

Zafar Khan and Others

Vs

Board of Revenue, U. P. and Others

Civil Appeal No. 1514 of 1970

(D. A. Desai, V. B. Eradi JJ)

31.07.1984

JUDGMENT

DESAI, J. –

1. Appellants claiming to be the Khudkasht holders of the zamindars of the plots of land involved in dispute filed a suit for possession under Section 180 of the U.P. Tenancy Act, 1939 ('Tenancy Act' for short) against respondents 4 and 5 ('respondents' for short) who were and are in actual and physical possession and cultivating the land. This suit ended in a decree in favour of the appellants on September 30, 1948 and in execution of the decree, the appellants assert that they obtained actual and physical possession from the respondents on December 2, 1948. On the advent of the U.P. Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act, 1950 ('1950 Act' for short) the appellants claimed to have acquired the status of bhumidhars in respect of the plots of land in dispute.

2. The respondents moved an application under Section 232 of the 1950 Act against the appellants alleging that as they were in actual and physical possession during the year 1356 Fasli and were subsequently dispossessed in view of the provision contained in Section 20 of the 1950 Act, they have acquired the status of adhvasis and therefore, they are entitled to regain possession. This application was made to the Assistant Collector within the prescribed period of limitation. The Assistant Collector rejected the application holding that as the respondents were not in possession through the entire year of 1356 Fasli but only for a part of the year, they have not acquired the status of adhvasis and were not entitled to regain possession. The respondents carried the matter in appeal to the Additional Commissioner who held that the respondents had acquired the status of adhvasis and were entitled to regain possession and accordingly allowed the appeal by his order dated June 15, 1956 and in compliance with this order, the respondents regained actual and physical possession of the land and since then till today they are in possession of the same.

3. According to the appellants the village/villages in which the plots of land involved in the dispute are situated, were put into consolidation under the U.P. Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1953 ('1953 Act' for short) and therefore, the Additional Commissioner had no jurisdiction to decide the appeal of the respondents on merits but should have stayed the same. In the mean time according to the appellants a statement under Section 8 and 8-A of the 1953 Act was published in which according to them they were shown as bhumidhars of the plots in question and the respondents had filed to object to the entries. However, it appear that since the appeal preferred by the respondents was allowed by the Additional Commissioner, pursuant to his judgment the entries in the statement were corrected in favour of the respondents and they regained actual and physical possession of the land. The appellants carried the matter in appeal to the Board of Revenue, which was allowed holding that once the village/villages in which the plots involved in the dispute are situated have been put into

consolidation and a notification under Section 4 of the 1953 Act is issued, the Additional Commissioner should have stayed the appeal as the law then stood, and not heard it on merits and allowed the same. The appeal was accordingly remitted to the Additional Commissioner to retain it on his file and stayed further hearing of the appeal.

4. The appellants on the reversal of the decision of the Additional Commissioner moved an application under Section 144 of the Code of Civil Procedure, before the Sub-Divisional Officer on September 11, 1958 praying for restitution of possession. Thus started the second round of litigation. The Sub-Divisional Officer by his Order dated April 14, 1959 rejected the application of the appellants holding that as the rival claims have been decided under the 1953 Act, he has no jurisdiction to reopen the proceeding concluded before the authorities under the 1953 Act and the decision therein recorded has become final. He was further of the opinion that if any redressal consequent upon the reversal of the decision of the Additional Commissioner was to be obtained, the appellants should have moved the authorities under the 1953 Act which they having failed to do, no relief by way of restitution can be granted by the Sub-Divisional Officer. The appellants carried the matter in appeal to the Additional Commissioner who by his order dated July 7, 1959 upheld the decision of the Sub-Divisional Officer and dismissed the appeal. The appellants after an unsuccessful appeal to the Board of Revenue approached the Allahabad High Court in Writ Petition No. 622 of 1960. The writ petition was dismissed by a learned Single Judge of the High Court holding that as the authorities under the Consolidation Act - 1953 Act have allotted the plots in question to the respondents on the strength of the order of the Additional Commissioner, on the reversal of that order, the appellants should have approached the authorities under the 1953 Act for recording them as the holders of the plots and for correction of the statement by filing appropriate proceeding. It was held that as the appellants failed to seek relief before the authorities having jurisdiction in the matter, they cannot succeed in a proceeding under Section 144 of the Code of Civil Procedure because if such a relief is granted, it would tantamount to interfering with the decisions recorded by the authorities under the 1953 Act which have become final. It was observed that "after the final decision of the consolidation authorities it is always open to the petitioners to move the first appellate court to decide the appeal in terms of the decision of the consolidation authorities or it was open to them to have moved the appropriate consolidation authorities at appropriate time". That having not been done, they were not entitled to relief at the hands of the court. The writ petition was accordingly rejected on January 27, 1966.

