EMPOWERING CONSUMERS: REDEFINING INDIA'S CONSUMER LAWS

Rushil Verma, Symbiosis Law School, Pune

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses one of the most important issues in India, i.e., consumer product safety through the changing nature of the legal regimes and ever-expanding judicial activism in the protection of consumer rights. Historical movements are also traced from the Consumer Protection Act of 1986 to some of the most recent changes ushered in by the Consumer Protection Act of 2019, with particular reference to how these changes will affect the evolving manner in which the legislative framework meets the challenges posed by a dynamic market. The essay then proceeds to an invocation of paradigm judgments that have overhauled liability standards of manufacturers and distributors in an attempt to advance the application of the key principle that the safety of the consumer should prevail at the expense of commercial interests.

The essay further emphasizes the effects of globalization and technological innovations, with particular reference to the swift emergence of e-commerce and digital marketplaces, introducing some new risks and complexities with respect to ensuring product quality and safety. Some of the issues identified include divided enforcement of regulations, lack of education of consumers about the electronic supply chain, and difficulty in tracing the electronic supply chain. Finally, this essay emphasizes the pressing need to implement an integrated, multi-faceted strategy of adopting progressive reforms and consumer awareness campaigns to facilitate the establishment of a safer and responsible marketplace.

Keywords: Consumer Protection Act; Product Safety; Indian Consumer Statute; Consumer Law; Consumer Awareness.

Introduction

India's economic transformation over the past few decades has been accompanied by a burgeoning consumer market and paralleled by increasing complexity in product design, manufacturing, and distribution.[1] Within this evolving environment, **consumer product safety** has emerged as an important concern, not just for the well-being of individuals but also for the integrity of the markets themselves. As consumers increasingly engage with goods in both physical as well as online markets, the necessity for a **strong and dynamic legal system** has become more crucial than ever.

The **Consumer Protection Act, 1986**[2], the parent legislation, included essential definitions of terms such as *consumer*, *defect*, and *deficiency*, thus providing the basis for redressal and accountability. With the passage of time, however, technological advancements at a fast pace and changing market practices have called for additional legislative changes. The subsequent enactment of the **Consumer Protection Act, 2019**[3], extended its ambit to digital transactions as well as reinforced manufacturer liability, while also empowering regulatory agencies with investigative authority, exemplifying India's commitment to adapting legal standards to contemporary realities.

In this context, consumer product safety is not merely about adherence to technical standards; it is intrinsically linked to the confidence consumers place in the market. A lack of safety provisions can result in major public health hazards and financial losses, but stringent enforcement measures can stimulate sustainable development. In addition, supporting legislations along with regulatory guidance through institutions such as the **Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS)** ensure technical standards are kept at par, hence establishing a multi-layered defence system.[4]

Against this backdrop, landmark judicial pronouncements, including decisions in *Maruti Udyog Ltd. v. Consumer Education & Research Centre*[5] and *Indian Medical Association v. V.P. Shantha*[6], have underscored the judiciary's role in interpreting and enforcing these legal norms.

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[1] Government of India, *Economic Survey 2024-25*, Ministry of Finance, 136, 191 (2024), https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/economicsurvey/doc/echapter.pdf.
[2] Consumer Protection Act, 1986, No. 68, Acts of Parliament, 1986 (India).
[3] Consumer Protection Act, 2019, No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).
[4] BUREAU OF INDIAN STANDARDS, https://www.bis.gov.in/ (last visited Feb. 26, 2025).
[5] Maruti Udyog Ltd. v. Consumer Education & Research Centre, IV (2003) CPJ 25 (NC).
[6] Indian Medical Association v. V.P. Shantha, 1995 (6) SCC 651.

This essay, therefore, examines the historical evolution, current legal and regulatory frameworks, enforcement challenges, and future policy directions – demonstrating that an integrated approach is essential for strengthening consumer product safety in India.

Historical Evolution of Consumer Protection Law in India

India's transition to a consumer-oriented legal regime started with the revolutionary **Consumer Protection Act, 1986**. This Act was a paradigm shift since it officially recognized the vulnerability of Indian consumers in business transactions and provided specialized consumer forums for expeditious redressal. The Act defined *consumer* in precise terms under **Section 2(1)(d)**[7] as any person who purchases goods or hires services for personal use by paying (or promising to pay), including authorized users, but excludes those acquiring them for resale or commercial purposes. It also introduced the concepts of *defect* under **Section 2(1)(f)**[8] as any flaw or shortcoming in a good's quality, quantity, potency, purity, or standard that fails to meet legal, contractual, or advertised requirements; and *deficiency* under **Section 2(1)(g)**[9] as any fault or inadequacy in a service's performance that fails to meet legal or contractual standards; ensuring that manufacturers and service providers could be held accountable for compromised product safety. Not only did these provisions give power to the consumers, but they also marked a major move towards specialized dispute resolution, away from conventional adversarial litigation.

