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REPORTABLE

**IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUDICATURE AT BOMBAY
GOA SEAT, AT PORVORIM
PIL WRIT PETITION NO. 4 OF 2022**

- 1. THE GOA FOUNDATION,**
Through its Secretary,
Dy. Claude Alvares, Age 73 years,
Having Regd. Office at Room No. 7,
Above Mapusa Clinic, Mapusa,
Goa 403 507,
PAN No. AAAAG0249C
Email id: goafoundation@gmail.com

...PETITIONER

~ VERSUS ~

- 1. THE NATIONAL GREEN
TRIBUNAL, PRINCIPAL BENCH,**
Through the Registrar General,
Faridkot House, Copernicus Marg,
New Delhi 110001.
- 2. THE NATIONAL GREEN
TRIBUNAL, WESTERN BENCH,**
Through its Registrar, New
Administrative Building, 1st Floor,
B-wing, Opposite Council Hall,
Pune - 411001.
- 3. THE UNION OF INDIA,**
Through the Secretary, Ministry of
Environment, Forests & Climate
Change, Indira Paryavaran Bhavan,
Jor Bag Road, New Delhi - 110003.

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4. THE STATE OF GOA

Through its Chief Secretary,
Secretariat, Porvorim, Goa 403521

... RESPONDENTS

APPEARANCES

FOR THE PETITIONER: Ms Norma Alvares, *with Mr Om Dcosta.*
GOA FOUNDATION

FOR RESPONDENTS NOS. 1 & 2: Mr Abhijeet Joshi, *with Ms Varsha Sawant & Mr Namit V Loya.*
NATIONAL GREEN TRIBUNAL
("NGT") AND NATIONAL GREEN
TRIBUNAL WESTERN BENCH

FOR RESPONDENT NO. 3: Mr Anil Singh, Addl. Solicitor
UNION OF INDIA
General, *with Mr Aditya Thakkar & Ms Savita Ganoo, i/b DP Singh.*

FOR RESPONDENT NO. 4: Mr Deep Shirodkar, Addl.
THE STATE OF GOA
Government Pleader, *with Ms Neha Shirodkar.*

**CORAM : DIPANKAR DATTA, CJ.,
G.S. PATEL &
M.S. SONAK, JJ.
(Hearing at Principal Seat
at Bombay through VC and
physical hearing)**

RESERVED ON : 14th September 2022

PRONOUNCED ON : 21st September 2022

JUDGMENT (Per GS Patel J):-

1. Rule. By consent, Rule is made returnable forthwith.

2. The matter was first listed before a Division Bench (Chief Justice and MS Sonak J) at the seat of the Bombay High Court at Porvorim, Goa on 5th August 2022. After outlining the issue, the Bench was of the view that the matter could be more advantageously be heard by a Full Bench of three Judges. Hence the present Full Bench, which took up the matter at the principal seat since all three of us were presently in Mumbai.

3. This Public Interest Writ Petition is filed by the Goa Foundation, an environment NGO based in Goa, and represented by Ms Alvares. Over several decades, the Goa Foundation has approached this court and the Supreme Court in the public interest, litigating questions regarding environmental protection in various forms. The members of the Petitioner are all Indian citizens. We are satisfied with the bona fides of the Petitioner, and, indeed, these are not questioned in the Writ Petition.

4. The Petition assails administrative notices dated 6th September 2021 (page 130), 4th January 2022 (page 132), 11th April 2022 (page 133A) and 27th April 2022 (page 133B) and 26th August 2022 (page 227 of the Petitioners' Affidavit dated 8th September 2022).¹ The last of this was noticed after Affidavits came in. We grant leave to amend to include a challenge to the 26th August 2022 notice, without need of reverification. The amendment is to be effected in two weeks from the date this judgment is pronounced. We allow the

1 There is some duplication in the Affidavits in Reply on behalf of the 1st and 2nd Respondents and the further Affidavit filed by the Goa Foundation. Our references in this judgment are to the Affidavits and their page numbers, both.

additional challenge because the fifth notice is of a class with the other four notices.

