

2022 SCC OnLine SC 362

In the Supreme Court of India
(BEFORE INDIRA BANERJEE AND J.K. MAHESHWARI, JJ.)

Pahwa Plastics Pvt. Ltd. and Another ... Appellants;

Versus

Dastak NGO and Others ... Respondents.

Civil Appeal No. 4795 of 2021

Decided on March 25, 2022

The Judgment of the Court was delivered by

INDIRA BANERJEE, J.:— This appeal under Section 22 of the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010, is against an order dated 3rd June 2021 passed by the Principal Bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in O.A No. 287/2020 at New Delhi, *inter alia*, holding that establishments such as the manufacturing units of the Appellants, which did not have prior Environmental Clearance (EC) could not be allowed to operate.

2. The question of law involved in this appeal is, whether an establishment employing about 8000 workers, which has been set up pursuant to Consent to Establish (CTE) and Consent to Operate (CTO) from the concerned statutory authority and has applied for ex post facto EC can be closed down pending issuance of EC, even though it may not cause pollution and/or may be found to comply with the required pollution norms.

3. With increasing industrialization and the establishment of factories which emitted smoke and other pollutants, there was worldwide concern for protection of environment. In June 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm, where decisions were taken to take appropriate steps for preservation of the natural resources of the earth, which, among other things, included preservation of the quality of air and water by controlling pollution.

4. In 1974, Parliament enacted the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, with a view to prevent and control water pollution and to maintain and restore wholesomeness of water.

5. In furtherance of the decisions taken at Stockholm, Parliament enacted the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981, hereinafter referred to as "the Air Pollution Act", to provide for prevention, control and abatement of air pollution.

6. The Air Pollution Act provides for the constitution of a Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and State Pollution Control Boards (SPCB) to deal with the problem of air pollution. Section 16 of the Air Pollution Act enables the Central Pollution Control Board to take steps to improve the quality of air and to prevent, control or abate air pollution in the country. Section 17 of the Air Pollution Act enables the State Pollution Control Boards to plan comprehensive programmes for the prevention, control or abatement of air pollution, *inter alia*, by laying down standards for emission of air pollutants.

7. Section 18 of the Air Pollution Act enables the Central Government to give directions by which the CPCB is to be bound. Similarly, every SPCB is to be bound by directions in writing as might be given by the CPCB or the State Government.

8. Where a notification is issued under the Air Pollution Act, placing an area within the control area of air pollution, permission is necessary to set up and operate any factory or plant thereat. No person operating any factory or plant in any air pollution control area is to discharge or cause or permit to be discharged the emission of any air pollutants, in excess of the standards laid down by the SPCB under Clause (q) of sub-

Section (1) of Section 17.

9. The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, hereinafter referred to as "the EP Act" was also enacted pursuant to the decisions taken at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in June, 1972. As per the Statement of Objects and Reasons for enactment of the EP Act, the said Act has been prompted by concern over the environment, that has grown all over the world since the 60s.

10. Sub-section (1) of Section 3 of the EP Act empowers the Central Government to take all such measures as it might deem necessary or expedient for the purpose of protecting and improving the quality of the environment and preventing, controlling and reducing environmental pollution.

11. Sub-section (2) of Section 3 of the EP Act enables the Central Government to take, inter alia, the following measures:

"(i) co-ordination of actions by the State Governments, officers and other authorities—

(a) under this Act, or the rules made thereunder; or

(b) under any other law for the time being in force which is relatable to the objects of this Act;

(ii) planning and execution of a nation-wide programme for the prevention, control and abatement of environmental pollution;

(iii) laying down standards for the quality of environment in its various aspects;

(iv) laying down standards for emission or discharge of environmental pollutants from various sources whatsoever:

Provided that different standards for emission or discharge may be laid down under this clause from different sources having regard to the quality or composition of the emission or discharge of environmental pollutants from such sources;

(v) restriction of areas in which any industries, operations or processes or class of industries, operations or processes shall not be carried out or shall be carried out subject to certain safeguards;

(vi) laying down procedures and safeguards for the prevention of accidents which may cause environmental pollution and remedial measures for such accidents;

(vii) laying down procedures and safeguards for the handling of hazardous substances;

(viii) examination of such manufacturing processes, materials and substances as are likely to cause environmental pollution;

(ix) carrying out and sponsoring investigations and research relating to problems of environmental pollution;

(x) inspection of any premises, plant, equipment, machinery, manufacturing or other processes, materials or substances and giving, by order, of such directions to such authorities, officers or persons as it may consider necessary to take steps for the prevention, control and abatement of environmental pollution;

(xi) establishment or recognition of environmental laboratories and institutes to carry out the functions entrusted to such environmental laboratories and institutes under this Act;

(xii) collection and dissemination of information in respect of matters relating to environmental pollution;

(xiii) preparation of manuals, codes or guides relating to the prevention, control and abatement of environmental pollution;

(xiv) such other matters as the Central Government deems necessary or expedient for the purpose of securing the effective implementation of the provisions

of this Act."

12. Sub-section (3) of Section 3 of the EP Act provides as follows:

"3. Power of Central Government to take measures to protect and improve environment.—

...

(3) The Central Government may, if it considers it necessary or expedient so to do for the purposes of this Act, by order, published in the Official Gazette, constitute an authority or authorities by such name or names as may be specified in the order for the purpose of exercising and performing such of the powers and functions (including the power to issue directions under Section 5) of the Central Government under this Act and for taking measures with respect to such of the matters referred to in sub-section (2) as may be mentioned in the order and subject to the supervision and control of the Central Government and the provisions of such order, such authority or authorities may exercise the powers or perform the functions or take the measures so mentioned in the order as if such authority or authorities had been empowered by this Act to exercise those powers or perform those functions or take such measures."

