

**SUPREME COURT OF INDIA**

Ramavatar Budhaiprasad

Vs.

Assistant Sales Tax Officer, Akola

Petitions Nos. 4, 36 and 37 of 1958

(S. K. Das, J. L. Kapur, M. Hidayatullah, J. C. Shah and T. L. Venkatarama Ayyar, JJ.)

14.03.1961

**JUDGEMENT**

**KAPUR, J.:**

1. These are three petitions under Art. 32 of the Constitution challenging the imposition of sales tax on betel leaves by the Sales Tax Officer, Akola. The question raised in all the three petitions is the same and can conveniently be disposed of by one judgment.

2. The petitioners in the three petitions are dealers in betel leaves at Akola, now in the State of Maharashtra and at the relevant time in the State of Madhya Pradesh. The Assistant Sales Tax Officer at Akola assessed the petitioners under the provisions of the C. P. and Berar Sales Tax Act, 1947 (Act XXI of 1947), hereinafter termed the "Act" to the payment of sales tax as follows:

WRIT PETITION NO.	PERIOD	AMOUNT
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W. P. No. 4/58            7-11-53 to 26-10-54   Rs. 1882- 9-0

and 27-10-54 to 14-11-55      Rs. 1885-13-0

W. P. No. 36/58        27-10-54 to 26-10-55   Rs. 1890- 3-0

W. P. No. 37/58        27-10-54 to 14-11-55   Rs. 3530- 4-0

The petitioners in W. P. Nos. 4 and 36 did not appeal under s. 22 of the Act but the petitioner in W. P. No. 37 did appeal under that section. As he did not deposit the amount of tax the petition was dismissed. He then filed a petition under Art. 226 in the High Court of Nagpur but that petition was withdrawn and therefore no decision was given on the merits of the case. In all the petitions the submission of the petitioners is that the order demanding tax was without authority of law inasmuch as betel leaves were not taxable under s. 6 read with the second Schedule of the Act. The imposition of the tax, it is alleged, is an infringement of the petitioners' right to carry on trade or business guaranteed under Art. 19(1)(g) of the constitution and the prayer is for the issue of a writ of certiorari quashing the order of the Assistant Sales Tax Officer and for prohibition.

3. Section 6 of the Act under which the exemption is claimed provides :

S. 6(1) "No tax shall be payable under this Act on the sale of goods specified in the second column of Schedule II, subject to the conditions and exceptions, if any, set out in the corresponding entry in the third column thereof.

(2) The State Government may, after giving by notification not less than one month's notice of their intention so to do, by a notification after the expiry of the period of notice mentioned in the first notification amend either Schedule, and thereupon such Schedule shall be deemed to be amended accordingly."

Thus under the Act all articles mentioned in the Schedule were exempt from Sales Tax and articles not so specified were taxable. In the Schedule applicable there were originally two items which are relevant for the purposes of the case. They were items Nos. 6 and 36 :

Item 6 Vegetables - Except when sold in sealed containers.

Item 36 Betel leaves.

4. The Schedule was amended by the C. P. and Berar Sales Tax Amendment Act (Act XVI of 1948) by which item No. 36 was omitted. It is contended that in spite of this omission they were exempt from Sales Tax as they are vegetables. The intention of the legislature in regard to what is vegetables is shown by its specifying vegetables and betel leaves as separate items in the Schedule exempting articles from Sales Tax. Subsequently betel leaves were removed from the Schedule which is indicative of the legislature's intention of not exempting betel leaves from the imposition of the tax. But it was submitted that betel leaves are vegetables and therefore they would be exempt from Sales Tax under item 6. Reliance was placed on the dictionary meaning of the word "vegetable" as given in Shorter Oxford Dictionary where the word is defined as "of or pertaining to, comprised or consisting of, or derived, or obtained from plants or their parts." But this word must be construed not in any technical sense nor from the botanical point of view but as understood in common parlance. It has not been defined in the Act and being a word of every day use it must be construed in its popular sense meaning "that sense which people conversant with the subject matter with which the statute is dealing would a tribute to it." It is to be construed as understood in common language; Craies on Statute Law, p. 153 (5th Ed.). It was so held in *Planters Nut Chocolate Co. Ltd. v. The King*, 1952-1 Dom LR 385 at p. 389. This interpretation was accepted by the High Court of Madhya Pradesh in *Madhya Pradesh Pan Merchants' Association, Santra Market, Nagpur v. State of Madhya Pradesh*, 1956-7 STC 99 at p. 102 : AIR 1956 Nag 54 at p. 55) where it was observed :-

"In our opinion, the word "vegetables" cannot be given the comprehensive meaning the term bears in natural history and has not been given that meaning in taxing statutes before. The term "vegetables" is to be understood as commonly understood denoting those classes of vegetable matter which are grown in kitchen gardens and are used for the table."

In that case the word "vegetables" was construed and in our opinion correctly construed in relation to the very provisions of the Act which are now in controversy before us. In cases under the U. P. Sales Tax Act betel leaves have been held not to be within the expression "green vegetables"; *Brahma Nand v. State of Uttar Pradesh*, 1956-7 STC 206 (All); *Firm Shri Krishna Chaudhry v. Commissioner of Sales Tax*, 1956-7 STC 742 (All). In *Bhairondon Tolaram v. State of Rajasthan*, 1957-8 STC 798 (Raj) they were held not to be plants and in *Kokil Ram v. State of Bihar*, 1949-1 STC 217 : (AIR 1951 Pat 367), it was held that vegetables meant plants cultivated for food and Pans are not foodstuffs. In *Dharamdas Paul v. commissioner of Commercial Taxes*, 1958-9 STC 194 : (AIR 1958 Cal 302) also they were held not to be vegetables which specifically meant Sabzi, Tarkari and Sak. Therefore apart from the fact that the legislature by using two distinct and different items i. e. item 6 "vegetables" and item No. 36 "betel leaves" has indicated its intention, decided cases also show that the word "vegetables" in taxing statutes is to be understood as in common parlance i.e. denoting class vegetables which are grown in a kitchen garden or in a farm and are used for the table.

5. In our view, betel leaves are not exempt from taxation. These petitions therefore fail and are dismissed with costs. One hearing fee.

Petitions dismissed.