

SUPREME COURT OF INDIA

Dattaraj Nathuji Thaware

Vs

State of Maharashtra

Special Leave Petition (C) No. 26269 of 2004

(Arijit Pasayat and S.H.Kapadia)

14/12/2004

JUDGMENT

ARIJIT PASAYAT, J.

1. This case is a sad reflection on members of the legal profession and is almost a black spot on the noble profession. The petitioner who belongs to this profession filed a petition styled as "Public Interest Litigation" before the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court. By the impugned judgment, the High Court dismissed it holding that there was no public interest involved and in fact the petitioner had resorted to black mailing respondent nos. 6 and 7 and was caught red handed accepting 'black mailing' money. The High Court also noticed that the allegations of unauthorized constructions made in the petition were also not true.

2. Cost of Rs. 25,000/- (Rupees Twenty five thousand only) which was levied, was directed to be paid to the affected respondent nos. 6 and 7 before the High Court.

3. It is, in fact, a black day for the black robed professionals, if the allegation, as found by the High Court to be true and which presently appear to be the subject matter of further proceedings in a criminal case, are true. This will leave the members of the legal profession black faced for the black deed of the petitioner who may be as the High Court found a black sheep in profession. Though the petition filed by the petitioner carried the attractive brand name of 'Public Interest Litigation', the least that can be said is that it smacks of every thing what the Public Interest Litigation should not be.

4. When there is material to show that a petition styled as a public interest litigation is nothing but a camouflage to foster personal disputes, said petition is to be thrown out. Before we grapple with the issue involved in the present case, we feel it necessary to consider the issue regarding public interest aspect. **Public Interest Litigation which has now come to occupy an important field in the administration of law should not be 'publicity interest litigation' or 'private interest litigation' or 'politics interest litigation' or the latest trend 'paaise income litigation'. The High Court has found that the case at hand belongs to the last category. If not properly regulated and abuse averted, it become also a tool in unscrupulous hands to release vendetta and wreck vengeance, as well. There must be real and genuine public interest involved in the litigation and not merely an adventure of knight errant borne out of wishful thinking. It cannot also be invoked by a person or a body of persons to further his or their personal causes or satisfy his or their personal grudge and enmity. Courts of justice should not be allowed to be polluted by unscrupulous litigants by resorting to the extraordinary jurisdiction. A person acting bona fide and having sufficient interest in the proceeding of public interest litigation will alone have a locus standi and can approach the Court to wipe out violation of fundamental rights and genuine infraction of statutory provisions, but not for personal gain or private profit or political motive or any oblique consideration.** # These aspects were highlighted by this Court in *The Janta Dal vs. H.S. Chowdhary* (7) and *Kazi Lhendup Dorji vs. Central Bureau of Investigation*, (). A writ petitioner who come to the Court for relief in public interest must come not only with clean hands like any other writ petitioner but also with a clean heart, clean mind and clean objective. (See *Ramjas Foundation vs. Union of India*, (7) and *K.R. Srinivas vs. R.M. Premchand*, (5)).

5. It is necessary to take note of the meaning of expression 'public interest litigation'. In Stroud's Judicial Dictionary, Volume 4 (IV Edition), 'Public Interest' is defined thus:

"Public Interest (1) a matter of public or general interest does not mean that which is interesting as gratifying curiosity or a love of information or amusement but that in which a class of the community have a pecuniary interest, or some interest by which their legal rights or liabilities are affected." *

6. In Black's Law Dictionary (Sixth Edition), 'public interest' is defined as follows:

"Public Interest something in which the public, or some interest by which their legal rights or liabilities are affected. It does not mean anything the particular localities, which may be affected by the matters in question. Interest shared by national government..." *

7. In *Janata Dal* case (supra) this Court considered the scope of public interest litigation. In para 52 of the said judgment, after considering what is public interest, has laid down as follows:

*"The expression 'litigation' means a legal action including all proceedings therein initiated in a Court of law for the enforcement of right or seeking a remedy. Therefore, lexically the expression 'PIL' means the legal action initiated in a Court of law for the enforcement of public interest or general interest in which the public or a class of the community have pecuniary interest or some interest by which their legal rights or liabilities are affected." **

8. In paras 60, 61 and 62 of the said judgment, it was pointed out as follows:

"Be that as it may, it is needless to emphasis that the requirement of locus standi of a party to a litigation is mandatory, because the legal capacity of the party to any litigation whether in private or public action in relation to any specific remedy sought for has to be primarily ascertained at the threshold."