13. Subject to the provisions of the EP Act, the Central Government has power under sub-Section (1) of Section 3, to take all such measures, as it deems necessary or expedient, for the purpose of protecting and improving the quality of environment and preventing, controlling or reducing environmental pollution.

14. Section 5 of the EP Act provides that notwithstanding anything contained in any other law, but subject to the provisions of the EP Act, the Central Government may, in exercise of its powers and performance of its functions under the EP Act, issue directions in writing to any person, officer or any authority and such person, officer or authority shall be bound to comply with such directions.

15. In exercise of powers conferred by Sections 6 and 25 of the EP Act, the Central Government has made the Environment (Protection) Rules, 1986, hereinafter referred to as "the EP Rules".

16. The Central Government issued an Environmental Impact Assessment Notification dated 27th January 1994 in exercise of powers conferred by sub-section (1) and clause (v) of sub-section (2) of Section 3 of the EP Act read with clause (d) of sub-rule (3) of Rule 5 of the EP Rules, directing that on and from the date of publication of the said notification in the Official Gazette, expansion or modernization of any activity or a new project listed in Schedule I to the said notification shall not be undertaken in any part of India, unless it has been accorded EC by the Central Government in accordance with the procedures specified in the said notification.

17. In exercise of powers conferred by sub-section (1) and clause (v) of sub-section (2) of Section 3 of the EP Act read with clause (d) of sub-rule (3) of Rule 5 of the EP Rules and in supersession of notification number S.O. 60 (E) dated 27th January 1994, except in respect of things done or omitted to be done before such supersession, the Central Government issued a notification dated 14th September 2006, being Notification S.O. 1533 (E) requiring prior environmental clearance from the Central Government or as the case may be, by the State-Level Environment Assessment Authority, duly constituted by the Central Government under sub-section (3) of Section 3 of the EP Act.

18. In terms of the said notification dated 14th September 2006, the process of environmental clearance for new projects was to comprise of a maximum of four stages, all of which might not apply to particular cases. The stages were (1) Screening, (2) Scoping, (3) Public Consultation and (4) Appraisal.

19. In the meanwhile, by a notification being S.O. 327 (E) dated 10th April 2001, published in the Gazette of India on 12th April 2001, the Central Government has

delegated the powers vested in it under the EP Act, to the Chairpersons of the respective State Pollution Control Boards/Committees to issue directions to any industry or any local or other authority to prevent violation of the Rules.

20. The Appellants carry on business, *inter alia*, of manufacture and sale of basic organic chemicals, namely, Formaldehyde. The Appellant No. 1, M/s. **Pahwa Plastics** Private Limited has two manufacturing units, one at village Kharawar in Rohtak, hereinafter referred to as the "Rohtak Unit" and the other at village Jathlana, Jagadhri in Yamuna Nagar in Haryana, hereinafter referred to as the "Yamuna Nagar Unit". The Appellant No. 2 has a manufacturing unit at village Ghespur in Yamuna Nagar, Haryana which is hereinafter referred to as the "Yamuna Nagar Unit". The manufacturing units established, run and operated by the respective Appellants fall in the category of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) as defined under the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006, hereinafter referred to as "the MSME Act".

21. On or about 31st March 2014, the Appellant No. 1, M/s. **Pahwa Plastics** Ltd. applied for Consent to Establish (CTE) its Yamuna Nagar unit for manufacture of Formaldehyde.

22. By a communication No. HSPCB/Consent/ : 2846616YAMCTE 3087415 dated 2nd June 2016, the Haryana State Pollution Control Board (HSPCB) granted Consent to Establish (CTE) to the Appellant No. 1 M/s. **Pahwa Plastics** Private Limited in respect of its Yamuna Nagar Unit. The CTE was to remain valid for 60 months from the date of its issue, to be extended for another year at the discretion of the Board or till the time the unit started its trial production, whichever was earlier.

23. Some of the terms and conditions on which CTE was granted are set out hereinbelow:

"3. The officer/official of the Board shall have the right to access and inspection of the industry in connection with the various processes and the treatment facilities being provided simultaneously with the construction of building/machinery. The effluent should conform the effluent standards as applicable.

4. That necessary arrangement shall be made by the industry for the control of Air Pollution before commissioning the plant. The emitted pollutants will meet the emission and other standards as laid/will be prescribed by the Board from time to time.

5. The applicant will obtain consent under section 25/26 of the Water (Prevention & Control of Pollution) Act, 1974 and under section 21/22 of the Air (Prevention & Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 as amended to-date-even before starting trial production.

6. The above Consent to Establish is further subject to the conditions that the unit complies with all the laws/rules/decisions and competent directions of the Board/Government and its functionaries in all respect before commissioning of the operation and during its actual working strictly.

8. The Electricity Department will give only temporary connection and permanent connection to the unit will be given after verifying the consent granted by the Board, both under Water Act and Air Act.

12. That there is no discharge directly or indirectly from the unit or the process into any interstate river or Yamuna River or River Ghaggar.

13. That the industry or the unit concerned is not sited within any prohibited distances according to the Environmental Laws and Rules, Notification, Orders and Policies of Central Pollution Control Board and Haryana State Pollution Control

Board.

