

How your International Roaming calls fleece you?

Nov 07

If you are a subscriber to an Indian mobile service operator and travel abroad regularly you will notice that sometime in April of 2006 a major change happened. Depending on who your mobile operator is – you would have noticed that – while on international roaming, your mobile no longer displays CLI (Calling Line Identification). Correct? Why did this happen?

Simple! Everyone knows that while on International Roaming you pay a lot more on your in-bound calls. This is exactly why the CLI is so important especially when you are traveling overseas. With CLI, you know who is calling and if it is not an important number you could ignore the call or if its someone you know, you could perhaps send an SMS and let the caller know that you would only take the call if its urgent as you are traveling abroad. Is this why, the operators decided to disable CLI – so that not knowing the caller, you are bound to take the call only to realize it's a telemarketing call from the usual 'life time free' credit card from a local bank or a 'membership discount at a club'? But in the bargain, the registers for roaming calls have started ringing and your phone bill is already bloated.

I noticed that my operator cut off all CLI (while roaming overseas) sometime in April and so I have had a terrible time taking all kinds of unnecessary calls while roaming abroad. This has become a complete pain and I wondered how to fix this. But the practical problem is that by the time you return from an offshore travel there is so much catching-up to do, and this remains unresolved...till your next travel comes up again!

Solution?

Thankfully, the TRAI has decided to step in and resolve this issue. A simple solution has been currently arrived at. All mobile operators are required to implement a special Ring back tone: 'I am on international roaming' to the called party which will be subscriber enabled / disabled with some simple command from the key pad. **According to this ruling, all cellular mobile operators now should enable this facility and inform all its subscribers about this feature within November 15 2006.**

Not good enough?

While this might be an early solution it may not be a complete one. Firstly, why should it be a Ring Tone based solution? This is also a breach of privacy at level one: perhaps a subscriber may not want his callers to know he is abroad. Secondly, a telemarketing caller may go through the whole ring tone and continue to hold the call and since there is no CLI, the roaming subscriber may be forced to pick the call.

The key question is why operators that originally displayed CLI, now do not? I would like to understand if there is a technical problem that caused this? For example: Is it that international IP based trunking and 3rd party carriers' aggregation could be making CLI information passage a significant overhead to the signaling traffic? This should be discussed and the appropriate reasons made public. Else it appears as though a problem is being created where there was none and the operators are trying to solve it under guidance from the TRAI.

Caution:

In any case, while you are traveling abroad next time, watch when your phone rings. And if there is no CLI or specific message played to your caller, check how your bill reads. You can start hoping the bill will not contain a 'RING TONE DOWNLOAD' charge of Rs 6 per instance of playing the message!

Update: Nov 23: I just returned from a trip to UK and my operator has switched on CLIP for international roaming again. I am not sure if there was a 'message played for my callers' or not..

Sridhar Pai / Tonse Telecom Pvt. Ltd / www.tonsetelecom.com / marketingtr@tonsetelecom.com