

Quantum jump in public distribution

By K. R. VENUGOPAL, Commissioner of Civil Supplies

THE Indian Express has done a great service to the consumers by carrying for nearly two months readers' views on the public distribution system in the feature 'Your Views'. From the point of view of the department of civil supplies, not only has this discussion enlightened the department on the various points pertaining to its day-to-day work, but the other editor to render us an opportunity to respond to the readers' views is also bound to help in the starting of a relationship between us and the consumers which will be greatly beneficial to the consumers and the Government in the long run.

In a matter of such public importance as civil supplies, it is very essential that the Government intends to do, as frequently as possible, so that the exploitation of both the Government and the consumers by anti-social forces is minimized. It will be thus started by the Indian Express between the Government and the consumers is placed on a continuous footing for the good of both in the days to come.

An analysis of the letters has shown that while scores of queries pertaining to the public distribution system have agitated the minds of the consumers, the most important among them have been those relating to the quality of essential commodities in the fair price shops at all times during the month. The quality of the commodities supplied, adulteration and under-weightment of commodities, inadequacy of the number of fair price shops and the distance the consumers have to cover to reach them and the behaviour of the fair price shop dealers towards the consumers.

The expectation of the people that the commodities to be available in the fair price shops at all times are unquestionable and it is our duty to endeavour to ensure this. So far as rice is concerned, this should never be difficult considering that we are a rice-producing State, provided we have the necessary facilities to procure the required quantities of rice. The record procurement of 46.23 lakh tones of rice through the Food Corporation of India and the purchase of 3.39 lakhs through the Andhra Pradesh State Civil Supplies Corporation, totalling in all nearly 20 lakh tones of rice in the crop year 1982-83 should leave no one in any doubt about our capability in this regard under normal circumstances.

COOKING OIL

However, commodities like sugar and palmolein oil have to be moved over long distances from factories located sometimes outside the State and from the ports. Sometimes, there could be delayed arrivals of ships carrying palmolein oil and its attendant formalities. This could thus lead to delayed supply of these commodities to the fair price shops. But even here by augmenting our storage so that at least a month's stocks could be stored in advance, we have endeavoured to start moving the commodities to the shops in the last week of the month so as to make them available in the first week of the following month. However, wherever there has been delayed arrival, as there was of kerosene recently, because of disruption of communication caused by floods, consumers have had to face inconvenience.

Nevertheless, to protect the consumers' rights, the department would try to ensure that the consumers are not the losers in the bargain. In this context, readers would recall that when the arrival of soya bean oil was delayed in November this year, palmolein oil was supplied instead and allowed to be

drawn even in the early part of December. I must also plead that perhaps by next year, and also because of its fundamental importance, we in the department tend to concentrate on the supply of rice and, therefore, do not give the same attention to ensuring the availability of all commodities at the same time, though our arrangements are quite adequate to position required quantities of other commodities also in the fair price shops in the twin cities. We realise now the need for ensuring that the fair price shop dealers lift certain quantities of all the commodities

We are grateful to the Commissioner of Civil Supplies, Mr. K. R. Venugopal, for personally appearing at length all the important points raised by the large number of correspondents who dissected the working of the fair price shops. While drawing the discussion on the subject we wish to underscore Mr. Venugopal's remarks about the ration cards and appeal to the civic-minded actively to fight the menace. The discussion on nationalised banks will start on Sunday.

essential commodities at one time so that a consumer can draw all these commodities in one visit as far as possible.

QUALITY OF RICE

The entire procurement of essential commodities is done on the basis of known and well laid down standards and specifications relating to quality. The problem here, however, is two fold. One is that the stage agencies — be it the Food Corporation of India or the State Civil Supplies Corporation — procure fair average quality of rice and other commodities and not superior average quality, as consumers, especially in cities, may expect in other words, ration cards and appeal to the civic-minded actively to fight the menace. The discussion on nationalised banks will start on Sunday.

In affluent places and in cities, people are accustomed to buy in the open market, for instance, rice with very high polish and containing little or no broken.

