

Indra Devi vs The State Of Rajasthan on 23 July, 2021

Equivalent citations: AIR 2021 SUPREME COURT 3549, AIR ONLINE 2021 SC 367

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Bench: Hemant Gupta, Sanjay Kishan Kaul

Reportab

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA

CRIMINAL APPELLATE JURISDICTION

CRIMINAL APPEAL NO. 593 OF 2021
[Arising out of SLP (Crl) No. 1605 of 2018]

INDRA DEVI

.....APPELLANT

VERSUS

STATE OF RAJASTHAN & ANR.

....RESPONDENTS

WITH

CRIMINAL APPEAL NO. 594 OF 2021
[Arising out of SLP (Crl) No.5015 of 2021
D.No. 7196 of 2019]

STATE OF RAJASTHAN

.....APPELLANT

VERSUS

YOGESH ACHARYA

...RESPONDENT

JUDGMENT

SANJAY KISHAN KAUL, J.

1. Indra Devi, the appellant, is the complainant in FIR No.80 dated 23.02.2011 registered under Sections 420/467/468/471/120B of the IPC and Sections 3(1)(4)/3(15)/3(5) of the Scheduled Caste & Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act at P.S. Kotwali, Distt. Barmer. It was alleged that she and her husband Bhanwar Lal purchased two plots in Khasra No.1179/03 located in Distt. Barmer. Out of these two plots, one plot was sold to one Megharam while another plot was sold to

one Chetan Choudhary. In the plot purchased in the name of her husband, a residential house and shops are stated to have been made. Megharam is alleged to have tampered with and fabricated the agreement with the intention to defraud. This was allegedly done in collusion with the then executive officer of the Municipality, one Surender Kumar Mathur and “the concerned clerk and others”, by enlarging the dimensions of the plot which have been sold to him with the intention to grab the land and house occupied by the complainant and her husband. The Khasra number is also alleged to have been changed from 1179/03 to 1143/04. This fact is stated to have come to the notice of the complainant only when they were served with a court notice when they were in physical possession of the plot with the house and the shop. Her husband is stated to have gone to Jaipur for treatment of cancer. The accused persons are, thus, alleged to have committed the offences of fraudulently making a scheduled caste women, her cancer diagnosed husband and other family members homeless. It may be noted that Respondent No.2 herein, Yogesh Acharya was not named in the FIR but, apparently, he is stated to be “the concerned clerk”.

2. In pursuance of the investigation, a chargesheet was filed and charges were framed vide order dated 10.04.2012 against Megharam. Once again Respondent No.2 was not named in the chargesheet but a reference was made to Megharam acting in collusion with “co-accused persons”.

3. The records placed before us do not reflect how Respondent No.2 was exactly roped in, but suffice to say, Respondent No.2 moved an application under Section 197 of the CrPC before the trial court stating that he was a public servant and what he did in respect of allotment of lease, that was executed in favour of Megharam, was done during the course of his official duty and thus he was entitled to protection under the aforementioned provision. He also sought to assail the chargesheet as the same had been filed without obtaining sanction of the competent authority under Section 197 of the CrPC.

4. The trial court dismissed the application vide order dated 10.08.2017, while noticing that Respondent No.2 had not been mentioned in the FIR. It was opined that it was the duty of Respondent No.2 to bring irregularities to the knowledge of the competent officers, i.e. Megharam had mentioned the wrong Khasra number in the lease but no documents of ownership of the land were produced. The trial court was of the view that had the discrepancies been brought to the knowledge of the competent officers by Respondent No.2, the disputed lease would not have been issued. The result of the failure to do so caused the forged lease to be prepared. Respondent No.2 had also drafted the disputed lease in which he failed to mention necessary details. It was, thus, opined that Respondent No.2 was liable to be prosecuted against for having committed criminal offence to procure a forged lease. What Respondent No.2 did was held not to be done by the public servant in discharge of his official duty and thus protection under Section 197 of the CrPC would not come to his aid.

5. Respondent No.2 thereafter filed a Crl. Misc. Petition No.3138/2017 under Section 482 of the CrPC before the High Court of Judicature at Jodhpur assailing the said order of the trial court. The High Court, vide impugned order dated 03.10.2017, allowed the petition. It was opined that the case was similar to the one of *Devi Dan v. State of Rajasthan*¹. The High Court had opined therein that sanction under Section 197 of the CrPC was required before triggering any prosecution against the

Station House Officer for filing/failing to file an FIR and for other criminal acts committed during the discharge of his duties. The complainant, aggrieved by the said judgment, has approached this court by filing a special leave petition. The State has also filed an SLP. Leave was granted in both the matters.

6. The appellant contended before us that the involvement of Respondent No.2 only came to light during investigation. He had failed to bring the irregularities to the knowledge of his superiors which was instrumental in issuing the forged lease. Thus, he had conspired with his superiors in dishonestly concealing the forgery, and intentionally omitting mentioning the date of the proceedings on the order sheet. Such action of forging documents would not be considered as an act conducted in the course of his official duties and, thus Section 197 of the CrPC would not give protection to Respondent No.2.

