

# Issues of Consumerism in Bangladesh: Present Status and Challenges

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**Abstract-** Consumerism is the organized movements of conscious consumers against the sellers to protect their rights. Extant consumerism literature mainly focused on developed countries while the conditions of developing countries are largely ignored by the researchers. This paper is an effort to explore the present status, related issues and challenges of consumerism in Bangladesh, i.e. from a developing country perspective. Empirical data, however, evidence that 85 percent of the sample respondents are away from consumerism. The collected data reveals that the areas of consumer deception are adulteration, miss-branding, poor sales service, deception in advertising and poor marketing information system etc. Further, the survey results identified that the factors of consumer deception are - illiteracy, lack of consumer consciousness, absence of consumer legislation, inadequate role of consumer interest groups and indifference of law enforcing agencies, etc. Finally, the paper recommends in support of healthy growth of consumerism global context in general and in Bangladesh in particular.

**Index Terms-** consumerism, prospect and challenges, Bangladesh.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Consumerism has emerged as an issue of considerable importance affecting managerial decision in the marketplace (e.g. Ede and Calcich, 1999; Day and Aaker, 1997; Quazi, 2002). It is an organized movement of consumers whose aim is to improve the rights and powers of consumers in relation to sellers (Kotler et al. 1998) and thus emphasizes on how to diminish dominance of sellers in the market and enhance customer satisfaction. Business organizations consider customer satisfaction a top priority, enhance customer knowledge, beef up service support and field linkages and implement a customer oriented philosophy (Bailey, 1991). Customer satisfaction requires understanding the buyers' requirements and developing a total organizational commitment to meeting these needs. Management must build an organizational culture committed to understanding and meeting the needs of customers (Cravens, 1991). However, there is general allegation that sellers' market is prevailing in the developing countries of the world and which is true in the case of Bangladesh, too (Quazi, 2000). During the early stage of the development of consumerism, consumers usually voiced their grievances individually on the individual seller. The focus of organized movement got impetus based on the vigorous activities different consumer activists such as Ralph Nader (Quazi 1998; 2002) and former US President John F.

Kennedy (Ede and Calcich, 1999; Day and Aaker, 1997; Quazi 2002). Late President John F. Kennedy announced in his "Consumer Bill of Rights" of 1962 that consumer had the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard. This consumer bill of rights is the main ground of establishing consumer rights in the market against sellers' domination, which also guide the expansion of consumer movement or consumerism across the world. Consumerism involves the widened range of activities of government, business, social and voluntary organizations that are designed to save buyers/users from malpractice that infringe upon their rights 'as consumers. Consumerism compels marketers to consider relevant factors from viewpoint of consumers instead of producers.

In Bangladesh, absence of competitive marketing norms, human values, business ethics, rules, regulations have also created marketing inefficiency, which in turn, may lead to adverse impact on consumerism and the overall economy of the country. However, in developing countries like Bangladesh, corporate attitude and actions are relatively less concerned about the consumers and the pressure arising from the consumer movement is generally low (Quazi, 2002). Because, most of the least developed countries' (LDC) consumers place greater emphasis on the satisfaction of the psychological needs of the general public. In addition the prevalence of seller's market conditions in most LDCs has also contributed to the low response from business. Consumers of such market conditions accept whatever they are offered as they have little voice in the marketplace (Reddy and Campbell 1994; Quazi 2002). Previous research did focus on the condition of consumerism in general in Bangladesh perspective. In this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to pinpoint the areas of consumer deception and relevant issues for development of consumerism in Bangladesh.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on both desk study and empirical survey. In desk study, extant literature have been reviewed to ascertain the relevant factors associated with the development of consumerism in Bangladesh. Further, this paper presents the information collected through a survey of 500 sample respondents which were selected from 10 different professional groups, such as-consumers: male and female, manufacturers, intermediaries, marketers, government, officials, social workers, academicians, legal practitioners, CAB (Consumer Association of Bangladesh) representatives and Chamber of Commerce representatives on the basis of random sampling. Data were collected from respondents regarding consumerism by questionnaire through

direct interview method. The questionnaire had three features: open ended ness, check-lists and 5-points scaling which were specially related to factors adversely offering growth of consumerism in Bangladesh.

