

(2015) 03 P&H CK 0025
In the Punjab And Haryana At Chandigarh
Case No : C.W.P. No. 17863 of 2010

Nathu Ram Sharma and Others	Vs	APPELLANT
State of Punjab and Others		RESPONDENT

Date of Decision : 09-03-2015

Acts Referred:

Constitution of India, 1950 — Article 226, 32

Citation : (2015) 2 SCT 631

Hon'ble Judges : Deepak Sibal, J.

Bench : Single Bench

Advocate : Peeush Gagneja, for the Appellant; Sushant Maini, DAG, Advocates for the Respondent

Final Decision : Dismissed

Judgement

Deepak Sibal, J.—Through the present judgment, I tend to decide two writ petitions being C. W.P. No. 17863 of 2010-Nathu Ram Sharma and another vs. State of Punjab and others and C.W.P. No. 17873 of 2010-Balish Kumar and another vs. State of Punjab and others as similar issues are involved in both these writ petitions. For the sake of convenience, facts are being taken from C. W.P. No. 17863 of 2010.

2. The undisputed facts which have emerged from the record of the case and from the arguments addressed at the bar are that petitioner no. 1 is working as a Special Fire Officer in Municipal Council, Pathankot, whereas petitioner no. 2 is working as Special Fire Officer in Municipal Council, Abohar, District Ferozepur. Both the petitioners are seeking release of service benefits/arrears pertaining to the period from 15.05.2002 to 24.03.2004.

3. Admittedly, the present writ petition has been filed in September 2010 i.e. after a delay of 6 1/2 years. A perusal of the writ petition offers no justifiable explanation for the delay except that in the case of similarly situated persons, there is an order of this Court in their favour.

4. It seems that the petitioners slept over their rights for over 6 1/2 years and woke up only when they came to know that similarly situated persons have been granted relief by this Court.

5. On the issue of rejection of stale claims, the Apex Court in the case of Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board and Others Vs. T.T. Murali Babu, has held as under:-

"13. First, we shall deal with the facet of delay. In Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation Vs. Balwant Regular Motor Service, Amravati and Others, the Court referred to the principle that has been stated by Sir Barnes Peacock in Lindsay Petroleum Co. v. Prosper Armstrong Hurd, Abram Farewall, and John Kemp [1874 (5) PC 221], which is as follows:-

"Now the doctrine of laches in Courts of Equity is not an arbitrary or a technical doctrine. Where it would be practically unjust to give a remedy, either because the party has, by his conduct, done that which might fairly be regarded as equivalent to a waiver of it, or where by his conduct and neglect he has, though perhaps not waiving that remedy, yet put the other party in a situation in which it would not be reasonable to place him if the remedy were afterwards to be asserted in either of these cases, lapse of time and delay are most material. But in every case, if an argument against relief, which otherwise would be just, is founded upon mere delay, that delay of course not amounting to a bar by any statute of limitations, the validity of that defence must be tried upon principles substantially equitable. Two circumstances, always important in such cases, are, the length of the delay and the nature of the acts done during the interval, which might affect either party and cause a balance of justice or injustice in taking the one course or the other, so far as relates to the remedy. "

14. In State of Maharashtra Vs. Digambar, , while dealing with exercise of power of the High Court under Article 226 of the Constitution, the Court observed that power of the High Court to be exercised under Article 226 of the Constitution, if is discretionary, its exercise must be judicious and reasonable, admits of no controversy. It is for that reason, a person's entitlement for relief from a High Court under Article 226 of the Constitution, be it against the State or anybody else, even if is founded on the allegation of infringement of his legal right, has to necessarily depend upon unblameworthy conduct of the person seeking relief, and the court refuses to grant the discretionary relief to such person in exercise of such power, when he approaches it with unclean hands or blameworthy conduct.

15. In State of M.P. and Others Vs. Nandlal Jaiswal and Others, the Court observed that it is well settled that power of the High Court to issue an appropriate writ under Article 226 of the Constitution is discretionary and the High Court in exercise of its discretion does not ordinarily assist the tardy and the indolent or the acquiescent and the lethargic. It has been further stated therein that if there is inordinate delay on the part of the petitioner in filing a

petition and such delay is not satisfactorily explained, the High Court may decline to intervene and grant relief in the exercise of its writ jurisdiction. Emphasis was laid on the principle of delay and laches stating that resort to the extraordinary remedy under the writ jurisdiction at a belated stage is likely to cause confusion and public inconvenience and bring in injustice.

