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Shaheen Welfare Association Vs Union of India and others

Writ Petition (Cri.) No. 117 of 1995

Court: Supreme Court of India

Date of Decision: Feb. 27, 1996

Acts Referred:

Constitution of India, 1950 â€" Article 14, 21#Penal Code, 1860 (IPC) â€" Section 120B, 147#Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1987 â€" Section 20, 3, 4, 5

Citation: AIR 1996 SC 2957 : (1996) 1 ALD(Cri) 96 : (1996) CriLJ 1866 : (1996) 2 JT 719 : (1996) 2 LW(Cri) 414 : (1996) 2 SCALE 481 : (1995) 6 SCALE 419 : (1996) 2 SCC 616 : (1996)

2 SCR 1123

Hon'ble Judges: A. M. Ahmadii, C.J.; Sujata V. Manohar, J

Bench: Division Bench

Final Decision: Disposed Of

Judgement

@JUDGMENTTAG-ORDER

Mrs. Sujata V. Manohar, J.

This is a public interest litigation in which the petitioner has prayed for certain reliefs to undertrial prisoners

charged under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1987 (hereinafter referred to as "TADA"). The petitioner has asked, inter

alia, for a direction that the respondents should file a list of detenus lodged in jails in different States under TADA and has asked for a direction for

the release of TADA detenus against whom proper evidence is not with the prosecution and where proper procedure prescribed under law is not

followed.

2. Under orders passed from time to time in this petition the States of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra as well as the Central Government have

filed affidavits giving information relating to the number of cases under TADA pending in different Designated Courts in various States of the

country. We have also been furnished with the Statewise numbers of Designated Courts constituted under TADA. In the affidavit filed on behalf of
the Union of India by Shri A.K. Shrivastava, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, a statement is
annexed showing live cases under TADA and the number of Designated Courts in different States and Union Territories. The

the Union of India by Shri A.K. Shrivastava, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Deini, a statement is
annexed showing live cases under TADA and the number of Designated Courts in different States and Union Territories. The statement is as
follows:
Sr.No. Name of No. of live cases No. of
State/UT under Designated
TADA courts
(1) (2) (3) (4)
1. Andhra Pradesh 1937 61
Arunachal
2. 15 11
Pradesh
3. Assam 2908 1
4. Bihar 4 35
5. Gujarat 72 18
6. Haryana 118 8
Himachal
7.53
Pradesh
Jammu &
8. 5041 4
Kashmir
9. Karnataka 25 19
10. Kerala 1
11. Manipur 603 4
12. Madhya Pradesh 76 10
13. Maharashtra 244 8
14. Meghalaya 8 1
15. Punjab 2248 18
16. Rajasthan 77 1
17. Tamil Nadu 26 5

19. West Bengal 1 18

18. Uttar Pradesh 39 15

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20.92

Admn.

21. Delhi 759 4

22. Goa 1 1

Total :-- 14446 248

Thus, for example, in the State of Assam the number of live cases are 2908. There is only one Designated Court to try all these cases. In Jammu &

Kashmir, there are only four Designated Courts for trial of 5041 cases. In Rajasthan there is only one Designated Court for the trial of 77 cases

while in Delhi there are four Designated Courts for the trial of 759 pending cases. The number of Designated Court is also somewhat deceptive in

the sense that in some Sates the existing Sessions Courts are also designated as courts under TADA, with the result that these courts do not deal

exclusively with the trial of TADA cases. They also deal with other criminal cases. Therefore, the entire time of such courts is not available for the

trial of TADA cases. It is quite clear that in many States there is no prospect of a speedy trial of pending TADA cases. A statement which is

annexed to an earlier affidavit filed on behalf of the Union of India by Shri R.S. Tanwar, Under Secretary to the Government of India. Ministry of

Home Affairs, New Delhi, shows that in respect of 14446 cases under investigation and pending trial in the various States of the country, the

detentions involved are 42488, out which the number of persons actually arrested and under detention is 5998. Those released on bail are 30357,

and those absconding and yet to be arrested are 6044. This is after taking into account the cases which were reviewed by the State Review

Committees, and were either withdrawn or where charges under the provisions of TADA were dropped. The total number of cases so reviewed

comes to 9203 and the number of persons discharge form TADA provisions are 7968.

3. The National Human Rights Commission has also furnished a statement showing the position of TADA detenus in jail as on 30.6.1995. While

the Statewise figures given by it do not tally with the figures given by the Union of India, the total number of undertrials in jail according to the

National Human Rights Commission is 6000, (after taking into account its corrections for Assam, Punjab and Rajasthan) which is close to the

figure of 5998 given by the Union of India.

