

# Ghostly phone bills in Badda

MAHBUBA ZANNAT

Telephone users in the city are subject to harassment as they receive ghostly bills but Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) authorities are reluctant to take action against the linemen and other staff involved in this malpractice.

At least seven families of Madhya Badda area alleged that they have received such inflated telephone bills ranging from Tk 3,000 to 18,000 for the month of November last year whereas their bills usually did not cross Tk 1,000 per month previously.

A number of subscribers in Bakshi Bazar made similar complaints. "I have been using the land phone for the last eight years and paying Tk 400-600 as monthly bill, but in November last year I received a bill of Tk 16,705," said Kazi Mozammel Haque of Madhya Badda, a former assistant engineer of BTTB.

Haque said he made no NWD or ISD calls in the last one year. "I went to the divisional engineer at Gulshan Telephone Exchange to lodge complaint, but he did not receive my application saying fake billing is not possible in digital system," he said.

Sheikh Nazruzzaman, another victim of the ghostly bill, said he paid the highest Tk 2,215 for a single month since he took connection several years ago. "I was simply thundered to see the bill of Tk 17,605 in November though I

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did not make any NWD or ISD call. But the BTTB officials said they have nothing to do with the problem," he said.

Nazruzzaman said the linemen are responsible for the fake billing. They connect one subscriber's line to other's -- sometimes the lines of residential houses are disconnected and diverted to phone/fax shops for several days. Bribing the linemen, the phone shop owners use those lines but the subscribers concerned have to pay the bills.

Narrating his experience, Nazruzzaman said almost every month his telephone line remains disconnected for several days and he has to pay the linemen for restoring the connection.

"The linemen run the illegal business to make money with the help of the switchmen," he said, adding that a lineman was also suspended after he was caught red-handed a few

months back. "But the situation has not changed, the public suffering is worsening day by day."

When contacted, Mohammad Nasiruddin, director (revenue) at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar exchange, said fake billing is not possible in the digital telephone billing system.

He however admitted that there are hundreds of such complaints of extra billing. "But we don't know how to resolve it," the official said.

The only solution is keeping the telephone sets locked so that others cannot use the line for NWD or ISD calls without the knowledge of the customer, he said, adding that the clients could get their call details if they apply to the authorities.

About the ghostly bills received by some subscribers, Mohammad Nasiruddin said: "They must pay the bills that they have received."

# Decline in moviegoers shuts cinemas down

SHARMIN MEHRIBAN

Cinemas in the city are currently experiencing a severe decline in the number of viewers due to the easy availability of alternative forms of entertainment.

"I don't need to go to the hall to watch movies as I watch them at home," said Ferdous, a rickshawpuller, adding that he watches movies through cable TV and on VCDs.

Md Shahjada Mia, the manager of Padma and Surma cinema, which were established in 1988, said cinema once was only forms of entertainment but now it lost attraction.

Officials and staff of other cinemas said rampant sale of pirated VCDs, screening of newly released movies on DVD by cable TV operators and increasing vulgarism in local movies and their posters have made most viewers stay away from cinemas.

"The number of viewers have declined to a minimum," said Anwar Hossain, manager of about 40-year-old Jonaki cinema run by the Police Co-operative Society.

Anwar said only the lower class people like day labourers and rickshawpullers are now watch films at cinemas. Middle class and educated people hardly go to cinema.

About anti-social activities taking place in most of the cinemas, a supervisor of the same cinema said that a certain section of viewers come to the cinemas with ill intention. "If we see any such incident, we ask them to leave straightaway," he added.

The cinema staff said they fail to attract viewers despite the fact that ticket prices are still well within the commoners' capacity. The prices range between Tk 23

and Tk 40.

"Tickets at Surma cost less as it caters to the extreme lower class viewers who prefer obscenities in films," said a staff, adding that these viewers hardly go to Padma where usually good quality films are screened.

About security, most of the cinema staff said they have separate ticket counters for male and female and they use metal detectors to check the audience at the entrance.

Film producers are also worried about the decline in the number of viewers as they spend Tk 70 lakh to Tk 1.5 crore to make film.

The cinemas however witness some crowds when international film festivals are held although the tickets to such movies are comparatively expensive.

During the recently held film festival, popular Indian movies like *Mujhe shaadi karoge* and *Garv* attracted lesser viewers in contrast to the local ones because these films are already available on pirated VCDs and cable TV channels.

About the obscene posters put in place around the cinemas, the cinema staffs said these posters are released by the film distributors with approval from the Film Censor Board. So the cinema owners have nothing to do with it.

Another common allegation against cinemas is that they often screen some uncensored part of films, which are known as "cut piece". A section of unscrupulous filmmakers produce these cut pieces and supply them to cinemas. These are usually screened in the cinemas located outside the city, claimed the cinema staffs.

"They do it to attract viewers but such films are often seized by the police," said Shahjada Mia.

A local movie *Takar nesh* was



being screened at Padma and Surma when this correspondent visited the cinema. The front seats were empty whereas the number of viewers in the back seats was scarce.

Some old cinemas like Moon

and Lion have been shut down by their owners due to constant losses. The owners of Padma and Surma also intend to shut it down and lease it out to garment factory.

"On average two Bengali films

are screened every week on the satellite Bengali channels so why would people bother to come to the cinemas to watch the same movies?" questioned a maintenance officer at Jonaki.

10x3

10x2

9x3