16. Thus, the doctrine of delay and laches should not be lightly brushed aside. A writ court is required to weigh the explanation offered and the acceptability of the same. The court should bear in mind that it is exercising an extraordinary and equitable jurisdiction. As a constitutional court it has a duty to protect the rights of the citizens but simultaneously it is to keep itself alive to the primary principle that when an aggrieved person, without adequate reason, approaches the court at his own leisure or pleasure, the Court would be under legal obligation to scrutinize whether the lis at a belated stage should be entertained or not. Be it noted, delay comes in the way of equity. In certain circumstances delay and laches may not be fatal but in most circumstances inordinate delay would only invite disaster for the litigant who knocks at the doors of the Court. Delay reflects inactivity and inaction on the part of a litigant—a litigant who has forgotten the basic norms, namely, "procrastination is the greatest thief of time" and second, law does not permit one to sleep and rise like a phoenix. Delay does bring in hazard and causes injury to the lis. In the case at hand, though there has been four years' delay in approaching the court, yet the writ court chose not to address the same. It is the duty of the court to scrutinize whether such enormous delay is to be ignored without any justification. That apart, in the present case, such belated approach gains more significance as the respondent-employee being absolutely careless to his duty and nurturing a lackadaisical attitude to the responsibility had remained unauthorisedly absent on the pretext of some kind of ill health. We repeat at the cost of repetition that remaining innocuously oblivious to such delay does not foster the cause of justice. On the contrary, it brings in injustice, for it is likely to affect others. Such delay may have impact on others' ripened rights and may unnecessarily drag others into litigation which in acceptable realm of probability, may have been treated to have attained finality. A court is not expected to give indulgence to such indolent persons—who compete with "Kumbhakarna" or for that matter "Rip Van Winkle". In our considered opinion, such delay does not deserve any indulgence and on the said ground alone the writ court should have thrown the petition overboard at the very threshold."

6. The above view of the Apex Court was followed in a recent judgment rendered by this Court in *Suraj Mal Vs. The State of Haryana and Others*, wherein it has been held as under:-

"9. In view of the above authoritative enunciation of law by Hon^{ble} the Supreme Court and this Court, the present writ petition filed by the petitioner nearly after 9 years of his retirement to claim certain benefits, which may be due to him while in service, certainly deserves to be dismissed on account of delay and

laches as there is no satisfactory explanation available for delay."

7. The benefits of a decision rendered in the case of similarly placed persons cannot straightway be given to a person, who himself approaches the Court belatedly. For getting relief from the Court, he is required to satisfactorily explain the delay on his part in approaching the Court.

8. In this regard, it would be useful to refer to the following observations made by the Apex Court in the case of *Chairman, U.P. Jal Nigam and Another Vs. Jaswant Singh and Another*, :-

"6. The question of delay and laches has been examined by this Court in a series of decisions and laches and delay has been considered to be an important factor in exercise of the discretionary relief under Article 226 of the Constitution. When a person who is not vigilant of his rights and acquiesces with the situation, can his writ petition be heard after a couple of years on the ground that same relief should be granted to him as was granted to person similarly situated who was vigilant about his rights and challenged his retirement which was said to be made on attaining the age of 58 years. A chart has been supplied to us in which it has been pointed out that about 9 writ petitions were filed by the employees of the Nigam before their retirement wherein their retirement was somewhere between 30.6.2005 and 31.7.2005. Two writ petitions were filed wherein no relief of interim order was passed. They were granted interim order. Thereafter a spate of writ petitions followed in which employees who retired in the years 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005, woke up to file writ petitions in 2005 and 2006 much after their retirement. Whether such person should be granted the same relief or not?

7. Learned senior counsel for the appellants has invited our attention to various decisions to impress upon that persons who are guilty of such laches and acquiesced with the situation should not be granted any relief because it is going to cost the Nigam a heavy financial burden to the tune of Rs. 17,80,43,108/-. Therefore, relief should be confined to those persons who were continuing in service and filed their writ petitions in time but not to all and sundry who woke up to file the writ petitions much after their retirement. In this connection, our attention was invited to a decision of this Court in the case of *Rup Diamonds and Others Vs. Union of India and Others*, wherein their Lordships observed that those people who were sitting on the fence till somebody else took up the matter to the court for refund of duty, cannot be given the benefit. In that context, their Lordships held as follows:

"Petitioners are re-agitating claims which they had not pursued for several years. Petitioners were" not vigilant but were content to be dormant and chose to sit on the fence till somebody else's case came to be decided. Their case cannot be considered on the analogy of one where a law had been declared unconstitutional and void by a court, so as to enable persons to recover monies paid under the compulsion of a law later so declared void. There is also an unexplained, inordinate delay in preferring the present writ petition which is brought after a

year after the first rejection. As observed by the Court in Durga Prashad case, the exchange position of this country and the policy of the government regarding international trade varies from year to year. In these matters it is essential that persons who are aggrieved by orders of the government should approach the High Court after exhausting the remedies provided by law, rule or order with utmost expedition. Therefore, these delays are sufficient to persuade the Court to decline to interfere. If a right of appeal is available, this order rejecting the writ petition shall not prejudice petitioners' case in any such appeal. "

8. Our attention was also invited to a decision of this Court in the case of State of Karnataka and Others Vs. S.M. Kotrayya and Others, In that case the respondents woke up to claim the relief which was granted to their colleagues by the Tribunal with an application to condone the delay. The Tribunal condoned the delay. Therefore, the State approached this Court and this Court after considering the matter observed as under:

"Although it is not necessary to give an explanation for the delay which occurred within the period mentioned in sub-section (1) or (2) of Section 21, explanation should be given for the delay which occasioned after the expiry of the aforesaid respective period applicable to the appropriate case and the Tribunal should satisfy itself whether the explanation offered was proper In the instant case, the explanation offered was that they came to know of the relief granted by the Tribunal in August 1989 and that they filed the petition immediately thereafter That is not a proper explanation at all. What was required of them to explain under sub-sections (1) and (2) was as to why they could not avail of the remedy of redressal of their grievances before the expiry of the period prescribed under subsection (1) or (2). That was not the explanation given. Therefore, the Tribunal was wholly unjustified in condoning the delay."

