
(2004) 02 SC CK 0033

In the Supreme Court Of India

Case No : Civil Appeal No's. 5112-5113 of 1997

Sudhangshu Mohan Deb (Dead) by Lrs.

APPELLANT

Vs

Niroda Sundari Debidhup and Others

RESPONDENT

Date of Decision : 20-02-2004

Acts Referred:

Civil Procedure Code, 1908 (CPC) — Order 41 Rule 27, 144
Tripura Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960 — Section 133, 134, 134(1),
134(2), 135

Citation : AIR 2004 SC 1781 : (2004) AIRSCW 1078 : (2004) 2 JT 591 : (2004) 2 SCALE 599 : (2004) 4 SCC 389 : (2004) 3 SCR 581

Hon'ble Judges : Brijesh Kumar, J;Arun Kumar, J

Bench : Division Bench

Advocate : Dinesh Dwivedi and Madhu Moolchandani, for the Appellant; K. Ramamoorthy Tufail A. Khan, Shoba Nagarajan, J. Sriram, G.D. Gupta and Mukul Gupta, for the Respondent

Final Decision : Allowed

Judgement

Arun Kumar, J.—This litigation has a chequered history. Land comprised in Jote No. 145 standing in the name of one Sonatan Dhopi was acquired by the then Maharaja of Tripura in the year 1347 T.E. corresponding to 1937 A.D. for a public purpose viz. construction of motor stand and pathway etc. It was found that the acquired land was in excess of the requirement, therefore, the excess land was decided to be settled in favour of tenants. One Dhirendrajit Singh Roy (predecessor of the appellant) and Jagabandhu Dhopi, who is said to be nephew of original owner Sonatan Dhopi, (predecessor of the respondents) were the applicants for settlement of the excess land. Application of Jagabandhu Dhopi was rejected while that of Dhirendrajit Singh Roy was accepted and a registered patta granting Takshishi Taluki rights in his favour was executed. In the year 1949 Jagabandhu Dhopi, however, encroached upon the land, subject matter of the patta which led Dhirendrajit Singh Roy to file a suit for eviction being Miscellaneous Case No. 141 of 1956 in the Court of District Magistrate-cum-

Collector. During the pendency of the suit Dhirendrajit Singh Roy sold the suit land to Sudhangshu Mohan Deb (since deceased and represented by LRs), the appellant herein, on 10th December, 1957. The name of the appellant was duly substituted in place of Dhirendrajit Singh Roy in the eviction suit. Vide order dated 27th June, 1958 the District Magistrate directed the SDO to arrange delivery of possession of portion of the suit land which was vacant to the plaintiff and for the rest the appellant was directed to move civil court for recovery of possession. Dhopi preferred an appeal against the said order before the Chief Commissioner. The Chief Commissioner directed appellant to file a civil suit for the relief of possession of the suit land. On 30th June, 1959 the appellant filed Title Suit No. 47 of 1962 for declaration of Takshishi Taluki right and for recovery of possession. The said suit was decreed on 25th March, 1963. The appeal filed by Dhopi against the decree was dismissed on 28th April, 1965. Dhopi filed second appeal before the Judicial Commissioner. However on 28th May, 1965, the appellant took possession of the suit land in execution of the decree that was passed in his favour.

2. On 25th October, 1961 the Tripura Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960 (hereinafter referred to as the "Act") was notified. The said Act came into force with effect from 14th November, 1961. The Judicial Commissioner allowed the appeal filed by Dhopi on 12th April, 1971 holding that in view of the Act, the land in question vested in the Government and the appellant had lost his right to seek its possession. The Act contained provision in Sections 134 and 135 which had the effect of vesting all estates situated in a notified area in the Government free from all encumbrances. All right, title and interest of every intermediary in such estates got extinguished as a result of the statutory provision. In the appeal the present appellant had moved an application under Order 41 Rule 27 to bring on record by way of additional evidence the fact that after the vesting of the land in the Government, provisional khatiyana had been granted by the Government in his favour with respect to the suit land. The said application was, however, rejected on the ground that khatiyana was still provisional and was yet to be finalised. Section 136 of the Act entitles an intermediary to retain possession of the vested land subject to payment of land revenue directly to the Government. The Section is reproduced as under:

"Section 136: (1) Notwithstanding anything contained in Sections 134 and 135, an intermediary shall, subject to the provisions of Sub-section (2), be entitled to retain with effect from the vesting date,-

