
UNIT 11 CONSUMER RESPONSIBILITIES

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11.1 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, the learner shall be able to:

explore and define the area of consumer responsibility and its various aspects;

understand the concepts of Consumer, Citizen and Ethical Consumer;

describe the past, present, and future of the consumer profile and the emerging role of consumer responsibility;

define and differentiate between the types of consumer responsibility;

list the effects of exercising consumer responsibility at various levels of society and environment; and

attempt an assessment of the essential conditions for ensuring responsibility.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

Modern consumers are under pressure from all quarters – from governments, environmentalists, activists, industry and even at the market place. The consumer

is accused of over consumption and of causing environmental destruction. Consumers are also under pressure to behave responsibly.

In the consumer/seller relationship, duties and responsibilities of producers as well as consumers have begun to be defined. Consumers are now expected to assume responsibility not only for exerting their individual and collective rights, but also show through their attitudes and behaviour patterns, responsibility towards the environment, other consumers and future generations.

Till very recently, the market forces have decided the direction and spread of Consumerism, reducing the consumer to a more or less passive role. Along the way not only has the consumer been defrauded, manipulated and exploited by the industry but the environment has also been damaged.

Progressive urbanisation has been used by the market forces to delink the consumer from the environment. Urbanisation has also destroyed accountability in community living and forced people to lead secret lives. This has eroded the code of responsible behaviour in society.

Consumerism in its modern manifestation is a by-product of western lifestyles. The spread of media and communication networks has, however, helped it to spread to the less developed nations, in more insidious and destructive ways. Keeping all this in view, the concept of consumer responsibility should be introduced to the Indian Consumer immediately. This should have a salutary impact on the growing market economy in India as well as on its environment.

11.3 CONSUMER RESPONSIBILITY

While we all like to know about our rights and exercise them, we hardly accord the same importance and urgency to our consumer responsibilities. Consumer rights and responsibilities are intertwined together, and without sharing consumer responsibility, consumers will find it very difficult to enjoy their rights on a long-term basis.

The ethical and ecological facts of **consumer behaviour** have helped to evolve the concept of **consumer responsibility**. Thus, **consumer responsibility is based on ethics and rationale. There are no definitive set of consumer responsibilities, and a consumer must exercise restraint in the consumption of goods responsibly. For example, conservation of the environment cannot be forced upon the consumers, but a consumer must make a conscious effort to reduce consumption, choose environment-friendly alternatives and conserve energy.**

A responsible consumer is a person who exercises his/her discretion with full awareness of the implications of his/her right to choice and is accountable or answerable to other consumers and the environment for his/her purchase decisions.

Consumer responsibility can be divided into **three phases**. **Initially**, the consumer was supposed to be concerned **only with value for money, information, and production of consumer goods**.

In the **second phase**, the **aware consumer** challenged the large corporations and their marketing strategies and advocated consumer cause.

In the **third and the current phase**, the consumer is expected to be **aware of the environmental implications** of each product on the market shelf and be aware of his/her duties and responsibilities as a consumer and as a citizen.

Currently, the crucial area of concern is the question of **consumer priority**. In other words, this means what the consumer should look for; whether to purchase cheaper and more easily available products or to look out for fair trade practices, environmental costs and public health.

In the 1980s, CI's (consumer international) then president, Anwar Fazal, made a call to introduce a set of consumer responsibilities complimenting consumer rights.

These remain to be the crucial principles for many consumer rights organisations even today:

Critical awareness - Consumers must be awakened to be more questioning about the provision of the quality of goods and services.

Involvement or action - Consumers must assert themselves and act to ensure that they get a fair deal.

Social responsibility - Consumers must act with social responsibility, concern, and sensitivity to the impact of their actions on other citizens, in particular, about disadvantaged groups in the community and the economic and social realities prevailing.

Ecological responsibility - There must be a heightened sensitivity to the impact of consumer decisions on the physical environment, which must be developed to a harmonious way, promoting conservation as the most critical factor in improving the real quality of life for the present and the future.

