

# Oxfam India vs Deputy Commissioner Of Income Tax & Anr on 10 May, 2024

**Author: Yashwant Varma**

**Bench: Yashwant Varma, Purushaindra Kumar Kaurav**

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\* IN THE HIGH COURT OF DELHI AT NEW DELHI

+ W.P.(C) 6723/2024

OXFAM INDIA

..... Petitioners

Through: Mr. Sachit Jolly, Mr. Rishabh Malhotra, Ms. Disha Jham, Ms. Soumya Singh and Mr. Devansh Jain, Advocates

Versus

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER OF INCOME TAX & ANR.

..... Respondents

Through: Mr. Zoheb Hossain, Sr. Panel Counsel with Mr. Vipul Agarwal, Sr. SC alongwith Sanjeev Menon, Mr. Gibran Naushad and Ms. Sakshi Shairwal, Jr. SCs.

CORAM:

HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE YASHWANT VARMA

HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE PURUSHAINDR KUMAR

KAURAV

ORDER

% 10.05.2024 CM APPL 27981/2024 (Exemption) Allowed, subject to all just exceptions. The application stands disposed of.

W.P.(C) 6723/2024 and CM APPL 27980/2024 (Interim relief)

1. We take note of an identical challenge which was considered by us in W.P.(C) 6651/2024. Upon hearing learned counsel, we had allowed the petition in the following terms:-

"6. As is evident from a reading of the impugned order, it is manifest that the AO has neither considered the prima facie merits of the challenge which stood raised by the writ petitioner and reiterated in its application for stay nor does it deal with the issue of undue hardship. The AO appears to have mechanically proceeded on the premise that since the petitioner had not made a This is a digitally signed order.

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Server on 17/05/2024 at 21:56:17 pre-deposit of 20%, the application for stay of demand could not be considered.

7. We note that while dealing with an identical view which was taken, we had in National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) v. Deputy Commissioner of Income Tax (Exemption) Circle 2(1), New Delhi & Ors<sup>1</sup> enunciated the legal position in the following terms:

"12. It must at the outset be noted that the two OMs noticed above neither prescribe nor mandate 15% or 20% of the outstanding demand as the case may be, being deposited as a pre-condition for grant of stay. The OM dated 29 February 2016 specifically spoke of a discretion vesting in the AO to grant stay subject to a deposit at a rate higher or lower than 15% dependent upon the facts of a particular case. The subsequent OM merely amended the rate to be 20%. In fact, while the subsequent OM chose to describe the 20% deposit to be the "standard rate", the same would clearly not sustain in light of the discussion which ensues.

13. We note that while dealing with an identical question, we had in Avantha Realty Ltd. vs The Principal Commissioner of Income Tax Central Delhi & Anr. observed as under:-

"2. We note that the impugned orders are principally based on the instructions of the Central Board of Direct Tax ["CBDT"] as encapsulated in the Office Memorandum dated 31 July 2017 and which had while dealing with the manner in which the power under Section 220(6) of the Act is liable to be exercised had held that assessee may be accorded interim protection subject to deposit of 20% of the total outstanding demand failing which they would be treated as an "assessee in default".

3. Insofar as the aforesaid Office Memorandum is concerned, suffice it to note that while considering its ambit the Supreme Court in Principal Commissioner of Income Tax and Others vs. LG Electronics India Private Limited had held as follows:-

"1. Delay condoned. Leave Granted.

2. Having heard Shri Vikramjit Banerjee, learned ASG Neutral Citation-2024:DHC:2078-DB This is a digitally signed order.

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3. The appeal is disposed of accordingly. Pending application, if any, shall stand disposed of."

14. As is manifest from the order passed by the Supreme Court in Principal Commissioner of Income Tax & Ors. vs LG Electronics India Pvt. Ltd., it had been emphasized that the administrative circular would not operate as a fetter upon the power otherwise conferred on a quasi-judicial authority and that it would be wholly incorrect to view the OM as mandating the deposit of 20%, irrespective of the facts of an individual case. This would also flow from the clear and express language employed in sub-section (6) of Section 220 which speaks of the Assessing Officer being empowered "in his discretion and subject to such conditions as he may think fit to impose in the circumstances of the case". The discretion thus vested in the hands of the AO is one which cannot possibly be viewed as being cabined by the terms of the OM.

