

State of Karnataka

Vs

K. H. Annegowda and Another

Criminal Appeal No. 361 of 1975

(P.N. Bhagwati, A.C. Gupta JJ)

08.12.1976

JUDGMENT

BHAGWATI, J. –

1. This appeal by special leave raises a short but interesting question of law relating to the interpretation of certain provisions of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898 (hereinafter referred to as the "Old Code"). The facts giving rise to the appeal are few and may be briefly stated as follows.

2. One Bobegowda was murdered and in regard to this incident a case was registered at the police station on October 13, 1973 as crime No. 62 of 1973. The police investigated the case after the investigation was complete, a chargesheet was filed against the respondents in the court of Judicial Magistrate, First Class, Chickmagalur and the case was registered as C. C. 2319 of 1973. The learned Magistrate held an inquiry in accordance with the provisions of Chapter XVIII of the old Code and being of the opinion that the respondents should be committed for trial, the learned Magistrate framed a charge against the respondents for having committed an offence under Section 302 read with Section 34 of the Indian Penal Code. The learned Magistrate then read and explained the charge to the respondent and after giving an opportunity to the respondents to give in a list the names of witnesses whom they wished to be summoned to give evidence, the learned Magistrate made an order committing the respondents for trial by the court of sessions, Chickmagalur. This order of committal was made on March 15, 1974 and in pursuance of it, the records of the case were forwarded to the court of sessions, Chickmagalur where they reached on March 23, 1974 and the case was registered as S.C. 5 of 1974. The Sessions Judge fixed the trial of the case on July 15, 1974 but before that date, the Public Prosecutor filed an application on June 29, 1974 praying for permission to withdraw from the prosecution under Section 494 of the old Code. The learned Sessions Judge by an order passed on the same day accorded permission to the Public Prosecutor to withdraw from the prosecution and 'discharged' the respondents in respect of the offence charged against them. The State thereafter ordered fresh investigation into the offence and in consequence of such investigation, a new chargesheet was filed against the respondents and three other accused in the court of Judicial Magistrate, First Class, Chickmagalur. Since this chargesheet was filed after April 1, 1974 when the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (hereinafter referred to as "New Code") had come into force, the learned Magistrate, following the provisions of the new Code, committed the respondents and the other three accused to stand their trial before the court of the Sessions Judge, Chickmagalur for the same offence. When the case came up for hearing before the Sessions Judge, the respondents made an application contending that by virtue of the order dated June 29, 1974 made by the Sessions Judge under Section 494 of the old Code, the respondents had been acquitted and they were, therefore, not liable to be prosecuted again for the same offence in view of Section 300 of the new Code. The Sessions Judge rejected the application, taking the view that the

respondent were discharged and not acquitted under the order dated June 29, 1974 and, therefore, Section 300 of the new Code was not applicable and there was no bar against their fresh prosecution for the same offence. The respondents challenged this order by preferring a revision application to the High Court. This revision application was allowed and the High Court held that though the order passed by the Sessions Judge directed that the respondents be 'discharged', the legal effect of this order was to bring about the acquittal of the respondents since the withdrawal from the prosecution was made after the charge had been framed and the respondents having been acquitted under that order, the bar of Section 300 of the new Code was attracted and the respondents were not liable to be prosecuted again for the same offence. This order made by the High Court is challenged in the present appeal preferred by the State with special leave obtained from this Court.

