

English rendering of excerpts from PM's address at International Conference on Consumer Protection

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My Cabinet colleague Shri Ram Vilas Paswan Ji, Shri C.R. Chaudhary Ji, Secretary General, UNCTAD, Dr. Mukhisa Kituyi, and other dignitaries present here.

First of all, I congratulate all of you for this Regional Conference on an important subject like Consumer Protection. This programme is being attended by representatives from South Asia, Southeast Asia and all the East Asian countries. I welcome all of you to this programme.

This event is the first of its kind in South Asia. I would also like to express gratitude to UNCTAD for having supported India's initiative and playing an active role in bringing it to this stage.

Friends, very few regions of the world have such intensive historical interfaces as this region has. For thousands of years we have been connected by Trade, Culture and Religion. The Coastal Economy has made significant contribution in connecting this region for centuries. Movement of people from one place to another and exchange of thoughts and ideas, has been a two way process and has benefitted every country in this region. Today, we all symbolise a shared heritage not only economically but also culturally.

Friends, in today's modern era our traditional relationship has attained a new dimension. The Asian countries are not only catering to the goods and services markets in their own country but their reach has expanded to other continents as well. In such a scenario, Consumer Protection is an important component which enhances and strengthens trade in this region.

Today's event is a reflection of how seriously we understand the needs of our citizens, how hard we strive to overcome their difficulties. Every citizen is a consumer too and hence this event symbolizes our collective determination.

It is also very heartening to see that the United Nations has come forward as a partner in this entire process. For the first time in 1985, the UN Guidelines on Consumer Protection were framed. They were revised two years ago. India has also played an active role in the process of revision. These guidelines are very important with regard to Sustainable Consumption, E-Commerce and Financial Services in developing countries.

Friends, consumer protection has been an integral part of governance for ages in India. Consumers' protection finds mention in our Vedas written thousands of years ago. It is

mentioned in Atharvaveda that-

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It means that nobody should be involved in malpractices of quality and measurement.

These ancient documents explain the rules of Consumer Protection and the kind of punishment to be given to the trader who indulges in wrong practices. You will be astonished to know that in India around 2500 years ago, during the period of Kautilya, there were guidelines for the government regarding how the trade should be regulated and the interest of the consumers be protected. The Posts in the organisational structure in the Kautilya period may be considered as Director of Trade and the Superintendent of Standards in today's context.

Friends, we consider consumer as gods. In many shops you may see the writing – : Regardless of the nature of business, Consumer satisfaction should be the prime motive.

Friends, India is one of the first few countries to legislate Consumer Protection Act in 1986, just one year after adoption of UN Guidelines.

Protection of consumer interests is a priority of the government. This is also reflected in our resolution of the New India. Moving beyond Consumer Protection, New India will have Best Consumer Practices and Consumer Prosperity.

Friends, today we are in process of enacting a new Consumer Protection Act keeping in view the business practices and requirements of the country. The proposed Act lays great emphasis on consumer empowerment. Rules are being simplified to ensure that Consumer grievances are redressed in a time-bound manner and at least possible cost. Stringent provisions are proposed against misleading advertisements. A Central Consumer Protection Authority with executive powers will be constituted for quick remedial action.

We have enacted the Real Estate Regulatory Act for the protection of home buyers. Earlier, consumers waited for years to get the possession of their homes as they would fall prey to unscrupulous builders. There used to be ambiguity regarding the area of the flat. Now after RERA, only registered developers can seek bookings only after getting all the required permissions. Moreover, booking amount has been fixed only at 10 per cent.

Earlier, the builders used to divert the money received for bookings to other projects. Now government has made a stringent provision that 70 per cent of the payment received from buyers will be kept in an "Escrow" account and this amount will be spent on that project only.

Similarly, the Bureau of Indian Standard Act has also been enacted. Now any commodity or service related to public or consumer interest can be brought under compulsory

certification. This Act also has provisions to order recall of substandard products from the market and for compensation in case of loss or damages incurred by the consumer.

Recently, India has also implemented Goods and Services Tax-GST. After GST, dozens of different types of indirect taxes in the country have been abolished. Many Hidden Taxes have also gone away. Now, the consumer knows how much tax he has paid to the state government and how much to the central government. The queues of the trucks on the borders now no longer exist.

With GST, a new business culture is developing and in the long term consumers will be the biggest beneficiaries. It is a transparent system in which no one can hurt the interests of the Consumers. Increased competition due to the GST will lead to moderation in prices. It will directly benefit poor and middle class consumers.

Friends, besides strengthening the interests of the consumers through the law, it is also necessary that the grievances of the people are promptly addressed. In the last three years, our government has created a new eco-system for Grievance Redressal by making efficient use of technology.

The capacity of the National Consumer Helpline has been increased 4 times. Portals and Social Media associated with Consumer Protection have also been integrated. A large number of private companies have been connected to the portal. About 40 percent complaints get transferred directly to the companies automatically through the portal enabling quick action. Consumers are also being made aware through the “Jago Grahak Jago” campaign. I can confidently state that this govt. has used social media positively for Consumer Protection in India, as has never been done before.

