

DOONGAR SINGH v. STATE OF RAJASTHAN

741

(2018) 13 Supreme Court Cases 741

(BEFORE ADARSH KUMAR GOEL AND UDAY U. LALIT, JJ.)

a

Criminal Appeals Nos. 2045-46 of 2017[†]

DOONGAR SINGH AND OTHERS .. Appellants;

Versus

STATE OF RAJASTHAN .. Respondent.

b

With

Criminal Appeal No. 2047 of 2017[‡]

NARAIN CHANDELIA AND OTHERS .. Appellants;

Versus

STATE OF RAJASTHAN .. Respondent.

c

Criminal Appeals Nos. 2045-46 of 2017 with
No. 2047 of 2017, decided on November 28, 2017

A. Criminal Procedure Code, 1973 — S. 309 — Power to postpone or adjourn proceedings — Judicious exercise of, particularly to prevent witnesses being won over/turning hostile — Murder trial — After recording examination-in-chief of star witness PW 14 on 13-4-2010 in a murder case wherein 20 persons were tried, matter was adjourned on request of defence counsel to 25-8-2010, whereafter part evidence of witness was recorded on 24-9-2010 and matter was again adjourned to 11-10-2010 — Before that, four witnesses of same family in their statements recorded on 10-4-2010 turned hostile — Propriety of

e — Held, in criminal case of such nature, trial court has to be mindful that for protection of witness and also in interest of justice mandate of S. 309 requiring expeditious disposal of proceedings by examining all witnesses on continuous basis unless Court finds adjournment of same beyond following day to be necessary for reasons to be recorded, need to be strictly complied with — Further held, unless this is done there is every chance of witnesses succumbing to pressure/threat of accused — Fact that despite repeated directions of Supreme Court, situation remained unremedied, strongly deprecated — Trial courts directed to (i) carry out mandate of S. 309; (ii) Examine eyewitnesses expeditiously; and (iii) Record statements of eyewitnesses under S. 164 in terms of prescribed procedure — Penal Code, 1860 — S. 302 — Criminal Trial — Witnesses — Hostile witness (Paras 3 to 10)

g *State of U.P. v. Shambhu Nath Singh*, (2001) 4 SCC 667 : 2001 SCC (Cri) 798; *Mohd. Khalid v. State of W.B.*, (2002) 7 SCC 334 : 2002 SCC (Cri) 1734; *Vinod Kumar v. State of Punjab*, (2015) 3 SCC 220 : (2015) 2 SCC (Cri) 226 : (2015) 1 SCC (L&S) 712, *relied on*

h [†] Arising out of SLPs (Crl.) Nos. 8994-95 of 2015. Arising from the Judgment and Order in *Narayan Singh v. State of Rajasthan*, 2015 SCC OnLine Raj 7089 (Rajasthan High Court, Jaipur Bench, DBCRAs Nos. 872 and 1066 of 2011, dt. 12-5-2015)

[‡] Arising out of SLP (Crl.) No. 1761 of 2016

742 SUPREME COURT CASES (2018) 13 SCC

Raj Deo Sharma v. State of Bihar, (1998) 7 SCC 507 : 1998 SCC (Cri) 1692; *Raj Deo Sharma (2) v. State of Bihar*, (1999) 7 SCC 604 : 1999 SCC (Cri) 1324; *N.G. Dastane v. Shrikant S. Shivde*, (2001) 6 SCC 135; *Gurnaib Singh v. State of Punjab*, (2013) 7 SCC 108 : (2013) 3 SCC (Cri) 49; *Talab Haji Hussain v. Madhukar Purshottam Mondkar*, AIR 1958 SC 376 : 1958 Cri LJ 701, cited

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B. Constitution of India — Art. 136 — Scope of Interference — Interference in criminal matters — Nine persons convicted concurrently by trial court and High Court in murder trial — Held, no interference in exercise of jurisdiction under Art. 136 called for — Penal Code, 1860, S. 302 (Para 2)

b

Narayan Singh v. State of Rajasthan, 2015 SCC OnLine Raj 7089, affirmed

Appeals dismissed

P-D/59599/SR

Advocates who appeared in this case :

S.S. Shamsbery, Additional Advocate General and Sushil Kr. Jain, Senior Advocate (Puneet Jain, Ms Christi Jain, Harsh Jain, Abhinav Gupta, Ms Pratibha Jain, Ms Parijat Bhardwaj, Ms G.M. Padma Priya and T. Mahipal, Advocates) for the appearing parties; Caveator-in-person.

