

(1998) 7 Supreme Court Cases 569 : 1998 Supreme Court Cases (L&S) 1837

(BEFORE S. SAGHIR AHMAD AND G.B. PATTANAIK, JJ.)

UNION OF INDIA AND OTHERS . . Appellants;

Versus

DINANATH SHANTARAM KAREKAR AND OTHERS . . Respondents.

Civil Appeal No. 1477 of 1993⁺, decided on July 30, 1998

A. Service Law — Departmental Enquiry — Procedure — Mode of service of charge-sheet and other documents — Service by registered post or by publication in newspaper — Validity — Charge-sheet sent by registered post received back undelivered with postal endorsement “not found” — Held, single attempt was not sufficient in this case — Further efforts should have been made for effecting the service — Show-cause notice also published in newspaper without attempting to effect its service through office peon or by registered post — Newspaper was not shown to be having wide circulation or sufficiently popular — Disciplinary enquiry, held, was vitiated for want of actual service of documents to the charged employee — Further held, legal position regarding service of documents in a disciplinary enquiry is different from communication of termination order — Constitution of India, Art. 311(2) — Departmental enquiry — Ex parte enquiry — Termination of service — Service of notice — General Clauses Act, 1897, S. 27 — Notice — Publication in newspaper — Effectiveness and sufficiency of

Original respondent (since deceased) was removed from service by way of penalty. Charge-sheet was sent to him by registered post which was received back with postal endorsement “not found”. A show-cause notice was thereafter published in Dainiki Sagar, Navshakti (presumably published from the city where the original respondent was working). CAT found the service of the charge-sheet and the show-cause notice on the respondent as insufficient and, therefore, set aside the order by which he was removed from service. Dismissing the appeal, the Supreme Court



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Held :

The postal endorsement “not found” indicates that the charge-sheet was not tendered to the respondent even by the postal authorities. A document sent by registered post can be treated to have been served only when it is established that it was tendered to the addressee. Where the addressee was not available even to the postal authorities, and the registered cover was returned to the sender with the endorsement “not found”, it cannot be legally treated to have been served. The appellant should have made further efforts to serve the charge-sheet on the respondent. A single effort, in the circumstances of the case, cannot be treated as sufficient. That being so, the very initiation of departmental proceedings was bad. It was ex parte even from the stage of the charge-sheet which, at no stage, was served upon the respondent.

(Para 3)

Show-cause notice cannot also be treated to have been served on the respondent. Service of this notice was sought to be effected on the respondent by publication in a newspaper without making any earlier effort to serve on him personally by tendering the show-cause notice either through office peon or by registered post. There is nothing on record to indicate that the newspaper in which the show-cause notice was published was a popular newspaper which was expected to be read by the public in general or that it had a wide circulation in the area or locality where the respondent lived. The show-cause notice cannot, therefore, in these circumstances, be held to have been served on the respondent. In any case, since the very initiation of the disciplinary proceedings was bad for the reason that the charge-sheet was not served, all subsequent steps and stages including the issuance of show-cause notice are also bad.

(Para 4)

Position regarding service of charge-sheet is different from position regarding communication of termination order. Where the disciplinary proceedings are intended to be initiated by issuing a charge-sheet, its actual service is essential as the person to whom the charge-sheet is issued is required to

submit his reply and, thereafter, to participate in the disciplinary proceedings. Similarly, when show-cause notice is issued, the employee is called upon to submit his reply to the action proposed to be taken against him. Since in both the situations, the employee is given an opportunity to submit his reply, the theory of "communication" cannot be invoked and "actual service" must be proved and established. Neither the charge-sheet nor the show-cause notice were ever served upon the original respondent. Consequently, the entire proceedings are vitiated.


(Para 10)

State of Punjab v. Balbir Singh, (1976) 3 SCC 242 : 1976 SCC (L&S) 411 : AIR 1977 SC 629; *S. Partap Singh v. State of Punjab*, AIR 1964 SC 72 : (1964) 4 SCR 733 : (1966) 1 LLJ 458, distinguished

State of Punjab v. Khemi Ram, (1969) 3 SCC 28 : AIR 1970 SC 214; *Bachhittar Singh v. State of Punjab*, AIR 1963 SC 395 : 1962 Supp (3) SCR 713; *State of Punjab v. Amar Singh Harika*, AIR 1966 SC 1313 : (1966) 2 LLJ 188, referred to

[Ed.: Service of charge-sheet and other notices by post is one of the modes of communication recognised by many rules relating to disciplinary enquiry. For example, it is laid down in Rule 30 of the CCS (CCA) Rules, 1965, that "every order, notice and other process made or issued under these rules shall be served in person on the government servant concerned or communicated to him by registered post." Similar provision exists in Rule 26 of the Railway Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1968.

