

SUPREME COURT OF INDIA

Mohamed Masthan

Vs

Society, Congregation, Bros., S. Heart and Another

C.A. No. 1617 of 2006

(S. B. Sinha and P. K. Balasubramanyan, JJ)

10.03.2006

JUDGMENT

S. B. SINHA, J.

1. Leave granted.

2. The properties in question are said to be belonging to the Society of Congregation of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. Brother Lawrance, who was then Superior General of the First Respondent-Society (Society) transferred 8 acres and 44 cents of land to one Siluvai Rajan by a deed of sale, dated 18.10.1979. According to the Society, the said sale was illegal. After the death of the said purchaser, his wife sold the property to her sister Juliet Mary, Second Respondent herein by a deed of sale dated 23.7.1986.

3. The First Respondent filed a suit against the Second Respondent in the Court of District Munsif, Tirunelveli which was marked as O.S. No. 1220 of 1987 praying for declaration of title and possession and consequential injunction. The parties entered into a compromise in terms whereof right, title and interest of the First Respondent was accepted. A compromise memo was also filed. The suit of the Society was decreed in terms thereof. A decree was prepared on the basis, of the said settlement declaring that the suit property belonged to the plaintiff-Society, and granting permanent

injunction restraining the Second Respondent herein or her agent or, her men from in any way interfering with the peaceful possession and enjoyment of the Society.

4. After a lapse of about fourteen years from the date of passing the said decree, the Second Respondent filed a suit against the Society for a declaration that the aforementioned consent decree passed in O.S. No. 1220 of 1987 was null and void. According to her, she did not appear in the said suit nor put her signature on the memo of settlement. She was allegedly even not aware of the institution of the said suit. The said suit admittedly is still pending.

5. In the meanwhile, the Second Respondent entered into a purported agreement for sale with the Appellant herein on or about 1.10.2002. The Appellant filed a suit for specific performance of the contract in the Court of Subordinate Judge, Tirunelveli being O.S. No. 14Q of 2003. The said suit was decreed on 11.4.2003 and in execution of the said decree, a deed of sale was executed and registered on 17.6.2003. The Appellant filed an Execution Petition for obtaining possession on the said lands. The Central Nazir, while purporting to deliver possession on 19.10.2003, in his report stated:

"Most respectfully submitted, to the Sub-Judge, Tirunelveli by the petitioner/plaintiff, on 19.10.2003 on the orders of N. Ganesan, Senior bailiff District Court, Tirunelveli along with the under signed, I visited the schedule property and it was noticed that on the above schedule property was not in the possession of the respondent/defendants, I explained the nature of order to the persons who accompanied me and the property was vacant land, I took possession through senior bailiff of the Court under Order 21, Rule 35, C.P.C."

6. The Senior Bailiff in his report to the Court recorded:

"I went to the petitioner's place, at Munearpalam Village, Palai T.K., along with the witnesses, the respondent was not there, I explained the nature of order regarding the vacant land under possession of respondent and under Order 21, Rule 35, C.P.C, and gave possession to petitioner, attested copy of Sale Deed, decree copy is enclosed with this return. Village Administrative order (sic) refused to sign."

7. The First Respondent contends that they are still in possession. It filed an application in the said Execution Application being E.A. No. 1222 of 2003 before the Executing Court on the next day i. e. on 29.10.2003 stating:

"Now I came to understand records have been created as though the 2nd respondent had delivered the possession of the property to the 1st respondent. Even though no such thing had happened in reality. Because I alone is in the possession and enjoyment of the property."

8. The said Execution Application was dismissed. During pendency of the said Execution

Application, the First Respondent filed two suits being O.S. No. 271 of 2003 and O.S. No. 276 of 2003. The first suit was filed for restraining the defendant (Second Respondent herein) from giving possession of the suit property whereas in the second suit, the prayer made was for cancellation of the decree passed in O.S. No. 140 of 2003 and declaring the sale deed borne out of the said decree as null and void. Both the suits were withdrawn. The First Respondent thereafter filed a suit for declaration of title and consequential permanent injunction in the Court of District Munsiff, Tirunelveli being O.S. No. 641 of 2003. The said suit again indisputably is still pending.

9. Against the order dismissing the said E.A. No. 1222 of 2003, the First Respondent filed a Civil Revision Petition before the High Court. By reason of the impugned judgment, the High Court not only went into the question as regard correctness or otherwise of the purported delivery of possession of the land in question in favour of the Appellant herein but also opined that the decree passed in the aforementioned O.S. No. 140 of 2003 was collusive. Having held so, it directed:

"In the above said circumstances, the power given to the Court under Article 227 of the Constitution of India to have the superintendence over all the Courts had got to be exercised to set aside the very decree and judgment passed in O.S. No. 140 of 2003 and the first respondent is not entitled to execute the decree and take possession of the suit property.