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Chronological list of cases cited

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1. (2015) 3 SCC 220 : (2015) 2 SCC (Cri) 226 : (2015) 1 SCC (L&S) 712, *Vinod Kumar v. State of Punjab* 745c, 746d
2. 2015 SCC OnLine Raj 7089, *Narayan Singh v. State of Rajasthan* 742f-g
3. (2013) 7 SCC 108 : (2013) 3 SCC (Cri) 49, *Gurnaib Singh v. State of Punjab* 745e
4. (2002) 7 SCC 334 : 2002 SCC (Cri) 1734, *Mohd. Khalid v. State of W.B.* 745a, 746d
5. (2001) 6 SCC 135, *N.G. Dastane v. Shrikant S. Shivde* 745c
6. (2001) 4 SCC 667 : 2001 SCC (Cri) 798, *State of U.P. v. Shambhu Nath Singh* 743b-c, 745b-c, 746d
7. (1999) 7 SCC 604 : 1999 SCC (Cri) 1324, *Raj Deo Sharma (2) v. State of Bihar* 744d
8. (1998) 7 SCC 507 : 1998 SCC (Cri) 1692, *Raj Deo Sharma v. State of Bihar* 744b
9. AIR 1958 SC 376 : 1958 Cri LJ 701, *Talab Haji Hussain v. Madhukar Purshottam Mondkar* 746a

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ORDER

1. Delay condoned. Leave granted. For the murder of one Bhagwan Singh at Sikar, Rajasthan, on 27-5-2005, 20 persons were tried. Nine have been convicted concurrently by the trial court and the High Court¹. They are the appellants. Others have either been acquitted or have died.

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2. We have heard the learned counsel for the parties at great length and also perused the record. We do not find any infirmity in the orders of the court below calling for our interference under Article 136 of the Constitution of India. The appeals are, accordingly, dismissed.

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3. Before parting with this matter, we must record a disturbing feature in the conduct of the trial of the present case. After recording examination-in-chief of the star witness, PW 14 Prabhu Singh, on 13-4-2010, the matter was adjourned on the request of the defence counsel to 25-8-2010 i.e. for about more than four

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¹ *Narayan Singh v. State of Rajasthan*, 2015 SCC OnLine Raj 7089

a months. After that, part evidence of the witnesses was recorded on 24-9-2010 and the matter was again adjourned to 11-10-2010. Before that, four witnesses of the same family in their statements recorded on 10-4-2010 had become hostile.

b 4. In a criminal case of this nature, the trial court has to be mindful that for the protection of witness and also in the interest of justice the mandate of Section 309 CrPC has to be complied with and evidence should be recorded on continuous basis. If this is not done, there is every chance of witnesses succumbing to the pressure or threat of the accused.

c 5. This aspect of the matter has received the attention of this Court on a number of occasions earlier. In *State of U.P. v. Shambhu Nath Singh*² this Court observed it was a pity that the Sessions Court adjourned the matter for a long interval after commencement of evidence, contrary to the mandate of Section 309 CrPC. Once examination of witnesses begins, the same has to be continued from day to day unless evidence of the available witnesses is recorded, except when adjournment beyond the following day has to be granted for reasons recorded. This Court observed: (SCC pp. 673-75, paras 12-15, 17 & 19)

d “12. Thus, the legal position is that once examination of witnesses started, the court has to continue the trial from day to day until all witnesses in attendance have been examined (except those whom the party has given up). The court has to record reasons for deviating from the said course. Even that is forbidden when witnesses are present in court, as the requirement then is that the court has to examine them. Only if there are “special reasons”, which reasons should find a place in the order for adjournment, that alone can confer jurisdiction on the court to adjourn the case without examination of witnesses who are present in court.