17. In case of change of name from previous Consent to Establish granted, fresh Consent to Establish fee shall be levied.

18. Industry should adopt water conservation measures to ensure minimum consumption of water in their Process. Ground water based proposals of new industries should get clearance from Central Ground Water Authority for scientific development of previous resources.

19. That the unit will take all other clearances from concerned agencies, whenever required.

20. That the unit will not change its process without the prior permission of the Board.

21. That the Consent to Establish so granted will be invalid, if the unit falls in Aravali Area or non conforming area.

22. That the unit will comply with the Hazardous Waste Management Rules and will also make the non-leachate pit for storage of Hazardous waste and will undertake not to dispose off the same except for pit in their own premises or with the authorized disposal authority.

23. That the unit will submit an undertaking that it will comply with all the specific and general conditions as imposed in the above Consent to Establish within 30 days failing which Consent to Establish will be revoked."

24. By another communication No. HSPCB/Consent/ : 2846618YAMCTO3098246 dated 26th March 2018, HSPCB granted consent to the Appellant No. 1 to operate its Yamuna Nagar Unit from 8th February 2018 to 31st March 2022.

25. By an order No. HSPCB/YMN/2242, dated 31st March 2010, the Appellant No. 2, M/s. Apcolite Polymer Private Limited was granted CTE to establish its Yamuna Nagar Unit for manufacture of Formaldehyde with the manufacturing capacity of 80 tonnes per day.

26. By another communication Nos. HSPCB/Consent/ : HSPCB/YMN/DLC/2011/4027 & HSPCB/YMN/DLC/2011/4029 dated 16th January 2012, HSPCB granted the Appellant No. 2, M/s. Apcolite Polymers Private Limited, Consent to Operate (CTO) its Yamuna Nagar Unit. The CTO has been extended from 1st April 2016 till 31st March 2026, by a letter dated 13th March 2016. The CTO is valid till March 2026.

27. By a communication No. HSPCB/Consent/ : 2846616YAMCT OHWM2630357 dated 13th March 2016, HSPCB granted consent for emission of AIR to Appellant No. 2, M/s. Apcolite Polymers Private Limited in respect of its Yamuna Nagar Unit on, inter alia, the terms and conditions specified in the said letter, some of which are extracted hereinbelow:—

"10. The air pollution control equipment of such specification which shall keep the emissions within the emission standard as approved by the State Board from time to time shall be installed and operated in the premises where the industry is carrying on/proposed to carry on its business.

11. The existing air pollution control equipment if required shall be alerted or replaced in accordance with the direction on the Board.

12. All solid wastes arising in the factory premises shall be properly graded and disposed of by:—

(i) In case of Land fill material, care should be taken to ensure that the material does not give rise to leachate which may percolate in ground water or carried away with storm run off.

(ii) Composting in case of bio degradable materials.

(iii) If the method of incineration is used for the disposal of solid waste the consent application should be processed separately and it should be taken up which consent is granted.

13. The industry shall submit an undertaking to the effect that the above conditions shall be complied with by them.

14. The applicant shall submit its undertaking to the effect that the above conditions shall be complied with by them.

15. The applicant shall make an application for grant of fresh consent at least 90 days before the date of expiry of this consent.

18. There should not be any fugitive emission from the premises.

19. The liquid effluent arising out of the operation of the air pollution control equipment shall also be treated in a manner and to the standards stipulated in the consent granted under Water (Prevention & Control of Pollution) Act, 1974 by this Board.

21. If the industry fails to adhere to any of the condition of this consent order the consent so granted shall automatically lapse.

33. The industry shall submit Environment Audit report once in a year.

38. In case of by passing the emissions, the consent shall be deemed revoked."

28. It is the case of the Appellants that at the time when CTE was granted to the Appellants, it was thought that EC was not required for units which manufactured Formaldehyde. Even HSPCB itself was not sure of whether EC was required for such units.

29. Mr. Gupta argued that the Appellants were *bona fide* under the impression that the Appellants were not required to obtain prior EC for setting up this establishment to manufacture Formaldehyde. On the basis of CTE granted by HSPCB, the Appellants set up their units taking huge loans from banks for which repayments have to be paid in installments.

30. In exercise of power under Section 3(1) and Section 3(2)(v) of the EP Act read with Rule 5(3)(d) of the EP Rules, the Central Government issued a notification being S.O. 804(E) dated 14th March 2017 which provides for grant of *ex post facto* EC for project proponents who had commenced, continued or completed a project without obtaining EC under the EP Act/EP Rules or the Environmental Impact Notification issued thereunder. Paragraphs 3, 4 and 5 of the said notification, read as hereunder:

"(3) In cases of violation, action will be taken against the project proponent by the respective State or State Pollution Control Board under the provisions of section 19 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 and further, no consent to operate or occupancy certificate will be issued till the project is granted the environmental clearance.

(4) The cases of violation will be appraised by respective sector Expert Appraisal Committees constituted under sub-section (3) of Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 with a view to assess that the project has been constructed at a site which under prevailing laws is permissible and expansion has been done which can be run sustainably under compliance of environmental norms with adequate environmental safeguards; and in case, where the finding of the Expert Appraisal Committee is negative, closure of the project will be recommended along with other actions under the law.