4. It is in this context that we have to consider what relief can be granted to detenus under TADA. In the case of Kartar Singh v. State of Punjab:

1994CriLJ3139 this Court while considering the validity of Section 20(8) of TADA, has observed that while liberty of a citizen must be zealously

safeguarded by the courts, nonetheless the courts while dispensing justice in cases like the one under TADA Act, should keep in mind not only the

liberty of the accused but also the interest of the victims and their near and dear ones and above all the collective interest of the community and the

safety of the nation so that the public may not lose faith in the system of judicial administration and indulge in private retribution. It also observed

that the invocation of the provisions of TADA in cases, the facts of which do not warrant its invocation, is nothing but sheer misuse and abuse of

the Act by the police.

5. Looking to the nature of the crime and the paramount interests of the society this Court held that the conditions imposed u/s 20(8) for the

release of TADA undertrials on bail did not violate Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution. It, however, gave directions for the constitution of

Review/Screening Committees in each State and at the center to ensure that the provisions of TADA were correctly invoked in the cases pending

before the Designated Courts. The purpose of constituting such committees was to ensure a higher level of scrutiny regarding applicability of the

provisions of TADA to the case in point. The need for such committees is amply borne out by the results which have been annexed in the affidavits

filed on behalf of the Union of India before us relating to the number of cases so reviewed by the Review Committees where it has been found that

the provisions of TADA ought not to have been applied. We are, however, sorry to note that not a single case filed by C.B.I. has been so

reviewed although the Review Committee, it is said, has examined all the cases. A more independent and objective scrutiny of these cases by a

Committee headed by a retired judge is obviously necessary.

6. Inspite of such review, from the figures which we have cited above, it is clear that there is very little prospect of a speedy trial of cases under

TADA in some of the States because of the absence of an adequate number of Designated Courts even in cases where a chargesheet has been

filed and the cases are ready for trial. We are conscious of the fact that even the trial of ordinary criminal cases does take some time because of the

courts being overloaded with work and the concept of a speedy trial in the case of TADA cases must be viewed in the context of pendency in

relation to criminal trials also. But when the release of undertrials on bail is severely restricted as in the case of TADA by virtue of the provisions of

Section 20(8) of TADA, it becomes necessary that the trial does proceed and conclude within a reasonable time. Where this is not practical,

release on bail which can be taken to be embedded in the right of a speedy trial may, in some cases, be necessary to meet the requirements of

Article 21.

- 7. It was on this basis that in the case of Supreme Court Legal Aid Committee Representing Undertrial Prisoners v. Union of India & Ors. (1994
- (6) SCC 731), this Court considered similar provisions restricting the grant of bail under Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985

and directed release of undertrials on bail in certain situations and subject to the terms and conditions set out there. The Court while doing so

observed, (p.748):"".... we have felt that deprivation of the personal liberty without ensuring speedy trial would also not be in consonance with the

right guaranteed by Article 21. Of course, some amount of deprivation of personal liberty cannot be avoided in such cases; but if the period

deprivation pending trial becomes unduly long, the fairness assured by Article 21 would receive a jolt. It is because of this that we have felt that

after the accused persons have suffered imprisonment which is half of the maximum punishment provided for the offence, any further deprivation of

personal liberty would be violative of the fundamental right visualised by Article 21, which has to be telescoped with the right guaranteed by Article

14 which also promises justness, fairness and reasonableness in procedural matters.

8. It is in this context that it has become necessary to grant some relief to those persons who have been deprived of their personal liberty for a

considerable length of time without any prospect of the trial being concluded in the near future. Undoubtedly, the safety of the community and of

the nation needs to be safeguarded looking to the nature of the offences these undertrials have been charged with. But the ultimate justification for

such deprivation of liberty pending trial can only be on their being found guilty of the offences for which they have been charged. If such a finding is

not likely to be arrived at within a reasonable time some relief becomes necessary.

9. The petition thus poses the problem of reconciling conflicting claims of individual liberty v. the right of the community and the nation to safety and

protection from terrorism and disruptive activities. While it is essential that innocent people should be protected from terrorists and disruptions, it is

equally necessary that terrorists and disruptions are speedily tried and punished. In fact the protection to innocent civilians is dependent on such

speedy trial and punishment. The conflict is generated on account for the gross delay in the trial of such persons. This delay may contribute to

absence of proper evidence at the trial so that the really guilty may have to be ultimately acquitted. It also causes irreparable damage to innocent

persons who may have been wrongly accused of the crime and are ultimately acquitted, but who remain in jail for a long period pending trial

because of the stringent provisions regarding bail under TADA. They suffer severe hardship and their families may by ruined.

10. Bearing in mind the nature of the crime and the need to protect the society and the nation, TADA has prescribed in Section 20(8) stringent

provisions for granting bail. Such stringent provisions can be justified looking to the nature of the crime, as was held in Kartar Singh"s case (supra),

on the presumption that the trial of the accused will take place without under delay. No one can justify gross delay in disposal of cases when

undertrials perforce remain in jail, giving rise to possible situations that may justify invocation of Article 21.