### III. CONSUMERISM – WORLD PERESPECTIVE VIS-A-VIS BANGLADESH PERESPECTIVE

Consumerism refers to the movement through which rights and powers of consumers are ensured is known as consumerism. This process generally includes consumer education, consumer safety, consumer choice, consumers' rights to be heard and the responses of business to consumer issues (Evans and Berman, 1982). The consumer movement has been originated in the USA during early 1900's subsequently fueled by depression and writings of intellectuals on the conditions in specified industries like Sinclar's. The movement further flourished in 1930 in the contexts of deceptive advertising, performance standards, product safety, misrepresentation and growth of relevant government legislation's. The third phase of the development of consumerism was sparked up by better consumer education, emergence of complex and hazardous products, wasteful and unethical practices of big businesses and public dissatisfaction with marketing organizations. However, the consumer movement which started in the USA rapidly assumed international dimensions and grew very strong in Scandinavian countries. The processes of development of consumerism since 1900 to date have been characterized by the selected events such as portrayed below:

- (i) President John F. Kennedy delineated four fundamental consumer rights is a message to congress : right to be informed, right to safety, right to choose, and right to be heard. In addition, he established a Consumer Advisory Council with the objective of examining and providing advice to government on issues of macro economic policies, governmental policies protecting consumer needs and needed improvements in the flow of consumer research material for the public.
- (ii) In 1968, President Johnson, in a special message to Congress, proposed an eight-point program to protect consumers and honest business people against fraud and indifference.
- (iii) In 1969, President Nixon affirmed consumer rights pertaining to choice information, health and safety, and complaints.
- (iv) In 1979-80 American congress moved to limit the powers of the Federal Trade Commission to investigate and act against deceptive or unfair business practices.

Protection of consumers' rights is an imperative in the developed countries as well as in the developing countries. The consumerism movement started in Asia in the mid 1960s (Hrick and Scammon, 1993). As Allain (1988) explained, consumerism movement in the developing countries have typically followed the model of developed countries. Further, from a third-world point of view, the most important consumers' right is the right to satisfy basic needs - a right which, according to a recommendation of the International Organization of Consumers' Union (IOCU), 1990 Bangkok conference, should be added to

the UN guidelines for consumers' protection. In addition, identification of areas of consumers' deception is important for development of consumerism as consumers not only have the right but also the responsibility to protect themselves.. Consumers' deception is a state of affairs wherein consumers do not get proportionate goods and services as they pay for them (Kotler, 1992).

During the recent years issues relating to the protection of consumers' rights have drawn attention of the proponents of human rights, social reformers, public policy makers, environmentalists and the likes. But unlike the situations prevailing in this respect in the developed countries of the world, protection of consumers' rights is not adequately taken care of in Bangladesh. As a result, consumers, marketers and the manufacturers are suffering unlimitedly, and thereby, adversely affecting the marketing efficiency in Bangladesh. Consumerism in Bangladesh is yet to assume full-fledged dimension and serve the interests of consumers. Voluntary organization like CAB (Consumers Association of Bangladesh) plays a positive role in this direction. CAB is playing its role amidst manyfold hadicaps in order to organize the consumers of Bangladesh as regard their rights and privileges as well as consumer consciousness. Farther, as a result of motivation extended by CAB, other voluntary organizations like 'Consumers' Interest Protection Association, 'Health for All', 'Anti-Smoking Association' and 'Adunik' have come out in the consumers field and started contributing substantially towards the developing the consumer consciousness and protection of consumer welfare along with extension of legal adice in the area concerned. Further, government agencies like BSTI (Bangladesh Standard and Testing Institution) and various Acts such as Bangladesh Control of Essential Commodities Act 1956 Essential Commodities Price and Distribution Order, 1970, Bangladesh Pure Food Ordinance, 1959, Agricultural Produce Markets Regulation Act, 1964, Bangladesh Government Hats and Bazars (Management) Order, 1972, The Standards of Weightsand Measures Ordinance, 1982 and Law enforcing agencies, e.g., Bangladesh Rifles and Police also contribute significantly to safeguard the interest of consumers.