Friends, in my view and in the vision of my govt. the scope of Consumer Protection is very broad. Development of any country and consumer protection are complementary. Good governance has an important role in taking the benefits of development to every citizen.

Ensuring delivery of rights and services to the deprived by the Government is also a way of protecting interests of the consumers. Ujjwala Yojna for Clean Energy, Swacch Bharat Abhiyaan for health and hygiene, Jan-Dhan Yojna for Financial Inclusion reflect this spirit. The govt. is also working towards the goal that every citizen of the country owns a house by 2022.

Recently, a scheme has also been launched to provide electricity connection to every household of the country. All these efforts are for providing Basic Lifeline support to people and to make their lives more comfortable.

Interests of consumers are not protected by merely giving them rights. In India we are also working to formulate schemes which help consumers save money. The poor and middle class in the country is benefitted most from these schemes.

You might also be aware that UNICEF has recently announced findings of a survey in India. According to the survey, considering medical costs averted, value of time savings and mortality averted, financial savings for each household in Open Defecation Free communities are Rs. 50,000 per year.

Friends, Bhartiya Jan Aushadhi Pariyojna has been launched to provide affordable medicines to the poor. More than 500 medicines have been included in the list of essential drugs and their prices have been reduced. Capping prices of Coronary Stents have made them cheaper by up to 85 per cent. Recently, prices of knee implants have also been brought under control. This also is saving crores of rupees for the poor and middle class people.

Our thinking is to move beyond Consumer Protection to promotion of Consumers Interest.

Our scheme, Ujala is another example of monetary saving in Consumer Interest. This simple scheme for distribution of LED bulb has shown extraordinary results. When this government assumed charge, cost of a LED bulb was Rs. 350-/. After government's efforts, the same bulb is now available in just Rs. 40 to 45-/- under the scheme. Therefore, this scheme alone has caused saving of more than Rs. 20 thousand crores for consumers by reducing the cost of LED bulb and through reduction in electricity bills.

Friends, keeping the inflation under control has caused economic benefits to the poor and middle class consumers. Otherwise, the rate at which the Inflation was rising during previous government's tenure it would have resulted in huge rise in the budget of the common citizen's kitchen.

By strengthening the Public Distribution System through technology, it is also being ensured that the poor, who have the right to affordable food grains, get their due.

Under the Direct Benefit Scheme, by transferring the money directly into the beneficiaries' bank accounts the government has prevented leakage of more than Rs. 57 thousand crores.

Friends, it is necessary that the consumers also understand their shared responsibilities towards the society and discharge their duties in this regard to achieve Sustainable Development Goals.

Here, on this occasion, I specially want to inform colleagues from other countries about Give-it-up campaign. Subsidy is provided on LPG cylinders in our country. On my appeal, within a short time of around one year, more than one crore people have given up their gas subsidy. The savings thereon have been used in giving free gas connections to 3 crore households so far.

It is an example that how the shared contribution from each consumer benefits other consumers thus creating a positive environment in the society towards one's duties.

Friends, Government is implementing Prime Minister Rural Digital Literacy Campaign for Digital Empowerment of Consumers living in rural areas of the country. Under this scheme, one person each from 6 crore households is being made digitally literate. This campaign will facilitate villagers for electronic transactions and availing Government services digitally.

Digital awareness in the villages of India is also creating a huge e-commerce market for the future. Unified Payment Interface-UPI has given the e-commerce industry a lot of strength. Bharat Interface For Money - i.e. BHIM App has expanded digital payments in cities as well as in rural areas.

Friends, India is one of the world's largest markets on the strength of the population of more than 125 crore and the fast growing middle class. The openness of our economy welcomes every country in the world, brings Indian consumers closer to the global players. Through Make in India we are offering a platform to Global Companies to produce in India and to make better use of our huge human resource.

Friends, this is a first of its kind conference in this part of the world. Every country represented here is engaged in its own way for protecting the interests of their consumers. But we must also keep in mind that now with the increasing Globalization, the whole world is changing into a single market. Therefore it is very important to learn from each other's experiences, to explore the points of common understanding and to discuss the possibility of building a Regional Coalition for Consumer Protection through such an event.

Friends, Asian countries provide large business opportunities because of large consumer base of more than 4 billion, increasing purchasing power and young demographic profile. E-commerce and trans-border mobility of people is resulting in increased cross border transactions. Under these circumstances, a strong regulatory system in every country and information sharing is a must for sustaining consumer confidence. A framework for cooperation is also necessary to expeditiously act in cases related to consumers from other countries. This will enhance mutual trust and trade.

Creating a Structured Mechanism for Communication, Mutual Sharing of Best Practices, Creating New Initiatives for Capacity Building and Starting Joint Campaigns, are such areas which can be pursued in mutual interest.

Friends, strengthening of our emotional bonds will also strengthen our shared cultural and trade heritage. Taking pride in our culture while respecting other cultures is part of our tradition. Over the centuries, we have been learning from each other and Trade and Consumer Protection are also an integral part of this process.

I hope that keeping in view the future challenges a roadmap with a clear vision for moving forward will be prepared in this conference. I am hopeful that we will also succeed in institutionalizing regional cooperation through this conference.

I once again express gratitude to you for participating in this conference.

Thanks a lot!

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