

CONSUMER VOICE

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Consumer interest above all



Paneer: Eat It with Caution

All but One Fail Crucial Tests

14 brands lab-tested



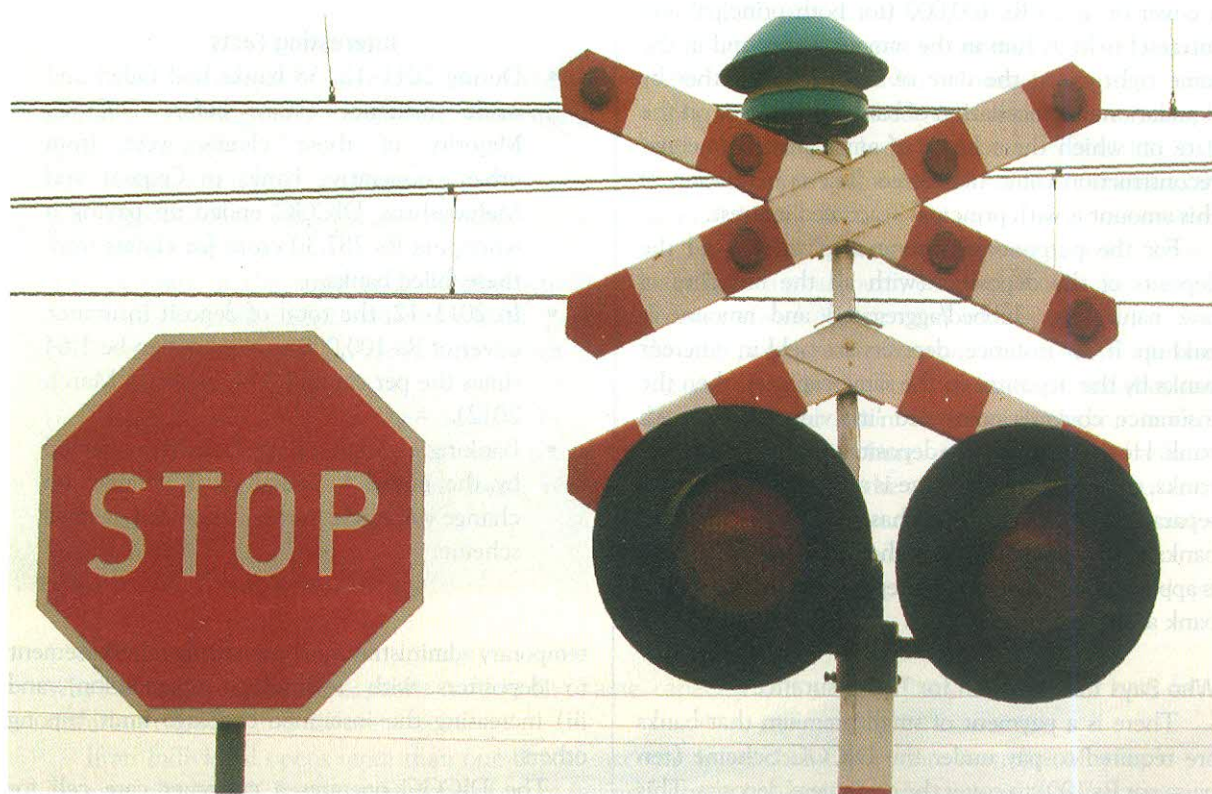
Health Insurance Features and Friendliness Matter

16 Policies Studied

Light Kyun Gayi?
Question. Law Is on Your Side

Going Green
The Easy Way

Your Bank Deposit
Is It Insured?



Consumer Safety in India

Documented, Yes, But Yet to Be Implemented

This is not news to anyone: On 19 August (2013), 37 people, mostly women and children, were killed in Bihar when an express train ploughed into pilgrims at a remote and poorly connected area in the state's Khagaria District, around 160 km from Patna.

Amarjeet Singh, CUTS International

However, this will certainly be news: In India, consumer safety issues have been dealt with in about 25 legislations and there are constitutional provisions, international conventions and various regulations issued by different regulatory agencies on the issue of safety. And the objective of all of them, as you can guess, is to 'ensure safety of the consumer'.