(5) In case, where the findings of the Expert Appraisal Committee on point at

sub-para(4) above are affirmative, the projects under this category will be prescribed the appropriate Terms of Reference for undertaking Environment Impact Assessment and preparation of Environment Management Plan. Further, the Expert Appraisal Committee will prescribe a specific Terms of Reference for the project on assessment of ecological damage, remediation plan and natural and community resource augmentation plan and it shall be prepared as an independent chapter in the environment impact assessment report by the accredited consultants. The collection and analysis of data for assessment of ecological damage, preparation of remediation plan and natural and community resource augmentation plan shall be done by an environmental laboratory duly notified under Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, or a environmental laboratory accredited by National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories, or a laboratory of a Council of Scientific and Industrial Research institution working in the field of environment."

31. The Notification of 2017 is a valid statutory notification issued by the Central Government in exercise of power under Sections 3(1) and 3(2)(v) of the EP Act read with Rule 5(3)(d) of the EP Rules in the same manner as the EIA Notification dated 27th January 1994 and the Notification dated 14th September 2006.

32. Section 21 of the General Clauses Act, 1897 provides that where any Central Act or Regulations confer a power to issue notifications, orders, rules or bye-laws, that power includes the power, exercisable in like manner, and subject to like sanction and conditions, if any, to add to, amend, vary or rescind any notification, order, rule or bye-law so issued. The authority, which had the power to issue Notifications dated 27th January 1994 and 14th September 2006 undoubtedly had, and still has the power to rescind or modify or amend those notifications in like manner. As held by this Court in *Shree Sidhbali Steels Ltd. v. State of Uttar Pradesh*¹, power under Section 21 to amend, vary or rescind notifications, orders, rules or bye-laws can be exercised from time to time having regard to the exigency.

33. Puducherry Environment Protection Association filed a Writ Petition being W.P. No. 11189 of 2017 in the High Court of Madras assailing the said notification dated 14th March 2017. By a judgment and order dated 13th October 2017, a Division Bench of the High Court refused to interfere with the said notification, holding that the impugned notification did not compromise with the need to preserve environmental purity.

34. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) issued a draft notification dated 23rd March 2020 which was duly published in the Gazette of India Extraordinary Part II. The Notification was proposed to be issued in exercise of powers conferred by subsection (1) and clause (v) of sub-section (2) of Section 3 of the EP Act for dealing with cases of violation of the notification with regard to EC. It was proposed that cases of violation would be appraised by the Appraisal Committee with a view to assess whether the project had been constructed or operated at a site which was permissible under prevailing laws and could be run sustainably on compliance of environmental norms with adequate environmental safeguards. Closure was to be recommended if the findings of the Appraisal Committee were in the negative. If the Appraisal Committee found that such unit had been running sustainably upon compliance of environmental norms with adequate environment safeguards, the unit would be prescribed appropriate Terms of Reference (TOR) after which the procedure for grant of EC would follow.

35. On 10th November 2020, the Department of Environment and Climate Change of the Government of Haryana issued an order which is extracted hereinbelow for convenience:

"Whereas the process of manufacturing of Formaldehyde is covered under the provisions of 5(f) of Schedule of Environment Impact Assessment Notification (EIA),

2006 of Government of India, and requires the prior Environmental Clearance (EC) from the competent authority State Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA)/Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India, before establishment and operation of such units, besides other mandatory clearance, as applicable;

Whereas, it has come to the notice of Government that around 15 such units have been permitted to establish/operate in the State of Haryana, without obtaining the necessary Prior Environmental Clearances, but with the Consent of the Haryana State Pollution Control Bureau (HSPCB), which misinterpreted the category of such units and on realising the requirement of EC in these cases, has revoked its consents issued earlier to these units recently;

Whereas, some of these units approached the Government explaining their hardship due to such sudden revocation of their consents and have sought time for obtaining the necessary EC from the competent authority as the process is likely to take a minimum of 6 months to one year period, and to allow them to operate with all pollution control measures, following the pollution control norms applicable, and,

Whereas, the Government has carefully considered their request and the competent authority has decided that these units shall be allowed to continue their operations for a period of six months, without prejudice to any legal action taken against the violations committed by them, by the competent authorities, with the conditions that they will immediately apply for Environmental Clearance from the competent authority and provide the proof of such application within 60 days from the issuance of this communication to Environment and Climate Change Department and to Haryana State Pollution Control Board.

Therefore, it is ordered accordingly."

36. Referring to the Counter Affidavit filed by HSPCB before the NGT, Mr. Gupta pointed out that, since HSPCB itself was under the misconception that prior EC was not necessary for units such as the Yamunanagar units of the Appellants Nos. 1 and 2 respectively. HSPCB took a policy decision to allow the units which did not have prior EC to operate for six months, on condition that they would apply for EC within sixty days.

37. The Appellants duly applied for EC in respect of their manufacturing units. After scrutinizing their applications and after finding the units suitable for grant of EC in terms of the prevailing guidelines, the Expert Appraisal Committee constituted by the MoEF&CC conducted a public hearing to finalize the cases of the Appellants for issuance of Terms of Reference (TOR).

38. By an Office Memorandum, being F. No. 22-21/2020-1A III, dated 7th July 2021, the MoEF&CC issued Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for identification and handling of violation cases under EIA Notification 2006.

39. The said Office Memorandum, inter alia, reads:

"The Ministry had issued a notification number S.O.804(E), dated the 14th March, 2017 detailing the process for grant of Terms of Reference and Environmental Clearance in respect of projects or activities which have started the work on site and/or expanded the production beyond the limit of Prior EC or changed the product mix without obtaining Prior EC under the EIA Notification, 2006.

2. This Notification was applicable for six months from the date of publication i.e. 14.03.2017 to 13.09.2017 and further based on court direction from 14.03.2018 to 13.04.2018.