5. Briefly stated, Ms Alvares's case is that these five notices taken together have resulted in cases from Goa that were being heard by the Western Zonal Bench of the National Green Tribunal ("NGT") at Pune being abruptly taken up, for no good reason and without clarity as to which case would be taken and when, by a so-called "Special Bench" sitting in New Delhi, and comprising members of the Northern Bench joined on VC by members of the Western Zonal Bench. There is no power, she submits, for the Chairperson of the NGT to issue such directions or orders. There is no superior or governing seat or bench. Nothing in the National Green Tribunal (Practice and Procedure) Rules 2011 ("**the Procedure Rules**") or in the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010 ("**the NGT Act**") permits this. Every one of these notices is explicitly said on its face to be a 'notice', not an order. Each is said to have been issued by a "Competent Authority", without identifying that authority; and neither the NGT Act nor the Procedure Rules speak of any such 'Competent Authority'.

6. That these are administrative directions or notices is accepted in the Affidavit in Reply filed on behalf of the NGT (the 1st and 2nd Respondents collectively), which describes them as "office orders/notices". In other words, all five notices are issued without underlying any petition, application, or judicial proceeding.

7. We note this at the forefront because Mr Joshi, learned Advocate for the NGT raises a preliminary objection as to maintainability. He relies a decision of the Supreme Court in *Union of India v Alapan Bandyopadhyay*.² Mr Joshi's submission is that since the impugned notices emanated from the Northern Zonal Bench, claimed to be "the Principal Bench" of the NGT, therefore, this Court does not have the territorial jurisdiction to entertain the Petition. His submission is that *Bandyopadhyay*'s ratio is that it is only the High Court which has territorial jurisdiction over the notice-issuing bench that can entertain a petition such as this one. In the present case that would be the Delhi High Court. He emphasizes paragraphs 40 to 44 of *Bandyopadhyay*:

"40. The law thus declared by the Constitution Bench cannot be revisited by a Bench of lesser quorum or for that matter by the High Courts by looking into the bundle of facts to ascertain whether they would confer territorial jurisdiction to the High Court within the ambit of Article 226 (2) of the Constitution. We are of the considered view that taking another view would undoubtedly result in indefiniteness and multiplicity in the matter of jurisdiction in situations when a decision passed under Section 25 of the Act is to be called in question especially in cases involving multiple parties residing within the jurisdiction of different High Courts albeit aggrieved by one common order passed by the Chairman at the Principal Bench at New Delhi.

41. The undisputed and indisputable position in this case is that the WPCT No.78/2021 was filed to challenge the order dated 22.10.2021 in P.T.No.215/2021 of the Central Administrative Tribunal, Principal Bench at New Delhi, (by the Chairman of the Tribunal in exercise of the power under

2 (2022) 3 SCC 133

Section 25 of the Act sitting at the Principal Bench) transferring O.A.No.1619/2021 to its files. On applying the said factual position to the legal exposition in L. Chandra Kumar's case (supra) it is crystal clear that the Principal Bench of the Central Administrative Tribunal at New Delhi, which passed the order transferring O.A.No.1619/2021 vide order in P.T.No.215/2021 falls within the territorial jurisdiction of High Court of Delhi at New Delhi.

42. Needless to say that the power of judicial review of an order transferring an Original Application pending before a Bench of the Tribunal to another Bench under Section 25 of the Act can be judicially reviewed only by a Division Bench of the High Court within whose territorial jurisdiction the Bench passing the same, falls. In fact, the decision in *Bhavesh Motiani's* case (supra), relied on by the respondent is also in line with the said position as in that case also, as against the order of transfer passed under Section 25 of the Act by the Principal Bench of the Central Administrative Tribunal at New Delhi Writ Petition was filed by the aggrieved party only before the High Court of Delhi. This is evident from the very opening sentence of the said judgment, which reads thus:

“The present petition has been filed being aggrieved by order dated 30.11.2018 passed by the Central Administrative Tribunal, Principal Bench, New Delhi (the ‘Tribunal’), by the O.A.No.421/2018 pending before the Ahmedabad Bench has been transferred to the Principal Bench of the Tribunal.”

43. In the instant case, the High Court at Calcutta has usurped jurisdiction to entertain the Writ Petition, viz., WPCT No.78/2021, challenging the order passed by the Central Administrative Tribunal, New Delhi, in P.T.No.215/2021, even after taking note of the fact that the

Principal Bench of the Tribunal does not lie within its territorial jurisdiction.

44. In the circumstances, based on our conclusion the impugned judgment and final order in WPCT No.78/2021 passed by the High Court at Calcutta is to be held as one passed without jurisdiction and hence, it is ab initio void. Accordingly, it is set aside. The writ petition being WPCT No.78/2021 filed before the High Court at Calcutta is accordingly dismissed, however, with liberty to the petitioner therein/the respondent herein to assail the same before the jurisdictional High Court, if so advised.”

