

DON'T SUBMIT MEEKLY TO EXCESS PCO BILLING

Are you aware that every time you make a telephone call from a private telephone booth, you are paying more than what you need to? Whether it is a local call or an STD/ISD call. The excess might be anything between 75 paise to Rs 2.50.

Almost all STD/ISD booths charge Rs 2 for local calls. Those located at strategic point charge Rs 3. All these booths are actually billed Rs 1.31 per local call but hardly anyone speaks out against this practice. Their silence is understandable. Firstly, many users are not aware of the technical details: how the tariff is calculated, mechanical details of the metering equipment, etc. Secondly, they are helpless, for they don't have a private phone. Thirdly, many feel that paying 75 paise in excess is not worth quibbling over.

But as responsible citizens, every telephone user has to pay according to the bill only for services received. Any excess payment amounts to enrichment of the service provider. They should understand that the excess amount does not fill the telephone department's coffers but those of the booth owners. The other indirect loss to the government is by way of taxes, surcharge, etc.

Telephone users needn't be cynical. Thanks to the Consumer Protection Act (CPA), they can question such arbitrary functioning. Take for instance the case of J.Purushothaman who successfully claimed compensation from a booth owner. Purushothaman made two STD calls from a public call office (PCO) booth to Madurai,. The first call was billed Rs 10 (duration: 27 seconds), the bill for the second read Rs 20 (duration: 60 seconds).

Dissatisfied with this billing, Purushotaman proved that he had been charged extra. As per telecom rules, four seconds is considered one unit and the tariff is Rs 1.25 per unit. He complained to the Pondicherry State Commission and explained that he should have been billed Rs 8.75 for the first call. Similarly, the second call ought to have been billed Rs 20. The complainant, apart from seeking reimbursement, also wanted the telecom department to collect such unauthorized collections from all STD booths and remit them to the consumer welfare fund.

The Pondicherry state commission ordered that he be reimbursed, but rejected his other contention, saying that such an order can be passed only when a complaint is filed on behalf of a large number of consumers by a registered consumer association. The telephone directory says that telephone booths can charge Rs 1.25 (plus surcharge) for the local calls. In the case of an STD call, a flat rate of Rs 2 can be charged as service charges.

However, the telecom department has not taken any steps to enforce these instructions. To say that consumers should not pay more than the bill is to philosophise the issue. A few simple steps may change the situation.

At present, though booth-owners collect more than the bill amount, the user has no way to prove that an excess amount has been collected. In order to plug this loophole, the telecom department should act, based on written complaints from the users. Another suggestion would be to depute telecom staff for random checking of the rates charged. Secondly, providing information to consumers may bring down instances of malpractices. There is not a single STD booth which displays the rates/tariffs, taxes surcharge, service charges, etc. It is wrong to presume that every phone user is aware of the rules.