3. Hon'ble NGT in Original Application No. 287 of 2020 in the matter of Dastak N.G.O. v. Synochem Organics Pvt. Ltd. and in applications pertaining to same subject matter in Original Application No. 298 of 2020 in Vineet Nagar v. Central Ground Water Authority, vide order dated 03.06.2021 held that "(...) for past

violations, the concerned authorities are free to take appropriate action in accordance with polluter pays principle, following due process".

4. Further, the Hon'ble National Green Tribunal in O.A. No. 34/2020 WZ in the matter of Tanaji B. Gambhire v. Chief Secretary, Government of Maharashtra, vide order dated 24.05.2021 has directed that".... a proper SoP be laid down for grant of EC in such cases so as to address the gaps in binding law and practice being currently followed. The MoEF may also consider circulating such SoP to all SEIAAs in the country".

5. Therefore, in compliance to the directions of the Hon'ble NGT a Standard Operating Procedure (SoP) for dealing with violation cases is required to be drawn. The Ministry is also seized of different categories of 'violation' cases which have been pending for want of an approved structural/procedural framework based on 'Polluter Pays Principle' and 'Principle of Proportionality'. It is undoubtedly important that action under statutory provisions is taken against the defaulters/violators and a decision on the closure of the project or activity or otherwise is taken expeditiously.

6. In the light of the above directions of the Hon'ble Tribunal and the issues involved, the matter has accordingly been examined in detail in the Ministry. A detailed SoP has accordingly been framed and is outlined herein. The SoP is also guided by the observations/decisions of the Hon'ble Courts wherein principles of proportionality and polluters pay have been outlined."

40. The SOP formulated by the said Office Memorandum dated 7th July 2021 refers to and gives effect to various judicial pronouncements including the judgment of this Court in *Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd. v. Rohit Prajapati*².

41. In terms of the SOP, the proposal for grant of EC in cases of violation are to be considered on merits, with prospective effect, applying principles of proportionality and the principle that the polluter pays and is liable for costs of remedial measures.

42. By an order dated 9th July 2021, the MoEF&CC confirmed the minutes of an earlier meeting of the Expert Appraisal Committee and recommended issuance of terms of reference to the Appellant No. 1, M/s. **Pahwa Plastics** Private Limited for expansion of its Formaldehyde Manufacturing unit from 60 TPD to 150 TPD.

43. In the meanwhile, on or about 26th November 2020, the Respondent No. 1, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) hereinafter referred to as "Dastak" filed an application being O.A. No./287/2020 before the NGT praying that the order dated 10th November 2020 passed by the State of Haryana be quashed and units which were operating without EC be closed. The NGT disposed of the said application of Dastak by the impugned order dated 3rd June 2021.

44. A Public Interest Litigation being W.P. (MD) No. 11757 of 2021 (*Fatima v. Union of India*) was filed before the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court challenging the said Memorandum dated 7th July 2021. By an interim order dated 15th July 2021 a Division Bench of the Madras High Court admitted the Writ Petition and stayed the said memorandum.

45. The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court observed and held:—

"This writ petition has been filed as a public interest litigation challenging the validity of the office memorandum dated 07.07.2021, issued by the respondent.

2. We have heard Mr. A. Yogeshwaran, learned counsel appearing for the writ petitioner and Mr. L. Victoria Gowri, learned Assistant Solicitor General of India, accepts notice for the respondent.

3. The impugned office memorandum is challenged as being wholly without jurisdiction, contrary to the Environment Impact Assessment Notification, 2006, ultra vires the powers of the respondent under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 and violative of the various principles enunciated by the Hon'ble Supreme

Court, while interpreting Article 21 and Article 48-A of the Constitution of India.

4. Further, it is submitted that the impugned notification is in gross violation of the undertaking given before the Hon'ble Full Bench of this Court in W.P. No. 11189 of 2017, wherein, the Court took note of the submissions made on behalf of the Government of India, that the notification impugned therein is only a one-time measure. Further, it is submitted that the respondent failed to see that concept of ex-post facto approval is alien to environment jurisprudence and it is anathema to the Environment Impact Assessment Notification, 2006.

5. Further, it is submitted that the impugned notification is in gross violation of the judgment of the Hon'ble Supreme Court in the case of Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd. v. Rohit Prajapati, 2020 SCC OnLine SC 347 and the orders passed by the National Green Tribunal, Principal Bench, New Delhi, in the case of S.P. Muthuraman v. Union of India, 2015 SCC OnLine NGT 169.

6. Identical grounds were considered by us in a challenge to an office memorandum dated 19.02.2021, which provided a procedure for granting post facto clearance under Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification 2011, on the ground that despite no such provisions in the notification and being contrary to the earlier judgments and undertaking. The said writ petition in W.P.(MD). No. 8866 of 2021 was admitted and by order dated 30.04.2021, the said office memorandum dated 19.02.2021 has been stayed.

