

SUPREME COURT OF INDIA

Union of India

Vs.

Hansoli Devi

C.A.No.9477 of 1994

(G. B. Pattanaik, M. B. Shah, Doraiswamy Raju, S. N. Variava and D. M. Dharmadhikari JJ.)

12.09.2002

JUDGEMENT

G.B.Pattanaik, J.

1. In this bunch of cases, the provisions of Section 28-A of the *Land Acquisition Act, 1894* (hereinafter referred to as 'the Act'), crop up for consideration. Two learned Judges of this Court, in course of hearing of Civil Appeal No. 9477 of 1994 (Union of India and another v. Smt. Hansali Devi and others), formulated two questions to be answered by a larger Bench. The said questions are:

"1.(a) Whether dismissal of an application seeking reference under Section 18 on the ground of delay amounts to "not filing an application" within the meaning of Section 28-A of the Land Acquisition Act, 1894?

(b) Whether a person whose application under Section 18 of the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 is dismissed on the ground of delay or any other technical ground is entitled to maintain an application under Section 28-A of the Land Acquisition Act?

2. Whether a person who has received the compensation without protest pursuant to the award of the Land Acquisition Collector and has not filed an application seeking reference under Section 18 is "a person aggrieved" within the meaning of Section 28-A?"

According to the learned Judges, the three Judge Bench decision of this Court in *Jose Antonio Cruz Dos R. Rodrigues and another v. Land Acquisition Collector and another*¹ requires reconsideration. At the outset, it may be stated that the Constitution Bench in *Pradip Chandrika Parija and others v. Pramod Chandra Patnaik and others*² held that judicial discipline and propriety demands that a Bench of two learned Judges should follow a decision of a Bench of three learned Judges. But if a Bench of two learned Judges concludes that an earlier Judgment of three learned Judges is so very incorrect that in no circumstances can it be followed, the proper

course for it to adopt is, to refer the matter before it to a Bench of three learned Judges setting out the reasons why it could not agree with the earlier judgment and then the Bench of three learned Judges also comes to the conclusion that the earlier judgment of a Bench of three learned Judges is incorrect, then a reference could be made to a Bench of five learned Judges. In view of the aforesaid Constitution Bench decision, the very reference itself made by the two learned Judges was improper and we would have sent the matters to a Bench of three learned Judges for consideration. But since the questions involved are pending in many cases in different High Courts and certain doubts have arisen with regard to the interpretation to the provisions of Section 28-A of the Act, we thought it appropriate to answer the two questions referred. Section 28-A of the Land Acquisition Act reads thus :

"28A. Re-determination of the amount of compensation on the basis of the award of the Court.- (1) Where in an award under this Part, the Court allows to the applicant any amount of compensation in excess of the amount awarded by the Collector under Section 11, the persons interested in all the other land covered by the same notification under Section 4, sub-section (1) and who are also aggrieved by the award of the Collector may, notwithstanding that they had not made an application to the Collector under Section 18, by written application to the Collector within three months from the date of the award of the Court require that the amount of compensation payable to them may be re-determined on the basis of the amount of compensation awarded by the Court :

Provided that in computing the period of three months within which an application to the Collector shall be made under this sub-section, the day on which the award was pronounced and the time requisite for obtaining a copy of the award shall be excluded.

(2) The Collector shall, on receipt of an application under sub-section (1), conduct an inquiry after giving notice to all the persons interested and giving them a reasonable opportunity of being heard, and make an award determining the amount of compensation payable to the applicants.

(3) Any person who has not accepted the award under sub-section (2) may, by written application to the Collector, require that the matter be referred by the Collector for the determination of the Court and the provisions of Sections 18 to 28 shall, so far as may be, apply to such reference as they apply to a reference under Section 18.

The aforesaid provision was inserted by way of an amendment by Act 68 of 1984, which came into force w.e.f. 24-9-1984. Prior to the present reference in *Jose Antonio Cruz Dos R. Rodriguese and another v. Land Acquisition Collector and another*³ two learned Judges of this Court had referred the following two questions for being answered by a larger Bench of five Judges. The said questions being:-

"1. Whether the award of the Court i.e. civil court made under Section 26 on reference under Section 18 would also include judgment and decree of the appellate Court under Section 54?