The State's agencies do not procure such rice but procure what is technically called fair average quality of rice which has all the nutritional value but which may not be as highly polished as what a private merchant sells in his shop at much higher prices, and would carry permissible percentage of broken up to between 18% and 25%. The other problem is the one relating to consumer preference. While in Andhra Pradesh, we produce rice bearing nearly 150 names, the preferred varieties as far as the consumers are concerned, are hardly one or two. For example, even though varieties like Jaya, Hazra, Mithulu and Masuri are all classified as fine rice, and their procurement prices are all fixed at Rs. 225.00 per quintal, because of consumer preference, they have vastly differing prices in the open market, the difference often going up to Rs. 100 per quintal or Rs. 1 per kg.

FINE VARIETY

Masuri rice, which is classified as a fine variety and the most preferred in the State and almost the only variety acceptable in the twin cities, is not only sold in the open market, on an average at Rs. 1 per kg more than Masuri,

its price is substantially higher than that of the superior varieties like Sureshika, the procurement price of which is 60 paise more than Masuri itself. A consumer who all this is bound to appear, and quite rightly, anomalous. But this is actually a function of agricultural pricing. Since the breakthrough in agricultural production in our State, such as it is, has come about on the basis of a higher price for the finer varieties, varieties preferred by the consumers do not necessarily fetch a higher price for the farmer.

Therefore, if Sureshika variety of rice which is a superior variety is made available to yellow cardholders at Rs. 2.65 per kg and Masuri rice at Rs. 2 to the green cardholders, there are complaints that the yellow cardholders are supplied with inferior rice!

Often, we are helpless in this regard because there may not be enough Masuri rice available for procurement to meet the requirements of the entire population. It is, therefore, essential that the consumer looks at the problem of quality from the point of view. Variety may, quite often, cloud the concept of quality.

QUALITY CONTROL

This is not to say that the anti-social elements do not indulge in adulteration in rice. In fact, against this, we have now strengthened the State's quality control cell which is in the charge of the Commissioner of Civil Supplies with qualified technical personnel to check the quality of rice available in the fair price shops to verify whether the dealers have substituted the rice supplies to them with inferior quality rice. This can further be ensured by every fair price shop being provided with sealed samples and such samples publicly displayed in the fair price shop so that the consumers can see for themselves that he is not being cheated.

As for adulteration of the commodities supplied through fair price shops, namely, rice, wheat, sugar, palmolein and kerosene, considering that palmolein is the cheapest edible oil available in the market, while its diversion is entirely possible, adulteration with palmolein oil of any other oil for the purpose of sale in the fair price shops appears remote. This is not to say that we are not alive to the problem of adulteration and under weightment.

Coordination between the Civil Supplies Department and other departments like health and the municipal authorities as well as the weights and measures department and consumer organisations will be strengthened to deal with this.

As for the adequacy of fair price shops, the position is that we have 770 fair price shops in the twin cities for 3.12 lakh cards which comes to one fair price shop for 169 cards. An analysis made by the shops that only 38 shops out of the 770 fair price shops in the city, have more than 1000 cards attached to them. We shall be taking action to see that even in the case of these shops not more than 700 cards are attached to them. Another analysis made by us shows that only in the case of 12 shops, consumers in the twin cities have to cover a distance of more than 1 km to reach them and in the case of three, they have to traverse a distance of more than 2 kms.

Admittedly 2 kms is a long distance in the city and so is 1 km and we shall be taking action to eliminate this inconvenience to our consumers, in the near future. It may be stated here, however,

that as against the guideline of one fair price shop for every 2000 population indicated by the Government of India, in our State we have one fair price shop for every 1729 people of the population.

DEALERS' CONDUCT

One aspect of the fair price shops regarding which the consumers seem to be almost unanimously concerned is the conduct and behaviour of the fair price shop dealers towards them. The department



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would like to assure the consumers that this will not be tolerated and would be put to an end to. As far as malpractices indulged in by the fair price shop dealers are concerned, in the current year alone, in the twin cities, we have cancelled the authorisation of 11 shops and have taken disciplinary action like suspension of authorisation and imposition of fine of more than Rs. 1000 in each case, in 57 cases.

In future, the department will proceed to take disciplinary action against fair price shop dealers guilty of rude behaviour towards consumers.

