I: SAMPLE SIZE

Category	Village one		Village two	
	Total sample	% of BPL families in sample	Total sample	% of BPL families in sample
SHG member	35	90	10	90
MNRREGS job card holder	45	100	17	100
Old age pensioners	15	100	6	100
Educated unemployed	10	50	2	50
Others	15	60	5	80
Total	120	87	40	92.5

Considering the complex nature of the field study, the data so collected were tabulated using computer for analysis and interpretation.

V. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The analysis of the research revolves around three factors i.e (i) structure and demographic features of the villages, (ii) impact measurement on knowledge and awareness, and (iii) awareness mechanism.

A. Structure and Demographic Features

The detailed structure and demographic profile of the sample villages is presented through Table 2. The table contains population with the breakup of BPL, old age pensioners, MNREGS job card holders, infrastructure and communication support services, educational environment and socio-economic livelihood projects.

- i. Interestingly, it was found that in the first village all the BPL families had at least 1 mobile phone but only 53 mobile handsets had a subscriber identity module (SIM) card and the rest were having only memory card used for listening music. Further, 97.22 per cent BPL families got power connection under RGGVY and the rest were waiting to get connected. Electricity enabled 37 families (54.17 %) to have television with DTH connection. Out of 15 motor bikes in these families, 11 were reported to have been purchased and other 4 were received as dowry. On the other hand, 21 out of 23 BPL families in second village had power connection. In the second village all BPL families were having power supply and only one cell phone was found.
- ii. For safe drinking water 11 tube wells in different locations were found in first village and 5 in second villages. This was reported to be adequate. The daily wage earners under MNREGS were 147 and 63 in the two villages respectively.
- iii. As regards the educational infrastructure both the villages were found to have Anganwadi with 20 and 10 pre-school going kids. For elementary education, first village had a school with 5 teachers, 170 student's enrolment and up to class eight and second village had 2 teachers, 30 students and up to class five. Consumer clubs were established in these schools during 2007 and were reported to be defunct since 2008 due to non-availability of funds.
- iv. Educated youths numbering 69 in the 18-35 years age group and 17 in above 35 years age group in the first village were found to have seasonal employment outside home particularly in cotton mills in Surat and in construction related works in Hyderabad. This was reported to be the main reason that BPL families had at least one mobile phone in their house. Only 5 youths in the second village similarly went outside for seasonal employment. People with at least graduate level education were employed in the public sector or government in first village but no one with such education was found in the second village.
- v. Ten self help groups (SHGs) were working in the first village whereas two were found in the second village. All the groups went for small savings and individual business with the loans from banks.
- vi. Village development workers like Angawadi assistant, Asha Karmi, Krushak Sathi and Gram Sathi were working in the first village but in the second village no Asha Karmi or Gram Sathi worked.
- vii. The significant feature in the second village was that villagers planted and preserved 62.30 hectares of forest land under social forestry in participatory mode. The project was launched in 2004 with a government grant of Rs. 5 lakh. This project not only provided to them employment and earnings but also made them to learn about sustainable consumption and environment protection. On the other hand, the first village was trying to follow the path of the second village but was not able to make registration of the project, due to conflicting political interests and squabbling even though they had 23 hectares of forest land.

TABLE II: STRUCTURE AND DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Sr. No	Items	Village		
		One	Two	
1	Total adult population/ No of voters	574	147	
2	No of electoral administrative wards	2	1	
3	No of BPL card holder	72	23	
4	No of Old age pension holder	51	14	
5	MNREGS job card holder	147	62	
6	Electric connection	BPL	70	21
		General	11	3
7	TV	BPL	43 (12 dowry)	2
		General	10 (3 dowry)	2
8	Mobile	BPL	114	-
		General	28	1

9	Motorbike	BPL	15 (1 dowry)		-	
		General	7 (1dowry)		1 (Dowry)	
10	Auto rickshaw	9		-		
11	Tractor	3		-		
12	Pump set	5		-		
13	Tube well	11		5		
13	Education	a. Anganwadi	Yes/ 20		Yes/10	
		b. School	Up to 8 class		Up to 5 class	
		c. Student strength	170		30	
		d. No of teachers	5		2	
		e. Consumer club	Est- 2007		Est- 2007	
14	Educational attainment for employability	Standard	Age		Age	
			18-35yrs	Above 35 yrs	18-35yrs	Above 35 yrs
		Up to 10 th	30	6	-	3
		10-12	16	5	-	2
		Undergraduate	15	1	-	-
		Graduates	8	4	-	-
Above		1	-	-		
15	Salaried employment	a. Private sector	6		1	
		b. Public sector	8		-	
16	SHGs	10		1		
17	Govt. social worker/ employee	a. Anganwadi	2		2	
		b. Asha	1		-	
		c. Krushak sathi	1		-	
		d. Grama sathi	2		1	
18	Social project with people's participation	Un-recognized social forestry conservation (disputed) 23 hectares		Recognized social forestry Plantation and conservation 62.30 hectares		
19	Diary co-operative	Existing		Membership with first village diary cooperative		
20	News paper subscribed	8		-		
21	No of shops	10		-		