9. Similarly, in the case of Jagdish Lal and others Vs. State of Haryana and others, , this Court reaffirmed the rule if a person chose to sit over the matter and then woke up after the decision of the Court, then such person cannot stand to benefit. In that case it was observed as follows:

"The delay disentitles a party to discretionary relief under Article 226 or Article 32 of the Constitution. The appellants kept sleeping over their rights for long and woke up when they had the impetus from Vir Pal Singh Chauhan case. The appellants' desperate attempt to redo the seniority is not amenable to judicial review at this belated stage."

10. In the case of Union of India and Others Vs. C.K. Dharagupta and Others, it was observed as follows:

"We, however, clarify that in view of our finding that the judgment of the Tribunal in R.P. Joshi gives relief only to Joshi, the benefit of the said judgment of the Tribunal cannot be extended to any other person. The respondent C.K. Dharagupta (since retired) is seeking benefit of Joshi case. In view of our finding that the benefit of the judgment of the Tribunal dated 17-3-1987 could only be

given to Joshi and nobody else, even Dharagupta is not entitled to any relief."

11. In the case of Government of West Bengal Vs. Tarun K. Roy and Others, , their Lordships considered delay as serious factor and have not granted relief. Therein it was observed as follows:

"The respondents furthermore are not even entitled to any relief on the ground of gross delay and laches on their part in filing the writ petition. The first two writ petitions were filed in the year 1976 wherein the respondents herein approached the High Court in 1992. In between 1976 and 1992 not only two writ petitions had been decided, but one way or the other, even the matter had been considered by this Court in Debdas Kumar. The plea of delay, which Mr. Krishnamani states, should be a ground for denying the relief to the other persons similarly situated would operate against the respondents. Furthermore, the other employees not being before this Court although they are ventilating their grievances before appropriate courts of law, no order should be passed which would prejudice their cause. In such a situation, we are not prepared to make any observation only for the purpose of grant of some relief to the respondents to which they are not legally entitled to so as to deprive others there from who may be found to be entitled thereto by a court of law."

12. The statement of law has also been summarized in Halsbury's Laws of England, Para 911, pg. 395 as follows:

"In determining whether there has been such delay as to amount to laches, the chief points to be considered are:

(i) acquiescence on the claimant's part; and

(ii) any change of position that has occurred on the defendant's part.

Acquiescence in this sense does not mean standing by while the violation of a right is in progress, but assent after the violation has been completed and the claimant has become aware of it. It is unjust to give the claimant a remedy where, by his conduct, he has done that which might fairly be regarded as equivalent to a waiver of it; or where by his conduct and neglect, though not waiving the remedy, he has put the other party in a position in which it would not be reasonable to place him if the remedy were afterwards to be asserted. In such cases lapse of time and delay are most material. Upon these considerations rests the doctrine of laches."

13. In view of the statement of law as summarized above, the respondents are guilty since the respondents has acquiesced in accepting the retirement and did not challenge the same in time. If they would have been vigilant enough, they could have filed writ petitions as others did in the matter. Therefore, whenever it appears that the claimants lost time or while away and did not rise to the occasion in time for filing the writ petitions, then in such cases, the Court should be very slow in granting the relief to the incumbent. Secondly, it has also to be taken into consideration the question of acquiescence or waiver on the part of

the incumbent whether other parties are going to be prejudiced if the relief is granted. In the present case, if the respondents would have challenged their retirement being violative of the provisions of the Act, perhaps the Nigam could have taken appropriate steps to raise funds so as to meet the liability but by not asserting their rights the respondents have allowed time to pass and after a lapse of couple of years, they have filed writ petitions claiming the benefit for two years. That will definitely require the Nigam to raise funds which is going to have serious financial repercussion on the financial management of the Nigam. Why the Court should come to the rescue of such persons when they themselves are guilty of waiver and acquiescence."

[Emphasis supplied by me].

9. To the same effect are two Full bench judgments of this Court in Jagjit Rai Vohra, Etc. Vs. The State of Haryana, Etc., , and Punjab State Electricity Board vs. Ashok Kumar Sehghal reported as 1989 (4) SLR 437.

10. Applying the above principles to the case in hand, where I find no justifiable explanation given for the delay of 6 1/2 years in approaching this Court, I unhesitatingly order dismissal of the present writ petition.

11. No costs.