

In Re : Harijai Singh and Another In Re : Vijay Kumar

Contempt Petitions Nos. 206-207 of 1996 In Writ Petition (C) No. 26 of 1995

17.09.1996

(Kuldip Singh, Faizanuddin JJ)

## JUDGMENT

FAIZAN UDDIN, J. –

1. When this Court was seized of writ petition filed by the "Common Cause, A Registered Society" with regard to the alleged misuse and arbitrary exercise of discretionary power by the Petroleum and Natural Gas Ministry in relation to the allotment of retail outlets for petroleum products and LPG dealership, from discretionary quota, a news item in box with a caption "Pumps for all" was published in the daily newspaper The Sunday Tribune dated 10-3-1996 which is reproduced hereunder :

### "PUMPS FOR ALL

Believe it or not, Petroleum Minister Satish Sharma has made 17 allotments of petrol pumps and gas agencies to relatives of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao out of his discretionary quota. Allotments in this category can only be made to members of the weaker sections of society and war widows. Yet five of the Prime Minister's grandchildren have been favoured as have been five of his nephews from the family of V. Rajeshwar Rao, MP. Besides, three wards of his brother Manohar Rao, two relatives of P. Venkata Rao and the son of A. V. R. Krishnamurthy whose family lives with the Prime Minister have been allocated petrol pumps and gas agencies. Similarly, Rao's daughter, Vani Devi, who is the official hostess has a petrol pump allotted in the name of her daughter, Jyotirmai. She was also favoured by the Airport Authority of India which released a prime piece of land located in Begumpet area to her for just Rs. 3 lakhs. The market value is stated to be over Rs. 1 crore. It has been registered in the name of Shri Sai Balaji Agency. However, the Prime Minister's kin are not the only ones who have benefited from these allotments. Two children of Lok Sabha Speaker Shivraj Patil have also been favoured as have the two sons of a Senior Judge of the Supreme Court. Interestingly, the Supreme Court had recently asked the Government to supply a list of all discretionary allotments made by the Ministry. However, the Minister has so far managed to withhold this crucial document. But it has hardly helped as the list has been leaked by Sharma's own men."

2. A similar news item was also published in the Hindi newspaper Punjab Kesari dated 10-3-1996, the English translation of which is as follows :

### "17 POOR MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY OF THE PRIME MINISTER

Out of the short cut ways of becoming rich, one way is to obtain petrol pump or gas agency. But the power to allot the same lies with the Petroleum Minister. He has the discretionary powers to allot petrol pumps or gas agencies in charity. This power of

doing such charities has been entrusted in some special cases which include the people belonging to the poor, backward classes and the wives of those who were killed in the war. But all those persons to whom these agencies have been allotted by the Petroleum Minister Capt. Satish Sharma turned out to be a scam in itself. The matter was referred to the Supreme Court in which the Government was directed to submit a list. The Petroleum Minister suppressed the list. The list was demanded in Parliament. But the list was not presented. Now the list has been leaked out from the Petroleum Ministry. Believe it, there are 17 relatives of the Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in that list. Five persons are his grandsons and granddaughters. Five others are the members of the family of V. Rajeshwar Rao. He is a Member of Parliament and the relative of the Prime Minister. Manohar Rao is the brother of Narasimha Rao. These agencies were also allotted to his three children. There is one more relative - P. Venkata Rao. Two allottees have been found in his family. One is A. V. R. Krishnamurthy who resides in the residence of the Prime Minister. He has also been allotted the agency at the Bolarum Road at Sikandrabad. But the most interesting story is of Jyotirmai. Narasimha Rao is her real maternal grandfather.

The authorised hostess of the Prime Minister's residence is Vani Devi who is the daughter of the Prime Minister and mother of Jyotirmai. Their agency is situated at Begumpet under the name and style 'Sri Sai Balaji Agency'. The land of 2000 sq.m. of the Indian Aviation Authority was given to Sri Sai Balaji Agency merely for rupees three lakhs. Presently, the cost of this land is more than one crore. The Petroleum Minister also allotted the agencies to the two children of Shivraj Patil, Speaker of the Lok Sabha. You should not be astonished if you find the names of two sons of Mr Ahmadi Chief Justice of India in the list of the discretionary quota. Otherwise the names of such poor and backward persons are also available in this list."