Source: Official records from Panchayat and field data

B. Impact measurement on knowledge and awareness

The study analyses the impacts of development projects on the knowledge and awareness of the villagers on subjects like political empowerment and environment, economic empowerment, social empowerment, environment and climate change, corruption perception and consumer rights and protection. Table 3 exhibits their level of knowledge and awareness on these subjects in three parameters i.e 'basic', 'moderate' and 'clarity'. The findings are described here.

TABLE III: RESULTS OF IMPACT MEASUREMENT: KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS (%)

Level of understanding Subject	Village One			Village Two		
	Basic	Moderate	Clear	Basic	Moderate	Clear
Subject A: Political empowerment & environment	--	8	92	-	37	63
Subject B: Economic empowerment						
i. MNREGS	7	42	51	29	57	14
ii. Self-help group approach	-	38	62	34	60	-
Subject C: Social empowerment						
i. Foods security (PDS, NRLM)	-	27	73	11	33	56
ii. Shelter (IAY)	-	19	81	11	52	37
iii. Education (TLC)	-	19	81	11	52	37
iv. Health& sanitation	-	34	66	08	51	41

	(NRDWP)	12	28	60	18	69	13
v.	Power (RGGVY)	17	32	51	29	54	17
vi.	Roads(PMGSY)	11	36	53	27	51	22
Subject D: Environment and Climate change (Forest conservation)		-	68	32	-	14	86
Subject E: Corrupt practices		-	26	74	05	57	38
Subject F: Consumer protection		66	27	07	82	18	-

Source: Field data

- i. Villagers from both the villages understood their political rights. The clarity level of respondents of first village was as high as 92 per cent against 63 per cent in second village. This is an obvious trend because the second village was backward in educational infrastructure and attainment. During interaction, it was admitted by many respondents that though they were committed to their political leader(s), irrespective of their income level, most of them accepted money ranging from Rs. 100 to Rs. 200 to cast their votes in the last Panchayat election. There were conflicts and factionalism in both the villages but it was more visible in the first village. The social forestry project in the village suffered due to factionalism. The meeting of the village development committee for undertaking or maintaining hygiene and welfare works was not held in April 2012 and it was deferred many times due to conflict of interests.
- ii. As regards economic empowerment of poor people, MNREGS was working well and the respondents had no complaints. But their level of knowledge and understanding of the subject in the first village was spread over 'moderate' and 'clear' levels whereas in second village it was between 'basic' and 'moderate level'. Respondents from the second village invariably felt that they needed work and timely payment of wages. Villagers from first village did not experience any such problem. Further, regarding economic activities under SHGs scheme for women, it was found in both the villages that the loan amount taken from the bank was equally distributed among the group members and used for purposes like goat/ sheep rearing, agriculture, debt payment, medical expenses and creating assets. Spending on non-income generating activities were more, so the repayment of a loan was mostly from the sale of agricultural and forest produces.
- iii. It was found that the understanding level of PDS beneficiaries was high in both the villages. It was understood from the in-depth interaction with the respondents that they had little complaint about the PDS delivery mechanism after the agency system was removed about six months back. However, feedback received from 22 respondents showed that they had sold the rice after de-husking at a higher price for money in some urgency. This indicates their involvement in unfair practices.
- iv. All BPL families had IAY in both the villages but the quality of work was poor, therefore needing renovation/ major repair in many cases. Getting an allotment of a house under IAY needed payment to bribe ranging between Rs. 2000 to Rs. 5000.
- v. The total literacy campaign created impact in both the villages. About 90 per cent respondents in both villages had either 'understanding' or 'clarity' level on various aspects of literacy campaign. However, nearly 85 per cent respondents in the first village and 64 per cent in the second village affirmed that they could read, write and sign their name.
- vi. It is heartening to note that health and sanitation was lacking in the villages under study. Malaria was known to be a common disease. Even 16 cases were reported to have repeated malaria during last one year. The level of their understanding on the subject suggested that they needed more education and awareness on this front.
- vii. It was found that all BPL people had power connection under RGGVY. It was reported that Rs. 100 was collected from each consumer by the official concerned at the time of charging their power connection. Respondents expressed their happiness that nobody bothered to give monthly bill and collect dues or they volunteered to pay a fixed monthly dues of Rs. 30. Unauthorised hooking was known to be common with non-BPL families who were not consumers. For BPL consumers who were in default, their lines were disconnected. However, the promising impact of power connection to BPL families under RGGVY is that more DTH services were found with them for entertainment. Penetration of mobile services, which required power to recharge, improved ease and effectiveness communication.