5. Thereupon the appellants started the third round of litigation. After having concurrently failed before all authorities for obtaining relief under Section 144 of the Code of Civil Procedure, the appellants filed Suit No. 73 of 1967 under Sections 209 and 229-B of the 1950 Act against the respondents in August 1966. In this suit they claimed a decree for possession on the ground that as they are bhumidhars of the plots in question under the 1950 Act, and as against them the respondents are not entitled to retain possession they are entitled to be reinducted in possession. It was alleged that the respondents cannot continue to remain in possession which they obtained under the order of the Additional Commissioner because that order no more exists and has been reversed by the Board of Revenue at the instance of the appellants. The suit was resisted by the respondents and the State of U.P. which had been impleaded as one of the defendants inter alia contending that the suit is barred under Section 49 of the 1953 Act as also it was barred by limitation. It was also contended that the plots were finally allotted in consolidation proceedings to the respondents and that order having not been challenged, the same has become final and the Revenue Court has no jurisdiction to nullify that order even if it is satisfied that that order was not consistent with law or facts. The learned Assistant Collector held that on the date of vesting of the estate, the appellants became the bhumidhars and the suit is not barred under Section 49 of the 1953 Act. It was also held

that even though the suit was barred by limitation, the appellants were entitled to the benefit of the provision contained in Section 14 of the Limitation Act. It was further held that as against the appellants, the respondents were not entitled to retain possession as the order under which they obtained possession no more exists. Consistent with these findings, the appellants' suit for possession was decreed.

6. The respondents preferred an appeal to the Additional Commissioner who by his judgment and order dated August 23, 1967 allowed the same and set aside the judgment of the Assistant Collector and dismissed the appellants' suit for possession inter alia holding that a decision on an application under Section 232 of the 1950 Act would operate as res judicata in respect of the suit of the appellants from which the appeal arose and the suit was also barred by Section 49 of the 1953 Act nor were the present appellants-plaintiffs in the suit entitled to the benefit of the provision contained in Section 14 of the Limitation Act. The suit accordingly was liable to be dismissed as barred by limitation. Consistent with these findings the appeal of the respondents was allowed and the plaintiffs' suit was dismissed. The appellants' second appeal to the Board of Revenue was summarily dismissed whereupon they moved the High Court in Writ Petition No. 19 of 1968. A learned Single Judge of the High Court rejected the writ petition holding that the finding of the statutory authorities that the suit was barred by limitation was unexceptional and that they were rightly denied the benefit of the provision contained in Section 14 of the Limitation Act. The learned Judge also held that the suit of the appellants was also barred by Section 10 (sic) of the Code of Civil Procedure. An application was moved before the learned Judge seeking an amendment in the writ petition so as to be able to question the correctness of the order of allotment made by the authorities under 1953 Act in favour of the respondents and praying for quashing the same. The learned Judge was not persuaded to grant the amendment application and the same was rejected. The learned Judge also held that the respondents had become adhvavis and were entitled to regain possession both in view of Section 20 of the 1950 Act and clause (c) of sub-section (1) of Section 27 of the United Provinces Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1947. While holding that the respondents had become adhvavis under Section 20, the learned Judge observed that a person evicted after June 30, 1948 but within the year 1356 Fasli would be deemed to be in possession in that year till the date of his ejection and he may thus be in possession for a part of the year, but if he is recorded in the year 1356 Fasli, he would be a person recorded as an occupant in 1356 Fasli within the meaning of the first part of clause (b)(i), even though he may not have been actually in possession throughout the year and thus the necessary requirements to clothe him with the status of adhvavis would be wholly fulfilled. Consistent with this finding, the writ petition was dismissed with costs. Undaunted by the continuous repeated rejection of their claim, the appellants carried the matter in Special Appeal No. 92 of 1969 which was heard by a Division Bench of the Allahabad High Court presided over by the then learned Chief Justice. Before the Division Bench only two points were canvassed : (1) whether the appellants were entitled to the benefit of the provision contained in Section 14 of the Limitation Act and (2) whether the suit was barred under Section 49 of 1953 Act. On both these points, the Division Bench agreed with the learned Single Judge and rejected the appeal of the appellants. Hence this appeal by certificate under Article 133(1)(a) of the Constitution.