3. Since the aforesaid news items contained an allegation that two sons of a Senior Judge of the Supreme Court and two sons of the Chief Justice of India were also favoured with the allotments of petrol outlets from the discretionary quota of the Ministry and, therefore, by our order dated 13-3-1996, we issued a notice to the Secretary, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas to file an affidavit offering his comments and response to the facts stated in the aforesaid two news items. Pursuant to the said notice, Shri Vijay L. Kelkar, Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Government of India, filed his affidavit dated 20-3-1996 stating that since the allegation regarding allotment under the discretionary quota in favour of two sons of a Senior Judge of the Supreme Court are vague and in the absence of specific names, it is difficult to deal with the same. Thereafter when the matter again came up before this Court on 21-3-1996 Shri Altaf Ahmed, learned Additional Solicitor General stated that he would look into the records and file further affidavit of a responsible officer giving response to the other allegations regarding relations of VIPs. We, therefore, granted time for the purpose and at the same time directed the relevant files to be produced in Court. It was thereafter that Shri Devi Dayal, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Government of India, filed his affidavit dated 26-3-1996. In para 5 of his affidavit, he made a categorical statement that there is no allotment in favour of son/sons of any Supreme Court Judge. After verification of records and affidavits referred to above, we found that the news items referred to above were patently false and, therefore, by our order dated 27-3-1996, we initiated contempt proceedings against the editors and publishers of the dailies The Sunday Tribune, Chandigarh and the Punjab Kesari, Jalandhar and issued notices to them to show cause why they may not be punished for the contempt of this Court.

4. In response to the contempt notice, Shri Hari Jaisingh, the Editor of The Sunday Tribune filed an affidavit dated 24-6-1996 admitting that the news item published in The Sunday Tribune dated 10-3-1996 with regard to the allotment of petrol outlets to the sons of a Senior Judge of the Supreme Court was not correct and, therefore, tendered unqualified apology and has prayed for mercy and pardon. He has stated that it was an inadvertent publication made bona fide on the faith that the item supplied by an experienced journalist, Shri Dina Nath Misra, who is generally reliable would not be factually incorrect. It has been stated that Dina Nath Misra is a journalist of standing for over 30 years and there have been no complaints about the correctness of the material contributed by him and believing the said item of news to be correct it was published without any further scrutiny in good faith. He has submitted that he has the highest respect for the judiciary in general and for this Court in particular and has tendered his unqualified apology with a feeling of remorse. He has submitted that since it was noticed that the news item was not correct, an apology was already published by him in The Tribune dated 12-5-1996 and necessary instructions to all members of the editorial staff were issued to be careful in assuring the factual accuracy of all legal reports.

5. Lt. Col. S. L. Dheer (Retd.), the publisher of The Tribune, in response to the contempt notice has also filed his affidavit dated 27-6-1996 more or less in the same terms as the one filed by Shri Hari Jaisingh and has tendered his apology and prayed for mercy and pardon due to the bona fide mistake.

6. In response to the contempt notice, Shri Vijay Kumar Chopra, editor and publisher of the daily Punjab Kesari, Jalandhar has also filed his affidavit dated 29-6-1996 stating that the news item in the daily Punjab Kesari referred to above was published on the basis of the news report sent by a senior journalist which due to inadvertence escaped the attention of the editor. He has stated that immediately after the incorrectness of the news item was noticed a contradiction and apology was carried out prominently in the issue of the paper dated 7-4-1996. He has stated that the said news item was not actuated by any malice towards the judiciary and that the mistake was bona fide. He has also tendered his unconditional and unqualified apology.

