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M/S. DARSHAN OILS PVT. LTD. AND ANR. ETC. ETC.

v.

UNION OF INDIA AND ORS.

NOVEMBER 8, 1994

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[J.S. VERMA AND K.S. PARIPOORAN, JJ.]

C

Import and Export (Control) Act, 1947—Section 3—Import and Export Policy for period April, 1983 to March, 1984—Public notice amending the policy—Import of fatty acids could be made only by State Trading Corporation under Open General Licence—Exception limited to actual shipment made prior to issue of public notice dated 11.11.1983—Whether amendment could be termed unreasonable or unduly restrictive—Held, No—Classification between goods in transit and those of which transit had not begun—Held: Neither irrational nor unreasonable.

D

Administrative Law—Promissory estoppel—Export Import Policy—Amendment—Applicability of doctrine of promissory estoppel.

E

The Import and Export Policy for the period 1.4.1983 to 31.3.1984 was declared by the Central Government by issue of an order in exercise of the powers conferred by Section 3 of the Import and Export (Control) Act, 1947 giving general permission for Import into India of raw materials, components and consumables by actual users (industrial) subject to certain conditions.

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Split stear in fatty acids were not a canalised item under that Policy. The appellants entered into a contract with a foreign supplier for import of fatty acids and on 3.10.1983 opened an irrevocable letter of credit in favour of the foreign supplier. On 11.11.1983, the Central Government issued a public notice amending the said Policy whereby the import of fatty acids became a canalised item. The only exception made for import of the canalised items under import licences already issued was in respect of the shipments already effected from the country of origin before the date of said amendment. The shipment of fatty acids by appellants, not being covered by the exception made in the amendment and the import being not through the State Trading Corporation, the appellant was denied the benefit of its import being covered by the Policy prior to its amendment.

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A writ petition filed in the High Court challenging the amendment made by the public notice dated 11.11.1983 was dismissed. Hence, this appeal. A

Appellants submitted that an irrevocable letter of credit having been opened by the appellant in favour of foreign supplier on 3.10.1983 prior to amendment of the Policy, it was not feasible for the appellants to prevent the shipment of the goods thereafter and, therefore, not extending the benefit of exception to such cases also, confining the exception only to actual shipments made prior to issue of public notice dated 11.11.1983, was unreasonable and violative of Article 14 of the Constitution of India. It was also submitted that amendment of the Import Policy by issue of a public notice could be only prospective, but in this manner it had been made retrospective. B C

The respondent contended that the only consequence of the amendment was an increase in the tax which was not violative of Articles 14 and 19 of the Constitution of India. D

Dismissing the appeal, this Court

HELD 1.1 The entitlement to import items which were canalised or not, is governed by the Import Policy prevalent at the time of import. In the present case, the import of a canalised item being made after amendment of the Policy by the public notice dated 11.11.1983 in a manner not permitted by the amended Policy, the appellant cannot claim to avoid the logical consequences of the import being made contrary to the Import Policy prevailing at the time of Import of the goods. Exemption under the amended Policy being limited to shipment already made cannot be termed unreasonable or unduly restrictive. Obviously, the exception was made to cover only those goods of which the shipment had been made and were in transit, excluding all such goods of which no shipment had been made. The classification between goods in transit and those of which the transit had not begun, cannot be called irrational or unreasonable in the context. (283-E-F) E F G

D. Navinachandra and Co. Anr Etc. v. Union of India and Ors., [1987] 2 SCR 989, relied on and *M/s Universal Imports Agency and Anr v. Chief Controller of Imports and Exports and Ors.*, [1981] 1 SCR 305 distinguished. H

- A 1.2. Doctrine of promissory estoppel is inapplicable in the facts and circumstances of the case. Equities have to be balanced and public interest must outweigh individual interest. Withdrawal of benefit of exemption from payment of duty etc. can be made in public interest during the period for which the benefit had earlier been intended.
- B *Kasinka Trading and Anr. Etc. v. Union Of India*, [1994] suppl. 4 SCR, 448, relied on. (283-A-C)

Kaptan's Enterprises and Anr. v. Union Of India, AIR (1986) Delhi 221, distinguished.