15. The issue of a grant of stay pending appellate remedies being pursued arose for the consideration of a Division Bench of the Court in Dabur India Limited vs Commissioner of Income Tax (TDS) & Anr. where it was pertinently observed as under:

"6. Having heard learned counsel for the parties and having perused the two Office Memorandums, in question, this Court is of the view that the requirement of payment of twenty percent of disputed tax demand is not a pre-requisite for putting in abeyance recovery of demand pending first appeal in all cases. The said pre-condition of deposit of twenty percent of the demand can be relaxed in appropriate cases. Even the Office Memorandum dated 29 February, 2016 gives instances like where addition on the same issue has been deleted by the appellate authorities in earlier years or where the decision of the Supreme Court or jurisdictional High Court is in favour of the assessee.

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8. In the present case, the impugned order is non- reasoned. The three basic principles i.e. the prima facie case, balance of convenience and irreparable injury have not been considered while deciding the stay application."

16. More recently in Indian National Congress vs Deputy Commissioner of Income Tax Central - 19 & Ors. we had an occasion to examine the scope of the power conferred by Section 220(6) of the Act and which was explained in the following terms:

"22. However, as we read the order impugned, the matter does not appear to have proceeded along those lines before the ITAT. The tone and tenor of submissions clearly appear to have been concentrated upon the merits of the assessment order.

Although the issue of payment of 20% of the outstanding demand appears to have been raised, the same came to be summarily rejected by the ITAT in cryptic terms. Notwithstanding the above, it becomes pertinent to observe that the 20% deposit which is spoken of in the OM dated 31 July 2017 is not liable to be viewed as a condition etched in stone or one which is inviolable. The OM merely seeks to provide guidance to the authorities to bear in mind certain aspects while considering applications for stay of demand pending an appeals remedy being pursued. The OM is not liable to be read as conferring an indefeasible right upon the assessee to claim a stay of a tax liability by merely offering or consenting to deposit 20% of the outstanding liability. Ultimately, it is for the authorities to examine and consider what amount would be sufficient to securitise the interest of the Revenue and thus a just balance being struck. The quantum of the deposit that would be required to be made would ultimately depend upon the facts and circumstances of each case.

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23. The position which thus emerges is that while 20% is not liable to be viewed as an entrenched or inflexible rule, there could be circumstances where the respondents may be justified in seeking a deposit in excess of the above dependent upon the facts and circumstances that may obtain. This would have to necessarily be left to the sound exercise of discretion by the respondents based upon a consideration of issues such as prima facie, financial hardship and the likelihood of success. This This is a digitally signed order.

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17. As explained in Indian National Congress, the 20% which is spoken of in the OM cannot possibly be viewed as being an inviolate or inflexible condition. The extent of the deposit which an assessee may be called upon to make would have to be examined and answered bearing in mind factors such as prima facie case, undue hardship and likelihood of success. We note that while dealing with the question of the claim of stay as made by an assessee and the competing obligation to protect the interest of the Revenue, the Supreme Court in Benara Valves Ltd. & Ors. Vs Commissioner of Central Excise & Anr. had elucidated the legal position in the following words:

"6. Principles relating to grant of stay pending disposal of the matters before the forums concerned have been considered in several cases. It is to be noted that in such matters though discretion is available, the same has to be exercised judicially.

7. The applicable principles have been set out succinctly in Silliguri Municipality v. Amalendu Das and Samarias Trading Co. (P) Ltd. v. S. Samuel and CCE v. Dunlop India Ltd.