Solidarity - The best and most effective action is through cooperative efforts through the formation of consumer/citizen groups who together can have the strength and influence to ensure that adequate attention is given to the consumer interest.

Consumer responsibility can play a significant role not only in checking the market but also in restricting unnecessary consumption. It is not the sole responsibility of the market or the government to provide consumers with detailed information. A consumer, on his part, must make every effort to inform himself of the product or service. For example, if a consumer purchases a health product, he must make an effort to inform himself beforehand about its possible side-effects, and must also exercise caution regarding his eating habits, diet, and physical exercise, to take full advantage of the product.

Consumer responsibility needs to be shouldered by different consumer segments. Every segment has its special consumer profile and consumption patterns. These patterns define the kind of consumer responsibility that a consumer must discharge. (see Section 11.4)

11.3.1 Citizen as Consumer

For our purpose, we need to examine the concept of Citizen as Consumer. A person's range of activities and interactions extends from his/ her home to the market place as a consumer. But as a citizen, the area of his/her activity

expands to encompass not only what he/she can carry from the market to his/her home for personal use, but what he/she can give in return to society and the environment. This involves not only action but also the decision not to act in a certain established or acceptable manner. For example, as a user of market commodities, he/she takes partial responsibility for garbage disposal. Or if he/she is a car owner, s/he automatically assumes responsibility for reduction of pollution as far as possible, by either choosing to use it only when necessary, or by using lead-free (unleaded petrol).

Following are some of the areas where consumer intervention can influence the market to act responsibly towards the consumer. For that the consumer should always check correct weights and measures, dates of manufacture and expiry, pricing and ingredient labelling, the inclusion of quality marks (ISI, Agmark, Eco-mark), warranties and guarantees, etc., before making a purchase.

This is the first dimension of the consumer's responsibility as a citizen. His/Her other dimension of responsibility is towards the environment which is global and thus makes him/her a citizen of the world. This involves awareness of environmental impact. For example, use of Chloro Fluoro Carbon (CFC) – free air conditioners and refrigerators. It also involves a conscious rejection of non-biodegradable packaging, and minimal use of chemicals at home.

11.3.2 Ethical Consumer

Understandings of what is 'the ethical consumer' are not particularly straightforward. The term 'ethics' means values, principles or rules of conduct followed by an individual, group or culture as a whole. It is a science of values, and by applying these values, the consumer can mobilise responsible responses in the industry, the government agencies, and the market place.

Discussing in the broadest sense, Ethical purchasers are those who may have political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social or other motives for choosing one product over another and, they frequently disagree about who is right and who is wrong. The one thing they have in common is that they are concerned with the effects that a purchasing choice has, not only on themselves but also on the external world around them.

The ethical consumer buys and invests appropriately and ethically. Price is not the only priority for him/her; ethical behaviour means that one is doing what is right and good in most situations for most people. **An Ethical Consumer is also a green consumer.**

11.3.3 Green Consumer

Consumers and producers, both, are economic beings. Consumers behave to maximise their total utility, and manufacturers and marketers aim to maximise profits; they hardly care and act for the environment. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight how closely environmental problems are related to consumer's utility or interests.

The evolution of a consumer into a green consumer means that the consumer exercises his/her vote, not only in favour of market responses to his needs but also considering the individual's responsibility towards the environment.

A green or ecological consumer asks what the product's quality is, what is its long term impact not on his pocket alone, but on health, environment and distant

parts of the world. S/He also raises the question of need and wants to know how or why the product is needed and on what ground. Thus, a Green consumer is the one who can convert the power of the consumer into a force for positive action to protect the environment.

Consumption by its very nature has an impact on the environment, to some degree or other; hence consumption cannot be truly green. The consumption of households and individuals is an important element of green consumerism. Consumers can consider reducing or abstaining from certain consumption activities. They can also replace certain activities with environmentally less damaging activities, even though not absolutely sound in character. In other words, they could change their consumption styles or patterns, out of consideration for environmental protection. With electricity, for example, a household can prefer solar energy – a way that is expensive but environmentally more sound than a conventional electric power supply.