3. It may be pointed out that before the High Court it was contended on behalf of the State that the earlier case before the Sessions Judge, viz., Sessions Case 5 of 1974, was governed by the provisions of the new Code and, therefore, in view of Section 228 of the new Code, it was the obligation of the Sessions Judge to frame a charge before proceeding with the trial and since the withdrawal from the prosecution was effected before the framing of such charge by the Sessions Judge, the order passed by the Sessions Judge amounted to an order of discharge and not of acquittal. This contention was, however, not pressed at the hearing of the appeal before us and it was conceded, and in our opinion rightly, that the earlier case before the Sessions Judge was governed by the provisions of the old Code and the new Code had no application to it. Section 484 of the new Code clearly provides that where a trial is pending immediately before the commencement of the new Code, it shall be proceeded with in accordance with the provisions of the old Code as if the new Code were not in force. Here in the present case the Judicial Magistrate had already made an order of committal on March 15, 1974 and pursuant to that order, the records of the case had reached the court of the Sessions Judge on March 23, 1974. The case was, therefore, already before the court of sessions prior to April 1, 1974 and it was pending before that court for trial on April 1, 1974 when the new Code came into force. It is immaterial as to when the case was actually registered and a number given to it. Since the case was pending for trial before the Sessions Court on April 1, 1974, it was liable to be tried in accordance with the provisions of the old Code and it was for this, reason that the application for withdrawal from the prosecution was also made by the Public Prosecutor under Section 494 of the old Code and not under the corresponding provision of the new Code. Section 494 of the old Code provides that any Public Prosecutor may, with the consent of the court, in cases tried by jury before the return of the verdict and in other cases, before the judgment is pronounced, withdraw from the prosecution of any person either generally or in respect of any one or more of the offences for which he is tried and the section then goes on to add that upon such withdrawal -

(a) if it is made before a charge has been framed, the accused shall be discharged (in respect of such offence or offences);

(b) if it is made after a charge has been framed, or when under this Code no charge is required, he shall be acquitted (in respect of such offence or offences).

The withdrawal from the prosecution in the present case having been made under this section, it is clear that if it was made before a charge was framed, the respondents would be discharged but if it was made after a charge had been framed, the consequence would be that the respondents would be acquitted. It, therefore, becomes material to inquire whether at the date when the withdrawal from the prosecution was made, a charge had been framed against the respondents or not. Whether the order of the Sessions Judge granting consent to the withdrawal from the prosecution amounted to an

order of discharge or acquittal would depend upon the answer to this question. It may be pointed out that it is of no consequence that the Sessions Judge directed the respondents to be 'discharged' because if the legal effect of the order was to acquit the respondents, then the incorrect use of the expression 'discharged' by the Sessions Judge would not alter the legal position and convert the order of acquittal into one of discharge.

4. Now, in order to determine whether the withdrawal from the prosecution was made before the framing of the charge or after, it is necessary to notice the scheme of the relevant provisions of the old Code. Sessions Case 5 of 1974 in which the withdrawal was made was committed to the sessions court by the Judicial Magistrate under the provisions of Chapter XVIII of the old Code. The proceeding before the Judicial Magistrate was instituted on a police report and the learned Magistrate, therefore, followed the procedure specified in Section 207A. This section lays down a special procedure to be adopted in proceedings instituted on police report with a view to expeditions disposal of criminal cases. Sub-section (1) provides that the magistrate, on receipt of the report forwarded under Section 173, shall fix a date for the purpose of holding an enquiry and sub-section (2) empowers the magistrate to issue process for compelling the attendance of any witness or the production of any document. The magistrate is required by sub-section (3) to satisfy himself at the commencement of the enquiry that the documents referred in Section 173 have been furnished to the accused. Sub-section (4) then requires the magistrate to proceed to take the evidence of such persons as may be produced by the prosecution as witnesses to the actual commission of the offence and also empowers the magistrate to take the evidence of any other witness for the prosecution if he thinks it necessary to do so in the interest of justice. The accused is given liberty under sub-section (5) to cross-examine the witnesses examined under sub-section (4) and sub-section (6) provides that the magistrate shall, if necessary, examine the accused for the purpose of enabling him to explain any circumstance appearing in the evidence against him and thereafter give to the prosecution and the accused an opportunity of being heard. If the magistrate, at the end of this procedure, feels that there is no ground for committing the accused for trial, he is bound to discharge the accused under sub-section (6). But where "upon such evidence being taken, such documents being considered, such examination (if any) being made and the prosecution and the accused being given an opportunity of being heard", the magistrate forms an opinion that the accused should be committed for trial, sub-section (7) provides that the magistrate shall frame a charge under his had declaring with what offence the accused is charged. Sub-section (8) then requires the magistrate to read and explain the charge to the accused and to give a copy thereof to him free of costs. Sub-section (9) provides that the accused shall then be required to give in at once, orally in writing, a list of the persons, if any, whom he wishes to be summoned to give evidence at the trial and when the accused on being required to give the list under sub-section (9) declines to do so, or gives such list, the magistrate is empowered under sub-section (10) to make an order committing the accused for trial by the court of session. It will thus be seen that, according to this procedure, the magistrate is required to frame a charge and to read and explain it to the accused before making an order of committal and the accused is in fact committed to stand his trial before the court of session on the charge so framed. This was the procedure followed by the judicial Magistrate in the present case and in accordance with it, the Judicial Magistrate framed a charge against the respondents and committed them for trial to the court of session on this charge.