With the liberalization of the economy alongside growth in industries, the limitations of the 1986 Act began to surface. The swift development of industries, the setting-up of compound supply chains, and the rapid expansion of e-commerce initiated mismatches between conventional patterns and contemporary requisites. These were viewed as emerging challenges, and, therefore, policymakers came up with a radical overhaul of the **Consumer Protection Act, 2019**, which further streamlined and developed the rights and remedies available to consumers. For instance, **Section 94**[10] of the new Act makes express provision to cover digital transactions, **Section 2(34)**[11] reinforces the responsibility of manufacturers and service providers for harm arising from faulty products, and **Section 22**[12] gives regulatory bodies

[7] Consumer Protection Act, 1986, § 2(1)(d), No. 68, Acts of Parliament, 1986 (India).
[8] Consumer Protection Act, 1986, § 2(1)(f), No. 68, Acts of Parliament, 1986 (India).
[9] Consumer Protection Act, 1986, § 2(1)(g), No. 68, Acts of Parliament, 1986 (India).
[10] Consumer Protection Act, 2019, § 94, No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).
[11] Consumer Protection Act, 2019, § 2(34), No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).
[12] Consumer Protection Act, 2019, § 22, No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).

greater investigatory powers, indicating a tactical move towards active regulation. In addition, the definition of *consumer* was amended to **Section 2(7)**[13], *defect* to **Section 2(10)**[14], and *deficiency* to **Section 2(11)**[15].

Supporting these legislative amendments are a range of other of legislations and regulatory codes. Combined, these legislative provisions and regulatory measures have moved from being a reactive redressal mechanism to a pro-active, multi-faceted framework aimed at pre-empting consumer harm – a shift in keeping with the changing aspirations of a contemporary, digitally connected society.

Contemporary Legal and Regulatory Framework

A complex interplay of legislation, regulatory bodies, and judicial interpretations defines India's consumer product safety regime today. The Consumer Protection Act, 2019, forms the central core of this regime, which has redefined consumer rights by providing new and revised framework in a time when conventional commerce is increasingly complemented by e-commerce and therefore, marks a critical change in protecting consumer rights in the modern marketplace.

Unlike the 1986 Act – which established a tiered system of Consumer Forums, State Commissions, and a National Commission – the 2019 legislation introduces a dedicated *Central Consumer Protection Authority* under **Section 10**[16], empowering it with proactive enforcement and investigative functions through an Investigation Wing. Moreover, the 2019 Act modernizes consumer safeguards by expanding definitions to cover *e-commerce and product liability* under **Section 2**[17], and it imposes stringent penalties for false or misleading advertisements - *up to ten lakh rupees for an initial contravention and up to fifty lakh rupees for repeat offenses* as delineated in **Section 21**[18] **-** thereby ensuring a more dynamic and responsive framework for consumer protection.[19]

[13] Consumer Protection Act, 2019, § 2(7), No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).
[14] Consumer Protection Act, 2019, § 2(10), No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).
[15] Consumer Protection Act, 2019, § 2(11), No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).
[16] Consumer Protection Act, 2019, § 10, No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).
[17] Consumer Protection Act, 2019, § 2, No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).
[18] Consumer Protection Act, 2019, § 21, No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).
[19] Suryanarayana, K.S., *Consumer Protection In India: Laws, Challenges, And Effectiveness*, Int. J. Res. Hum. Resour. Manag. 5(1) 94, 95 (2023), https://doi.org/10.33545/26633213.2023.v5.i1a.212.

Apart from these consumer legislations, the **Legal Metrology Act, 2009**[20] also contributes significantly towards the protection of consumers. Under this Act, *the use of standard units and proper marking with explicit and verifiable information about the amount and description of products* has been made obligatory under **Section 2**[21], **Section 5**[22], and **Section 6**[23] to avoid misrepresentation so that consumers are provided with standardized quantities of goods. Such statutory provisions are bolstered by technical standards set by the BIS, which periodically update and audit products to ensure compliance with both national and international benchmarks.