The **United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD)** noted in 1995: *“During the last decade, there has been increased awareness amongst consumers that their purchasing choices impact on the environment. Through various media campaigns sponsored by Governments and NGOs, the consumers are urged to consider not only the quality of goods, but also the conditions under which the goods are made, and to distinguish needs from desires. The inclusion of sustainable consumption objectives in the Guidelines for Consumer Protection would reinforce recognition of the crucial role that consumers can play in protecting the global environment.”*

Thus, Green consumers are those who consume goods and services consciously by the natural environment. They are accustomed to a new life style that is environmentally sound and behave themselves according to the concept of sustainable growth (sustainability of production as well as consumption). They buy and use products and services that, during their entire lifecycle, affects the environment the least. Green Consumers buy eco-friendly products, i.e., products with little or no packaging; products made from natural ingredients; products that are made without causing pollution and produce the minimum waste; consume minimum energy to work. A true green consumer not only buys eco-friendly products but also minimises his consumption level; he follows the principle of 3R, i.e., reduce, reuse and recycle.

Green Consumerism- The word ‘Green’ is associated with enviro-friendly and enviro-sustainable activities, whereas Mc Gown D.A. defines ‘Consumerism’ as ‘a movement to inform consumers so that they can make a knowledgeable judgement regarding the purchase of public and private goods.’

It is an un-denying fact that the economic development world-over has come at the cost of environment. Thus, the idea of green consumerism becomes important in the contemporary era to popularise among all sections of society the concerns related to the protection and improvement of environment and to save the planet Earth.

‘Green Consumerism’, at a functional level may be defined as ‘either a highly democratic strategy to save the planet or exploitative marketing, depending on who you are talking to?’ At a conceptual level, Green consumerism is the use of individual consumer power to promote less environmentally damaging consumption, without compromising on the wants and needs of the consumers’.

It is a practice by which consumers show their responsibility towards the environment and society by buying and consuming eco-friendly products, even if they have to pay extra.

The **Agenda 21** action plan of The **Rio Conference (1992)** provided international recognition to the concept of **Sustainable Consumption** and production as part of Green Consumerism. According to Section G of the extended **United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (1999)**, “*sustainable consumption includes meeting the needs of present and future generations for goods and services in ways that are economical, socially and environmentally sustainable.*”

Green consumerism or environmentally responsible consumerism is a fairly new concept which marked its beginning during the 1980s. Soon, green consumerism rapidly spread all over the world as a movement dedicated to choosing goods or products safe to the natural environment and the companies and stores that sell such goods. The followers of green consumerism support environmental causes to the extent of switching allegiance from one product or supplier to another, even if it costs more. It is believed that the environment can be saved if individuals are responsible for their shopping habits and prefer to buy only environmentally benign products.

In India, Green Consumerism made its beginning during the year 1991. When in addition to the Rules notified, the Central Government, through its Gazette notification dated 20th February 1991, declared its decision to institute a scheme on labelling of environment-friendly products. The scheme has been notified with objectives:

- i) To provide an incentive for manufacturers and importers to reduce adverse environmental impact of their products;
- ii) To reward genuine initiatives by companies to reduce adverse environmental impact of their products;
- iii) To assist consumers to become environmentally responsible in their daily lives by providing information to take account of environmental factors in their purchase decisions;
- iv) To encourage citizens to purchase products which have less harmful environmental impacts; and
- v) Ultimately to improve the quality of the environment and to encourage the sustainable management of resources.

The scheme has nation-wide application and provides accreditation and labelling for many households and other consumer products. The label is known as the “**ECOMARK**”. Only those products which meet certain environmental criteria along with the quality requirements of the Indian standards for the same are given “**Eco-mark**” and “**Eco labelling**”. Any product, which is made, used or disposed of in a way that significantly reduces the harm it would otherwise cause to the environment, are considered to be an environment-friendly product.



The scheme could be one of the most effective tools in improving the quality of the environment and sustainable management of resources through green consumerism. However, the consumers, empowered through education and awareness should not be allured by a bare labelling of the product as 'green', 'Eco-mark' or 'eco-friendly' but must make efforts to verify the nature of products/services being enviro-benign.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Define Consumer Responsibility.