- C CIVIL APPELLATE JURISDICTION: Civil Appeal No. 7153 of 1994 etc. etc.

From the Judgment and Order dated 20.8.93 of the Bombay High Court in W.P.No 434 of 1984.

- D H.N. Salve, S.K. Ghambir and Vivek Ghambir for the Appellant.

A. Subba Rao, R. Sasi Prabhu, V.K.Verma and Ms. Sushma Suri for the Respondents.

- E The Judgment of the Court was delivered by

VERMA, J. Leave granted in all the special leave petitions.

- F *Civil Appeal No. 7153 of 1994 [arising out of SLP (C) No. 20837 of 1993]*

The Import and Export Policy for period 1.4.1983 to 31.3.1984 was declared by the Central Government by issue of an order in exercise of the powers conferred by Section 3 of the Import and Export (Control) Act, 1947 giving general permission for import into India of raw materials, components and consumables by actual users (industrial) subject to certain conditions which included the following :-

- H "22. Items covered under Part-111 of the Schedule to this licence can be imported under OGL by Actual Users (Industrial) and others, for stock and sale;"

"26. Such goods are shipped on through consignment to India on or before 31st March, 1984 or in the case of Actual Users (Industrial) on or about 30th June 1984 against confirmed orders for which irrevocable letters of credit are opened and established on or about 29-2-1964 with no grace period whatsoever."

Split stearin fatty acids were not a canalised item under that Policy. The appellant entered into a contract with a foreign supplier for import of fatty acids on 1.8.1983 and on 3.10.1983 opened an irrevocable letter of credit in favour of the foreign supplier. On 11.11.1983, the Central Government issued a public notice amending the said Policy for the period April 1983 to March 1984 whereby the Import of fatty acids became a canalised item. The amendment clearly provided that import of fatty acids could be made only by the State Trading Corporation under Open General Licence and therein it was stated as under :-

"3. Import of items referred to in para 2 of this public notice shall not be allowed under any import licence already issued or under paras 31, 34, 37, 38, 138, 148 and 203 of the Import and Export Policy, 1983-84 or under any other provision of the Import and Export Policy 1983-84, *except against shipments from the country of origin already effected before the date of this public notice*. This restriction will not, however, apply to the Imports by STC of India Ltd."

(emphasis supplied)

Thus the amended Policy effective from 11.11.1983 made it clear that import of fatty acids was not allowed thereafter even under any import licence already issued "except against shipments from the country of origin already effected before the date of this public notice". In other words, the only exception made for import of the canalised items under import licences already issued was in respect of the shipments already effected from the country of origin before the date of said amendment, that is, of shipments of which transit had already commenced from the country of origin. The shipment in question arrived at Bombay on 9.2.1984 and it is not the appellants case that this shipment falls within the exception indicated above. This being so the shipment of fatty acids in the present case, not being covered by the exception made in the amendment to the Policy effective from 11.11.1983 and the import being not through the State

- A Trading Corporation, the appellant has been denied the benefit of its import being covered by the Policy prior to its amendment.

The appellants filed a writ petition in the Bombay High Court challenging the amendment made by the public notice dated 11.11.1983. That writ petition having been dismissed, this appeal has been filed by special leave.

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- The challenge to the public notice dated 11.11.1983 by the appellants in the High Court was based mainly on the doctrine of promissory estoppel which has been rejected by the High Court. A similar challenge on the ground of promissory estoppel has been rejected by this Court in *Kasinka Trading and Anr. etc. v. Union Of India and Anr.*, [1994] Suppl. 4 SCR 448. Accordingly, decision of the Delhi High Court in *Kaptan's Enterprises and Another v. Union of India*, AIR (1986) Delhi 221 cannot furnish any support to the appellants in the present case. Shri Harish Salve, learned counsel for the appellants made no attempt to support the appellants case on the doctrine of promissory estoppel. This point does not therefore, require any further consideration.