1 Crim. Misc. Pet. No.2177/2013 decided on 10.10.2014

7. On the other hand, Respondent No.2 endeavoured to support the impugned judgment of the High Court by emphasising that in FIR only Megharam alongwith some unnamed officials were mentioned. Surrender Kumar Mathur, the Executive Officer of the Nagar Palika, had filed a petition under Section 482 of the CrPC relating to the same transaction and the High Court had granted him protection under Section 197 of the CrPC vide order dated 22.02.2018. The conduct of putting his initials was held to be an act done in discharge of his duties. Similarly, Sandeep Mathur, a Junior Engineer, who was part of the same transaction, was granted protection by the Sessions Court vide order dated 19.03.2020, once again under the same provision, i.e., Section 197 of the CrPC. Both the orders remained unchallenged by the complainant and the State. Further, it has been argued that Respondent No.2 was simply carrying out his official duty which is apparent from the work allotted to him that pertained to allotment, regularisation, conversion of agricultural land and all kinds of work relating to land and conversion. The application of Megharam was routed through the office, and the proceedings show that the file was initially put up before the Executive Officer, who directed inspection, which was carried out by the Junior Engineer. Thereafter, file was placed before the Executive Officer again and only then was it signed by the Municipal Commissioner. The two key people involved in the process had already been granted protection and thus Respondent No.2 herein, who was merely a Lower Division Clerk, could not be denied similar protection.

8. Learned counsel for Respondent relied upon the judgments of this Court in B. Saha & Ors. Vs. M.S. Kochar² and State of Maharashtra Vs. Dr. Budhikota Subbarao³ to contend that Section 197 of the CrPC ought to be read in a liberal sense for grant of protection to the public servant with respect to actions, which though constitute an offence, are “directly and reasonably” connected with their official duties.

9. We have given our thought to the submissions of learned counsel for the parties. Section 197 of the CrPC seeks to protect an officer from unnecessary harassment, who is accused of an offence committed while acting or purporting to act in the discharge of his official duties and, thus, prohibits the court from taking cognisance of such offence except with the previous sanction of the competent authority. Public servants have been treated as a special category in order to protect

them from malicious or vexatious prosecution. At the same time, the shield cannot protect corrupt officers and the provisions must be construed in such a manner as to advance the cause of honesty, justice and good governance. [See Subramanian Swamy Vs. Manmohan Singh⁴]. The alleged indulgence of the officers in cheating, fabrication of records or misappropriation cannot be said to be in discharge of their official duty. However, such sanction is necessary if the offence alleged against the public servant is committed by him “while acting or purporting to act in the discharge of his official duty” and in order 2 (1979) 4 SCC 177 3 (1993) 3 SCC 339 4 (2012) 3 SCC 64 to find out whether the alleged offence is committed “while acting or purporting to act in the discharge of his official duty”, the yardstick to be followed is to form a prima facie view whether the act of omission for which the accused was charged had a reasonable connection with the discharge of his duties. [See State of Maharashtra Vs. Dr. Budhikota Subbarao]⁵. The real question, therefore, is whether the act committed is directly concerned with the official duty.

10. We have to apply the aforesaid test to the facts of the present case. In that behalf, the factum of Respondent No.2 not being named in the FIR is not of much significance as the alleged role came to light later on. However, what is of significance is the role assigned to him in the alleged infraction, i.e. conspiring with his superiors. What emerges therefrom is that insofar as the processing of the papers was concerned, Surendra Kumar Mathur, the Executive Officer, had put his initials to the relevant papers which was held in discharge of his official duties. Not only that, Sandeep Mathur, who was part of the alleged transaction, was also similarly granted protection. The work which was assigned to Respondent No.2 pertained to the subject matter of allotment, regularisation, conversion of agricultural land and fell within his domain of work. In the processing of application of Megharam, the file was initially put up to the Executive Officer who directed the inspection and the inspection was carried out by the Junior Engineer and only thereafter the Municipal Commissioner signed the file. The result is that the superior 5 supra officers, who have dealt with the file, have been granted protection while the clerk, who did the paper work, i.e. Respondent No.2, has been denied similar protection by the trial court even though the allegation is of really conspiring with his superior officers. Neither the State nor the complainant appealed against the protection granted under Section 197 of the CrPC qua these two other officers.

11. We are, thus, not able to appreciate why a similar protection ought not to be granted to Respondent No.2 as was done in the case of the other two officials by the Trial Court and High Court respectively. The sanction from competent authority would be required to take cognisance and no sanction had been obtained in respect of any of the officers. It is in view thereof that in respect of the other two officers, the proceedings were quashed and that is what the High Court has directed in the present case as well.

12. In view of the aforesaid, the appeals are dismissed leaving the parties to bear their own costs.

.....J. [SANJAY KISHAN KAUL]J. [HEMANT GUPTA] NEW DELHI.

JULY 23, 2021