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2) Give an example to explain the concept of 'citizen as consumer'?

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3) Who is an ethical consumer?

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4) Who is a Green Consumer?

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5) What is meant by Sustainable Consumption?

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11.4 CONSUMERISM

As long as social and civilised modes of existence have been in operation, the consumer has been in its centre. The early consumer behaviour was characterised by the mutual trust which was reflected in the barter system. Societies in the past depended upon the mutual exchange of skills in the market place rather than value for money. Some amount of quality control was inherent in this system.

As the market economies began to develop and spread, consumer behaviour also altered. Consumer began to be progressively distanced from the details of the production process, the environment or the natural resources. As a result, s/he began to have less control over his/ her life and became increasingly dependent on the market.

Due to the consumer's initial dependence and trust in the veracity of the written words, the consumer began to accept printed information about consumer goods as a mark of quality, leaving the door wide open for exploitation on that count. It also encouraged the market forces to make exaggerated claims and to give false, fraudulent and misleading information. The growth of this pattern of market conduct exploited and victimised the consumer in every possible way in the name of selling him/her convenience, choice, availability and fulfilling his/her needs in the least complicated way.

Packaging gained precedence over the product. Sales tactics became more important than quality; consumer psychology was analysed for the benefit of the producers and the sellers. Advertising was used not only as a means of promoting availability but also, ironically for indulging in false claims and fraudulent trade practices. Advertising sold concepts, not products. For example, bath soaps are sold not for their hygienic, cleansing or environment-friendly qualities but as symbols of 'beauty' and status.

All this reveals the progressive decline in consumer responsibility with the consumer's role becoming increasingly passive over the years.

11.4.1 Spread of Consumerism

Inherently, all societies are based on a give and take principle. However, modern societies have created an imbalance between the giver and the taker. The primary provider has been nature and its resources. Human societies single mindedly and increasingly have taken more from nature than ever before.

Development, industrialisation, technological advancement have all used natural resources mercilessly. What has caused the imbalance is that man has taken from nature without showing any sensitivity or regard towards its conservation or preservation. In short, man's relationship with nature has not been sustainable. The more a society has shown evidence of "advancement" the more it has exploited and manipulated nature.

One way of determining the range and extent of consumption is the use of energy and natural resources. The developed countries of the North have 25% of the world's population, but consume 75% of all energy, 79% of all commercial fuels, 85% of all wood products and 72% of all steel products. They also generate nearly three fourths' of all carbon dioxide emissions.

At present, the world is perceived to be divided into two halves- Northern and Southern. This division is indicative of the Northern half which, for maintenance of its standard of living and quality of life, is dependent upon the southern half of the hemisphere. This is because it contains three-fourths of the world's natural resources in forest cover, water, biodiversity, wildlife, minerals, and oil resources.

However, this dependence of the North has not ensured a good life for the inhabitants of the south. This has been for various sociological and historical reasons. At present, it is beginning to be realised that the world needs more equitable distribution and use of its resources and new environmental and market strategies. Sustainable technologies also have to be evolved if all mankind is to enjoy the beneficence of nature.

The consumers of the North are now being pressured to act with responsibility and opt for sustainable consumption patterns, so that sustainability in production can be maintained by the South.

Consumerism surfaced in all its negative connotations in the North, and then through the spread of market economy and globalisation of market forces, it has spread to all parts of the world. Underdeveloped and developing nations have been swamped by obsolete technologies and alien cultural inputs dislocating their traditional way of life.

The reach of consumerism has been so invasive that it has dislocated large populations in rural and less industrialised parts of the world's areas and replaced environment-friendly methodologies with consumer items.

11.4.2 Use of Advertising and Unfair Trade Practices for Promotion of Consumerism

The greatest tool of consumerism has been aggressive advertising. Its development and spread have been parallel to the industrial and technological progress of society. The business community maintains that the onset of commercialism has improved the quality of general life.