The concept of consumer protection centers around ensuring seven R's of consumer rights, such as- (a) right to safety (b) right to be informed (c) right to be heard (d) right to redress (e) right to consumer education and (f) right to healthy environment (Quddus and Ali, 1986). Consumerism induces the government to act to protect and safeguard the interest of consumers by influencing marketing decision and operations of companies (Gandhi, 1985). In Bangladesh, consumerism movement is still in initial stage. However, Government of Bangladesh has adopted some legislative measures in order to protect consumers from the malpractice of the dishonest businessmen/marketers. The important legislation with regard to this include (a) The Patents and Design Act, 191 1, (b) Trade Marks Act, 1940, (c) Prevention of Adulteration Act, 1954 (d) Pure Food Ordinance, 1959 (e) Bangladesh Drugs Act, 1982, etc. Further consumer organization like CAB (Consumer Association of Bangladesh) has come into being and it concerned with promoting consumer awareness, providing consumer education, setting consumer deputies and complaints, conducting consumer research and the likes.

IV. CONSUMER DECEPTION AREAS

Marketers sometimes are accused of deceptive practices that lead customers to believe they will get more value than they actually do. Deceptive practices fall into three groups: deceptive

pricing, promotion and packaging (Kotler, 1995). More important, unhappy customers negatively affect business. However, the data and information collected in this regard have been shown in Table-2.

Table 2: Consumer Deception Areas as Opined by Samples

Consumer Deception Areas	No. of Samples	Frequency in Percentage
Adulteration	311	62.20%
Misbranding	294	58.80%
Poor sales service	217	43.40%
Deception in advertising	201	40.20%
Poor marketing information system	198	39.60%
Shortage in weights and measures	196	39.20%
Quoting highly inconsistent price	187	37.40%
Deceptive packaging	171	34.20%
Misbehaviors of sales force	166	33.20%

[Note: Total exceeds 100 because the respondents mentioned more than one area]

Table-2 reveals that 62.20 percent out of 500 sample respondents have identified adulteration as an area deception, followed by 58.80 percent who have earmarked misbranding of goods as the deceit area. The table further depicts that the areas of deception ranges from misbehavior of sales force 33.20 percent at the lowest to deception in adulteration 62.20 percent in the highest. The table further shows that the other area of deception are poor sales service, deception in advertising, poor marketing information system shortage in weights and measures, quoting highly inconsistent price and deceptive packaging and in terms frequency are 43.40 per cent, 40.20 per cent, 39.60 percent, 39.20 percent, 37.40 percent and 34.20 percent respectively, This

finding is also corroborated by other research works (Gupta 1985).

V. CAUSES OF CONSUMER EXPLOITATION

Consumerism is a protest against perceived business injustices, combined with the efforts to remedy these situations. It stemmed from cultural changes and from consumer discontents and frustrations (Stanton, 1987). Further, illiteracy, increased tolerance by customers, limited consumer interest groups and customer legislation are causes responsible for customer exploitation (Bhatt, 1985). However, the data collected in this regard have been shown in Table- 3

Table 3: Causes of Consumer Exploitation

Causes of Exploitation	Frequency in Percentage
Illiteracy	100
Absence of consumer consciousness	100
Increased tolerance by consumers	84.66
Limited number of consumer interest groups	84.66
Lack of consumer legislation	70.50
Inflation	56.55
Limited consumer choices	50.40
Scarcity of essential commodities	30.30
Absence of marketing audit	25.25

Note: Total exceeds 100 because the respondents mentioned more than one cause.]

**Table-3** portrays that the most important causes are illiteracy and of consumer consciousness which in fact leading to consumer exploitation. Consumers and limited number of interest groups has further gathered. This makes the dishonest marketers free from their social accountability. Lack of consumer legislation reportedly creates a heavenly environment for the exploiters. Inflation was reposed by some sample respondents to be one of the causes that affect efficient marketing process as a whole. The table further shows that marketers due to limited consumer choices exploit consumers, scarcity of essential commodities and absence of marketing audit etc. This

has also been corroborated by the findings of the similar types of research works (Thomas, 1978)

VI. ATTITUDES OF THE SAMPLE RESPONDENTS TOWARDS CONSUMERISM

Attitudes are mental states used by individual to structure the way they perceive their and guide the way they respond to it (Aaker and Day, 1980). The information was collected from the sample respondents regarding whether the respondents done anything for consumerism or not. Table-4 shows the opinions expressed by the samples in this regard.