Reference may also be made with some advantage to Section 27 of the General Clauses Act, 1897, which provides: "Where any Central Act or Regulation made after the commencement of this Act authorises or requires any document to be served by post, whether the expression 'serve' or either of the expression 'give' or 'send' or any other expression is used, then, unless a different intention appears, the service shall be deemed

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to be effected by properly addressing, pre-paying and posting by registered post, a letter containing the document and, unless the contrary is proved, to have been effected at the time at which the letter would be delivered in the ordinary course of post."

Charge-sheet is generally served by post when an employee is unauthorisedly absenting himself or absconding or otherwise evading service of charge-sheet. Absconding employees many times are not available at their last known address. Naturally, the charge-sheet or other communications sent to them through office messengers would not be received by them. Documents sent by post would also be returned with postal endorsements like, "not available", "not found", "left the place", etc. Requirement of "actual service" as laid down in this judgment makes it too difficult for the disciplinary authority to proceed against an employee who may himself be evading service of charge-sheet. If an employee is not attending office, charge-sheet has to be communicated to him at his last known address. Requirement of "actual service" laid down in this judgment does not seem to be in conformity with statutory provisions like Rule 30 or Rule 26 mentioned above. It may be a different matter that in a particular case, the disciplinary authority may act unfairly and deliberately send charge-sheet by registered post at the address where the charged employee is not likely to be available. Such colourable exercise of power is open to question and court may be justified in declaring enquiry proceedings vitiated but it does not seem to be justified to lay down a law of wide amplitude that there must be actual service whenever charge-sheet is sent by post.]

Suggested Case Finder Search Text (*inter alia*):

Search again and add:

See also (1994) 2 SCC 416

B. Service Law — Termination of service — Communication of order — Order passed in file but not communicated to terminated employee — Termination, held, does not become effective

Held :

Where the services are terminated, the status of the delinquent as a government servant comes to an end and nothing further remains to be done in the matter but if the order is passed and merely kept in the file, it would not be treated to be an order terminating service nor shall the said order be deemed to have been communicated.

(Para 9)

Appeal dismissed

K-M/ATLNZ/20167/CLA

Advocates who appeared in this case:

Ms Indra Sawhney, Ms Anubha Jain and Ms Sushma Suri, Advocates, for the Appellants.

Chronological list of cases cited

on page(s)

1. (1976) 3 SCC 242 : 1976 SCC (L&S) 411 : AIR 1977 SC 629, *State of Punjab v. Balbir Singh* 57:
2. (1969) 3 SCC 28 : AIR 1970 SC 214, *State of Punjab v. Khemi Ram* 57:
3. AIR 1966 SC 1313 : (1966) 2 LLJ 188, *State of Punjab v. Amar Singh Harika* 57:
4. AIR 1964 SC 72 : (1964) 4 SCR 733 : (1966) 1 LLJ 458, *S. Partap Singh v. State of Punjab* 573d, 573a
5. AIR 1963 SC 395 : 1962 Supp (3) SCR 713, *Bachhittar Singh v. State of Punjab* 57:



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The Judgment of the Court was delivered by

S. SAGHIR AHMAD, J.— The original respondent, Dinanath Shantaram Karekar, who died during the pendency of the proceedings before the Central Administrative Tribunal, Bombay and has since been replaced by the present respondents, was appointed as an unskilled labour in the Naval Armament Depot, Bombay. He was subsequently promoted to the post of Gun Repair Labourer Grade I. On 25-10-1973, he was declared quasi-permanent on that post with effect from 1-8-1966. He was, however, removed from service by order dated 19-8-1985 after a regular departmental enquiry. This order was upheld in the departmental appeal. The order of removal as also the appellate order were challenged by him before the Tribunal on the grounds, inter alia, that neither the charge-sheet nor the show-cause notice were ever served upon him and, therefore, the entire proceedings are vitiated. The Tribunal has found that the charge-sheet which was issued to him by registered post was returned with the postal endorsement "not found", while the show-cause notice was published straightaway in *Dainiki Sagar, Navshakti*. The Tribunal found the service of the charge-sheet and the show-cause notice on the respondent as insufficient and, therefore, set aside the order dated 19-8-1985, by which he was removed from service.

2. Learned counsel for the Union of India has strenuously urged that since the respondent had been absenting himself from the office unauthorisedly, the service of charge-sheet sent to him through registered post should be treated as sufficient. This contention cannot be accepted.