Commercialism has indeed added to convenience and material comfort. Advertising is perceived by them as a necessity for promoting new products and keeping the consumer informed about availability and choice in the market. Advertising has put down its roots and has spread with the help of economic and political power. The consumer has to evolve an agenda to control the market forces whose ultimate aim is to turn citizens into consumers.

A highly commercialised society pushes consumers towards short term convenience and pleasures and causes long term environment and cultural crises. **Resistance to over consumption has to come through the assumption of consumer responsibility.** Aggressive advertising makes it difficult for consumers to lead environment-sensitive lives. It projects and promotes extravagant lifestyles. Hence it is the consumer's responsibility to initiate economically and ecologically sound action. Advertising pushes new products into people's lives by promoting them as more efficient, stylish or convenient to use. Aggressive advertising invades almost every aspect of urban living, creating needs where none exists. It persuades and manipulates people to buy what they do not need. This is also done through trade practices like contests, unbelievable discounts, sales promotion exercises, offering items free of charge for the main item purchased.

Imposition of commercialised attitudes dislocated the fragile relationship between humans and environment. It seeks to control people's lives, prompting them to initiate the lavish and luxurious life-style portrayed in the advertisements. On many occasions, such encouragement makes people lose sight of their eco-friendly cultural and approach to life.

The current Indian scenario has seen an increase in commercial advertising. As information and commercial technologies have grown so has to advertise. Almost every aspect of our life has been invaded by one or the other form of advertising. Hand bills, hoardings, print media, TV commercials, telemarketing are a few such means. Every segment of society is targeted and manipulated. And every aspect of life is invaded by advertising. Its influence is so pervasive that consumers do not even realise the extent of change in their perception and attitudes. The greatest victims of this activity are the vulnerable sections of the society, namely children, non-literate, rural population, and housewives.

11.4.3 Consumer Empowerment

Today's consumer is more acted upon than acting. Today's consumer's current profile is that of a passive, helpless, hapless, gullible individual who owes responsibility only to himself/herself. His/ Her social, cultural, environmental national and global links are neither acknowledged nor supported. The market forces exploit and manipulate his/her desire for a good life and convenience by translating them into materialistic greed. Hence, it is necessary for a consumer and the society at large, to be aware of these practices.

The upcoming smart consumer needs to become sufficiently aware so that he/she can use all avenues of self-protection, and empowerment available to him. The first and major area of his/her activity, however, is under his/her control. Every consumer of whatever age, gender, class or region must assume personal responsibility for the right consumer behaviour.

This is the only way in which one can regain control over his/her personal life and contribute towards improving the quality of the life of the community.

Following are some of the constructive ways in which the consumer can empower himself:

Most of the problems of today's consumer are associated with irresponsible consumption patterns. Hence, the first step that a responsible consumer can take is to **exercise restraint and discretion in purchase decisions**.

Since advertising seeks to promote inappropriate and needless choices, the consumer should make sure that the decision about a particular need is made by him/ her and not the market.

The consumer should, while making a purchase, assess its necessity and need in his/ her life. He/she should not buy more than his/her requirements as that would lead to hoarding.

The Consumers must **educate himself/herself about his/her rights and availability of redressal mechanisms**. Every consumer should behave responsibly while exercising his/her rights.

It is equally important that the consumer should not misuse his/her rights to exploit the sellers. One must **be honest while making one's claim** be it about the prices paid, or the time of purchase, or quality of products and the place he/she had visited.

As far as possible, **none of his/ her purchases should generate excess or non-biodegradable waste. He/she should pay as much attention to the quality of packaging as to the quality of a product**.

Individual and collective consumer action can **ensure that the "Polluter Pays Principle" (PPP) comes into operation**. For example, if an industry has polluted the environment in any way, then it must build into its infrastructure the remedies for reducing and controlling such pollution. The market must operate on either the PPP or the User Pay Principle (UPP).

The consumer should create a **demand for durable, recyclable, repairable, reusable products**.

The Consumer should **demand information about the details of the product**. This information could be about pricing, ingredients, manufacture

and expiry dates, environmental costs of products, nutrition, and health related information, warranties and Guarantees.