Table 4: Attitudes of the Sample Respondents regarding Consumerism

Response Patterns	No. of Samples	Frequency in Percentage
Claimed to have done something for consumerism	50	10%
Done nothing for consumerism	425	85%
No response	25	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey

The survey data (Table- 4) portrays that 85 per cent of the sample respondents are away from consumerism. It further reveals that 10 per cent of the samples claimed to have done something for communism. In such a context, we were interested to know from the samples about the areas of consumer deception in the study area.

VII. MECHANISM OF CONSUMERISM

Mechanism of consumerism refers to the tools and techniques at the disposal of the consumer groups that are majorly used by them in creation of mass markets. An understanding of the different mechanisms as aids to consumerism is non-the-less essential in so far as the future programmes in connection with consumerism are concerned. This, in turn, assist the concerned people in the detainment of some of the existing effective tools

rejection of the others and discovery of the newer ones. In an over-all manner, mechanisms used in consumerism at home and abroad are letters to the editor, frequent issuance of press releases by different authorities, submission of litigation against the fraudulent marketers, setting up of consumer organizations, extending legal protection, frequent marketing inspection, setting up of mobile courts, publication of market reports in the news papers, periodical announcement of market bulletins through Radio and Television and playing of increased role by the govt. agencies. These tools, though not all-exhaustive, are adequately suggestive and can go along way to implement the objectives aimed at by consumerism. In Table-5, an attempt has been made to accommodate the collected data from the sample respondents regarding what mechanisms they adopted while involving in consumerism.

Table 5: Mechanisms of Consumerism

Mechanisms of Consumerism	Number	Percentage
Consumer Organizations	50	10%
Legal Protection	90	18%
Marketing Inspection	60	12%
Mobile Court	50	10%
Letters to the Editor	70	14%
Marketing Press Release	40	8%
Market Reports Published in News Papers	50	10%
Periodical Radio-TV Market Bulletin	50	10%
Role of Govt. Agencies	40	8%
<i>Total</i>	<b>500</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table-5 portrays that 90 (18%) out of 500 (100%) sample identify extension of legal protection to the consumers community by authorities concerned as the mechanism number one being closely followed by 70 (14%) in favour of ‘Letters to the Editor’, 60(12%) for marketing inspection, concurrently by 50 (10%) for establishing consumer organizations, setting up of mobile courts, publishing market reports in news papers and publicizing periodical market bulletins through Radio and Television. Again, 40 (8%) of the respondents simultaneously mention issuance of marketing press release and playing of increasing role by government agencies as the mechanisms of consumerism.

mechanisms used for the purpose. In this connection, the attitudes of sample respondents towards effectiveness and efficiency of mechanisms of consumers have been evaluated. Attitudes are mental states used by individuals to structure the way they perceive their environment, and guide the way they respond to it. Against this theoretical background, the data and informations were collected as to the effectiveness and efficiency of mechanisms of consumerism from the sample respondents. Table- 6 reveals the opinions expressed by the samples regarding the factors of efficiency in the area concerned processed through 7-point Likert scale. In this scale, + 3 indicates full satisfaction, + 2 medium satisfaction and + 1 least satisfaction and, on the contrary, — 3 indicates complete dissatisfaction,-2 moderate dissatisfaction and-1 least dissatisfaction.