7. On being apprised that the news items referred to above were found to be false which were published on the basis of the information and material supplied by the journalist/reporter Dina Nath Misra to The Sunday Tribune and Punjab Kesari, we issued a similar contempt notice to Dina Nath Misra by our order dated 9-7-1996. The journalist Dina Nath Misra in his affidavit dated 1-8-1996 admitted to have written a capsule item about the allotment of petrol pumps to the sons of a Senior Judge of the Supreme Court which was not factually correct and he has, therefore, tendered his unqualified apology for the lapse that he had committed. He has stated that he has been a journalist for about 4 decades and is known for his integrity and commitment towards professionalism. He has further stated that a highly reliable source who had earlier given many reliable informations to the deponent gave this information also which was believed by him to be true, but it turned out to be incorrect. He has stated various other facts to show that the mistake was bona fide, but we find the said excuses and explanations to be not acceptable at all. He has, however, expressed his deep repentance and tendered unqualified apology and seeks forgiveness for this honest and inadvertent blunder. In yet another additional affidavit dated 29-8-1996, he has reiterated the said facts and admitted that he has committed a grievous error in writing news items which have absolutely no basis, and has again offered unconditional apology to Hon'ble the Chief Justice as well as to this Court.

8. It may be relevant here to recall that the freedom of press has always been regarded as an essential prerequisite of a democratic form of Government. It has been regarded as a necessity for

the mental health and the well-being of the society. It is also considered necessary for the full development of the personality of the individual. It is said that without the freedom of press truth cannot be attained. The freedom of press is a part of the freedom of speech and expression as envisaged in Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India. Thus, the freedom of press is included in the fundamental right of freedom of expression. The freedom of press is regarded as "the mother of all other liberties" in a democratic society. Further, the importance and the necessity of having a free press in a democratic Constitution like ours was immensely stressed in several landmark judgments of this Court. The case of *Indian Express Newspapers v. Union of India* [(1985) 1 SCC 641], is one of such judgments rendered by Venkataramiah, J. (as he then was). Again in another case of *Express Newspapers P. Ltd. v. Union of India* [(1986) 1 SCC 133 : AIR 1986 SC 872], A. P. Sen, J. (as he then was) described the right to freedom of press as a pillar of individual liberty which has been unfailingly guarded by the courts.

9. It is thus needless to emphasise that a free and healthy press is indispensable to the functioning of a true democracy. In a democratic set-up, there has to be an active and intelligent participation of the people in all spheres and affairs of their community as well as the State. It is their right to be kept informed about current political, social, economic and cultural life as well as the burning topics and important issues of the day in order to enable them to consider and form broad opinion about the same and the way in which they are being managed, tackled and administered by the Government and its functionaries. To achieve this objective the people need a clear and truthful account of events, so that they may form their own opinion and offer their own comments and viewpoints on such matters and issues and select their further course of action. The primary function, therefore, of the press is to provide comprehensive and objective information of all aspects of the country's political, social, economic and cultural life. It has an educative and mobilising role to play. It plays an important role in moulding public opinion and can be an instrument of social change. It may be pointed out here that Mahatma Gandhi in his autobiography has stated that one of the objectives of the newspaper is to understand the proper feelings of the people and give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments; and the third is to fearlessly express popular defects. It, therefore, turns out that the press should have the right to present anything which it thinks fit for publication.

10. But it has to be remembered that this freedom of press is not absolute, unlimited and unfettered at all times and in all circumstances as giving an unrestricted freedom of speech and expression would amount to an uncontrolled licence. If it were wholly free even from reasonable restraints it would lead to disorder and anarchy. The freedom is not to be misunderstood as to be a press free to disregard its duty to be responsible. In fact, the element of responsibility must be present in the conscience of the journalists. In an organised society, the rights of the press have to be recognised with its duties and responsibilities towards the society. Public order, decency, morality and such other things must be safeguarded. The protective cover of press freedom must not be thrown open for wrong doings. If a newspaper publishes what is improper mischievously false or illegal and abuses its liberty it must be punished by court of law. The editor of a newspaper or a journal has a greater responsibility to guard against untruthful news and publications for the simple reason that his utterances have a far greater circulation and impact than the utterances of an individual and by reason of their appearing in print, they are likely to be believed by the ignorant. That being so, certain restrictions are essential even for preservation of the freedom of the press itself. To quote from the report of Mons Lopez to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations "If it is true that human progress is impossible without freedom, then it is no less true that ordinary human progress is impossible without a measure of regulation and discipline". It is the duty of a true and responsible journalist to strive to inform the people with accurate and impartial presentation of news

and their views after dispassionate evaluation of the facts and information received by them and to be published as a news item. The presentation of the news should be truthful, objective and comprehensive without any false and distorted expression.