7. At the commencement of the hearing, Mr Lodha urged that the appeal is filed by certificate under Article 133(1)(a) and (c) of the Constitution which would mean that apart from the valuation, the Division Bench granting the certificate was satisfied that there was substantial question of law of general public importance which ought to be decided by this Court. However, when we examined the certificate and the order granting the same, it transpired that the certificate was granted under Article 133(1)(a) of the Constitution and not under Article 133(1)(c) though there are some observations which may generate a belief that the High Court was satisfied that the case involved a

substantial question of law of general public importance which ought to be decided by this Court.

8. Mr C. M. Lodha, learned counsel urged that once the order of Additional Commissioner dated June 15, 1956 allowing the appeal of the respondents against the dismissal of their application under Section 232 of the 1950 Act by the Sub-Divisional Officer was reversed, they have neither a legal nor equitable right to be in possession and that the appellants are being pilloried and pushed from pillar to post denying substantial justice on technical grounds. His grievance was that on a very narrow view of law a genuine claim is refused. Apart from the two legal contentions, even this submission does not commend to us. Prior to the introduction of the 1950 Act, there used to be a vertical hierarchy of absentee landlords who thrived at the cost of the actual cultivators who had no security of tenure. It was a feudal order. To remove all intermediaries between the actual cultivator and the State, 1950 Act was introduced with the avowed object especially of abolition of Zamindari System and to assure to the actual cultivator security to tenure and fixity of rent. The promise of independence of ensuring the tillers of the soil to be the owners thereof, was being gradually implemented. The Zamindari Abolition Act was a step in that direction. Leaving aside all the nuances of agrarian reforms, absentee landlords and intermediaries who thrived on the labour of actual cultivators were to be removed and the burden on the land was thus to be reduced and the cultivators were to be protected against exploitation. It is notorious that before such radical step of abolition of vested interest in the land is taken, there is a fanfare of publicity with the result that those whose interests were to be affected would try to screen them away from the purview of the proposed statute by taking such steps at a time when the protection was not available to the tenants and offer a fait accompli when the agrarian reform legislation is put on the statute book. The facts in this case would illustrate the point and would negative any claim made on behalf of the appellants.

9. The entire claim of the appellants throughout this litigation spreading roughly over three and a half decades is founded upon a decree obtained under Section 180 of the U.P. Tenancy Act, 1939 against respondents 4 and 5. We repeatedly asked Mr Lodha to tell us under what title the appellants sought possession and succeeded in evicting the respondents who were admittedly the actual cultivators and against whom the suit for eviction was filed. We practically waited for the answer in vain, save and except being told that as that aspect was never in dispute, relevant facts were not available, nor the decree is on record. However, what emerges from facts as conceded on behalf of the appellants is that they were the Khudkasht holders of the erstwhile zamindars and in that capacity they filed suit for possession against the respondents under Section 180 of the 1939 Act. One has not to labour much to appreciate who are Khudkasht holders of the zamindars. They can be styled as alter ego or proxies of the zamindars. In other words, this proxy of zamindars filed a suit for eviction of the respondents and as the law then stood succeeded as per decree dated September 30, 1948 and in execution whereof of December 2, 1948 dispossessed the actual cultivators the respondents and got into possession. This was done when agrarian reform law was on the anvil. The entire edifice of the present litigation by the appellants is founded on this decree, a decree which because of the subsequent developments of law has become legally unsound and equitably unjust.