VIII. ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EFFECTIVENESS LEVEL OF THE CURRENT TOOLS OF CONSUMERISM

Implementation of the programmes aimed at by consumerism depends upon the level of efficiency demonstrated by the

Table 6: Effectiveness and Efficiency Level of Mechanisms of Consumerism'

<i>Variables</i>	<b>Average score</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
'Legal Protection' is effective	1.8	Insignificant
"Letters to the Editor" is efficient	2.0	Significant
"Marketing Inspection" is purposeful	1.5	Insignificant
"Role of Mobile Court' serves the desired purpose	1.4	Insignificant
"Role of consumer Organizations" is effective	1.0	Insignificant
"Role of Govt. Agencies" is significant	1.2	Insignificant
"Periodical Radio TV Market Bulletin" is frequent	2.0	Significant
'Marketing Press Release' is regular	1.8	Insignificant
'Publication of Market Reports in News Papers" is regular	2.0	Significant
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.63</b>	<b>Insignificant</b>

Table 6 reveals that the aggregate over all score as per opinions of the respondents based on 9 sub-variables is 1.63 and the range of score is from 1.8 to 2.0. This signifies the ineffective and inefficient application of consumerism mechanisms in sample areas. It is further asserted that the mechanisms of consumerism, such as "Letters to the Editor" and "Publication of Market Reports in News Papers" indicate significance which denotes effectiveness and efficiency. This has also been corroborated by the findings of the similar research studies conducted abroad.

IX. FACTORS AFFECTING GROWTH OF CONSUMERISM IN BANGLADESH

Consumerism is the organized efforts of consumers seeking redress, restitution and remedy for and dissatisfaction they have

accumulated in their standard of living (Buskirk and Rothe, 1970). However, the growth and development of consumerism movement depends to a great extent on environmental factors. Although there are many factors, the most important ones are societal, political, technical and governmental factors seemed to be important in this regard. The attitude of sample respondents towards the growth and development of consumerism have been evaluated. In such a context, the data and information were collected as to the growth and development of Consumerism from sample respondents. Table-7 shows the opinions expressed by the sample respondents regarding the factors of efficiency in the area concerned processed through Likert type 5-points bi-polar scale system. In this scale, + 2 or more would indicate very favorable impact, score falling between 1-2 would indicate favorable impact and '0' would indicate no comment.

Table 7: Factors Affecting Growth and Development of Consumerism

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Average Score</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
<b>Social Factors:</b>		
Ineffective human resource development process	1.9	Insignificant
Lower rate of social responsibility of business houses	2.0	Significant
Unawareness of people	1.8	Insignificant
Insignificant role of social institutions	1.8	Insignificant
Limited number of consumer interest groups	1.7	Insignificant
<b>Economic Factors:</b>		
Poor role of re-dressing consumer complaints	2.0	Significant
Negligible assistance of business community	1.9	Insignificant
Lack of consumer orientations	1.8	Insignificant
Increased tolerance of consumers	1.7	Insignificant
Absence of consumer consciousness	1.7	Insignificant
Poor conversant of political leaders with consumer education	2.0	Significant
Absence of democratic norms	2.0	Significant
Lower rate of public accountability	1.9	Insignificant
Lack of Political culture	1.9	Insignificant
Decreased tolerance of political leaders	1.8	Insignificant
<b>Technical Factors:</b>		
Poor investment in R and D	2.0	Significant
Lack of data bank	1.9	Insignificant
Lower rate of technological advancement	1.8	Insignificant
Outdated technology of production	1.8	Insignificant
Poor quality of products	1.7	Insignificant
<b>Governmental Legal Factors:</b>		

Absence of ideal government governance	1.7	Insignificant
Lower rate of accountability of government agencies	1.7	Insignificant
Lack of administrative transparency	1.8	Insignificant
Inadequate consumer protection legislation	2.0	Insignificant
Ineffective role of law enforcing agencies	1.8	Insignificant
<b>Average Score:</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>Insignificant</b>

Source: Field Survey

Table-7 reveals that the average over-all score as per opinions of the samples based on 25 sub-variables is 1.8. The range of score is 1.7 to 2.0 for different elements indicating the adverse impact on growth and development of consumerism in the study areas. This has also been corroborated by the findings of the similar research studies conducted abroad (Gupta 1985).