7. The core issue in this writ petition is whether the Government of India could have issued the office memorandum and brought about the Standard Operating Procedure for dealing with violators, who failed to comply with the mandatory condition of obtaining prior environment clearance under the Environment Impact Assessment Notification 2006, read with the provisions of Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. This issue was considered by the Hon'ble Supreme Court in Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd. (cited supra), and it was held that such office memorandum in the nature of circular is without jurisdiction. The operative portion of the judgment reads as follows:

...What is sought to be achieved by the administrative circular dated 14 May 2002 is contrary to the statutory notification dated 27 January 1994. The circular dated 14 May 2002 does not stipulate how the detrimental effects on the environment would be taken care of if the project proponent is granted an ex post facto EC. The EIA notification of 1994 mandates a prior environmental clearance. The circular substantially amends or alters the application of the EIA notification of 1994. The mandate of not commencing a new project or expanding or modernising an existing one unless an environmental clearance has been obtained stands diluted and is rendered ineffective by the issuance of the administrative circular dated 14 May 2002. This discussion leads us to the conclusion that the administrative circular is not a measure protected by Section 3. Hence there was no jurisdictional bar on the NGT to enquire into its legitimacy or vires. Moreover, the administrative circular is contrary to the EIA Notification 1994 which has a statutory character. The circular is unsustainable in law."

8. Despite the above decision, once again the Government of India, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change have chosen to adopt the route of issuing the office memorandum and virtually setting at naught the provisions of the Environment Impact Assessment Notification and the Environment (Protection) Act.

9. Before the Hon'ble First Bench, a public interest litigation was filed by the Puducherry Environment Protection Association, challenging the notification dated 14.03.2017, on identical grounds and the Hon'ble First Bench by judgment dated 13.10.2017, recorded the submissions of the learned Assistant Solicitor General of India that the said notification was a one-time measure and accordingly, disposed

of the writ petition.

10. Once again, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change have issued the impugned office memorandum. Thus, from what we have noted above, we are of the clear view that the petitioner has made out a *prima facie* case for entertaining the writ petition. Accordingly, the writ petition is admitted and there shall be an order of interim stay."

46. It is true that in the case of *Puducherry Environment Protection Association v. Union of India*³, the Division Bench of Madras High Court took note of and recorded the submission made on behalf of the Union of India that the relaxation was a one time relaxation. In view of such submission, this Court held that a one time relaxation was permissible.

47. It is, however, well settled that words and phrases and/or sentences in a judgment cannot be read in the manner of a statute, and that too out of context. The observation of the Division Bench that a one time relaxation was permissible, is not to be construed as a finding that relaxation cannot be made more than once. If power to amend or modify or relax a notification and/or order exists, the notification and/or order may be amended and/or modified as many times, as may be necessary. A statement made by counsel in Court would not prevent the authority concerned from making amendments and/or modifications provided such amendments and/or modifications were as per the procedure prescribed by law.

48. The Division Bench of Madras High Court fell in error in staying the said office memorandum, by relying on observations made by this Court in *Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd.* (supra), in the context of a circular which was contrary to the statutory Environment Impact Notification of 1994. The attention of the High Court was perhaps not drawn to the fact that the notification of 7th July 2021 was in pursuance of the statutory notification of 2017 which was valid. The judgment of this Court in *Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd.* (supra), was clearly distinguishable and could have no application to the office memorandum dated 7th July 2021 which was issued pursuant to the notification dated 14th March 2017.

49. The Appellants have already applied for EC. The Expert Appraisal Committee of the MoEF&CC has, after scrutinizing the application of the Appellants and finding them eligible for grant of EC, recommended their cases for grant of Terms of Reference (ToR). ToR was granted to the Appellants and a public hearing had also been conducted. Only last procedural step of issuance of EC is left.

50. It is claimed that the units of the Appellants are totally non-polluting units having "Zero Trade discharge". They have been in operation for many years. In the reply affidavit filed by the State before the NGT, it was mentioned that the units were operating in good faith with valid CTOs granted by the HSPCB. It was stated that the units were not causing pollution hazards. The only thing against the units was the procedural lapse of not obtaining EC.

51. By a communication No. F. No. IA-J-110011/185/2020-IA-II(I) dated 20th July 2021 issued to the Appellant No. 1, the MoEF&CC rejected the proposal for terms of reference on the purported ground that the activity of the Appellant No. 1 was covered under category "A" of item 5(f) "Synthetic Organic Chemicals" of the Schedule to the EIA Notification, 2006. A similar communication was issued in respect of M/s. Apcolite Polymers Pvt. Ltd. Significantly, by an order dated 9th July 2021, the MoEF&CC had confirmed the minutes of an earlier meeting of the Expert Appraisal Committee and recommended issuance of ToR to the Appellant No. 1, as observed above. The proposal for Terms of Reference has obviously been rejected at the final stage after the public hearing, by reason of the impugned order dated 3rd June 2021 passed by the NGT on the application of Dastak, which is under appeal.

52. This appeal was listed for admission on 30th September 2021, along with an

application for interim relief being I.A. No. 110064 of 2021 praying for orders permitting the Appellants to operate their units during the pendency of the appeal. The appeal was heard at length at the admission stage and reserved for judgment along with the interim application by an order dated 30th September 2021.

53. After receiving the communication dated 20th July 2021 rejecting the proposal for Terms of Reference, the Appellants requested HSPCB to forward to the Appellants the proceedings of public hearing in respect of the manufacturing units of the Appellants. By a communication No. HSPCB/YR/2021/2830 dated 15th February 2022, HSPCB forwarded proceedings of the public hearing in respect of the Yamuna Nagar unit of the Appellant No. 1. By another Communication No. HSPCB/YR/29021/2829 dated 15th February 2022 the HSPCB forwarded to the Appellant No. 2 the proceedings of the public hearing held on 3rd February 2022 in connection with the Yamuna Nagar Unit of the Appellant No. 2.

54. The manufacturing units of the Appellants appoint about 8,000 employees and have a huge annual turnover. An establishment contributing to the economy of the country and providing livelihood ought not to be closed down only on the ground of the technical irregularity of not obtaining prior Environmental Clearance irrespective of whether or not the unit actually causes pollution.