10. On the advent of the 1950 Act, the appellants assert that they became the bhumidhars of the plots. Assuming that the appellants have acquired the status of bhumidhars, the same was subject to the provision contained in Section 20(b) read with Explanation I of 1950 Act according to which the respondents would become adhvasis of the plots. It is not necessary to examine this aspect in detail because the learned Single Judge of the High Court found as a fact that for a portion of the year 1356 Fasli, the respondents were in possession as occupants and were cultivating the land and their names were so recorded in the khasra of 1356 Fasli and that they were dispossessed but were

entitled to regain possession under Section 27 of the United Provinces Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1947 and therefore they have become adhvasis of the plots. No amount of argument of Mr Lodha could persuade us to disturb this finding. It is correct in law, consistent with the record and eminently just. Such adhvasis if they had lost possession were entitled to regain the same by making an appropriate application under Section 232 of the 1950 Act. The respondents did move such an application which ultimately was accepted by the Additional Commissioner. This is not in dispute. Therefore, primarily, legally and additionally in equity, the respondents have an ironclad case to be in possession against appellants. Therefore we find no substance in the contention of Mr Lodha that an eminently just claim is refused on narrow technical view of the matter. The case is the other way round.

11. Reverting to the two points on which the suit of the appellants was dismissed, Mr Lodha pointed out that the High Court and all the statutory authorities were in error in denying to the appellants in the facts and circumstances of this case, the benefit of the provision contained in Section 14 of the Limitation Act and dismissed the suit as barred by limitation. After the appellants lost upto the High Court in the proceeding arising upon their application under Section 144 of the Code of Civil Procedure, the appellants filed a suit under Sections 209 and 229-B of the 1950 Act. Under the order of the Additional Commissioner, the respondents obtained possession of the plots on June 21, 1956. The present suit was filed in August 1966. Suit under Section 209 of the 1950 Act has to be filed within the prescribed period of limitation and it is not in dispute that the suit filed by the appellants in August, 1966 was filed beyond the period of limitation. The appellants submitted that they are entitled to the benefit of the provision contained in Section 14 of the Limitations Act. The learned Judge and the Division Bench of the High Court have concurrently held that the appellants were not entitled to the benefit claimed by them.

12. Section 14(1) of the Limitation Act reads as under :

14. (1) In computing the period of limitation for any suit the time during which the plaintiff has been prosecuting with due diligence another civil proceeding, whether in a court of first instance or of appeal or revision, against the defendant shall be excluded, where the proceeding relates to the same matter in issue and is prosecuted in good faith in a court which, from defect of jurisdiction or other cause of a like nature, is unable to entertain it.

13. In order to attract the application of Section 14(1), the parties seeking its benefit must satisfy the court that : (i) that the party as the plaintiff was prosecuting another civil proceeding with due diligence; (ii) that the earlier proceeding and the later proceeding was being prosecuted in good faith in a court which, from defect of jurisdiction or other cause of a like nature, is unable to entertain it. It may be assumed that the earlier proceeding under Section 144 of the Code of Civil Procedure was a civil proceeding for the purpose of Section 14. It may as well be assumed in favour of the appellants that they were prosecuting the same with due diligence and in good faith, as they relentlessly carried the proceeding upto the High Court invoking its extraordinary jurisdiction. The first of the aforementioned three cumulative conditions can be said to have been satisfied.