8. It is true that on merely establishing a prima facie case, interim order of protection should not be passed. But if on a cursory glance it appears that the demand raised has no leg to stand on, it would be undesirable to require the assessee to pay full or substantive part of the demand. Petitions for stay should not be disposed of in a routine matter unmindful of the consequences flowing from the order requiring the assessee to deposit full or part of the demand. There can be no rule of universal application in such matters and the order has to be passed keeping in view the factual scenario involved. Merely because this Court has indicated the principles that does not give a license to the forum/authority to pass an order which cannot be sustained on the touchstone of fairness, legality and public interest. Where denial of interim relief may lead to public mischief, grave irreparable private injury or shake a citizen's faith in the impartiality of public administration, interim relief can be given.

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9. It has become an unfortunate trend to casually dispose of stay applications by referring to decisions in Siliguri Municipality and Dunlop India cases without analysing factual scenario involved in a particular case.

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11. Two significant expressions used in the provisions are "undue hardship to such person" and "safeguard the interests of Revenue". Therefore, while dealing with the application twin requirements of considerations i.e. consideration of undue hardship aspect and imposition of conditions to safeguard the interest of Revenue have to be kept in view.

12. As noted above there are two important expressions in Section 35-F. One is undue hardship. This is a matter within the special knowledge of the applicant for waiver and has to be established by him. A mere assertion about undue hardship would not be sufficient. It was noted by this Court in S. Vasudeva v. State of Karnataka that under Indian conditions expression "undue hardship" is normally related to economic hardship. "Undue" which means something which is not merited by the conduct of the claimant, or is very much disproportionate to it. Undue hardship is caused when the hardship is not warranted by the circumstances.

13. For a hardship to be 'undue' it must be shown that the particular burden to observe or perform the requirement is out of proportion to the nature of the requirement itself, and the benefit which the applicant would derive from compliance with it.

14. The word "undue" adds something more than just hardship. It means an excessive hardship or a hardship greater than the circumstances warrant

15. The other aspect relates to imposition of condition to safeguard the interest of Revenue. This is an aspect which the Tribunal has to bring into focus. It is for the Tribunal to impose such conditions as are deemed proper to safeguard the interests of the Revenue. Therefore, the Tribunal while dealing with the application has to consider materials to be placed by the assessee relating to undue hardship and also to stipulate condition as required to safeguard the interest of the Revenue."

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The aforesaid principles were reaffirmed by the Supreme Court in Monotosh Saha vs Special Director, Enforcement Directorate & Anr.

18. We find a lucid explanation of the legal position with respect to pre-deposit and the grant of stay in a decision rendered by a Division Bench of the Allahabad High Court in ITC Ltd v. Commissioner (Appeals), Customs & Central Excise where the Court had held as follows:

"18. In Income-tax Officer v. M.K. Mohammad Kunhi, AIR 1969 SC 430, the Apex Court held that stay should be granted if a strong prima facie case has been made out and in the most deserving and appropriate cases where entire purpose of the appeal will be frustrated or rendered nugatory by allowing the recovery proceedings to continue, during the pendency of the appeal.

19. In B.P.L. Sanyo Utilities and Appliances Ltd. v. Union of India, 1999 (108) E.L.T. 621, the Karnataka High Court held that in the matter of grant of waiver of pre-deposit, each case has to be examined on its own merit and no hard and fast rule can be formulated.

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21. In Mehsana District Cooperative Milk P.U. Ltd. v. Union of India, 2003 (154) E.L.T. 347 (S.C.), the Hon'ble Supreme Court considered the case of dispensation of pre-deposit condition and held that the Appellate Authority must address to itself to the prima facie merits of the appellant's case and upon being satisfied of the same, determine the quantum of deposit taking into consideration the financial hardship and other such related factors.

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23. In *J.N. Chemicals Pvt. Ltd. v. CEGAT*, 1991 (53) E.L.T. 543, the Calcutta High Court while considering the provisions of pre-deposit of duty and penalty, observed that where the authority concerned comes to the conclusion that the appellant has a good prima facie case so as to justify the dispensation of requirement of pre-deposit of the disputed amount on duty and penalty, the authority must exercise its discretion to dispense with such requirement particularly in a case where the This is a digitally signed order.