(a) homesteads, buildings and structures together with the appurtenant thereto in the possession of the inter-mediary other than buildings vested in the Government u/s 135;

(b) lands under the personal cultivation of the intermediary;

(c) lands in which permanent rights have not already accrued to a tenant under any custom, agreement or law and which have been leased by an intermediary

who, both at the commencement of the lease and on the vesting date, was a person under disability;

(d) lands held by the intermediary as mortgagor which are subject to usufructuary mortgage and are under the personal cultivation of the mortgagee;

(e) lands comprised in orchards or used for the purpose of live-stock breeding, poultry, farming, or dairy farming, which are in the occupation of the intermediary;

(f) so much of the lands Comprised in a tea garden, mill, factory or workshop as in the opinion of the State Government is required for such tea garden, mill, factory or workshop.

2. An intermediary who is entitled to retain possession of any land under Sub-section (1) shall hold such land directly under the Government from the vesting date as a raiyat thereof or as a non-agricultural tenant thereof, as the case may be and be liable to pay therefore land revenue at full rate applicable to similar lands in the locality."

The appellant appears to have applied for fresh patta in pursuance of the said provision. Provisional khatiyana was granted in his favour. This was contested by Dhopi. However, the khatiyana was finalized in favour of appellant and it was duly published in 1974.

3. The appellant filed Title Suit No. 13 of 1980 on 13th March, 1980 for declaration of his title to the land and confirmation of possession in his favour and injunction. It was pleaded in the suit that khatiyana had been finalised in plaintiffs favour after contest and the plaintiff was paying land revenue to the Government for the suit land. Thus the plaintiff (appellant herein) pleaded that there was a fresh settlement of the suit land in his favour which entitled him to retain possession of the land. This new settlement by the Government was after vesting of the land in the Government in pursuance of Sections 134/135 of the Act. The final khatiyana had been granted on 22nd June, 1974. In view of the final khatiyana being granted in favour of the plaintiff, the plaintiff claimed that he had a valid right to possession of the suit land. Sonatan Dhopi had also filed an independent suit u/s 144 of the CPC for restitution of possession of the suit land to him in view of the decree in execution whereof he was dispossessed having been set aside. Both the suits were clubbed together. The Trial Court on 11th August, 1992 decreed the suit filed by the plaintiff i.e. present appellant while the suit of the defendant-respondent for restitution of possession was dismissed. The judgment and decree of the trial Court was set aside by the lower appellate Court by its judgment dated 10th June, 1993. The suit for possession filed by the appellant was dismissed while the suit for restitution of possession filed by the respondent judgment debtor was decreed. The present appellant filed a second appeal against said judgment which was dismissed by the High Court by its impugned judgment dated 27th August, 1996. The present appeal has been filed in this background.

4. The learned counsel for the appellant has contended that the present appeals can be decided on the basis of subsequent events in view of which the previous litigation has lost all relevance.

5. For this purpose our attention has been drawn to Sections 134 and 135 of the Act. They are reproduced as under:

"Section 134 : (1) As soon as may be after the commencement of this Act, the State Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, declare that, with effect from the date specified in the notification (herein after referred to as the vesting date), all estates situated in any area or areas and all rights, title and interest of every intermediary in such estates shall vest in the Government free from all encumbrances.

(2) Every notification under Sub-section (1) shall also be published in such other manner as may be prescribed.

(3) The publication of a notification in the manner provided in Sub-sections (1) and (2) shall be conclusive evidence of the notice of declaration to the intermediaries whose interests are affected by such notification.

Section 135 : Notwithstanding anything contained in any law for the time being in force or any agreement or contract, express or implied, with effect from the vesting date -

(a) each estate to which the notification relates and all rights, title and interest of intermediaries in such estate shall vest in the Government free from all encumbrances, including -

(i) rights in hats, bazaars, ferries, forests, wastelands, abadi sits, fisheries, tolls and other interests;

(ii) rights in any building other than a dwelling house or in any part of such building, used primarily as office of cut cherry for collection of rent;

(b) all grants and confirmation of title to the estate and rights therein made in favour of an intermediary shall cease and determine ;

(c) any building used for educational or charitable purposes and held by the intermediary shall vest in the Government for those educational or charitable purposes ;

(d) subject to the other provisions of this Act, every tenant holding any land under an intermediary shall hold the same directly under the Government as a raiyat thereof or as a non-agricultural tenant thereof, as the case may be and shall be liable to pay to the Government land revenue equal to the rent payable by him to the intermediary on the vesting date, subject to a maximum of the value of one-eighth of the gross produce which value shall be determined in the manner prescribed :