2. Whether each successive award or judgment and decree (if answer on Question No. 1 is positive) would give cause of action to file application under Section 28-A; if so construed, does not such a construction violate the language used in Section 28-A when Parliament advisedly did not use such expressions?"

The aforesaid order of the two learned Judges indicate that they did not agree with the ratio of this Court in the case of *Union of India and another v. Pradeep Kumari and others*⁴. But the two points stood answered by the three Judge Bench in the case of *Jose Antonio Cruz Dos R. Rodriguense and another v. Land Acquisition Collector and another* as already stated. The genesis of the dispute can be referred to *Babua Ram and others v. State of U. P. and another*⁵. In *Babua Ram*, the provisions of Section 28-A of the Act came up for consideration and a Bench of two learned Judges came to hold that the period of three months prescribed for making an application for re-determination of compensation must be computed from the date of earliest award of the Court made under Section 26 of the Land Acquisition Act and not from the date of Judgment and decree of the Court of appeal. It was also held that successive awards made by the reference Court at different times in respect of the land covered by the same notification do not furnish a fresh cause of action. In the case of *Union of India and others v. Karnail Singh and others*⁶ a Bench of two learned Judges reiterated the aforesaid view expressed in *Babua Ram* and held that the earliest award of the reference Court by which the compensation awarded by the Land Acquisition Officer stood enhanced, would be the starting point of limitation of three months, enabling the land owners whose lands had also been acquired under the same notification and who had not made any reference under Section 18 of the Act earlier. The views expressed in the aforesaid two judgments however stood overruled by a three Judge Bench in the case of *Union of India and another v. Pradeep Kumari and others*. In *Pradeep Kumari's* case, it was held that the benefit of re-determination of the amount of compensation under Section 28-A, can be availed of, on the basis of any one of the awards that has been made by the Court after coming into force of Section 28-A and the period of limitation of three months would start from the date of making of the award on the basis of which re-determination is sought. The learned Judges felt that there is nothing in sub-section (1) of Section 28-A to indicate that the right is confined in respect of the earliest award that is made by the Court. The Court further held:

"..... ..By restricting the benefit of Section 28-A to the first award that is made by the court after the coming into force of Section 28-A, the benefit of higher amount of compensation on the basis of the subsequent award made by the court would be denied to the persons invoking Section 28-A and the benefit of the said provision would be confined to re-determination of compensation on the basis of lesser amount of compensation awarded under the first award that is made after the coming into

force of Section 28-A. There is nothing in the wordings of Section 28-A to indicate that the legislature intended to confer such a limited benefit under Section 28-A."

The Court enumerated the conditions to be satisfied, whereafter an application under Section 28-A can be moved. The said conditions being:

"(i) An award has been made by the court under Part III after the coming into force of Section 28A;

(ii) By the said award the amount of compensation in excess of the amount awarded by the Collector under Section 11 has been allowed to the applicant in that reference;

(iii) The person moving the application under Section 28-A is interested in other land covered by the same notification under Section 4(1) to which the said award relates ;

(iv) The person moving the application did not make an application to the Collector under Section 18;

(v) The application is moved within three months from the date of the award on the basis of which the re-determination of amount of compensation is sought; and

(vi) Only one application can be moved under Section 28-A for re-determination of compensation by an applicant."

As has been stated earlier in Jose Antonio Cruz's case, the High Court had followed the decision of this Court in *Union of India and another v. Pradeep Kumari and others*, referred to supra but the two learned Judges doubted the correctness of the ratio in *Pradeep Kumari* and had referred the matter to a larger Bench of five learned Judges. When the cases had been placed before the learned Chief Justice, the Chief Justice was not persuaded to constitute a larger Bench of five learned Judges and on the other hand directed that the cases be placed before a three Judge Bench and then ultimately the three Judge Bench disposed of the matter by Judgment dated 20th November, 1996, since reported in 1996 (6) SCC 746. Out of the two questions referred to by the two Judge Bench, the Court answered the first question by observing that there is no difference of opinion on the question that the period of limitation would start to run from the date of reference Court order and the period of three months would start from the order of the reference Court and not from the order of the Court passed in appeal against the same. On the second question, as to whether successive awards would give a fresh cause of action, as was held in *Pradeep Kumari's* case, the Court held that the three Judge Bench in *Pradeep Kumari's* case had departed from the view taken earlier in two cases by two Judge Bench viz. in *Babua Ram and Karnail Singh*, and further observed that if and when the question arises in an appropriate case, perhaps a reference to a five-Judge Bench may become necessary. The aforesaid observation indicates that the three Judge Bench in *Jose Antonio Cruz*, doubted the correctness of the ratio in *Pradeep Kumari's* case that if