11. In the present case, as we have noticed above, neither the printer, publisher nor the editor and reporter took the necessary care in evaluating the correctness and credibility of the information published by them as the news items in the newspapers referred to above in respect of an allegation of a very serious nature having great repercussions causing an embarrassment to this Court. An editor is a person who controls the selection of the matter which is to be published in a particular issue of the newspaper. The editor and publisher are liable for illegal and false matter which is published in their newspaper. Such an irresponsible conduct and attitude on the part of the editor, publisher and the reporter cannot be said to be done in good faith, but distinctly opposed to the high professional standards as even a slightest enquiry or a simple verification of the alleged statement about grant of petrol outlets to the two sons of a Senior Judge of the Supreme Court, out of discretionary quota, which is found to be patently false would have revealed the truth. But it appears that even the ordinary care was not resorted to by the contemnors in publishing such a false news items. This cannot be regarded as a public service, but a disservice to the public by misguiding them with a false news. Obviously, this cannot be regarded as something done in good faith.

12. But it may be pointed out that various judgments and pronouncements of this Court bear testimony to the fact that this Court is not hypersensitive in matters relating to contempt of courts and has always shown magnanimity in accepting the apology on being satisfied that the error made in the publication was without any malice or without any intention of disrespect towards the courts or towards any member of the judiciary. This Court has always entertained fair criticism of the judgments and orders or about the person of a Judge. Fair criticism within the parameters of law is always welcome in a democratic system. But the news items with which we are concerned can neither be said to be fair or made in good faith but wholly false and the explanation given is far from satisfactory. Shri Hari Jaisingh, editor of The Sunday Tribune and Lt. Col. H. L. Dheer, publisher as well as Vijay Kumar Chopra, editor and publisher of daily Punjab Kesari have taken the stand that they had taken the news items to be correct on the basis of the information supplied by a very senior journalist of long standing, Dina Nath Misra. But this cannot be accepted as a valid excuse. It may be stated that at common law, absence of intention or knowledge about the correctness of the contents of the matter published (for example as in the present case, on the basis of information received from the journalist/reporter) will be of no avail for the editors and publishers for contempt of court but for determining the quantum of punishment which may be awarded. Thus they cannot escape the responsibility for being careless in publishing it without caring to verify the correctness. However, since they have not only expressed repentance on the incident but have expressed their sincere written unconditional apology, we accept the same with the warning that they should be very careful in future. As regards the case of Dina Nath Misra, we find he acted in gross carelessness. Being a very experienced journalist of long standing it was his duty while publishing the news item relating to the members of the Apex Court, to have taken extra care to verify the correctness and if he had done so, we are sure there would not have been any difficulty in coming to know that the information supplied to him had absolutely no legs to stand and was patently false and the publication would have been avoided which not only caused great embarrassment to this Court but conveyed a wrong message to the public at large jeopardizing the faith of the illiterate masses in our judiciary. Shri Dina Nath Misra has no doubt committed a serious mistake but he has realised his mistake and expressed sincere repentance and has tendered unconditional apology for the same. He was present in the Court and virtually looked to be gloomy and felt repentant of what he had done. We think this sufferance itself is sufficient punishment for

him. He being a senior journalist and an aged person and, therefore, taking a lenient view of the matter, we accept his apology also. We, however, direct that the contemnners will publish in the front page of their respective newspapers within a box their respective apologies specifically mentioning that the said news items were absolutely incorrect and false. This may be done within two weeks. The Contempt Petitions Nos. 206-207 of 1996 are disposed of accordingly.