As regards surprise checks, the need for which many consumers have referred to these are being undertaken not only by the assistant supply officers but by the chief rationing officer and the commissioner of civil supplies also.

VIGILANCE CELL

The vigilance cell of the civil supplies department has been activated as never before and in the past 11 months in the current year 1529 cases have been booked, involving the arrest of 1524 persons, the value of the property seized in the cases coming to Rs. 12.13 crores. A record number of 11 persons have been detained under the Prevention of Black Marketing and Maintenance of Supplies of Essential Commodities Act, 1981. It is doubtful whether any other State in the country has detained as many people for anti-social activities as we have.

Large-scale distribution of rice in the past few months in all the villages and towns in the State through the 21,500 fair price shops has brought home to us the fact that our massive procurement efforts can be easily nullified by the weaknesses of the fair price shops such as lack of finances and malpractices. Measures to remove the weaknesses are constantly being evolved including supervision by the representatives of the people.

The impression in the minds of some of the consumers that the malpractices in the fair price shops are because of the inadequate margins that the

dealers set is not correct. While it may be true that the margin in sugar is not substantial, the margins for other commodities are very substantial. Since the fair price shop dealers are provided with returns are very handsome, especially in the cities.

CONSUMER MOVEMENT

Many correspondents have emphasised the need for consumer participation in the purposeful organisation of the public distribution system. This has already been thought of by the Government and a decision has been taken to reconstitute the National Institute of Consumer Studies, Hyderabad, which hitherto has been a body merely of consumer representatives of the various consumer bodies and with financial assistance from the Government so that it may protect the interests of the consumers as an independent body and also advise and guide the Government as to the manner in which consumer welfare can be promoted. The reconstitution of the National Institute of Consumer Studies is now at an advanced stage.

Many readers have written about the bogus cards in circulation in the twin cities. Nothing is and has been a greater menace to the public distribution system than the existence of these bogus cards.

There are as many as 23 lakh bogus cards in circulation in our State.

Considering that the Government has not the enumeration of households gone drawing manpower from every section of our society and that the responsibility for this is not shared not only by the enumerators and their supervisors but also those who have received these cards, the society as a whole has to take the blame for the extent of such a large number of bogus cards. Their existence is mocking at the efforts we are making to feed the needy and the deserving and in the past seven months we have been able to weed out only three lakhs of these bogus cards.

PURCHASING POWER

Many correspondents have also mentioned a very important fact that there are a large number of consumers who are not in a position to buy the entire quota of rice and other commodities made available in the fair price shops. If this is so in the city where the income levels are relatively high, the position can be easily imagined in the rural areas, dominated by groups like agricultural labourers and rural artisans.

This is the main reason why we have rationalised the distribution of subsidised rice at five kg per head subject to a ceiling of Rs. 60 for each family instead of leaving the eligibility at 15 kgs per family at a flat rate.

Such a flat allotment, especially in the rural areas, where purchasing power can be very low could lead to ineligible people and traders, cornering the subsidised rice. Also, we have to bear in mind the basic fact that the public distribution system does not attempt to provide the entire requirements of a family and that what it endeavours to do is only to supplement the requirements of a family. This is a well-accepted principle all over the world and is applicable particularly in surplus States like our own.

In all humility, we would like to submit here that nowhere in the country is rice being distributed on such a large scale as has been done in our State, rural areas included. In some of our neighbouring States, for example, the quantum of rice distributed on cards per family in the rural areas is less than 1/3 and often less than 1/4 of what is being distributed in our State. Comparisons are odious but, nevertheless, things have to be put in perspective.

It is not to say that the allotment has arrived, but merely to point out that concerning the quantum of rice, we have made in the mobilisation of the commodities we are handling through the public distribution system in recent months, nearly four times — from less than four lakh tones of rice per annum to about 14 lakh tonnes of rice in 1982-83 and which will further go up to 15 lakh tonnes in 1983-84 — our efforts through our public distribution system cannot be dismissed lightly.

The year 1982-83 was a watershed year of procurement of essential commodities on a scale larger than ever before and, hopefully the year 1983-84 will see the streamlining of public distribution system in the State which will make the people get the full benefits of these un-

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