successive awards are passed by the reference Court, then it is open to the person who wants to take the benefit of filing an application under Section 28-A to choose anyone of those awards and can make an application within three months from the date of the said award.

2. Learned Solicitor General, appearing for the Union of India submitted that the language of Section 28-A of the Act and the decisions of this Court referred to earlier, unequivocally point out that the expression "award of the Court under this chapter" would mean the award passed by the reference court and not the order passed by the High Court in appeal or any other order in further appeal therefrom. The learned Solicitor General also urged that looking at the purpose for which Section 28-A was brought on the statute book, it would be reasonable to construe that the date of the first award of the reference court when it comes to the knowledge of the person who had not earlier availed of making a reference under Section 18 and to that extent, the decision of the court in Pradeep Kumari's is not correct. This contention of the learned Solicitor General was reiterated by Mr. Rakesh Dwivedi, the learned senior counsel, appearing for some of the States and several other counsels.

3. Mr. S. K. Gambhir, the learned senior counsel, appearing for the land owners, on the other hand contended that the legislative intent in bringing forth the amendment and inserting Section 28-A being to confer some benefits on the poor illiterate land owners, the court must not only liberally construe the provisions but also should construe the provisions in such a manner, even at the cost of doing violence to the language, so that the purpose for which the amendment was brought, can be achieved. According to the learned counsel, Section 28-A should be construed by deleting the expression "under this part" in sub-section (1) of Section 28 and by adding the word "or order" after the word "award" in the proviso. According to the learned counsel, thus construed, the application under Section 28-A can be filed even within three months from the appellate order or the second appellate order and it should not be restricted to the award of the reference court alone. Mr. Gambhir contended that both Pradeep Kumari as well as subsequent three Judge Bench decision in Jose Antonio Cruz, must be held to have been wrongly decided.

4. Before we embark upon an inquiry as to what would be the correct interpretation of Section 28-A, we think it appropriate to bear in mind certain basic principles of interpretation of statute. The rule stated by Tindal, C.J. in *Sussex Peerage case*, (1844) 11 Cl and F 85, still holds the field. The aforesaid rule is to the effect :

"If the words of the statute are in themselves precise and unambiguous, then no more can be necessary than to expound those words in their natural and ordinary sense. The words themselves do alone in such cases best declare the intent of the lawgiver."

It is a cardinal principle of construction of statute that when language of the statute is plain and unambiguous, then the court must give effect to the words used in the statute and it would not be open to the courts to adopt a hypothetical construction on the ground that such construction is more consistent with the alleged object and policy of the Act. In *Kirkness v. John Hudson and Co. Ltd.*⁷ Lord Reid pointed out as

