

State of Madras

Vs

G. J. Coelho

Civil Appeal No. 701 of 1963

(S. M. Sikri, K. Subha Rao JJ)

30.04.1964

JUDGMENT

SIKRI J. -

The respondent, hereinafter referred to as the assessee, purchased an estate in 1950, known as Silver Cloud Estate, consisting of tea, coffee and rubber plantations, in Gudalur, Nilgiris, Madras State. Out of the sale price of Rs. 3,10,000, he borrowed Rs. 2,90,000, at interest varying from seven to eight per cent. per annum. For the assessment year 1955-56, the assessee claimed to deduct interest on this sum amounting to Rs. 22,628-9-8. The Agricultural Income-tax Officer, Gudalur, disallowed Rs. 21,057-15-1, allowing Rs. 1,570-10-7, under section 5(k) of the Madras Plantations Agricultural Income-tax Act (Madras Act V of 1955) (hereinafter referred to as the Act.) The relevant part of the assessment order is reproduced below :

"Interest on borrowing Rs. 21,057-15-1. The assessee has claimed Rs. 22,628-9-8 towards interest. It is seen that about Rs. 80,000 has been borrowed from various parties, for the maintenance of the estate. Under section 5(k) the interest has to be limited to six per cent. on an amount equivalent to 25 per cent. of the agricultural income in that year. The gross income Rs. 1,04,710-13-11. So the borrowing has to be limited to 25 per cent. of Rs. 1,04,710-13-11 which is Rs. 26,177-11-6. Interest at six per cent. on this amount is Rs. 1,570-10-7. So a sum of Rs. 21,057-15-1 is disallowed (22,628-9-8 minus 1,570-10-7)."

The assessee appealed to the Assistant Commissioner of Agricultural Income-tax without success. He then appealed to the Madras Plantations Agricultural Income-tax Appellate Tribunal, hereinafter referred to as the Tribunal. The Tribunal observed as follows :

"It is not possible to agree with the contention that interest paid in the year of account towards a loan borrowed by the proprietor for the purpose of acquisition of the estate will fall within the category of "expenditure wholly and exclusively laid out for the purpose of the plantation". The immediate object of the expenditure, i.e., payment of interest, is to liquidate a personal liability of the proprietor, as a debtor. That after such borrowing the debtor used it as sale price and acquired the estate, cannot make the payment of interest an 'expenditure wholly and exclusively laid out for the purpose of the plantation.' The language of the various sub-divisions of section 5 of the Act referring to the various items of permissible deductions towards expenditure shows that the expenditure and the plantation must have a direct and proximate connection. Here, the proximate connection of the payment is with a personal loan

and not with the plantation."

The assessee filed a revision application to the High Court under section 54(1) of the Act, and raised the following question before it :

"Question of law raised for decision by the High Court :- Whether interest paid on monies borrowed for the purchase of the plantation is expenditure of the nature referred to in section 5(e) of the Act and should therefore be deducted in assessing the income of the plantation during the year ?"

The High Court held that the deduction claimed by the assessee fell within the scope of section 5(e) of the Act, and that the whole of Rs. 22,628-9-8, and not merely Rs. 1,570-10-7, should have been deducted from his assessable income. It ordered that the assessment be revised accordingly. The High Court refused to certify the case as a fit one, under article 133(1)(c) of the Constitution. But this court gave special leave to the appellant to appeal against the judgment and order of the High Court.

The relevant statutory provisions are as under. Section 2(a) defines "agricultural income" and section 2(r) defines "plantation" :

"2. (a) 'agricultural income' means -

Section 3 is the charging section and it directs that "agricultural income-tax at the rate or rates specified in Part I of the Schedule to this Act shall be charged for each financial year commencing from 1st April, 1955, in accordance with and subject to the provisions of this Act, on the total agricultural income of the previous year of every person. "Section 4 describes what is "total agricultural income". Section 5 is concerned with the computation of agricultural income and directs the deduction of various items. We are concerned with two sub- clauses and they are set out below :

"5. (e) any expenditure incurred in the previous year (not being in the nature of capital expenditure or personal expenses of the assessee) laid out or expended wholly and exclusively for the purpose of plantation; ...