3. The respondent was an employee of the appellants. His personal file and the entire service record was available in which his home address also had been mentioned. The charge-sheet which was sent to the respondent was returned with the postal endorsement "not found". This indicates that the charge-sheet was not tendered to him even by the postal authorities. A document sent by registered post can be treated to have been served

only when it is established that it was tendered to the addressee. Where the addressee was not available even to the postal authorities, and the registered cover was returned to the sender with the endorsement "not found", it cannot be legally treated to have been served. The appellant should have made further efforts to serve the charge-sheet on the respondent. A single effort, in the circumstances of the case, cannot be treated as sufficient. That being so, the very initiation of the departmental proceedings was bad. It was ex parte even from the stage of the charge-sheet which, at no stage, was served upon the respondent.

4. So far as the service of show-cause notice is concerned, it also cannot be treated to have been served. Service of this notice was sought to be effected on the respondent by publication in a newspaper without making any earlier effort to serve him personally by tendering the show-cause notice either through the office peon or by registered post. There is nothing on record to indicate that the newspaper in which the show-cause notice was published was a popular newspaper which was expected to be read by the public in general or that it had a wide circulation in the area or locality



where the respondent lived. The show-cause notice cannot, therefore, in these circumstances, be held to have been served on the respondent. In any case, since the very initiation of the disciplinary proceedings was bad for the reason that the charge-sheet was not served, all subsequent steps and stages, including the issuance of the show-cause notice would be bad.

5. Lastly, in order to save the lost battle, a novel argument was raised by the learned counsel for the appellant. He contended that since the charge-sheet as also the show-cause notice, at different stages of the disciplinary proceedings, were despatched and had been sent out of the office so that no control to recall it was retained by the Department, the same should be treated to have been served on the respondent. It is contended that it is the communication of the charge-sheet and the show-cause notice which is material and not its actual service upon the delinquent. For this proposition, reliance had been placed on the decision of this Court in *State of Punjab v. Balbir Singh*¹.

6. This decision has been misread, misunderstood and is now being misapplied by the counsel for the appellants in the instant case.

7. As would appear from the perusal of that decision, the law with regard to "communication" and not "actual service" was laid down in the context of the order by which services were terminated. It was based on a consideration of the earlier decisions in *State of Punjab v. Khemi Ram*², *Bachhittar Singh v. State of Punjab*³, *State of Punjab v. Amar Singh Harika*⁴ and *S. Partap Singh v. State of Punjab*⁵. The following passage was quoted from *S. Partap Singh*⁵ judgment:

"It will be seen that in all the decisions cited before us it was the communication of the impugned order which was held to be essential and not its actual receipt by the officer concerned and such communication was held to be necessary because till the order is issued and actually sent out to the person concerned the authority making such order would be in a position to change its mind and modify it if it thought fit. But once such an order is sent out, it goes out of the control of such an authority, and therefore, there would be no chance whatsoever of its changing its mind or modifying it. In our view, once an order is issued and it is sent out to the government servant concerned, it must be held to have been communicated to him, no matter when he actually received it."

8. It was in this background that in cases where services are terminated or a person is dismissed from service, communication of the order and not its actual service was held to be sufficient. But this principle cannot be invoked in the instant case.



9. Where the services are terminated, the status of the delinquent as a government servant comes to an end and nothing further remains to be done in the matter. But if the order is passed and merely kept in the file, it would not be treated to be an order terminating services nor shall the said order be deemed to have been communicated.

10. Where the disciplinary proceedings are intended to be initiated by issuing a charge-sheet, its actual service is essential as the person to whom the charge-sheet is issued is required to submit his reply and, thereafter, to participate in the disciplinary proceedings. So also, when the show-cause notice is issued, the employee is called upon to submit his reply to the action proposed to be taken against him. Since in both the situations, the employee is given an opportunity to submit his reply, the theory of "communication" cannot be invoked and "actual service" must be proved and established. It has already been found that neither the charge-sheet nor the show-cause notice were ever served upon the original respondent, Dinanath Shantaram Karekar. Consequently, the entire proceedings were vitiated.

11. For the reasons stated above, we do not find any reason to interfere with the findings recorded by the Tribunal. The appeal has no merit and is dismissed with no order as to costs.

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[†] From the Judgment and Order dated 8-10-1991 of the Central Administrative Tribunal, Bombay in O.A. No. 160 of 1988

¹ (1976) 3 SCC 242 : 1976 SCC (L&S) 411 : AIR 1977 SC 629

² (1969) 3 SCC 28 : AIR 1970 SC 214

³ AIR 1963 SC 395 : 1962 Supp (3) SCR 713

⁴ AIR 1966 SC 1313 : (1966) 2 LLJ 188

⁵ AIR 1964 SC 72 : (1964) 4 SCR 733 : (1966) 1 LLJ 458