The modernization of regulatory processes has been further enhanced by the integration of digital technologies. Regulatory bodies have utilized centralized data banks, real-time surveillance systems, and web complaint portals to track product safety data and react rapidly to possible infractions. All these digitalization measures not only facilitate easier enforcement of consumer protection laws but also promote greater transparency and accountability within the supply chain. With such technological developments in place, the contemporary setup makes certain that even the most complex and rapidly evolving market dynamics are covered with robust and effective oversight.[24]

Challenges in Enforcement and Regulatory Oversight

Even with the strong legal framework, the enforcement of consumer product safety legislation in India is practically plagued by difficulties. Perhaps the most urgent concern is the fragmentation of regulatory control. While urban areas tend to enjoy well-funded agencies and advanced infrastructure, rural and remote areas tend to be plagued by underinvestment and inadequate staff. This difference translates into unequal application, where shoddy or unsafe goods have the ability to spread in weak regulatory zones. Although Section 22 of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 vests considerable investigatory powers, enforcement of such provisions frequently keeps consumers in less accessible regions vulnerable.

Resource inadequacies are also part of the problem. The regulatory institutions charged with

[20] The Legal Metrology Act, 2009, No. 1, Acts of Parliament, 2010 (India).
[21] The Legal Metrology Act, 2009, § 2, No. 1, Acts of Parliament, 2010 (India).
[22] The Legal Metrology Act, 2009, § 5, No. 1, Acts of Parliament, 2010 (India).
[23] The Legal Metrology Act, 2009, § 6, No. 1, Acts of Parliament, 2010 (India).
[24] Government of India, *Annual Report 2023-24*, Department of Consumer Affairs, 5-7, 10-12, 233-244 (2023), https://consumeraffairs.nic.in/sites/default/files/file-uploads/annualreports/1729492569_AR_2023_2024.pdf.

examining millions of products themselves are usually severely resource-constrained, limiting their ability to perform regular inspections, keep technological facilities current, or provide sufficient training in emerging issues of product safety to examiners. In spite of very clear directions under the Legal Metrology Act, 2009, the large number of commodities within India's consumer market makes large-scale control impractical, and therefore many infractions habitually go unnoticed until they do harm to consumers.

The rapid expansion of e-commerce introduces yet another layer of complexity. Online marketplaces, by definition, exist in multiple jurisdictions and revise product listings in minutes. The speed and anonymity of online commerce provide a context where substandard or counterfeit products can flow with ease.[25] Even with the widened scope of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, it is a lingering issue to implement its provisions in an ever-changing online environment. Additionally, sellers located outside India tend to make legal recourse difficult, making cross-border enforcement an ever more pressing concern.[26]

Lastly, widespread consumer ignorance erodes enforcement effectiveness. Consumers, in general, are not even aware of how extensive their rights are or how they can have recourse – especially in rural localities. This informational imbalance diminishes the deterrent effect on manufacturers and allows below-standard practice to occur. Eliminating this gap requires more than mere strong legal action but also massive public education campaigns that allow consumers to demand higher safety levels.[27]

Judicial Oversight and Landmark Judgments

The judiciary in India has played a seminal role in both interpreting consumer protection laws and compelling the enforcement of rigorous safety standards. Landmark cases such as *Maruti Udyog Ltd. v. Consumer Education & Research Centre*[28] have set enduring precedents that define the scope of manufacturer liability and underscore the non-negotiable nature of consumer rights. In Maruti Udyog, the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission held that a manufacturer's duty of care is paramount and that any lapse in product safety

[25] Kumar, R. and Bhardwaj, S., *Consumer Protection In The Digital Age: Issues And Challenges*, J. Internet Law 25(4) 193–210 (2019).
[26] Verma, S., *The Impact Of E-Commerce On Consumer Protection: An Indian Perspective*, Indian J. E-commerce Stud. 15(1) 45–60 (2022).
[27] Reddy, M. and Das, S., *Consumer Awareness In India: Challenges And Opportunities*, J. Consum. Res. 47(5) 895–910 (2020).
[28] Maruti Udyog Ltd. v. Consumer Education & Research Centre, IV (2003) CPJ 25 (NC).

constitutes a breach of consumer trust – an interpretation that has since informed countless subsequent rulings.

Similarly, the decision in the case of *Indian Medical Association v. V.P. Shantha*[29] widened the ambit of consumer protection to include defects in services too. In reasserting consumers' right not only to safe goods but also to quality and trustworthy services, the Court established a detailed scheme of redressal beyond physical goods. Such judicial intervention has been a prime motivator in encouraging the regulatory bodies to become more proactive, such as imposing tougher inspection regimes and stringent penalties on defaulters.