- viii. As regards road connectivity, the first village had a high level Pucca road built primarily to prevent the carnage of frequent flood, whereas second village had poor road and they suffered in rainy season. A new approach road from the main road was being constructed as promised during the last Panchayat election by a local politician.
- ix. Social forestry plantation and conservation in the second village impacted much on the life of the villagers. It provided regular wages, and other forest products like free firewood, bamboo and logs for house construction on a regular basis. Out of the grants of Rs. 5 lakhs, a small community hall was constructed. Out of the sale proceeds of bamboo, they created a tent house. A mike set and some electrical appliances worth Rs 2 lakh were also purchased. These were used during festivals and given on rent to nearby villages at a reasonable rate.
- x. As regards corrupt practices, respondents felt that getting things done was not easy without a bribe- be it a matter with police or revenue or forest department officials. They knew about corruption, talked and debated the subject but expressed helplessness in fighting against it. Most of the respondents during interview mentioned that prevalence of high degree of corruption had led to their low confidence in governance system in general and awareness programme in particular. This negatively impacted on the sustainability consumption.
- xi. Consumer protection in the villages under study was found to be a non-issue. The knowledge of the respondents was found to be more or less at a basic level. Consumer clubs established in their respective schools in 2007 were defunct. No one remembered what programme the school conducted. Respondents consumed daily used products in small quantities preferably in pouches/ sachets. They all relied more on weekly local haats and daily market in the nearby town. They mostly preferred cheaper products. Chinese products were cheaper and dominated the market. Hardly anyone purchased with a cash memo/ money receipt. No one purchased any product based on TV advertisements. Consumer issues on technology, banking, insurance, financial services, medicines, real estate, education, travel services, energy saving, financial inclusion, census and aadhar numbers were frequently telecast in TV under “Jago Grahak Jago” campaign but hardly one could tell anything about the campaign.
- xii. It was interesting to find that 11 respondents from first village reported to have used AMWAY production APSA 80, a performance maximizer adjuvant added to water and pesticides that increases effectiveness of pesticides and foliar fertilizers, to increase crops/ fruits/vegetables yields. This was found to be a fascinating opportunity for educated unemployed to grow in AMWAY business. This trend suggests for studying the awareness and marketing strategy adopted by AMWAY to make inroads to villages.

C. Consumer Protection Awareness Mechanism

There was rigorous discussion with the respondents about how as sensible consumers, they could be enlightened about their rights, duties and responsibilities- be it developmental projects or their daily consumption of products and services. About 57 per cent of the respondents in the first village and 41 per cent in the second village viewed that educated youths, school teachers, social development workers and local bodies could play key roles in educating them. Other suggestions were that on the date of distribution of old age pension, all beneficiaries could be allowed to sit on Panchayat community hall instead of loitering here and there, and film(s) on consumer protection matters could be shown; Such short film show could also be organized in monthly meetings of Anganwadii workers/ Asha Karmi/ Gram Sathi/ Krushak Sathi who, in turn, would help educating the other villagers. People would not ordinarily like to come to meetings for discussions. As such, at least once in a month, such film show followed by discussion could be arranged for the parents in the school. Any Gram sabha held would be prompted to discuss these issues. Panchayat with the involvement of government officials could organize rallies/ meeting on all important occasions like Gandhi Jayanti, National Consumers’ Day, World Consumer Rights Day, Mother’s Day etc. .The Panchayat ward members in the village who were divided on political lines, needed to be trained about their role as facilitator. The respondents were positive when they asked whether they would approve and participate if any work was undertaken by public-private partnership mode, and whether these would improve their knowledge.

VI. IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

The situation covered in this study is area/ region specific. Similar situations can be found in many country sides. Review of the 12th Plan documents suggests that the 12th Plan priorities among others include promotion of socio-economic movement to protect consumer rights. As such, government has decided to address the problems of rural consumers by aggressively launching awareness programmes through the state government and voluntary consumer organizations. The budgetary support of Rs. 665 crores for awareness campaign in 12th Plan as against Rs. 409 crores in 11th Plan explains the commitment of the government. But as the system is not free from corruption, such huge spending on consumer awareness programmes has not yet produced desired benefits. Another impediment in this direction is that 'consumer clubs' established in many schools across states during 2005-06 are reported to be defunct/ inactive due to want of financial support. Debate has been going on to involve local bodies for promotion of the consumer movement in general and consumer awareness in particular. Execution of plans by the government takes its own time. With these socio-economic conditions the present government strategies to awaken the rural consumers to make them more aware, it is strongly advocated that 'consumer clubs' should be reactivated, restructured and adequate financial support should be provided. Local bodies and educational institutions of higher learning should be involved in the execution and finally a strong private-public partnership should be created and villages should be covered under such PPP scheme.

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