It is the consumer’s responsibility to **keep the receipts and other relevant documents** for future reference, especially for durable goods.

The consumer should **feel free to change the product** from the variety available, according to one’s specific needs.

An **aware, alert, and conscious consumer behaviour determines the quality of life in society.** Apathy, indifference, inaction on the part of the individual consumer, affects the others’ rights in many ways.

Collective or community inaction and lack of involvement affect the functioning of public and government institutions and society in general. **Responsible consumer behaviour individually or collectively ensures smooth social functioning.**

A responsible consumer should make all his/her purchases at the right place to avoid unscrupulous traders.

Consumers are also voters. Hence, **through the exercise of informed choices about correct ideologies and objectives, consumers can ensure a politically healthy society.**

Consumer Responsibility extends from clean backlands of individual homes to global warming, deforestation, labour laws, and corruption. **Everywhere consumer awareness halts negative action ensures the quality of life.**

Consumers can and should assume responsibility for the smooth and accountable functioning of public services. Taking necessary action on infringement of consumer rights of public services and utilities or political systems also comes under consumer responsibility. Timely intervention, an inquiry into malpractices, lodging of immediate protest by the concerned consumers to the appropriate authorities and responsible persons also means the exercise of consumer responsibility.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) List the qualities of an ideal consumer behaviour.

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- 2) Mention any three harmful effects of advertising.

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- 3) State five constructive ways in which the consumer can empower himself/herself?

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11.5 CONSUMER CATEGORISATION

The exercise of responsibility shall be the ultimate choice of any aware consumer. It should be considered as one of the Fundamental Rights of the Consumer.

The right to responsibility is emerging as a major area in the changing scenario of the modern social structure. In fulfilling his/her responsibility, the consumer seeks to make a conscious difference in the quality of life both of himself/herself and of the others. **The need for the assumption of individual consumer responsibility increases with the empowerment of the disadvantaged sections of the society.**

The need for the right to responsibility comes at a time when consumerism has gradually created a chasm in the society forming the consumer into a passive person. The market too has reduced the capacity of the consumer to choose. What has happened is that the market players, namely the companies, using advertisement as a medium, pretended to take care of all consumer needs. It has supposedly prompted the demands of the consumers by even anticipating their needs. In doing so, only new needs were created. Many times, artificial needs were also developed.

The consumer should know that the market's target is his/her pocket, earnings, and savings. Hence, **the first and foremost responsibility of the Consumers is to oneself.** This means that he/she should ensure value for his/her money spent on the purchase of goods or services.

Simultaneously, it becomes his/her responsibility to make the others aware of their rights and responsibilities. None of his/her actions or choices should affect the rights and responsibilities of the other fellow consumers. In other words, any responsible consumer must not act in a selfish manner or for getting short term pleasure or profit.

Consumer's responsibility towards the society is fulfilled only when he/she assume responsibility as an aware and alert citizen. As a citizen, he/she must be aware of the relationship between the human society and the environment. He/ She must behave knowing fully well that the environment is fragile enough and that it has to be carefully nurtured by each generation. By doing so, the future generations can benefit. **The consumer's responsibility as a Global citizen involves to think and act for not only nurturing the environment but also to reverse the damage done so far. This awareness of global responsibility** is now becoming increasingly important and necessary.

Hence the function of consumer's responsibility is to restore balance across the entire range of consumer activity. Consumer responsibility is a relatively new concept where the consumer is being made aware of his/her role and responsibility.

In short, the components of consumer's responsibility include:

Recognition of one's power and ability to control one's consumption practices.

Creation of an environmentally friendly life-style, or what is called a "greener life-style".

Awareness of accountability for one's actions and purchase decisions.

Capacity for rationale thought.

Being a watchdog over the activities of the industries and businesses.

Demanding the standards and quality of the products.

All these would lead to the consumer acquiring more control and to be an ethical person (ethical consumer).

E.F. Schumacher, the economist, and author of the classic book, “**small is beautiful**” had rightly stated: “the goal of responsible consumerism should be the maximum well-being with the maximum consumption.”