Well, in a country where the bare minimum requirements for survival are yet to reach a considerable

population, the legislations do not always work. And no, this is no exaggeration.

Numbers As Grim Reminders

The fact is that every two hours a woman in India dies while delivering a child in unsafe conditions. We need to ponder upon other fatalities caused by 'unsafe' interventions or non-availability of any sort of health services for the poor. (According to a World Bank 2010 report, India is losing more than six per cent

Worrying Facts

- Every two hours a woman in India dies during childbirth.
- One road accident happens every minute.
- One person dies every 3.7 minutes in a road accident – most of them are youths.
- About four lakh people get maimed in road accidents, annually.
- India loses more than six per cent of its GDP annually due to premature deaths and preventable illnesses.
- Social cost of road accidents in India stands at about three per cent of GDP.

According to a Railways data, 12,894 people were killed on track and level crossings due to trespassing in 2010; the next year witnessed the toll going up to 14,611.

Till June 2012, a total of 8,412 people were killed on the track, as per the data.

A few major accidents in the recent past – clear cases of compromised consumer safety

- 30 July 2012: One of the coaches of the Chennai-bound Tamil Nadu Express caught fire and 47 people died and 25 others were injured.
- 22 May 2011: An Air India Express airliner crashed and burst into flames killing 158 people, at Mangalore airport.
- 28 May 2010: The Gyaneshwari Express was derailed (allegedly by the Naxals) and collided with a goods train in West Bengal, killing over 170 people.
- 20 November 2011: 14 people died and over 30 were injured when a fire broke out at a community function of eunuchs in Nand Nagari in East Delhi.

of its gross domestic product [GDP] annually due to premature deaths and preventable illnesses.)

Apart from health services, unsafe road and transport services cause about 4.97 lakh road accidents annually in India (1 accident every minute), resulting





in about 1.5 lakh deaths (1 death every 3.7 minutes as per year 2011 data and most of them are youths) and about 4 lakh people getting maimed. A study undertaken by the Planning Commission in 2002 estimated the social cost of road accidents in India at about three per cent of GDP.

Then, there are large numbers of consumers who are affected by the ill effects of food safety violations. The National Survey on Milk Adulteration conducted by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in 2011 revealed 68.4 per cent samples non-conforming to FSSAI standards including presence of detergent powder, which may cause serious health hazards.

Consumer Safety vis-à-vis Service Sector Sufferings

The era of economic liberalization has ushered in rapid changes in the service industry. The services sector forms the backbone of social and economic development. In India, the services sector as a whole contributed as much as 68.6 per cent of the overall average growth in GDP. India is one of the largest consumer market of good and services. The Department of Consumer Affairs, Government of India, being the crusader of consumer rights in India,

is working to ensure consumers' right to safety, but the main focus seems to have been narrowed down to product safety. However, given the increasing scope of services, it is the need of the hour to focus on consumer safety in the services sector.

It is time that safety acts and policies were 'implemented', monitored and popularized among the masses. It is time that a policy was framed to first educate the consumer. Empowering consumers with awareness will further result in better and effective implementation of safety regulation and legislations. It will also enhance the visibility, accountability and functioning of agencies mandated to ensure consumers' right to safety.

In a national-level study on 'State of Indian Consumer' conducted by CUTS in the year 2012 (with support from Department of Consumer Affairs, Government of India), it was found that there was a serious lack of consumer awareness about safety standards/certification. As revealed by the study, only 22 per cent consumers reported that they always assessed products or services in terms of their potential to cause threat/hazard. In fact, 32 per cent consumers never considered the safety aspect of a product before making a purchase. The proportion of such people is more in rural area as compared to urban area.

Safety Boosts Confidence

Ensuring safety in services will not only save the lives and destinies of millions but also boost consumer confidence, resulting in tremendous growth in the nation's economy. Of course, the service providers will have to invest a little more to ensure safety standards, but it will be less than the compensation they will need to pay in case of accidents – and this is not counting in the hassle/ignominy/ill repute it will bring to their business.

So, in the collective national interest, the regulatory and implementing agencies, the services providers and the consumers should come together and prepare a joint strategy as well as action plan to ensure consumer safety in India.

Amarjeet Singh is a legal professional working as a project coordinator with CUTS International.