e 13. Now, we are distressed to note that it is almost a common practice and regular occurrence that trial courts flout the said command with impunity. Even when witnesses are present, cases are adjourned on far less serious reasons or even on flippant grounds. Adjournments are granted even in such situations on the mere asking for it. Quite often such adjournments are granted to suit the convenience of the advocate concerned. We make it clear that the legislature has frowned at granting adjournments on that ground. At any rate inconvenience of an advocate is not a “special reason” for bypassing the mandate of Section 309 of the Code.

f g 14. If any court finds that the day-to-day examination of witnesses mandated by the legislature cannot be complied with due to the non-cooperation of the accused or his counsel the court can adopt any of the measures indicated in the sub-section i.e. remanding the accused to custody or imposing cost on the party who wants such adjournments (the cost must be commensurate with the loss suffered by the witnesses, including the

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expenses to attend the court). Another option is, when the accused is absent and the witness is present to be examined, the court can cancel his bail, if he is on bail (unless an application is made on his behalf seeking permission for his counsel to proceed to examine the witnesses present even in his absence provided the accused gives an undertaking in writing that he would not dispute his identity as the particular accused in the case).

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15. The time-frame suggested by a three-Judge Bench of this Court in *Raj Deo Sharma v. State of Bihar*³ is partly in consideration of the legislative mandate contained in Section 309(1) of the Code. This is what the Bench said on that score: (SCC p. 516, para 16)

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‘16. The Code of Criminal Procedure is comprehensive enough to enable the Magistrate to close the prosecution if the prosecution is unable to produce its witnesses in spite of repeated opportunities. Section 309(1) CrPC supports the above view as it enjoins expeditious holding of the proceedings and continuous examination of witnesses from day to day. The section also provides for recording reasons for adjourning the case beyond the following day.’

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17. We believe, hopefully, that the High Courts would have issued the circular desired⁴ by the Apex Court as per the said judgment. If the insistence made by Parliament through Section 309 of the Code can be adhered to by the trial courts there is every chance of the parties cooperating with the courts for achieving the desired objects and it would relieve the agony which witnesses summoned are now suffering on account of their non-examination for days.

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19. In some States a system is evolved for framing a schedule of consecutive working days for examination of witnesses in each sessions trial to be followed. Such schedule is fixed by the court well in advance after ascertaining the convenience of the counsel on both sides. Summons or process would then be handed over to the Public Prosecutor in charge of the case to cause them to be served on the witnesses. Once the schedule is so fixed and witnesses are summoned the trial invariably proceeds from day to day. This is one method of complying with the mandates of the law. It is for the presiding officer of each court to chalk out any other methods, if any, found better for complying with the legal provisions contained in Section 309 of the Code. Of course, the High Court can monitor, supervise and give directions, on the administration side, regarding measures to conform to the legislative insistence contained in the above section.”

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3 (1998) 7 SCC 507 : 1998 SCC (Cri) 1692

4 *Raj Deo Sharma (2) v. State of Bihar*, (1999) 7 SCC 604 at p. 614, para 14 : 1999 SCC (Cri) 1324

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a 6. The above decision has been repeatedly followed. In *Mohd. Khalid v. State of W.B.*⁵, this Court noted how adjournment can result in witnesses being won over. It was observed: (SCC p. 366, para 54)

b “54. Before parting with the case, we may point out that the Designated Court deferred the cross-examination of the witnesses for a long time. That is a feature which is being noticed in many cases. Unnecessary adjournments give a scope for a grievance that the accused persons get a time to get over the witnesses. Whatever be the truth in this allegation, the fact remains that such adjournments lack the spirit of Section 309 of the Code. When a witness is available and his examination-in-chief is over, unless compelling reasons are there, the trial court should not adjourn the matter on the mere asking. These aspects were highlighted by this Court in *State of U.P. v. Shambhu Nath Singh*² and *N.G. Dastane v. Shrikant S. Shivde*⁶. ... ”