11. These competing claims can be reconciled by taking a pragmatic approach.

12. The proper course is to identify from the nature of the role played by each accused person the real hardcore terrorists or criminals from others

who do not belong to that category; and apply the bail provisions strictly in so far as the former class is concerned and liberally in respect of the

latter class. This will release the pressure on the courts in the matter of priority for trial. Once the total number of prisoners in jail shrinks, those

belonging to the former class and, therefore, kept in jail can be tried on a priority basis. That would help ensure that the evidence against them does

not fade away on account of delay. Delay may otherwise harm the prosecution case and the harsh bail provisions may prove counter-productive.

A pragmatic approach alone can save the situation for, otherwise, one may find that many of the undertrials may be found to have completed the

maximum punishment provided by law by being in jail without a trial. Even in cases where a large number of persons are tied up with the aid of

Sections 120B or 147, I.P.C., the role of each person can certainly be evaluated for the purpose of bail and those whose role is not so serious or

menacing can be more liberally considered. With inadequate number of courts, the only pragmatic way is to reduce the prison population of TADA

detenus and then deal with hardcore undertrials on priority basis before the evidence fades away or is lost. Such an approach will take care of both

the competing interests. This is the approach which we recommend to courts dealing with TADA cases so that the real culprits are promptly tried

and punished.

13. For the purpose of grant of bail to TADA detenus, we divide that undertrials into three classes, namely, (a) hardcore undertrials whose release

would prejudice the prosecution case and whose liberty may prove to be a menace to society in general and to the complainant and prosecution

witnesses in particular; (b) other undertrials whose overt acts or involvement directly attract Sections 3 and/or 4 of the TADA Act; (c) undertrials

who are roped in, not because of any activity directly attracting Section 3 and 4, but by virtue of Section 120B or 147, I.P.C., and; (d) those

undertrials who were found possessing incriminating articles in notified areas and are booked u/s 5 of TADA.

14. Ordinarily, it is true that the provisions of Sections 20(8) and 20(9) of TADA would apply to all the aforesaid classes. But while adopting a

pragmatic and just approach, no one can dispute the fact that all of them cannot be dealt with by the same yardstick. Different approaches would

be justified on the basis of the gravity of the charges. Adopting this approach we are of the opinion that undertrials falling within group (a) cannot

receive liberal treatment. Cases of undertrials falling in group (b) would have to be differently dealt with, in that, if they have been in prison for five

years of more and their trial is not likely to be completed within the next six months, they can be released on bail unless the court comes to the

conclusion that their antecedents arc such that releasing them may be harmful to the lives of the complainant, the family members of the

complainant, or witnesses. Cases of undertrials falling in groups (c) and (d) can be dealt with leniently and they can be released if they have been in

jail for three years and two years respectively. Those falling in group (b), when released on bail, may be released on bail of not less than Rs.

50,000 with one surety for like amount and those falling in groups (c) and (d) may be released on bail on their executing a bond for Rs. 30,000

with one surety for like amount, subject to the following terms:

- (1) the accused shall report to the concerned police station once a week;
- (2) the accused shall remain within the area of jurisdiction of the Designated Court pending trial and shall not leave the area without the permission

of the Designated Court;

(3) the accused shall deposit his passport, if any, with the Designated Court. If he does not hold a passport, he shall file an affidavit to that effect

before the Designated Court. The Designated Court may ascertain the correct position from the passport authorities, if it deems it necessary;

(4) The Designated Court will be at liberty to cancel the bail if any of these conditions is violated or a case for cancellation of bail is otherwise

made out.

(5) Before granting bail, a notice shall be given to the public prosecutor and an opportunity shall be given to him to oppose the application for such

release. The Designated Court may refuse bail in very special circumstances for reasons to be recorded in writing.

15. These conditions may be relaxed in cases of those under groups (c) and (d) and, or special reason to be recorded, in the case of group (b)

prisoners. Also these directions may not be applied by the Designated Court in exceptionally grave cases such as the Bombay Blast Bomb Case

where a lengthy trial is inevitable looking to the number of accused, the number of witness and the nature of charges unless the court feels that the

trial is being unduly delayed. However, even in such cases it is essential that the Review Committee examines the case against each accused

bearing the above directions in mind, to ensure that TADA provisions are not unnecessarily invoked.

- 16. The above directions are a one-time measure meant only to alleviate the current situation.
- 17. When stringent provisions have been prescribed under an Act such as TADA for grant of bail and a conscious decision has been taken by the

legislature to sacrifice to some extent, the personal liberty of an undertrial accused for the sake of protecting the community and the nation against

terrorist and disruptive activities or other activities harmful to society, it is all the more necessary that investigation of such crimes is done efficiently

and an adequate number of Designated Courts are set up to bring to book persons accused of such serious crimes. This is the only way in which

society can be protected against harmful activities. This would also ensure that persons ultimately found innocent are not unnecessarily kept in jail

for long period. It is unfortunate that none of the States to whom notices have been issued by us nor the Union of India, have come forward to

state that they would set up an adequate number of Designated Courts in each State so that cases pertaining to TADA can be speedily disposed

- of. This has necessitated the above other as a one-time measure.
- 18. With the above directions, the writ petition is disposed of.