(k) any interest paid in the previous year on any amount borrowed and actually spent on the plantation from which the agricultural income is derived :

Provided that the need for borrowing was genuine having due regard to the assets of the assessee at the time :

Provided further that the interest allowed under this clause shall be limited to six per cent. on an amount equivalent to twenty-five per cent. of the agricultural income from the plantation in that year."

The learned counsel for the State contends that the interest paid by the assessee is not deductible under section 5(e) of the Act on three grounds : first, it is in the nature of capital expenditure; secondly, it is a personal expenses of the assessee; and, thirdly, it is not laid out or expended wholly and exclusively for the purpose of the plantation.

Before advertng to the above grounds, it will be noticed that section 5(e) is word for word a reproduction of section 10(2)(xv) of the Income-tax Act, 1922, and as this court and the High Courts have on various occasions considered the said clause, these decision would be relevant for deciding the present case, which arises under the Act.

Is the payment of the said interest in the nature of capital expenditure or not ? Mr. Chetty urges that the assessee had bought the plantation with borrowed money and that was undoubtedly capital expenditure. He says that it follows logically from this that interest paid on the amount spent on the purchase of the plantation must also be capital expenditure. He invited our attention to a number of cases, with which we will shortly deal.

In order to determine whether an expenditure is revenue or capital expenditure, certain broad principles have to be borne in mind. This court formulated these principles in *Assam Bengal Cement Co. Ltd. v. Commissioner of Income-tax* in the following words :

This court further held that " one has got to apply these criteria, one after the other from the business point of view and come to the conclusion whether on a fair appreciation of the whole situation the expenditure incurred in a particular case is of the nature of capital expenditure or revenue expenditure in which latter event only it would be a deductible allowance under section 10(2)(xv) of the Indian Income-tax Act, 1922."

If we apply these principles to the facts of this case, the answer seems clear that the payment of interest is revenue expenditure. No new asset is acquired with it; no enduring benefit is obtained. Expenditure incurred was part of circulating or floating capital of the assessee. In ordinary commercial practice payment of interest would not be termed as capital expenditure.

The cases relied on by Mr. Chetty do not bear on the precise problem. We may, however, notice them in brief. In *S. Kuppuswami v. Commissioner of Income-tax* the assessee was held to have acquired the goodwill by paying a certain share of profits. This was held to be capital expenditure. In *Commissioner of Income-tax v. Siddareddy Venkatasubba Reddy*, the assessee had under certain agreements obtained mining rights in different plots of land for periods varying from five to nine years, and claimed deduction of the amounts paid by them under the said agreements. The High Court held the money expended for the acquisition of mining rights to be capital expenditure.

In *European Investment Trust Co. Ltd. v. Jackson*, the Court of Appeal was concerned with the interpretation of rule 3 of the Rules applicable to Cases I and II of Schedule D of the Income Tax Act, 1918 (8 and 9 Geo. V, c. 40). In the English Act there are a series of prohibitions; among other things prohibited to be deducted are any capital withdrawn from or any sum employed or intended to be employed as capital in such trade, profession or employment or vocation, and any annual interest or any annuity or annual payment payable out of profits. The English cases like the *European Investment Trust Co.* case 1 are distinguishable because in England there existed the prohibitions enumerated above. There are no such prohibitions in the Act with which we are concerned. But apart from these prohibitions, Lord Herschell observed in *Gresham Life Assurance Society v. Styles* as follows :

"I think the fourth rule was primarily designed to meet such a case as that in which a trader had contracted to make an annual payment out of his profits; as, for example, when he had agreed to make such a payment to a former partner or to a person who had made a loan on the terms of receiving such a payment. But for the rule it might

plausibly have been contended that in such a case a trader was only to return as his profits what remained after making such payment."