55. In *Electrosteel Steels Limited v. Union of India*⁴, this Court held:—

"82. The question is whether an establishment contributing to the economy of the country and providing livelihood to hundreds of people should be closed down for the technical irregularity of shifting its site without prior environmental clearance, without opportunity to the establishment to regularize its operation by obtaining the requisite clearances and permissions, even though the establishment may not otherwise be violating pollution laws, or the pollution, if any, can conveniently and effectively be checked. The answer has to be in the negative.

83. The Central Government is well within the scope of its powers under Section 3 of the 1986 Act to issue directions to control and/or prevent pollution including directions for prior Environmental Clearance before a project is commenced. Such prior Environmental Clearance is necessarily granted upon examining the impact of the project on the environment. Ex-Post facto Environmental Clearance should not ordinarily be granted, and certainly not for the asking. At the same time ex post facto clearances and/or approvals and/or removal of technical irregularities in terms of Notifications under the 1986 Act cannot be declined with pedantic rigidity, oblivious of the consequences of stopping the operation of a running steel plant.

84. The 1986 Act does not prohibit ex post facto Environmental Clearance. Some relaxations and even grant of ex post facto EC in accordance with law, in strict compliance with Rules, Regulations Notifications and/or applicable orders, in appropriate cases, where the projects are in compliance with, or can be made to comply with environment norms, is in over view not impermissible. The Court cannot be oblivious to the economy or the need to protect the livelihood of hundreds of employees and others employed in the project and others dependent on the project, if such projects comply with environmental norms.

*88. The Notification being SO 804(E) dated 14th March, 2017 was not an issue in Alembic Pharmaceuticals (*supra*). This Court was examining the propriety and/or legality of a 2002 circular which was inconsistent with the EIA Notification dated 27th January, 1994, which was statutory. Ex post facto environmental clearance should not however be granted routinely, but in exceptional circumstances taking*

into account all relevant environmental factors. Where the adverse consequences of *ex post facto* approval outweigh the consequences of regularization of operation of an industry by grant of *ex post facto* approval and the industry or establishment concerned otherwise conforms to the requisite pollution norms, *ex post facto* approval should be given in accordance with law, in strict conformity with the applicable Rules, Regulations and/or Notifications. *Ex post facto* approval should not be withheld only as a penal measure. The deviant industry may be penalised by an imposition of heavy penalty on the principle of 'polluter pays' and the cost of restoration of environment may be recovered from it.

96. The appeals are allowed. The impugned order is set aside. The Respondent No. 1 shall take a decision on the application of the Appellant for revised EC in accordance with law, within three months from date. Pending such decision, the operation of the steel plant shall not be interfered with on the ground of want of EC, FC, CTE or CTO."

56. As held by this Court in *Electrosteel Steels Limited* (supra) *ex post facto* Environmental Clearance should not ordinarily be granted, and certainly not for the asking. At the same time *ex post facto* clearances and/or approvals and/or removal of technical irregularities in terms of a Notification under the EP Act cannot be declined with pedantic rigidity, oblivious of the consequences of stopping the operation of mines, running factories and plants.

57. The 1986 Act does not prohibit *ex post facto* Environmental Clearance. Grant of *ex post facto* EC in accordance with law, in strict compliance with Rules, Regulations, Notifications and/or applicable orders, in appropriate cases, where the projects are in compliance with, or can be made to comply with environment norms, is in our view not impermissible. The Court cannot be oblivious to the economy or the need to protect the livelihood of hundreds of employees and others employed in the project and others dependent on the project, if such projects comply with environmental norms.

58. As held by a three Judge Bench of this Court in *Lafarge Umiam Mining Private Limited v. Union of India*⁵:—

"119. The time has come for us to apply the constitutional "doctrine of proportionality" to the matters concerning environment as a part of the process of judicial review in contradistinction to merit review. It cannot be gainsaid that utilization of the environment and its natural resources has to be in a way that is consistent with principles of sustainable development and intergenerational equity, but balancing of these equities may entail policy choices. In the circumstances, barring exceptions, decisions relating to utilisation of natural resources have to be tested on the anvil of the well-recognized principles of judicial review. Have all the relevant factors been taken into account? Have any extraneous factors influenced the decision? Is the decision strictly in accordance with the legislative policy underlying the law (if any) that governs the field? Is the decision consistent with the principles of sustainable development in the sense that has the decision-maker taken into account the said principle and, on the basis of relevant considerations, arrived at a balanced decision? Thus, the Court should review the decision-making process to ensure that the decision of MoEF is fair and fully informed, based on the correct principles, and free from any bias or restraint. Once this is ensured, then the doctrine of "margin of appreciation" in favour of the decision-maker would come into play."

59. In *Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd.* (supra), this Court observed:—

"27. The concept of an *ex post facto* EC is in derogation of the fundamental principles of environmental jurisprudence and is an anathema to the EIA notification

dated 27 January 1994. It is, as the judgment in *Common Cause* holds, detrimental to the environment and could lead to irreparable degradation. The reason why a retrospective EC or an ex post facto clearance is alien to environmental jurisprudence is that before the issuance of an EC, the statutory notification warrants a careful application of mind, besides a study into the likely consequences of a proposed activity on the environment. An EC can be issued only after various stages of the decision-making process have been completed. Requirements such as conducting a public hearing, screening, scoping and appraisal are components of the decision-making process which ensure that the likely impacts of the industrial activity or the expansion of an existing industrial activity are considered in the decision-making calculus. Allowing for an ex post facto clearance would essentially condone the operation of industrial activities without the grant of an EC. In the absence of an EC, there would be no conditions that would safeguard the environment. Moreover, if the EC was to be ultimately refused, irreparable harm would have been caused to the environment. In either view of the matter, environment law cannot countenance the notion of an ex post facto clearance. This would be contrary to both the precautionary principle as well as the need for sustainable development."