Provided that the tenant shall become the owner of any building or structure

constructed on such land at the expense of the intermediary on payment of such compensation to the intermediary as is equivalent to its market value on the vesting date, which value shall be determined in accordance with the rules made in this behalf;

(e) all arrears of land revenue, local rates, cesses and other dues lawfully payable to the Government by the intermediary on the vesting date in respect of the estate shall without prejudice to any other mode of recovery be recoverable by deduction from the compensation payable to the intermediary ;

(f) all rents and other dues in respect of the estate for any period after the vesting date which, but for this Act, would be payable to an intermediary shall be payable to the Government and any payment made in contravention of this clause shall not be valid discharging of the person liable to pay the same ;

(g) where under any agreement or contract made before the vesting date, any rent, cess, local rate or other dues for any period after the said date has been paid to or compounded or released by an intermediary, the same shall, notwithstanding such agreement or contract, be recoverable by the Government from the intermediary, and may, without prejudice to any other mode of recovery, be realized by deduction from the compensation payable to the intermediary."

6. In Sections 134 and 135, word 'intermediary' has been used.

7. The said word is defined in Section 133 as under:

"Section 133 :

(a).....

(b).....

(c)" intermediary" means a person who holds in an estate the right, title or interest of a talukdar and includes -

(i) a person who holds land either revenue-free or at a concessional rate.

(ii) A tenure holder.

(d).....

(e)....."

8. From a perusal of the above provisions, it will be seen that all estates in a notified area vest in the Government free from all encumbrances. All right, title and interest of every intermediary in the estates stands extinguished. After the notified date, no one except the State Government is left with any right, title or interest in the subject lands. Once the lands vested in the State Government, the State Government is free to deal with the same in any manner it decides. This may include a decision on the part of the State Government to grant tenancy

rights with respect to the lands or any portion thereof in favour of any party on payment of land revenue. It appears that in 1968 the appellant applied for grant of right as a 'Raiyat' or as a non-agricultural tenant for the land in suit on payment of land revenue u/s 136(2) of the Act. The State Government granted the right as a 'raiyaat' in favour of the appellant which was evidenced by a "khatiyanaa" (entry in the revenue records showing tenancy) in appellant's favour. The khatiyanaa was initially granted on a provisional basis which was after contest finalized in favour of the appellant in 1974. The revenue entry was published in the revenue records which is evidenced by the khatiyanaa. The effect of grant of khatiyanaa in favour of the appellant is that his possession of the lands is under the Government and is with the consent of the Government and he is paying land revenue to the Government for the same. In other words the appellant gets a fresh right to possession of the land as a tenant. Section 43 of the Act conveys the consequence of publication of khatiyanaa. The said Section is reproduced as under:

"Section 43 :

(1) When a record of rights has been prepared, the survey officer shall publish a draft of the record in such manner and for such period as may be prescribed and shall receive and consider any objections which may be made during the period of such publication, to any entry therein or to any omission therefrom.

(2) When all objections have been considered and disposed of in accordance with the rules made in this behalf, the survey officer shall cause the record to be finally published in the prescribed manner.

(3) Every entry in the record of rights as finally published shall, until the contrary is proved, be presumed to be correct."

9. It will be seen from the above provision that once a khatiyanaa is finalised and its publication takes place, it is presumed to be correct until the contrary is proved. The final khatiyanaa stands published in favour of the appellant which gives the appellant right to remain in possession of the suit land. This is a fresh right created in favour of the appellant by the State Government in whom the entire land had vested by virtue of Sections 134 and 135 of the Act.

10. On the basis of these facts, it is submitted that the appellant's right to possession of land is legal, valid and justified while the respondents have no right whatsoever to seek possession of the land. On promulgation of the 1960 Act, both parties lost the right to possession of the suit lands. The right to possession of the lands had been subsequently conferred on the appellant by the State Government. So far as the respondents are concerned, there is nothing which entitles them to seek possession of the lands.