The authenticity of the order can be re-verified from Delhi High Court Order Portal by scanning the QR code shown above. The Order is downloaded from the DHC Server on 17/05/2024 at 21:56:18 appellant satisfies the authority concerned that its case is squarely covered by the decision of a competent Court binding on it. In such an eventuality, asking the appellant to deposit the duty demanded and penalty levied would undoubtedly cause undue hardship to the appellant. While deciding the said case, Calcutta High Court placed reliance upon the judgment of the Hon'ble Apex Court in *L. Hirday Narain v. Income-Tax Officer, Bareilly*, (1970) 2 SCC 355 : AIR 1971 SC 33, wherein the Court observed as under:-

"If a statute invests a public officer with authority to do an act in a specified set of circumstances, it is imperative upon him to exercise his authority in a manner appropriate to the case when a party interested and having a right to apply moved in that behalf and circumstances for exercise of authority are shown to exist. Even if the words used in the statute prima facie enabling, the courts will readily infer a duty to exercise power which is invested in aid of enforcement of a right- public or private-of a citizen."

24. Thus, even where enabling or discretionary power is conferred on a public authority, the words which are permissive in character, require to be constituted, involving a duty to exercise that power, if some legal right or entitlement is conferred or enjoyed, and for the effectuating the such right or entitlement, the exercise of such power is essential. The aforesaid view stands fortified in view of that fact that every power is coupled with a duty to act reasonably and the Court/Tribunal/Authority has to proceed having strict adherence to the provisions of law. [Vide *Julius v. Lord Bishop of Oxford*, (1880) 5 Appeal Cases 214; *Commissioner of Police, Bombay v. Gordhandas Bhanji*, 1951 SCC 1088 : AIR 1952 SC 16; *K.S. Srinivasan v. Union of India*, AIR 1958 SC 419; *Yogeshwar Jaiswal v. State Transport Appellate Tribunal*, (1985) 1 SCC 725 : AIR 1985 SC 516; *Ambica Quarry Works etc. v. State of Gujarat*, (1987) 1 SCC 213 : AIR 1987 SC 1073].

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26. In *Bongaigaon Refinery & Petrochem Ltd. v. Collector of Central Excise (A)*, 1994 (69) E.L.T. 193 (Cal.), the Calcutta High Court, while examining a similar issue and placed reliance upon a large number of This is a digitally signed order.

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would cover a case where the appellant has a strong prima facie case. The phrase also covers a situation where there is an arguable case in the appeal. If the Appellate Authority forms the opinion that appellant has a strong prima facie case, it should dispense with the pre- deposit condition altogether. However, where it is of the opinion that the appellant has no arguable case, the Appellate Authority must safeguard the interest of the Revenue, as the same also cannot be jeopardised.

27. In *Sri Krishna v. Union of India*, 1998 (104) E.L.T. 305, Delhi High Court considered the issue of dispensation of pre- deposit condition and the concept of undue hardship while considering the provisions of Section 129E of the Customs Act, 1962 and Section 35 of the Act and held that the Court while considering the case of the appellant should examine as to whether the Appellate Authority or Tribunal have dealt with the plea raised by the appellant before it and have considered as to whether the appellant has a prima facie case on merit. In case the appellant has a strong prima facie case, as is most likely to exonerate him from liability and the Appellate Authority/Tribunal insists on the deposit of the amount, it would amount to undue hardship.

28. In *Hoogly Mills Co. Ltd. v. Union of India*, 1999 (108) E.L.T. 637, the Calcutta High Court again reiterated the view that if the appellant has a strong prima facie case, he is entitled of waiving the pre-deposit condition and in case the Appellate Authority insists to deposit the amount so assessed or penalty so levied, it will cause undue hardship to the assessee. While considering the said case, the Court placed reliance upon the large number of judgments including *Tata Iron & Steel Co. Ltd. v. Commissioner (Appeals), Central Excise*, 1998 (98) E.L.T. 50; *Hari Fertilizer v. Union of India*, 1985 (22) E.L.T. 301 (All.); *Re. American Refrigeration Co. Ltd.*, 1986 (23) E.L.T. 74; and *V.I.T. Sea Foods v. Collector of Customs*, 1989 (42) E.L.T. 220 (Ker.), wherein the Courts had expressed the similar view.