11.5.1 Higher Income Consumer

Impact of consumerism is felt more among this group. Their purchase patterns are usually excessive and wasteful. They tend to purchase the latest products and invest money in non-essential, disposable and convenience products. In foods and beverages, their preference is for junk and fancy items. Besides, the group also generate the maximum of no-biodegradable toxic and hazardous wastes.

So, it is the responsibility of this group to work towards environment protection as they are in a good position to influence the other sections of the population.

Educating the section of consumers who are urban poor exploited by the media’s advertisements is a major social responsibility of the higher income consumers. In urban areas, voluntary agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) assume responsibility for protecting and promoting the rights. These, in fact, substitute for the general indifference observed of the higher income categories.

11.5.2 Gender

Consumer responsibility can also be understood to be gender specific. Traditionally women are the gift-givers and organisers of social events. Moreover, they have been the reservoirs of cultural heritage and sustainable, consumption and production methods. They have been well-versed in avoidance of waste, reuse, recycling, and have used alternate strategies of survival. **The innate compatibility of women and nature has been an accepted counter force to the negative aspects of consumerism.** Empowerment of women becomes, therefore, essential for developing consumer responsibility.

11.5.3 Urban-Rural

Urban and rural sections of consumers owe a mutual responsibility to each other. Consumption patterns of urban consumers can influence the production patterns of rural consumers. Wasteful consumption of natural resources in urban areas is seen to have a negative impact on the natural environment of distant regions. For example, consumption of wood in an urban area is directly related to deforestation. The excessive use of energy by industry and the urban consumer is the reason for the building of large scale dams in the hilly regions. The building of a single dam causes dislocation at various human and environmental levels. The population is dislocated, agriculture and forest land are submerged, wildlife is disturbed and destroyed; cultural and architectural damage is also extensive.

Unaware rural consumers, especially in the agricultural sector indiscriminately use fertilisers and pesticides or remove forest cover for cultivation. If their traditional knowledge about their environment, wildlife, and herbs, water conservation methodologies are acknowledged and documented, they can

continue to use them for a personal, social and environmental benefit. If they are also made aware of how distant urban consumers consume their resources for negligible returns, then they can organise resistance as well as positive action. The Chipko Movement in the hilly areas of Garhwal is an example.

11.6 METHODS OF INCULCATING CONSUMER RESPONSIBILITY

A vigilant, well aware and responsible consumer is an asset to the nation. Educational institutions, parents, NGOs, media, as well as government agencies, have a responsibility of inculcating responsible consumer behaviour in the young citizens. How to exercise choice, how to make value-oriented purchases, how to look out for quality, how to avoid being cheated can be advised by the right consumer educators. Responsible Consumer behaviour can be inculcated in youngsters by teaching them how to use public services and utilities: for example, conservation of electricity and water can be taught at home and in the institutions. Health-related lessons in nutrition become very useful for making of a responsible consumer. Another area of concern that can be taught is the ways of minimising pollution and preserving green areas in and around the home and places of work. All laws can be brought to benefit only when we realise, our supreme veto powers of refusing a sub-standard products and exercise our rights to get the best and not by compromising on sub-standard products sold to us by traders, manufacturers, and salesman.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) List out the type of consumer responsibility
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- 2) Very briefly state what measures can be taken to inculcate consumer responsibility among students.
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11.7 LET US SUM UP

We have seen that the latest but the most important factor in consumer-related issues is **consumer responsibility**. Till very recent times, the consumer was perceived to be a passive unit of the market economy. Industry or the producers controlled and manipulated the market to exploit consumers on every front. However, in recent items, increasing Consumer awareness and education has all alerted consumers across the globe to the overt and hidden agenda of the market forces. Now a market place is not only a sellers' outlet. It is also a

place which is influenced by consumer behaviour which is increasingly becoming responsible. Aided and supported by strong legislation, by government's contribution to the development of standardisation, and voluntary organisation activity, the consumer is sufficiently armed to take on the market. Product information now makes it possible for consumers to make informed and responsible choices. In recent times there has been a major shift in what is expected of consumers. It is now the consumer's responsibility to help control the mindless exploitation of environment for profit by the industry.