60. Even though this Court deprecated ex post facto clearances, in *Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd.* (supra), this Court did not direct closure of the units concerned but explored measures to control the damage caused by the industrial units. This Court held:—

"However, since the expansion has been undertaken and the industry has been functioning, we do not deem it appropriate to order closure of the entire plant as directed by the High Court."

61. The Notification being SO. 804(E) dated 14th March 2017 was not in issue in *Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd.* (supra). In *Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd.* (supra) this Court was examining the propriety and/or legality of a 2002 circular which was inconsistent with the EIA Notification dated 27th January 1994, which was statutory. The EIA Notification dated 27th January 1994 has, as stated above, been superseded by the Notification dated 14th September 2006.

62. There can be no doubt that the need to comply with the requirement to obtain EC is non-negotiable. A unit can be set up or allowed to expand subject to compliance of the requisite environmental norms. EC is granted on condition of the suitability of the site to set up the unit, from the environmental angle, and also existence of necessary infrastructural facilities and equipment for compliance of environmental norms. To protect future generations and to ensure sustainable development, it is imperative that pollution laws be strictly enforced. Under no circumstances can industries, which pollute, be allowed to operate unchecked and degrade the environment.

63. *Ex post facto* environmental clearance should not be granted routinely, but in exceptional circumstances taking into account all relevant environmental factors. Where the adverse consequences of denial of *ex post facto* approval outweigh the consequences of regularization of operations by grant of *ex post facto* approval, and the establishment concerned otherwise conforms to the requisite pollution norms, *ex post facto* approval should be given in accordance with law, in strict conformity with the applicable Rules, Regulations and/or Notifications. The deviant industry may be penalised by an imposition of heavy penalty on the principle of 'polluter pays' and the cost of restoration of environment may be recovered from it.

64. The question in this case is, whether a unit contributing to the economy of the country and providing livelihood to hundreds of people, which has been set up pursuant to requisite approvals from the concerned statutory authorities, and has

applied for *ex post facto* EC, should be closed down for the technical irregularity of want of prior environmental clearance, pending the issuance of EC, even though it may not cause pollution and/or may be found to comply with the required norms. The answer to the aforesaid question has to be in the negative, more so when the HSPCB was itself under the misconception that no environment clearance was required for the units in question. HSPCB has in its counter affidavit before the NGT clearly stated that a decision was taken to regularize units such as the Apcolite Yamuna Nagar and Pahwa Yamuna Nagar Units, since requisite approvals had been granted to those units, by the concerned authorities on the misconception that no EC was required.

65. It is reiterated that the 1986 Act does not prohibit *ex post facto* EC. Some relaxations and even grant of *ex post facto* EC in accordance with law, in strict compliance with Rules, Regulations, Notifications and/or applicable orders, in appropriate cases, where the projects are in compliance with environment norms, is not impermissible. As observed by this Court in *Electrosteel Steels Limited* (supra), this Court cannot be oblivious to the economy or the need to protect the livelihood of hundreds of employees and others employed in the units and dependent on the units in their survival.

66. *Ex post facto* EC should not ordinarily be granted, and certainly not for the asking. At the same time *ex post facto* clearances and/or approvals cannot be declined with pedantic rigidity, regardless of the consequences of stopping the operations. This Court is of the view that the NGT erred in law in directing that the units cannot be allowed to function till compliance of the statutory mandate.

67. Accordingly, the appeal is allowed. The impugned order is set aside in so far as the same is applicable to the units of the Appellants established and operated pursuant to CTE and CTO from the HSPCB in respect of which applications for *ex post facto* EC have been filed. The Respondent shall take a decision on the applications of the Appellants for EC in accordance with law within one month from date. Pending decision, the operation of the Pahwa Yamuna Nagar Unit and the Apcolite Yamuna Nagar Unit, in respect of which consents have been granted and even public hearing held in connection with grant of EC, shall not be interfered with.

68. The Appellants will be allowed to operate the units. Electricity, if disconnected, shall be restored subject to payment of charges, if any. If the application for EC is rejected on the ground of any contravention on the part of the Appellants, it will be open to the Respondents to disconnect the supply of electricity.

69. The Union of India had proceeded with the application for EC and even public hearing had been held. Counsel appearing on behalf of the Union of India contended that the Appellant had not submitted its final application for EC, after public hearing. It is not clear what more was required of the Appellants. Be that as it may, the Union of India shall, within three working days from the date of receipt of a copy of this judgment and order, inform the Appellants in writing of whether anything further is required to be done by the Appellants, and if so what is required to be done. The Appellants shall, within a week thereafter do the needful. The final decision on the application of the Appellants for EC shall be taken within three weeks thereafter.

70. The application being I.A. No. 110064/2021 and other pending applications, if any, in this appeal are disposed of accordingly.

¹ (2011) 3 SCC 193

² 2020 SCC OnLine SC 347

³ 2017 SCC OnLine Mad 7056

⁴ 2021 SCC OnLine SC 1247

⁵ (2011) 7 SCC 338

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