Accordingly, we hold that there is no force in the contention that the payment of interest was capital expenditure within section 5(e) of the Act.

The next point, namely, that the payment of interest was a personal expenses is equally without substance. We are unable to appreciate that any expense to discharge a personal obligation becomes a personal expense within section 5(e). Personal expenses would include expenses on the person of the assessee or to satisfy his personal needs such as clothes, food, etc., or purposes not related to the business for which the deduction is claimed.

The third ground raised by Mr. Chetty needs careful scrutiny. This court, after reviewing English and Indian cases, summarised this position in *Commissioner of Income-tax v. Malayalam Plantations Ltd.* as follows :

"The aforesaid discussion leads to the following result : The expression 'for the purpose of the business' is wider in scope than the expression 'for the purpose of earning profits'. Its range is wide : it may take in not only the day to day running of a business but also the rationalization of its administration and modernization of its machinery; it may include measures for the preservation of the business and for the protection of its assets and property from expropriation, coercive process or assertion of hostile title; it may also comprehend payment of statutory dues and taxes imposed as a precondition to commence or for the carrying on of a business. However wide the meaning of the expression may be, its limits are implicit in it. The purpose shall be for the purpose of the business, that is to say, the expenditure incurred shall be for the carrying on of the business and the assessee shall incur it in his capacity as a person carrying on the business. It cannot include sums spent by the assessee as ag

Before deciding the question, it is necessary to mention three other decisions of this court. In *Eastern Investment Co. Ltd. v. Commissioner of Income-tax* this court held that interest on debentures issued by an investment company was to be allowed as business expenditure under section 12(2) of the Indian Income-tax Act. It observed that this being an investment company, if it borrowed and utilised the same for its investments on which it earned income, the interest paid by it on the loans will clearly be a permissible deduction under section 12(2) of the Act. Earlier, it had observed that *Scottish North American Trust v. Farmer* was a somewhat similar case.

In *Dharamvir Dhir v. Commissioner of Income-tax* this court held that a payment of 11/16 of the net profits of the assessee's business was an expenditure wholly and exclusively laid out for the purposes of the business as the assessee had arranged financing of the business on the best terms that he could manage.

In *Commissioner of Income-tax v. Jagannath Kissonlal* this court upheld the claim of the assessee to deduct the amount it had to pay the bank on a joint promissory note.

The only case cited by Mr. Chetty, which has some resemblance to the present case is the decision of the Bombay High Court in *Metro Theatre, Bombay Ltd. v. Commissioner of Income-tax*. But this case is distinguishable, for the interest claimed

to be deducted, and which was disallowed, was in respect of the amount borrowed for acquiring land on 999 years lease, on which a cinema was subsequently built. There was no immediate connection between the interest paid and the cinema business. As Kania J., as the then was, put it, "if the interest was not paid, the result would be not necessarily the stoppage of the business of showing cinema films, but the assessee will not acquire the lease of this property."

Applying the above principles to the facts of this case, it seems to us that it is impossible to dissociate the character of the assessee as the owner of the plantation and as a person working the plantation. The assessee had bought the plantation for working it as a plantation, i.e. , for growing tea, coffee and rubber. The payment of interest on the amount borrowed for the purchase of the plantation when the whole transaction of purchase and the working of the plantation is viewed as an integrated whole, is so closely related to the plantation that the expenditure can be said to be laid out or expended wholly and exclusively for the purpose of the plantation. In this connection, it is pertinent to note that what the Act purports to tax is agricultural income and not agricultural receipts. From the agricultural receipts must be deducted all expenses which in ordinary commercial accounting must be debited against the receipts. There is nothing in the Act which prohibits such expenses from being deducted. No

In the result, we agree with the High Court that the deduction claimed by the assessee fell within the scope of section 5(e) of the Act, and that the whole of Rs. 22,628-9-8 and not merely Rs. 1,570-10-7 should have been deducted from his assessable income. The appeal fails and is dismissed with costs.

Appeal dismissed.

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