In short consumer behaviour which is veering towards the assumption of responsibility can now seek to control the industry, the market and the environment, as well as, generate ethical and social norms. Consumers, singly and collectively, are becoming a force to reckon with. However, the exercise of consumer power must be coupled with a full awareness of its responsibility. **The best way to get the industry and the market to act responsibly to changing consumer demands is to tailor these demands by the environmental realities and diminishing energy resources. The emergence of a green profile in the industry is directly related to consumer awareness in this regard. Development of ethical norms is being undertaken by consumer organisations at local, national and international levels.**

11.8 KEY WORDS

Ecology : Deals with the relation between organisms and their environment. It now includes humankind's dependence and relationship with the environment.

Environmental Cost : It is the cost which the environment, industry or the producer pays or the production and the disposal process associated with and consumer product. This is usually not assessed regarding money but is associated with environmental depletion and degradation. The environmental cost is also borne by the future than the present generation of humans.

Polluter Pay Principle (PPP): It is a recently evolved concept where the person or the unit causing and kind of pollution, is held responsible. The polluter can make amends by making changes in his consumption or production pattern so that pollution is minimal.

User Pays Principle (UPP) : A consumer product can pollute the environment both during its production process or while it is being used. Sometimes the pollution costs are divided between the polluter and the user. The user's contribution to handling the polluting effects of the product is mostly associated with its disposal.

11.9 SOME USEFUL BOOKS AND REFERENCES

- 1) Brown, Lester, R., *State of the World*. W.W. Norton and Company, New York and London, 1994.
- 2) Jacobson and Mazur, *Marketing Madness*, Westview Press, Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, 1995.
- 3) IUCN (The World Conservation Union), UNEP, WWF (Publishers), *Caring for the Earth, A Strategy for a Sustainable Living*, 1991.

11.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The term consumer responsibility means the exercise of discretion as well as full awareness of the impact of consumer choice on other consumers and the environment.
- 2) The responsibility of a consumer to take partial responsibility for garbage disposal or when he/she is using market commodities. If he/she is using a car, his/her responsibility means how best to minimise pollution or to minimise its use. (Other examples may also be given).
- 3) The ethical consumer buys and invests appropriately and ethically. Price is not the only or the main consideration for him. The ethical consumer does what is right and good in most situations for most people.
- 4) “Green Consumer” is a person who exercises his/her vote, not only in favour of market responses to his needs but also in favour of his/her responsibilities towards the environment.
- 5) Please refer Sub-section 11.3.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1)
 - a) Frugality in purchase
 - b) Avoidance of waste in consumption
 - c) Recycling and Reuse
- 2)
 - a) Creating needs where none exist and persuading and manipulating people to buy what they do not need.
 - b) Promoting wasteful life-styles by projecting false choices and flooding the market with new products.
 - c) Creating disposal problems through the use of excess packaging.
- 3)
 - a) Since advertising seeks to promote false choices, the consumer should, when making a purchase, assess its necessity and need in his/her life.
 - b) As far as possible, none of his/her purchases should generate excess or non-biodegradable garbage.

- c) The consumer should demand as much information as possible, about the product, he/she decides to purchase.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1)
 - a) Economic Responsibility
 - b) Gender-Specific Responsibility
 - c) Age related Responsibility
 - d) Urban – Rural Responsibility
 - e) North – South Responsibility
- 2) Advertisers and the market target specific age segments for the sale of products. To counter unwanted advertisements and inculcation of wrong values, educational institutions and parents can promote responsible consumer behaviour in the young by teaching them to make informed choices in the market and to use public services. For young consumers, consumption and disposal of paper is an important issue. Avoidance of waster could also be taught to them through conservation of resources like water and electricity. Excessive consumption patterns in the North have generated problems of pollution and garbage disposal. The north has been largely responsible for the depletion of ozone layer, green house effect, global warming, and a threat to marine life.