to what is the meaning of "ambiguous" and held that "a provision is not ambiguous merely because it contains a word which in different context is capable of different meanings and it would be hard to find anywhere a sentence of any length which does not contain such a word. A provision is, in my judgment, ambiguous only if it contains a word or phrase which in that particular context is capable of having more than one meaning." It is no doubt true that if on going through the plain meaning of the language of statutes, it leads to anomalies, injustices and absurdities, then the court may look into the purpose for which the statute has been brought and would try to give a meaning, which would adhere to the purpose of the statute. Patanjali Sastri, C.J. in the case of *Aswini Kumar Ghose v. Arabinda Bose*⁸ had held that it is not a sound principle of construction to brush aside words in a statute as being inapposite surplusage, if they can have appropriate application in circumstances conceivably within the contemplation of the statute. In *Quebec Railway Light Heat and Power Co. v. Vandray*⁹ it had been observed that the Legislature is deemed not to waste its words or to say anything in vain and a construction which attributes redundancy to the legislature will not be accepted except for compelling reasons. Similarly, it is not permissible to add words to a statute which are not there unless on a literal construction being given a part of the statute becomes meaningless. But before any words are read to repair an omission in the Act, it should be possible to state with certainty that these words would have been inserted by the draftsman and approved by the legislature had their attention been drawn to the omission before the Bill had passed into a law. At times, the intention of the legislature is found to be clear but the unskilfulness of the draftsman in introducing certain words in the statute results in apparent ineffectiveness of the language and in such a situation, it may be permissible for the court to reject the surplus words, so as to make the statute effective. Bearing in mind the aforesaid principle, let us now examine the provisions of Section 28-A of the Act to answer the questions referred to us by the Bench of two learned Judges. It is no doubt true that the object of Section 28-A of the Act to confer a right of making a reference, who might have not made a reference earlier under Section 18 and, therefore, ordinarily when a person makes a reference under Section 18 but that was dismissed on the ground of delay, he would not get the right of Section 28-A of the Land Acquisition Act when some other person makes a reference and the reference is answered. But the Parliament having enacted Section 28-A, as a beneficial provision, it would cause great injustice if a literal interpretation is given to the expression "had not made an application to the Collector under Section 18" in Section 28-A of the Act. The aforesaid expression would mean that if the land-owner has made an application for reference under Section 18 and that reference is entertained and answered. In other words, it may not be permissible for a land owner to make a reference and get it answered and then subsequently make another application when some other person gets the reference answered and obtains a higher amount. In fact in Pradeep Kumari's case the three learned Judges, while enumerating the conditions to be satisfied, whereafter an application under Section 28-A can be moved, had categorically stated "the person moving the application did not make an application to the Collector under Section 18". The expression "did not make an application", as observed by this Court would mean, did not make an effective application which had

been entertained by making the reference and the reference was answered. When an application under Section 18 is not entertained on the ground of limitation, the same not fructifying into any reference, then that would not tantamount to an effective application and consequently the rights of such applicant emanating from some other reference being answered to move an application under Section 28-A cannot be denied. We, accordingly answer question No. 1(a) by holding that the dismissal of an application seeking reference under Section 18 on the ground of delay would tantamount to not filing an application within the meaning of Section 28-A of the Land Acquisition Act, 1894.

5. So far as question 1(b) is concerned, this is really the same question, as in question 1 (a) and, therefore, we reiterate that when an application of a land owner under Section 18 is dismissed on the ground of delay, then the said land owner is entitled to make an application under Section 28-A, if other conditions prescribed therein are fulfilled.

6. Coming to the second question for reference the receipt of compensation with or without protest pursuant to the award of the Land Acquisition Collector is of no consequence for the purpose of making a fresh application under Section 28-A. If a person has not filed an application under Section 18 of the Act to make a reference, then irrespective of the fact whether he has received the compensation awarded by the Collector with or without protest, he would be a person aggrieved within the meaning of Section 28-A and would be entitled to make an application when some other land owner's application for reference is answered by the reference Court. It is apparent on the plain language of the provisions of Section 28-A of the Act. Otherwise, it would amount to adding one more condition, not contemplated or stipulated by the Legislature itself to deny the benefit of substantial right conferred upon the owner.

7. So far as the argument of learned Solicitor General on the correctness of the Pradeep Kumari's case is concerned, it may be stated that the said question does not appear to be a question, which has been referred to this Constitution Bench. As has been stated earlier that question had been referred by a Bench of two learned Judges in Jose Antonio Cruz's case, 1996 (1) SCC 88 as question No. 2, but a Bench of three learned Judges in 1996 (6) SCC 746, while answered the first question, did not think it necessary to answer the second question, even though some doubts were raised about the correctness of the three Judge Bench decision in Pradeep Kumari's case. But since that question has neither been referred to us under the order of reference made in the present case nor does it arise in the case in hand, we refrain from answering the same.

8. The questions having thus being answered, these appeals and special leave petitions may now be placed before a Bench of two learned Judges for being disposed of.
Order accordingly.

¹(1996 (6) SCC 746)

²(2002 (1) SCC 1)

³(1996 (1) SCC 88)

⁴1995 (2) SCC 736

⁵1995 (2) SCC 689

⁶1995 (2) SCC 728

⁷1955 (2) All ER 345

⁸1953 SCR 1

⁹AIR 1920 PC 181