#### X. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation of consumerism mechanism efficiency of the sample areas through Likert scale indicates that the efficiency of the use of tools concerned has been poor. Such poor efficiency and effectiveness level of the tools has adversely affected the consumerism movement in contexts of purity, weightage accuracy, consistent price quotation, truthfulness in advertising, honesty in packaging and branding, amicable sales force behavior, congenial environment in transactions, efficient sales service, effective marketing information system, existence of consumer safety, choice and hearing and effective service from purchased goods. This, in turn, has impeded the desirable development of consumerism. Hence, the following specific steps may be worth mentioning in order to streamline the improvement of consumerism of the sample areas in Bangladesh:

##### i) Effective Communication Linkage

An ideal communication net-work may be set upto minimize the communication gap between the marketers and the consumers. A better communication system between the two paves the way for increased attention to consumer grievances, complaints and suggestions.

##### ii) Providing Mass-Media-Based Consumer Education

An effective mass-media-based education system implemented through the use of posters, publications, radio, television, documentary and other films accompanied by lectures, seminars, training course and adult education programmes, may go a long way to educate consumers and assist consumerism. Consumer education may also be ensured through drams folk arts and street plays.

##### iii) Consumer Protection Legislation

Legal coverage for consumer protection may also be given attention in order to ensure smooth consumerism. Enforcement of the existing laws and enactment of new laws in this direction may be considered with priorities.

##### iv) Role of Voluntary Organizations

Social cultural, humanitarian and voluntary organizations can play an effective role in the development of consumerism movement in the Country. Voluntary social and cultural organizations such as Lions' club, Rotary club, Apex club, Jaycees and other within country NGO's can play an effective role in the development of consumer consciousness in the country. Therefore, more and more consumer organizations may

be formed and federation of consumer interest groups may be created and thereby have a national approach to consumerism.

##### v) Social Responsibility of the Business Organizations

Business organizations may accept consumer protection as their social responsibility. Again government, business institutions and other funding agencies may motivate research works by concerned experts in order to safeguard the interest of consumers and thereby have an innovative approach in the growth and development of consumerism in global context in general and in Bangladesh in particular.

##### vi) Government Encouragement:

Government may forward to encourage growth of consumerism in the country. A democratically-elected govt. may even consider the point of consumer movement a fulfillment of its commitment to the nation.

##### vii) Growth of Consumer Organizations and Groups:

Growing number of consumer organizations and consumer groups might be an affirmative factor towards the development of consumerism. Organizations such as CAB (Consumers Association of Bangladesh) may be set up by and large in this connection.

##### viii) Settlement of Marketers-Consumers Disputes:

Acceptance of disputes between marketers and consumers and their settlement through formal and informal judicial machineries may play an effective role in the development of consumerism in Bangladesh.

##### ix) Introduction of Consumerism Courses in the Syllabi of the Educational Institutions

The issue of introducing academic courses on and about consumerism such as consumer economics, consumer protection, consumer legislation etc.; may be considered for inclusion in the syllabi of the educational institutions at different levels.

##### x) Motivation to Research on Consumerism:

Consumerism is a social movement. Public accountability in this regard may be ensured by conducting extensive research on different dimensions of consumerism. Such research may be motivated in different ways.

##### xi) Adopting a Global Approach to Consumerism:

Establishment of federation of consumer interest groups at local, national, regional and global levels through the patronage of government, non-government and social organizations and thereby evolving a global approach to consumerism may be actively taken into account in this perspective. Forums such as SAARC, Common Wealth, OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference) and Non-Aligned Conference may play a positive role in this perspective.

Consumerism is an area which is yet to receive adequate attention from relevant interest groups and quarters concerned in Bangladesh. The marketing system in our country is in the processes of continuous changes. The role of the actors in such a context may render the same more effective and efficient.

Consumers-the most influential among the relevant actors might play a formidable role in this direction. Moreover, the present government is stressing much emphasis on a switchover to a market economy-based on the free interaction of the forces of demand and supply. Such an economy is, among others, dependent on an effective and sound marketing system. Thus it can be concluded that the implementation of the above recommendations may create more consciousness in consumer's community in the country which might lead to the development of congenial atmosphere in the marketing environment. This may, in turn, assist the growth and development of consumerism in the country.

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