c 7. Again in *Vinod Kumar v. State of Punjab*⁷ this Court noted how unwarranted adjournments during the trial jeopardise the administration of justice. It was observed: (SCC p. 227, paras 3-4)

d “3. The narration of the sad chronology shocks the judicial conscience and gravitates the mind to pose a question: Is it justified for any conscientious trial Judge to ignore the statutory command, not recognise “the felt necessities of time” and remain impervious to the cry of the collective asking for justice or give an indecent and uncalled for burial to the conception of trial, totally ostracising the concept that a civilised and orderly society thrives on the rule of law which includes “fair trial” for the accused as well as the prosecution?

e 4. In the aforesaid context, we may recapitulate a passage from *Gurnaib Singh v. State of Punjab*⁸: (SCC p. 121, para 26)

f ‘26. ... we are compelled to proceed to reiterate the law and express our anguish pertaining to the manner in which the trial was conducted as it depicts a very disturbing scenario. As is demonstrable from the record, the trial was conducted in an extremely haphazard and piecemeal manner. Adjournments were granted on a mere asking. The cross-examination of the witnesses were deferred without recording any special reason and dates were given after a long gap. The mandate of the law and the views expressed by this Court from time to time appears to have been totally kept at bay. The learned trial Judge, as is perceptible, seems to have ostracised from his memory that a criminal trial has its own gravity and sanctity. In this regard, we may refer with profit to the pronouncement in *Talab Haji Hussain v. Madhukar*

h 5 (2002) 7 SCC 334 : 2002 SCC (Cri) 1734
2 (2001) 4 SCC 667 : 2001 SCC (Cri) 798
6 (2001) 6 SCC 135
7 (2015) 3 SCC 220 : (2015) 2 SCC (Cri) 226 : (2015) 1 SCC (L&S) 712
8 (2013) 7 SCC 108 : (2013) 3 SCC (Cri) 49

*Purshottam Mondkar*⁹ wherein it has been stated that an accused person by his conduct cannot put a fair trial into jeopardy, for it is the primary and paramount duty of the criminal courts to ensure that the risk to fair trial is removed and trials are allowed to proceed smoothly without any interruption or obstruction.’ ”

8. In spite of repeated directions of this Court, the situation appears to have remained unremedied. We hope that the Presiding Officers of the trial courts conducting criminal trials will be mindful of not giving such adjournments after commencement of the evidence in serious criminal cases. We are also of the view that it is necessary in the interest of justice that the eyewitnesses are examined by the prosecution at the earliest.

9. It is also necessary that the statements of eyewitnesses are got recorded during investigation itself under Section 164 CrPC. In view of amendment to Section 164 CrPC by Act 5 of 2009, such statement of witnesses should be got recorded by audio-video electronic means.

10. To conclude:

10.1. The trial courts must carry out the mandate of Section 309 CrPC as reiterated in judgments of this Court, inter alia, in *State of U.P. v. Shambhu Nath Singh*², *Mohd. Khalid v. State of W.B.*⁵ and *Vinod Kumar v. State of Punjab*⁷.

10.2. The eyewitnesses must be examined by the prosecution as soon as possible.

10.3. Statements of eyewitnesses should invariably be recorded under Section 164 CrPC as per procedure prescribed thereunder.

11. The High Courts may issue appropriate directions to the trial courts for compliance of the above.

12. A copy of this order be sent by the Secretary General to the Registrars of all the High Courts for being forwarded to all the presiding officers in their respective jurisdiction.

9 AIR 1958 SC 376 : 1958 Cri LJ 701

2 (2001) 4 SCC 667 : 2001 SCC (Cri) 798

5 (2002) 7 SCC 334 : 2002 SCC (Cri) 1734

7 (2015) 3 SCC 220 : (2015) 2 SCC (Cri) 226 : (2015) 1 SCC (L&S) 712