9. In para 96 of the said judgment, it has further been pointed out as follows:

*"While this Court has laid down a chain of notable decisions with all emphasis at their command about the importance and significance of this newly developed doctrine of PIL, it has also hastened to sound a red alert and a note of severe warning that Courts should not allow its process to be abused by a mere busy body or a meddlesome interloper or wayfarer or officious intervener without any interest or concern except for personal gain or private profit or other oblique consideration." **

10. In subsequent paras of the said judgment, it was observed as follows:

*"It is thus clear that only a person acting bona fide and having sufficient interest in the proceeding of PIL will alone have as locus standi and can approach the Court to wipe out the tears of the poor and needy, suffering from violation of their fundamental rights, but not a person for personal gain or private profit or political motive or any oblique consideration. Similarly a vexatious petition under the colour of PIL, brought before the Court for vindicating any personal grievance, deserves rejection at the threshold." **

11. It is depressing to note that on account of such trumpety proceedings initiated before the Courts, innumerable days are wasted, which time otherwise could have been spent for the disposal of cases of the genuine litigants. Though we spare no efforts in fostering and developing the laudable concept of PIL and extending our long arm of sympathy to the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed and the needy whose fundamental rights are infringed and violated and whose grievances go unnoticed, un-represented and unheard; yet we cannot avoid but express our opinion that while genuine litigants with legitimate grievances relating to civil matters involving properties worth hundreds of millions of rupees and criminal cases in which persons sentenced to death facing gallows under untold agony and persons sentenced to life imprisonment and kept in incarceration for long years, persons suffering from undue delay in service matters - government or private, persons awaiting the disposal of cases wherein huge amounts of public revenue or unauthorised collection of tax amounts

are locked up, detenu expecting their release from the detention orders etc. etc. are all standing in a long serpentine queue for years with the fond hope of getting into the Courts and having their grievances redressed, the busybodies, meddlesome interlopers, wayfarers or officious interveners having absolutely no public interest except for personal gain or private profit either of themselves or as a proxy of others or for any other extraneous motivation or for glare of publicity break the queue muffing their faces by wearing the mask of public interest litigation and get into the Courts by filing vexatious and frivolous petitions and thus criminally waste the valuable time of the Courts and as a result of which the queue standing outside the doors of the Courts never moves, which piquant situation creates frustration in the minds of the genuine litigants and resultantly they loose faith in the administration of our judicial system.

12. Public interest litigation is a weapon which has to be used with great care and circumspection and the judiciary has to be extremely careful to see that behind the beautiful veil of public interest an ugly private malice, vested interest and/ or publicity seeking is not lurking. It is to be used as an effective weapon in the armory of law for delivering social justice to the citizens. The attractive brand name of public interest litigation should not be used for suspicious products of mischief. It should be aimed at redressal of genuine public wrong or public injury and not publicity oriented or founded on personal vendetta. As indicated above, **Court must be careful to see that a body of persons or member of public, who approaches the court is acting bona fide and not for personal gain or private motive or political motivation or other oblique considerations. The Court must not allow its process to be abused for oblique considerations by masked phantoms who monitor at times from behind. Some persons with vested interest indulge in the pastime of meddling with judicial process either by force of habit or from improper motives, and try to bargain for a good deal as well to enrich themselves. Often they are actuated by a desire to win notoriety or cheap popularity. The petitions of such busy bodies deserve to be thrown out by rejection at the threshold, and in appropriate cases with exemplary costs. #**

13. The Council for Public Interest Law set up by the Ford Foundation in USA defined the 'public interest litigation' in its report of Public Interest Law, USA, 1976 as follows:

*"Public Interest Law is the name that has recently been given to efforts provide legal representation to previously un-represented groups and interests. Such efforts have been undertaken in the recognition that ordinary market place for legal services fails to provide such services to significant segments of the population and to significant interests. Such groups and interests include the proper environmentalists, consumers, racial and ethnic minorities and others." **

14. The Court has to be satisfied about (a) the credentials of the applicant; (b) the prima facie correctness or nature of information given by him; (c) the information being not vague and indefinite. The information should show gravity and seriousness involved. Court has to strike balance between two conflicting interests; (i) nobody should be allowed to indulge in wild and reckless allegations besmirching the character of others; and (ii) avoidance seeking public mischief and to avoid mischievous petitions seeking to assail, for oblique motives, justifiable executive actions. In such case, however, the Court cannot afford to be liberal. It has to be extremely careful to see that under the guise of redressing a public grievance, it does not encroach upon the sphere reserved by the Constitution to the Executive and the legislature. The Court has to act ruthlessly

while dealing with imposters and busybodies or meddlesome interlopers impersonating as public-spirited holy men. They masquerade as crusaders of justice. They pretend to act in the name of Pro Bono Publico, though they have no interest of the public or even of their own to protect.