14. The appellants must further satisfy the court that the earlier proceeding i.e. the one under Section 144 of the Code of Civil Procedure related to the same matter in issue, as in the present suit. There the appellants are not on sure ground. In a proceeding under Section 144 of the Code of Civil Procedure, the party applying for restitution has to satisfy the court of first instance that a decree under which it was made to part with the property is varied or reversed or modified in appeal or

revision or other proceedings or is set aside or modified in any suit instituted for the purpose and therefore, restitution must be ordered. Section 144 is founded on the equitable principle that one who has taken advantage of a decree of a court should not be permitted to retain it, if the decree is reversed or modified. That is why the marginal note to Section 144(1) reads 'application for restitution' and the word 'restitution' in its etymological sense means restoring to a party on the modification, variation or reversal of a decree what has been lost to him in execution of the decree or in direct consequence of the decree. In such a proceeding, the party seeking restitution is not required to satisfy the court about its title or right to the property save and except showing its deprivation under a decree and the reversal or variation of the decree. On the reversal by the Board of Revenue in the appeal filed by the appellants of the order of the Additional Commissioner under which the respondents obtained possession, the appellants merely claimed in their application under Section 144 that in view of the reversal of the order by the Board of Revenue the respondents are not entitled to retain possession and that restitution should be ordered because the appellants lost possession under the order of the Additional Commissioner which was reversed by the Board of Revenue. The cause of action was the reversal of the order of the Additional Commissioner. When they failed to obtain restitution, the appellants filed a substantive suit under Sections 209 and 229-B of the 1950 Act in which they claimed that they have become the bhumidhars of the plots in dispute and that the respondents are not entitled to retain possession as their possession is not in accordance with the provisions of 1950 Act. It was a suit on title as bhumidhars for possession against respondents alleging unauthorised retention of possession. It had nothing to do with the order of the Additional Commissioner. In this suit the appellants were bound to prove that the respondents were not entitled to retain possession under any of the provisions of the 1950 Act. Incidentally, the order of the Additional Commissioner and its reversal would figure as evidence but it is difficult to accept that the subsequent proceedings relates to the same matter in issue as was involved in the earlier proceedings. In the application under Section 144 Code of Civil Procedure only allegation to be proved for relief of restitution is that the decree or order under which respondents obtained possession from appellants has been reversed, modified or varied. They need not prove title or right to be in possession. In the suit, not only title to the land as bhumidhars must be proved but also the respondents had not a title of title to retain possession. And respondents can allege and prove that under the very 1950 Act under which appellants became bhumidhars, the respondents have become adhvasis entitled to retain possession against the appellants. This defence was not open to them in the proceeding under Section 144. It was, however, submitted that the appellants were seeking in both the proceedings, possession of the plots involved in the dispute on the ground that they are ultimately entitled to the possession thereof and the possession of the respondents vis-a-vis the appellants was unauthorised and they were not entitled to retain possession against the appellants. This is far from convincing. One can at best say there is a grey area and that as the provision of Section 14 is required to be construed liberally, therefore we may not have denied the benefit if this was the only aspect against the appellants.

15. The question however is whether the third condition for attracting Section 14(1) is satisfied. The appellants must further satisfy the court that the earlier proceeding failed on account of defect of jurisdiction or other cause of a like nature. Now at no stage it was contended that the authority to whom the application was made for restitution had no jurisdiction to entertain the application, nor through the course of the proceedings upto the High Court anyone, anywhere, questioned the jurisdiction of the authority to grant restitution. Therefore, it can be safely said that the previous proceeding did not fail on account of defect of jurisdiction.

16. The next limb of the submission was that as in the former proceeding restitution was refused on the ground that in the proceeding under the 1953 Act the land in dispute was allotted to the

