

Kurla hotel blaze: 'False ceiling collapsed on diners'

By Tanvi Deshpande | Posted 6 hours



Blatant irregularities at City Kinara, in total defiance of safety rules, included stored cylinders and pantry in Family Room on mezzanine where the unfortunate 8 were seated

City Kinara, a Chinese restaurant in Kurla West, is like several others in our megalopolis. It serves addictive Indian Chinese, and has been running to a packed house despite glaring irregularities.

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Two gas cylinders were stored in the mini pantry on the first floor. A leak in one of the cylinders went unnoticed by the staff. A short circuit in the overhead wires caused the fire

The impact of the inferno was such that the false ceiling melted and fell on the victims, trapping them on the first floor.

GRAPHIC/UDAY MOHITE

The fire that broke out at the ground-plus-one eatery on Friday afternoon between 12.30 pm and 1 pm, and claimed eight young lives, was a tragedy waiting to happen. A number of illegal alterations had been made in the structure, it stored two gas cylinders on the mezzanine floor, and didn't have a single fire extinguisher fitted to battle an emergency. The fire brigade claimed it had never visited the establishment for an inspection, and the ward officer wasn't aware, when this reporter approached him, if the cylinders were stored illegally and against the rules. Residents from surrounding buildings spoke in whispers about flouting of rules, but none of them had taken the initiative to file a written complaint with the BMC.



The damaged roof. Pic/Datta Kumbhar

Established in the 1960s, City Kinara changed hands about 10 years ago, when Sharad Tripathi took over its management. It gradually transformed into a ground-plus-one structure, becoming a popular snack joint for students of the nearby Don Bosco College, Vidyavihar. While the lower level housed two tables alongside the kitchen, the upper floor held four. Two gas cylinders were also stored on the mezzanine, with pipes connecting them to the kitchen downstairs. Although initial reports oscillated between a short circuit and cylinder blast as causes for the fire, it was later revealed that a gas leak had led to the tragedy. That the interiors featured wood, RCC and

PoP, made the fire spread furiously while the unfortunate eight diners lay trapped.

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The police cordon off the site after the blast

Ravindra Palkar, resident of a chawl that stands behind the restaurant, says he spotted a hand sticking out of one of the windows at the rear end of the mezzanine, flailing. It was one of those trapped asking for help. “Suddenly, the glass window shattered, and smoke belled out. It must have been just past 12.30 pm. I could see someone’s hand and hear screams. We quickly shut off the gas and electric supply at the chawl,” he said.

With two fire engines and two water tankers arriving at the spot, the fire was doused within an hour. The tin roof, walls and furniture were all charred, say onlookers.

Shyam Sonar, an electrician who works in the neighbourhood, said, “We alerted others around when we spotted smoke, and threw buckets of water.”

K V Hivrare, deputy chief fire officer, said he was unable to confirm if the fire broke out due to a gas leak or a short circuit. “There were two cylinders on the top floor, in complete contravention of rules. One of them was empty when we checked it. Maybe that’s the one responsible for the leak.”

Hivrare pointed out that the staircase leading from the ground level to the mezzanine was illegal, and loose wiring hanging from the walls and ceiling of the Family Room housed on the top floor made for a dangerous setting.

When asked if the local fire station should have run regular checks, he confessed that it wasn't practical for an already overburdened fire brigade. Will the brigade launch a drive against smaller establishments that tend to flout rules governing safety, we asked. The municipal commissioner will decide that, he said.

Meanwhile, the civic authorities seemed to have been caught off guard, claiming they had little idea whether the establishment supported irregularities. "The restaurant itself was not illegal. But I am not sure how many cylinders were stored in there with necessary permissions. There might be other irregularities too, but they will have to be investigated," said Prashant Sapkale, assistant municipal commissioner, L Ward.

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Assistant Commissioner of Police (Kurla division) Srirang Nadgauda, confirmed the gas leak. "Preliminary investigation has revealed that apart from having a main kitchen on the ground floor, the restaurant had a pantry on the mezzanine, which also supported a piped gas connection, apart from housing two spare cylinders. One of these was leaking and went unnoticed," he said. The waiter who was attending to the eight customers had stepped down at the fateful moment when the fire broke. "Moments later, it is believed that the gas had spread across the mezzanine and suddenly, due to a short circuit in the wires, a fire engulfed the area. The false ceiling collapsed on the diners. They had no opportunity to escape. Everything was over within minutes," he added.

A case has been registered under sections 304 (2) (culpable homicide not amounting to murder) and 285 (Negligent conduct with respect to explosive substance) of Indian Penal Code against Tripathi. "We are yet to arrest him," said Nadgauda.

Deven Bharti, Joint Commissioner of Police (Law and Order), confirmed that an FIR had been filed against the owner of the restaurant under Section 304 (murder) of the Indian Penal Code.