Judicial reliance on expert testimony has further bolstered the technical robustness of these rulings. Courts have regularly called upon experts from as wide a range of disciplines such as engineering, pharmaceuticals, and information technology to produce empirical evidence in complex safety-related cases.[30] This not only makes judicial rulings legally sound but ensures they are also backed by the most up-to-date scientific evidence, thus supporting the credibility of consumer protection legislation. In addition, these professional-led assessments act as a warning to manufacturers, motivating them to maintain high standards of safety to prevent expensive lawsuits and damage to their reputations.[31]

The active intervention of the judiciary has, in turn, triggered legislative and regulatory changes. Where systemic errors are exposed - especially those that cause mass consumer injury - courts have frequently instructed regulatory agencies to improve their infrastructure and operational practices. This interplay between judicial monitoring and regulation is an indication of India's growing commitment to the protection of consumer rights in an increasingly complicated marketplace.[32]

Impact of Technology and Globalization on Consumer Product Safety

Technological advancement and globalization have had a significant effect on India's consumer product safety framework. Production technologies such as computerized production lines,

[29] Indian Medical Association v. V.P. Shantha, 1995 (6) SCC 651.
[30] Sharma, P. and Singh, R., *Enforcement Of Product Liability In India: Challenges And Solutions*, J. Consum. Law 33(1) 78–95 (2021).
[31] Kumar, V. and Rao, P., *Consumer Awareness And The Effectiveness Of Legal Frameworks In India*, Indian J. Marketing 51(7) 89–104 (2021).
[32] Gupta, N. and Sharma, K., *The Role Of Consumer Protection Agencies In India*, J. Legal Stud. 28(2) 200–220 (2019).

real-time data analysis, and blockchain supply chain tracing are drastically enhancing quality control systems. These technological systems minimize the risks of human oversight, speed up compliance screening, and allow immediate detection of probable safety violations. But incorporating digital components into ordinary objects has risks of its own. Hence, consumers have to deal with cybersecurity threats, software bugs, and data privacy concerns - all problems that go far beyond the common physical security concerns.[33]

Globalization has further muddled the regulatory scenario. As manufacturing processes are scattered over national boundaries, making sure that each item of foreign merchandise coming into India conforms to home safety standards is an onerous task. Even as local regulations provide that articles offered for sale within India meet stipulated standards of quality, imported products sometimes lag behind such standards and thus present hurdles to the agencies enforcing regulations. To this, Indian regulators have increasingly been participating in bilateral and multilateral discussions to align safety standards across borders, thus attempting to provide a level playing field in an internationalized market.[34]

Meanwhile, online marketplaces have transformed consumer behaviour by giving consumers instant access to a huge range of products. While this has made consumers more powerful, it has also created opportunities for unethical suppliers to sell substandard or fake products. The speed and anonymity of the Internet make Internet trade difficult to monitor, and sophisticated surveillance systems and international cooperation are required to effectively police safety standards. With the quickly changing world within this sector, the intersection of technology and globalization requires repeated revamps within legal provisions as well as enforcements - such that consumer protection is robust enough against new risks.[35]

Consumer Awareness and Implementation Strategies

Outside the legislative and regulatory paradigms, the efficacious protection of consumer product safety also depends on a well-informed and active citizenry. In spite of the elaborate definitions and rights incorporated under the Consumer Protection Acts of 1986 and 2019, most consumers are not cognizant of the redressal mechanisms within their reach. This knowledge

[33] Jain, P., *Digital Consumer Protection In India: Legal Framework And Challenges*, Cyber Law Rev. 22(3) 145–165 (2020).
[34] *Supra* note 25. Verma, S., *The Impact Of E-Commerce On Consumer Protection: An Indian Perspective*, Indian J. E-commerce Stud. 15(1) 45–60 (2022).
[35] Jain, *supra* note 32.

gap is acutest in rural and backward regions, where access to legal and technical data might be scarce. Extensive public education campaigns - with the use of both conventional media and online platforms - are necessary in order to close this information gap and enable consumers to claim their rights.[36]

Successful implementation also involves considerable investment in capacity-building in regulatory agencies. Training programs for inspectors, run regularly, especially on new production technologies and developing technical standards, are essential to maintain that safety inspections are both adequate and current. Further, the incorporation of digital monitoring capabilities with conventional enforcement tools can greatly enhance the responsiveness of regulatory bodies. The whole structure of consumer protection in India can be made far more effective by ensuring that agencies have the requisite expertise and resources to identify and act upon safety violations in real time.[37]

