

Gujarat power consumer gets an 'electric' shock

For Dilip Patel of Anand town in Gujarat, tension had been building up for over a year. And when he saw his sealed electricity meter lying open with broken seals at a meter-testing laboratory in January this year, his worst fears came true.

What started as a simple exercise last year to replace his old electricity meter with an electronic one ended with Patel being slapped with a Rs.865,960 bill, facing disconnection and being accused of power theft by the Madhya Gujarat Vij Company Limited (MGVCL).

Patel, who runs a photographic and print laboratory in Anand, 73 km from here, was 'rescued' by the Ahmedabad-based Consumer Education and Research Society (CERS) in March this year but not before he was forced to pay nearly Rs.650,000 of the penalty amount.

'My business cannot run without electricity and the disconnection broke my back. I lost several customers. I was ruined. It was the CERS that came to my help,' Patel told IANS.

CERS activists say they have been fighting for harassed consumers, filing cases even outside Ahmedabad, against electricity companies that often become a source of harassment to consumers when false cases of theft of electricity are foisted on them.

And that's what happened in Patel's case.

'In 2002, a vigilance team of the erstwhile GEB (Gujarat Electricity Board) had come from Surat and checked my shop meter. They put a new seal and certified that my meter was ok,' Patel claimed.

The MGVCL came into being on April 1, 2005, when GEB was split. It took over distribution functions of the central zone in Gujarat.

Patel claimed that the MGVCL staff had approached him last year to replace the old meter with a new electronic meter. They took away the old meter for testing at the MGVCL laboratory.

Patel was called to the laboratory where he saw the broken meter. He was told that he had tampered with the meter and would have to pay Rs.865,960 to settle the bill.

He claimed that before slapping the hefty penalty on him, certain MGVCL officials came to his shop and sought a bribe to settle his account.

'I understood that it was a bribe they were asking for. I refused. When I have done no wrong why should I pay anyone?' Patel said.

He later agreed to pay the penalty in instalments in desperation after his power supply was disconnected.

'The CERS took up the case in February this year and filed a case against MGVCL before the Consumer Disputes Redress Forum, Anand. The forum in April stayed the payment of the last instalment of Rs.216,490 which was due this month and instructed MGVCL not to disconnect the power supply till a final order in this matter was announced,' he said.

V.N. Balakrishna (© IANS / India eNews)