But, however, the parties to the proceedings in O.S. No. 140 of 2003 shall take trial of that suit along with other suits in O.S. No. 641 of 2003, District Munsif Court, Tirunelveli, and O.S. No. 381 of 2003 on the file of the District Munsif Court, Tirunelveli. As the matters are inter related with each other in respect of the very same subject matter of the suit properties and also to avoid further multiplicity of proceedings, I come to the conclusion that all the suits have got to be tried jointly. Hence, I do hereby withdraw the suits pending before the District Munsif Court, Tirunelveli, and post these suits before the Sub-Court, Tirunelveli for a joint of all the suits which alone appears to me as more appropriate."

10. Mr. V. Krishna Murthy, learned counsel appearing on behalf of the Appellant raised a short question in support of this appeal. It was urged that having regard to the fact that in the Execution Application, the bailiff delivered possession of the suit land in favour of the Appellant, the First Respondent herein could not have maintained an application purported to be under Section 151 of the Code of Civil Procedure for the reliefs prayed for therein. Having not filed an application in terms of Order 21, Rule 97 of the Code of Civil Procedure, the First Respondent, thus, could not have raised a contention as to whether the decree obtained by the Appellant in the said O.S'. No. 140 of 2003 was collusive or not. Such a contention, Mr. Krishna Murthy would submit, should have been raised in a duly constituted suit.

11. Mr. P.S. Mishra, learned Senior Counsel appearing on behalf of the Respondent, on the other hand, submitted that as the First Respondent continued to be in possession of the suit property, the High Court rightly went into the question as regards legality or otherwise of the decree passed in the said O.S. No. 140 of 2003. It is not a case, Mr. Mishra would submit, where a suit for specific performance was filed impleading the owner of the property. Evidently, the Appellant and the Second Respondent herein had entered into the said purported agreement for sale dated 1.10.2002 only in an attempt to get rid of the compromise decree dated 27.4.1989 passed in O.S. No. 1220 of

1987.

12. It is not in dispute that the consent decree passed in O.S. No. 1220 of 1987 has not yet been set aside. It is furthermore not in dispute that in terms of the consent decree, the First Respondent herein is in possession. A decree for permanent injunction has been passed in its favour. The Appellant herein in terms of the decree passed in his favour in O.S. No. 140 of 2003 and the purported sale deed pursuant thereto on 17.6.2003, merely has stepped into the shoes of the Second Respondent. He cannot claim a better title than her. Thus, so long the decree passed in the said O.S. No. 1220 of 1987 is not set aside, and/or the original Suit No. 381 2003 is not decreed, the possession of the First Respondent herein could not have been interfered with. The slipshod manner in which the purported delivery of possession was sought to be effected has been noticed by us. The Central Nazir did notice that the schedule property was not in possession of the judgment-debtor in O.S. No. 140 of 2003 but still the possession thereof was purported to have been taken through Senior Bailiff under Order 21, Rule 35 of the Code of Civil Procedure. Even the Senior Bailiff in his report states that he went to the plaintiff's place. The defendant was not there. How the land was identified had not been shown. Even the Village Administrative Officer refused to sign.

13. In that view of the matter, when the First Respondent in its application under Section 151 of the Code of Civil Procedure stated that it continued to be in possession, the same cannot be disbelieved. In any event, having regard to the fact that the First Respondent could not have been dispossessed pursuant to or in furtherance of the decree passed in the said O.S. No. 140 of 2003, it would be entitled to continue to possess the said property and in the event, possession has been taken symbolically or otherwise, possession should be restored to the First Respondent.

14. The High Court, however, was not correct in dealing with the question as to whether the decree passed in O.S. No. 140 of 2003 was collusive or not. Such a question did not and could not have arisen before the Executing Court. The First Respondent also filed a suit which is pending. The question may have to be decided in O.S. No. 381 of 2003 and O.S. No. 641 of 2003 which are still pending. Until there is a decree in favour of the assignor of the Appellant in those suits, the compromise decree passed in O.S. No. 1220 of 1987 would have to prevail and prima facie, the title of the land is with the First Respondent. We are, therefore, of the opinion that interests of justice will be subserved if, in modification of the order passed by the High Court, both O.S. No. 381 of 2003 and O.S. No. 641 of 2003 are directed to be tried jointly by a competent Court. As the Appellant herein is a party in O.S. No. 641 of 2003, indisputably, all rival contentions could be gone into therein.

15. It is not necessary, as has been directed by the High Court, to reopen the decree passed in O.S. No. 140 of 2003. The fate of the decree passed in the said suit evidently would depend upon the outcome of the aforementioned O.S. No. 381 of 2003 and O.S. No. 641 of 2003. We will, however, request the concerned Court to consider the desirability of disposing of the aforementioned two suits as early as possible, preferably with a period of six months from the date of communication of this order. The purported delivery of possession in execution of O.S. No. 140 of 2003 will stand nullified and the possession of the First Respondent is recognized subject to the result of O.S. Nos. 381 of 2003 and 641 of 2003. If necessary, the Executing Court will redeliver the property to First Respondent, if applied for in that behalf.

16. This appeal is disposed of with the aforementioned directions. The parties shall bear their own costs.