15. Courts must do justice by promotion of good faith, and prevent law from crafty invasions. Courts must maintain the social balance by interfering where necessary for the sake of justice and refuse to interfere where it is against the social interest and public good. (See *State of Maharashtra vs. Prabhu*,), and *Andhra Pradesh State Financial Corporation vs. M/s. GAR Re-Rolling Mills and Anr.*, 3). No litigant has a right to unlimited draught on the Court time and public money in order to get his affairs settled in the manner as he wishes. Easy access to justice should not be misused as a licence to file misconceived and frivolous petitions. (See *Dr. B.K. Subbarao vs. Mr. K.Parasaran*,). Today people rush to Courts to file cases in profusion under this attractive name of public interest. They must inspire confidence in Courts and among the public.

16. As noted supra, a time has come to weed out the petitions, which though titled as public interest litigations are in essence something else. It is shocking to note that Courts are flooded with large number of so called public interest litigations where even a minuscule percentage can legitimately be called as public interest litigations. Though the parameters of public interest litigation have been indicated by this Court in large number of cases, yet unmindful of the real intentions and objectives, Courts are entertaining such petitions and wasting valuable judicial time which, as noted above, could be otherwise utilized for disposal of genuine cases. Though in *Dr. Duryodhan Sahu and others vs. Jitendra Kumar Mishra and others*), this Court held that in service matters PILs should not be entertained, the inflow of so-called PILs involving service matters continues unabated in the Courts and strangely are entertained. The least the High Courts could do is to throw them out on the basis of the said decision. The other interesting aspect is that in the PILs, official documents are being annexed without even indicating as to how the petitioner came to possess them. In one case, it was noticed that an interesting answer was given as to its possession. It was stated that a packet was lying on the road and when out of curiosity the petitioner opened it, he found copies of the official documents. Apart from the sinister manner, if any, of getting such copies, the real brain or force behind such cases would get exposed to find out the truth and motive behind the petition. Whenever such frivolous pleas, as noted, are taken to explain possession, the Court should do well not only to dismiss the petitions but also to impose exemplary costs. It would be desirable for the Courts to filter out the frivolous petitions and dismiss them with costs as afore-stated so that the message goes in the right direction that petitions filed with oblique motive do not have the approval of the Courts.

17. In *S.P. Gupta. vs. Union of India*) it was emphatically pointed out that the relaxation of the rule of locus standi in the field of PIL does not give any right to a busybody or meddlesome interloper to approach the Court under the guise or a public interest litigant. He has also left the following note of caution: (SCC p.219, para 24)

*"But we must be careful to see that the member of the public, who approaches the court in cases of this kind, is acting bona fide and not for personal gain or private profit or political motivation or other oblique consideration. The court must not allow its process to be abused by politicians and others to delay legitimate administrative action or to gain a political objective." **

18. In State of H.P. vs. A Parent of a Student of Medical College, Simla and others), it has been said that public interest litigation is a weapon which has to be used with great care and circumspection.

19. These aspects have been highlighted in Ashok Kumar Pandey vs. State of West Bengal 0) and Dr. B. Singh vs. Union of India and others).

20. It is disturbing feature which needs immediate remedial measure by the Bar Councils and the Bar Association to see that the process of law is not abused and polluted by its member. **It is high time that the Bar Councils and the Bar Associations ensure that no member of the Bar becomes party as petitioner or in aiding and/ or abetting files frivolous petitions carrying the attractive brand name of "Public Interest Litigation". That will be keeping in line with the high traditions of the Bar. No one should be permitted to bring disgrace to the noble profession. We would have imposed exemplary cost in this regard but taking note of the fact that the High Court had already imposed costs of Rs. 25,000/-, we do not propose to impose any further cost. #**

21. Yet copy of this judgment be sent to Bar Council of India and the Supreme Court Bar Association by the Registry for necessary action.

22. The petition deserves to be dismissed, which we direct.

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