5. The procedure to be followed by the sessions court when an accused is committed to it for trial is laid down in Chapter XXIII of the old Code. Section 271 provides that when the court is ready to commence trial, the accused shall appear or be brought before it and the charge shall be read out and explained to him and he shall be asked whether he is guilty of the offence charged or claims to be tried. That is the first step to be taken by the sessions court in relation to the case committed to it for

trial. Now, obviously, the charge that is required to be read out and explained to the accused is the charge that has been framed by the committing Magistrate under sub-section (7) of Section 207A. There is no provision in Chapter XXIII which requires the sessions court to frame a charge before proceeding with the trial of the accused. That is plainly unnecessary because a charge is already framed by the magistrate when he commits the accused for trial to the sessions court and that is the charge on which the sessions court is to try the accused. Of course, the sessions court is given an overriding power under section 226 that when I finds that an accused is committed for trial without a charge or the charge is imperfect or erroneous, it may frame a charge or add to or otherwise alter the charge, as the case may be, having regard to the rules contained in the old Code as to the framing of charges. But this is only an enabling power to frame a charge where, for some reason or the other, no charge has been framed by the committing Magistrate or to correct a charge where the charge is imperfect or erroneous. It does not say that in every case the court of session shall frame a new charge before proceeding with the trial. On the contrary, it clearly postulates that ordinarily there would be a charge framed by the committing Magistrate and it is on that charge that the accused would be tried, unless the court of session finds it necessary to alter or amend the charge. It is interesting to compare the procedure under the new Code where there is no provision for framing a charge by the committing Magistrate and it is only when the court of session to which the case is committed finds, after considering the record of the case and the documents submitted therewith and after hearing the submissions of the accused and the prosecution, that there is ground for presuming that the accused has committed an offence which is exclusively trial by the court of session, that it is required by Section 228 of the new Code to frame a charge against the accused. The charge against the accused under the procedure prescribed in the new Code is to be framed for the first time by the court of session while according to the procedure prescribed under the old Code, the charge is framed by the committing Magistrate and the court of session is merely given the power to alter or amend the charge, if it thinks necessary to do so. It is, therefore, clear that when the court of session commences the trial of an accused, there is already before it a charge framed by the committing Magistrate and it is that charge, unless altered or amended under Section 226, that is required to be read out and explained to the accused and on which the plea of the accused is required to be taken. It must follow inevitably as a necessary corollary from this proposition that when the prosecution against an accused who has been committed for trial is allowed to be withdrawn by the court of session under Section 494, the withdrawal of the prosecution would be after the framing of the charge against the accused and it must result in the acquittal of the accused under clause (b) of that section.

6. We find that this view which we are taking has prevailed with the Madras High Court since the last about eight or nine decades. The Madras High Court held as far back as 1888 in *Queen Empress v. Sivarama* [(1888) 12 Mad 35] that where an accused is committed to stand his trial before a court of session on a charge and the prosecution is withdrawn by the public prosecutor with the consent of the court of session under Section 494, the accused is entitled to be acquitted and not merely discharged. The same view was reiterated by the Madras High Court in *In re Velayudha Mudali* [AIR 1949 Mad 508 : ILR 1949 Mad 946 : 50 Cri LJ 698]. We are in agreement with the view taken in these two decisions of the Madras High Court.

7. We accordingly affirm the decision of the High Court holding that by reason of the order dated June 29, 1974 passed by the Sessions Judge granting consent to the withdrawal from the prosecution in the earlier case, the respondents were acquitted and in view of Section 300 of the new Code, they were not liable to be tried again for the same offence and dismiss the appeal.

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