- E
- The submission of Shri Harish Salve, learned counsel for the appellants is that an irrevocable letter of credit having been opened by the appellants in favour of the foreign supplier on 3.10.1983 prior to amendment of the Policy by the public notice dated 11.11.1983, it was not feasible for the appellants to prevent the shipment of the goods thereafter, and therefore, not extending the benefit of exception to such cases also, confining the exception only to actual shipments made prior to issue of public notice dated 11.11.1983, is unreasonable and violative of Article 14. Learned counsel submit that opening of an irrevocable letter of credit prior to issue of the public notice being lawful, its consequence could not be made unlawful by a subsequent amendment of the Policy. Learned counsel also submitted that amendment of the Import Policy by issue of a public notice can be only prospective, but in this manner it has been made retrospective. Shri Subba Rao, learned counsel for the Central Government submitted that the exception is applicable only to such goods which were already in transit on account of the shipments having been made and the only consequence of the amendment is an increase in the tax which is not violative of Articles 14 and 19 of the Constitution.

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- We are unable to accept the submissions of the learned counsel for the appellants. These submissions are merely a different facet of the doctrine of

promissory estoppel which has been held inapplicable in such a situation. In *Kanishka Trading* which related to withdrawal of exemption from payment, of duty etc., in exercise of the statutory powers, it was reiterated that the power to exempt includes the power to modify or withdraw that benefit and the liability to pay duty under the Customs Act, 1982 arises when the taxable event occurs being subject to payment of duty as prevent on the data of the entry of the goods. It was held that the doctrine of promissory estoppel could not be invoked to question the withdrawal of notification issued under Section 25 of the Customs Act, 1982 when it was done in public interest. Equities have to be balanced and public interest must outweigh individual interest, *Kanishka Trading* clearly holds that withdrawal of such a benefit can be made in public interest during the period for which the benefit had earlier been intended, in our opinion, this is sufficient to indicate the fallacy inherent in the submissions made on behalf of the appellant.

In *D. Navinachandra and Co. Bombay and Anr. etc. v. Union of India and Ors.*, [1987] 2 S.C.R. 989, it was clearly held that the entitlement to import items which were canalised or not, is governed by the Import Policy prevalent at the time of Import. In the present case, the import of a canalised item being made after amendment of the Policy by the public notice dated 11.11.1983 in a manner not permitted by the amended Policy, the appellants cannot claim to avoid the logical consequences of the import being made contrary to the Import Policy prevailing at the time of import of the goods. Exemption under the amended Policy being limited to shipments already made cannot be termed unreasonable or unduly restrictive. Obviously, the exception was made to cover only those goods of which the shipment had been made and were in transit, excluding all such goods of which no shipment had been made. The classification between goods in transit and those of which the transit had not begun, cannot be called irrational or unreasonable in the context.

Reliance by Shri Harish Salve on the decision in *M/s. Universal Imports Agency and Another v. The Chief Controller of Imports and Others*, [1981] 1 S.C.R. 305, which deals with the meaning of the expression "things done" in a general sense is misplaced. In the present case the language of the exception made in the amended Import Policy is clear and unequivocal excluding from its ambit all such goods, except those in transit because of the shipment having already been made. That decision does not, therefore, require any further consideration.

- A** For the aforesaid reason, the appeal has no merit and is dismissed with Rs. 10,000 (Rupees ten thousand) only as costs

Civil Appeal Nos. 7154 and 7155 of 1994 (arising out of SLP (C) Nos. 13040 and 14337 of 1994).

- B** In view of the decision in Civil Appeal No. 7153 of 1994 [arising out of S.L.P. (C) No. 20837 of 1993], these appeals are also dismissed with Rs. 10,000 (Rupees ten thousand) only as costs in each appeal.

A.G.

Appeals dismissed.