respondents and the allotment had become final, it can safely be said that the proceeding failed on account of a cause of like nature such as defect of jurisdiction and the appellants would be entitled to exclude the time spent in that proceeding while computing the period of limitation in the suit. It is true that where the expression as a whole reads "from defect of jurisdiction or other cause of a like nature, is unable to entertain it", the expression "cause of a like nature" will have to be read ejusdem generis with the expression "defect of jurisdiction". So construed the expression "other cause of a like nature" must be so interpreted as to convey something analogous to the proceedings words "from defect of jurisdiction". The defect of jurisdiction goes to the root of the matter as the court is incompetent to entertain the proceedings. The proceedings may as well fail for some other defect. Not all such defects can be said to be analogous to defect of jurisdiction. Therefore the expression "other cause of a like nature" on which some light is shed by the Explanation (c) to Section 14 which provides "misjoinder of parties or of causes of action shall be deemed to be a cause of a like nature with defect of jurisdiction", must take its colour and content from the just preceding expression, "defect of jurisdiction". Prima facie it appears that there must be some preliminary objection which if it succeeds, the court would be incompetent to entertain the proceeding on merits, such defect could be said to be "of the like nature" as defect of jurisdiction. Conversely if the party seeking benefit of the provision of Section 14 failed to get the relief in earlier proceeding not with regard to anything connected with the, jurisdiction of the court or some other defect of a like nature, it would not be entitled to the benefit of Section 14. Where, therefore, the party failed in the earlier proceeding on merits and not on defect of jurisdiction or other cause of a like nature, it would not be entitled to the benefit of Section 14 of the Limitation Act. (See *India Electric Works Ltd. v. James Mantosh* ((1971) 2 SCR 397 : (1971) 1 SCC 24 : AIR 1971 SC 2313).)

17. The appellants failed in the earlier proceeding not on the ground that the authority had no jurisdiction to entertain the application nor on the ground that there was any other defect of a like nature, but on merits inasmuch as the authorities and the High Court held that in view of the decision of the authorities under 1953 Act, the appellants are not entitled to restitution. That was the decision on merits of the dispute and the appellants' application was rejected. Therefore, the High Court rightly declined to grant benefit of the provision of Section 14 of the Limitation Act to the appellants.

18. The second contention of the respondents which found favour with the High Court was that the suit of the plaintiffs was barred by Section 49 of the 1953 Act. Section 49 reads as under :

49. Bar to civil jurisdiction. - Notwithstanding anything contained in any other law for the time being in force, the declaration and adjudication of rights of tenure-holders in respect of land lying in an area, for which a notification has been issued under sub-section (2) of Section 4 or adjudication of any other right arising out of consolidation proceedings and in regard to which a proceeding could or ought to have been taken under the Act, shall be done in accordance with the provisions of the Act and no civil or revenue court shall entertain any suit or proceeding with respect to rights in such land or with respect to any other matters for which a proceeding could or ought to have been taken under the Act.

The admitted facts are that the authority under the 1953 Act allotted the plots in question to the respondents. It may be that the decision may appear to be erroneous inasmuch as it was founded on the decision of the Additional Commissioner in favour of the respondents which was reversed by the Board of Revenue. The question is, once the allotment under 1953 Act became final, would a suit lie before the civil or revenue court with respect to rights in land or with respect to any other

matter for which a proceeding could or ought to have been taken under the 1953 Act ? When the village in which the plots in dispute are situated was put into consolidation was not made clear to us. But the statutory authorities and the High Court while dismissing the appeal of the appellants had noticed that the village was put into consolidation several years before the suit from which the present appeal arises was filed and village was denotified in the year 1958. Once the village was denotified, the allotment made under the 1953 Act became final. The final allotment cannot be questioned by the suit before civil or revenue court in view of the bar enacted in Section 49.

19. Mr Lodha, however, urged that when the matter was before the learned Single Judge in the High Court an application for amendment of the writ petition was moved on behalf of the appellants seeking to challenge that decision of the authorities under the 1953 Act by which the names of the respondents were introduced in the plots and the allotments were made in favour of them. This application for amendment was rejected by the learned Single Judge. The point was not canvassed before the Division Bench and we are of the opinion that it is of no use trying to infuse life into this carcass after a lapse of nearly two decades. Further Section 232-A which was introduced by Section 48 of Act XX of 1954 in the 1950 Act conferred right on adhvasi to eject anyone who has dispossessed him and to such a proceedings the provision of Section 209 will mutatis mutandis apply as if he was an asami. The provision would have certainly enabled the respondents to claim possession from the appellants even if they were bhumidhars on the ground that the respondents were adhivasis as held by the High Court. No useful purpose would therefore, be served by reopening the orders and decision of the authorities under the 1950 Act which have become final.

20. These were all the contentions urged in the appeal and as we find no merit in any of them the appeal fails and is dismissed with no order as to costs.

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