29. In *I.T.C. Ltd. v. Commissioner of Central Excise and Customs (Appeals)* ILR 2000 KAR 25, while examining the issue of pre- deposit under Section 35 of the Act, after considering a large number of judgments of the Apex Court and various High Courts, it was held as This is a digitally signed order.

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"While considering the case of „undue hardship , the authority is required to examine the prima facie on merits of the dispute as well. Pleading of financial disability would not be the only consideration. Where the case is fully covered in favour of the assessee by a biding precedent like that of the judgment of the Supreme Court, jurisdictional High Court or a Special Bench of the Tribunal, then to still insist upon the deposit of duty and penalty levied would certainly cause undue hardship to



the assessee. Absence of the financial hardship in such a case would be no ground to decline the dispensation of pre-deposit under the proviso to Section 35F. The power to dispense with such deposit is conferred under the authorities has to be exercised precisely in cases like this type and if it is not exercised under such circumstances then this Court will require it to be exercised. Such like cases where two views are not possible then the condition of pre-deposit before the appeal is heard on merits, can be dispensed with. In case two views are possible on interpretation, based on conflicting judgments of the Tribunal or different High Courts in the absence of the judgment of the jurisdictional High Court then the authorities may pass the order under proviso to Section 35F of the Act keeping in view the facts of the case in hand."

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35. In view of the above, the aforesaid authorities make it clear that the Court should not grant interim relief/stay of the recovery merely by asking of a party. It has to maintain a balance between the rights of an individual and the State so far as the recovery of sovereign dues is concerned. While considering the application for stay/waiver of a pre-deposit, as required under the law, the Court must apply its mind as to whether the appellant has a strong prima facie case on merit. In case it is covered by the judgment of a Court/Tribunal binding upon the Appellate Authority, it should apply its mind as to whether in view of the said judgment, the appellant is likely to succeed on merit. If an appellant having strong prima facie case, is asked to deposit the amount of assessment so made or penalty so levied, it would cause undue hardship to him, though there may be no financial restrain on the appellant running in a good financial condition. The arguments that appellant is in a position to deposit or if he succeeds in appeal, he will be entitled This is a digitally signed order.

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subjected to duty, it has to be established that it has been manufactured and it is marketable and to prove that it is marketable, the burden is on the Revenue and not on the manufacturer."

19. Though some of the decisions noticed by us hereinabove pertained to pre-deposit prescriptions placed by a statute, the principles enunciated therein would clearly be of relevance while examining the extent of the power that stands placed in the hands of the AO in terms of Section 220(6) of the Act. In our considered opinion, the respondents have clearly erred in proceeding on the assumption that the application for consideration of outstanding demands being placed in abeyance could not have even been entertained without a 20% pre-deposit. The aforesaid stand as taken is thoroughly misconceived and wholly untenable in law."

8. We thus and in light of the legal principles that were propounded in NASSCOM, find ourselves unable to sustain the order impugned.

9. It becomes pertinent to note that Mr. Hossain, learned counsel appearing for the respondents, conceded to the legal position as spelt out in NASSCOM, and the admitted failure of the AO to bear in mind the relevant considerations for grant of stay of demand.

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10. In view of the above, and in our considered opinion, there would appear to be no justification to retain the instant petition on our board. The ends of justice would in fact warrant the matter being remitted to the AO for considering the stay application moved by the writ petitioner afresh."

2. Accordingly and following the aforesaid decision we allow the instant writ petition on identical terms.

3. The impugned order dated 03 May 2024 is set aside. The matter shall in consequence stand remitted to the AO who shall examine the application for stay of demand afresh and bearing in mind the legal principles as enunciated in National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) v. Deputy Commissioner of Income Tax (Exemption) Circle 2(1), New Delhi & Ors [Neutral Citation- 2024:DHC:2078-DB].

YASHWANT VARMA, J.

PURUSHAINdra KUMAR KAURAV, J.

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