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'Every moment was terror'

Sumati Yengkhom, TNN Nov 28, 2008, 03.07am IST

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KOLKATA: Marovi Khiangte was serving guests at Pine, a restaurant at The Oberoi Trident, when gunshots and screams rang out on the floor above. Fighting the instinct to flee for her life, she and her colleagues stayed with their guests scores of foreigners included until they were evacuated by security forces.

"But for the few hours it lasted, it was sheer terror," said Marovi, who moved from Kolkata to Mumbai last year. "We did not know if the next bullet was for us."

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"It was like any other day when I reported for work in the afternoon. We had an easy time as there was not too many guests. But the night got a little hectic as people trooped in. I was busy attending guests when I heard a boom in the lobby above. Initially, I dismissed it as a loud cracker. Then, several bangs later, I realized they were gunshots. Soon, we learnt terrorists had stormed the hotel," said Marovi.

Numbed and terrified, she was at a complete loss momentarily. But seeing that some guests were panicking, she and her colleagues put on a brave face and tried to calm them down. Only a small staircase separated them from the terrorists.

"The gunmen could have easily come down and killed us had they noticed the stairs that connect the restaurant with the lobby. I was terrified every moment that they would spot it. All the shooting was happening right above us and the restaurant was brimming with guests, mainly foreigners. Imagine if the terrorists had raided the restaurant. But we could not desert the guests, so we stayed with them till they were evacuated through the emergency exit," she said.

When all the guests had been rescued, she ran out of the building with two other girl colleagues. Within minutes, police cordoned off the area. The terrified employees and some guests had to take shelter in the corridor of a nearby cinema hall. They stayed huddled there throughout the night.

"Later, I learnt from the pianist that a girl trainee was shot. She kept screaming for help that she did not want to die yet. But there was no one around. She was such a sweet and young girl. She died before anyone could help her," Marovi said.

Only in the morning, she and her colleagues were allowed to go home, tired, scared and traumatized. "I had a close brush with death. It was a long, long night. I still shudder to think about it. Mumbai has become so vulnerable."

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