11. In response to the above argument, the learned counsel for the respondents submitted that in view of provisions of Section 144 of the Code of Civil Procedure, the respondents were entitled to restitution of possession of the

lands. The respondents had been dispossessed from the suit lands in execution of a decree which then existed in favour of the appellant. The decree was set aside in appeal. As a consequence thereof, the respondents were entitled to be restored possession of the lands. Even if the respondents were unauthorized occupants of the lands, since they were dispossessed in execution of a decree which had been set aside on appeal, they were entitled to restoration of the possession. In our view this argument does not hold good in facts of the present case. In normal course it may be correct to say that possession obtained in execution of a decree has to be restored to the party dispossessed, on the decree being set aside. But the present case is different. Here a statute has intervened. The 1960 Act contains a vesting provision as a result whereof the land in suit automatically vested in the State Government. The statute has taken away the right of possession of the lands of the party who was earlier in possession of the lands. The statutory provision has such a salutary effect that even if somebody was in actual possession of the land on the date of promulgation of the statute, he/she would lose the right to possession and would have to hand over the possession to the State Government. Therefore, the respondents do not have any right to ask for possession of the lands.

12. Next the learned counsel for the respondents argued that the point regarding finalisation of khatiyanaa in favour of the appellant was taken before the Judicial Commissioner in the previous litigation. The Judicial Commissioner did not entertain this plea of the present appellant. The decision of the Judicial Commissioner has become final which debars the appellant from raising the same plea again in the present litigation. In other words, the plea of res judicata is sought to be raised with respect to the claim of the appellant based on grant of khatiyanaa in his favour. The learned counsel for the respondents concedes that the appellant had applied for the fresh khatiyanaa in 1988. Admittedly, the fresh khatiyanaa was finalised in favour of the appellant in 1974 when the same was published in accordance with Section 43 of the Act. We have carefully considered this argument. In our view the plea of res judicata raised by the learned counsel for the respondents is totally misconceived. The appeal before the Judicial Commissioner was decided on 12th April, 1971. At that time, the khatiyanaa in favour of appellant was only provisional and therefore the Judicial Commissioner had refused to entertain the plea based on the grant of fresh khatiyanaa in favour of the present appellant. There was no adjudication on the basis of khatiyanaa in the previous litigation. In the meanwhile, the khatiyanaa has been finalised in favour of the present appellant which happened in 1974. Therefore, the question of plea regarding grant of fresh khatiyanaa being barred by principles of res judicata does not arise.

13. The learned counsel for the respondents also contended that the finalisation of khatiyanaa in favour of the appellants was wrong as it was contrary to rules. Therefore the same should not be taken into consideration. This contention again, in our view, is devoid of any merit. The respondents cannot challenge the khatiyanaa in favour of the appellant in the present proceedings. They have to

seek remedy, if available, elsewhere. The khatiyanaa was finalized in favour of appellant after contest. So long as the khatiyanaa exists, it is final in view of Section 43 of the Act. A reference was made to an order dated 22nd February, 1992 passed by the Director of Settlement and Land Records, Government of Tripura, wherein it is observed that the suit land was liable to be transferred in the khatiyanaa of the Tripura Government. It was argued that the said order casts a shadow on the plea of grant of fresh khatiyanaa in favour of the appellant. We are informed that the officer passing the said order has himself stayed the order and the stay order is continuing. Apart from this, we are of the view that the said officer is an officer of the State Government. The State Government could cancel the khatiyanaa. It has done nothing to cancel the khatiyanaa. No value can be attached to the order of the Director of Settlement and Land Records. The argument is devoid of any force.

14. We note from the plaint of the suit which has given rise to the present appeals that the grant of fresh khatiyanaa in favour of the appellant has been duly pleaded. The plaintiff-appellant has based the relief in the suit on that plea. Yet we find that there is no issue on the question of legality and force of the khatiyanaa. The respondents who had contested the suit all through did not even claim an issue on this aspect. Therefore, it is too late in the day to argue that the khatiyanaa finalised in favour of the appellant in 1974 has no strength or value.

15. Thus, we find no merit in any of the submissions made by the learned counsel for the respondents. The claim of the appellant based in finalisation of khatiyanaa in his favour in 1974 is fully justified. As a result of the 1960 Act, the land in question had vested in the State Government free of all encumbrances. The State Government was free to deal with the land in any manner it chose to do. On application of the appellant the State Government granted khatiyanaa in favour of the appellant with respect to the suit lands. The khatiyanaa thus confers legal and valid right on the appellant to remain in possession of the suit lands. The appeals are accordingly allowed. The impugned judgment and decree of the High Court confirming that of the lower appellate court are hereby set aside. The suit of the plaintiff-appellant stands decreed. The suit for restitution of possession of lands filed by predecessor of respondent stands dismissed. The parties are left to bear their respective costs.