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are yet another crucial pillar in the drive to increase consumer safety. Government agencies, consumer groups, and industry associations can collaborate to establish certification schemes and quality control programs. Public-private partnerships not only foster a culture of compliance within manufacturers but also disseminate best practices across the industry. If consumers are enlightened by trustworthy data and regulatory agencies are equipped with advanced technology, the entire market becomes more resilient, open, and accountable.[38]

Recommendations for Policy Reforms and Future Directions

Meeting the complex issues of consumer product safety in India requires an integrated and visionary approach. To begin with, legislative mechanisms should continue to adapt to technological advancements and international market trends. The Consumer Protection Act should be amended to explicitly deal with issues arising from cybersecurity threats, the safety of digitally networked products, and issues arising from transnational supply chains. Similarly,

[36] *Supra* note 19. Suryanarayana, K.S., *Consumer Protection In India: Laws, Challenges, And Effectiveness*, Int. J. Res. Hum. Resour. Manag. 5(1) 94, 96 (2023), https://doi.org/10.33545/26633213.2023.v5.i1a.212.

[37] Basu, S. and Rao, P., *Consumer Courts In India: A Critical Analysis*, Indian J. Law Justice 14(2) 125–140 (2022).

[38] *Supra* note 19. Suryanarayana, K.S., *Consumer Protection In India: Laws, Challenges, And Effectiveness*, Int. J. Res. Hum. Resour. Manag. 5(1) 94, 95 (2023), https://doi.org/10.33545/26633213.2023.v5.i1a.212.

amendments to the Legal Metrology Act should introduce contemporary technical standards that are aligned with international best practices.[39]

Secondly, the regulatory agencies have to boost their technological capabilities and resources at once. More funds for routine inspections, the development of centralized real-time databases, and the linking of automatic monitoring systems can prove to be very effective in enforcement. Increased interagency coordination at both national and global levels will serve to ensure consistent application of safety standards to varying regions and products.[40]

Thirdly, consumer education programs must be spread on a mass scale. Mass public campaigns of education, backed by community-based outreach initiatives and computer literacy courses, can empower consumers as full-time participants in the regulatory process. Educated about their rights and the means at their disposal for redress, consumers can exert a healthy check on manufacturers and distributors who otherwise would take safety shortcuts.[41]

Finally, global cooperation is the answer. India needs to actively participate in international standard-setting bodies and engage in trans-border regulatory platforms to harmonize product safety norms. Coordinated research, common databases of non-compliance with safety standards, and mutual regimes of product recall can all contribute to raising standards and shielding consumers in a single, global economy. This cooperation not only makes domestic consumer protection more effective but also fuels the global dream of safer, more moral marketplaces.[42]

Conclusion

In summary, promoting consumer product safety in India is a complex challenge that needs to have the coordination of prudent legislative steps, pre-emptive regulatory actions, prudent judicial involvement, and a powerful consumer sector. Right from the innovative provisions of the Consumer Protection Act, 1986, to the upgraded protection measures infused in the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, India has travelled quite far in securing its consumers. But

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[39] Basu, s*upra* note 37.
[40] *Supra* note 30. Sharma, P. and Singh, R., *Enforcement Of Product Liability In India: Challenges And Solutions*, J. Consum. Law 33(1) 78–95 (2021).
[41] *Supra* note 19. Suryanarayana, K.S., *Consumer Protection In India: Laws, Challenges, And Effectiveness*, Int. J. Res. Hum. Resour. Manag. 5(1) 94, 96 (2023), https://doi.org/10.33545/26633213.2023.v5.i1a.212.
[42] *Supra* note 19. Suryanarayana, K.S., *Consumer Protection In India: Laws, Challenges, And Effectiveness*, Int. J. Res. Hum. Resour. Manag. 5(1) 94 (2023), https://doi.org/10.33545/26633213.2023.v5.i1a.212.

even as technology and globalization continue to transform the marketplace, ongoing issues - including disparate enforcement, limitations on resources, and the complexity of electronic commerce - persist.

The judiciary has taken a pioneering role in interpreting and elaborating on these legal norms by way of landmark judgments, thus reinforcing the accountability of manufacturers and the rights of consumers. In the future, it is necessary that legislative reforms, upgraded regulatory capabilities, and inclusive consumer education programs march in tandem to ensure public health and market integrity. With global cooperation and technological advances, India can not only resolve current issues but also become a world model for consumer product safety.

A future-oriented, multi-dimensional approach, one that synergistically blends statutory precision with provisional oversight and an educated citizenry is needed to bring about a safer, more responsible marketplace. With it, India will not only boost consumer confidence and encourage inclusive economic growth but also reaffirm its dedication to the fundamental right of every citizen to safe and reliable products.