8. We do not believe that the objection to maintainability is well taken. The facts in *Bandyopadhyay* were peculiar. The question arose in respect of tribunals created under Articles 323-A and 323-B of the Constitution of India, quite unlike a statutory tribunal such as a NGT constituted its own statute, the NGT Act. But that is not all. What was in question before the Supreme Court was a *judicial* pronouncement, and where — before which High Court exercising writ jurisdiction — such an order could be challenged. Bandyopadhyay, a former Chief Secretary of West Bengal, (since superannuated), filed an Original Application challenging certain disciplinary proceedings initiated against him. He filed this OA before the Kolkata Bench of the Central Administrative Tribunal (“CAT”). While that OA was pending before the Kolkata bench of the CAT, the Union of India moved a transfer petition under Section 25 of the Administrative Tribunals Act, 1985 seeking a transfer of the OA from the Kolkata Bench to what is undoubtedly the Principal Bench of the CAT at New Delhi. The transfer Petition was allowed, and the OA was then taken up and heard by the Principal Bench in

New Delhi, which disposed of the OA by an order of 22nd October 2021.³ What Bandyopadhyay next did was to challenge that final order passed on his OA by the New Delhi bench in a Writ Petition before the *Calcutta* High Court. On 29th October 2021, the Calcutta High Court allowed the Writ Petition and set aside the New Delhi CAT Bench's order of 22nd October 2021.⁴ The Union of India challenged the Calcutta High Court's order of 29th October 2021 before the Supreme Court — and this resulted in the decision that Mr Joshi cites.

9. The situation therefore was this: Bandyopadhyay initiated his OA before the Kolkata Bench of CAT. The Union of India sought its transfer to the Principal Bench at New Delhi. That was allowed. Having received an adverse order from the Principal Bench in New Delhi, Bandyopadhyay then challenged that final order (by the New Delhi Bench of the CAT) before the Calcutta High Court. This was the factual conspectus before the Supreme Court, and it is at a considerable remove from undisputed facts of the present case where there neither a transfer petition, application, or judicial proceeding of any kind, nor a judicial order, but only administrative (or “office”) directions or notices. None of the notices impugned in this Petition have any of the essential ingredients of a judicial order — the institution of a proceeding, notice to the opponent, hearing of both sides and then an order on merits.

3 *Public Grievances & Pensions v Alapan Bandyopadhyay*, 2021 SCC OnLine CAT 3242.

4 *Alapan Bandyopadhyay v Union of India*, 2021 SCC OnLine Cal 2793.

10. In *Bandyopadhyay*, the Supreme Court relied on its earlier decision in *L Chandra Kumar v Union of India*,⁵ particularly paragraph 99, for the proposition that decisions of tribunals are subject to scrutiny before the Division Bench of the High Court within whose jurisdiction the tribunal concerned falls. Far from being in Mr Joshi's favour, this is actually against him; for *L Chandra Kumar* speaks clearly of a *decision*. It is in this context that *Bandyopadhyay* must be understood. It is well settled that a decision is only an authority for what it actually decides.⁶

11. We do not think it is permissible to accept an argument such as the one canvassed by Mr Joshi. Indeed, we do not believe that such was or could have been the intention of the Supreme Court in *Bandyopadhyay*, for the simple reason that if extended as Mr Joshi would have us do, the result would be an evisceration of the entirety of Article 226(2) of the Constitution of India even in matters of *judicial review of administrative action*, which this Petition undoubtedly is. We quote Article 226(1) and (2):

“226. Power of High Courts to issue certain writs.—

(1) Notwithstanding anything in article 32, every High Court shall have powers, throughout the territories in relation to which it exercises jurisdiction, to issue to any person or authority including in appropriate case, any

⁵ (1997) 3 SCC 261.

⁶ *Goodyear India Ltd v State of Haryana*, (1990) 2 SCC 71; *State of Orissa v Mohd Illiyas*, (2006) 1 SCC 275; *Sarva Shramik Sanghatana (KV) v State of Maharashtra*, (2008) 1 SCC 494; *Bhuwalka Steel Industries v Bombay Iron & Steel Labour Board & Anr*, (2010) 2 SCC 273; *Jitendra Kumar Singh v State of UP*, (2010) 3 SCC 119. The principle was enunciated over a century ago by the House of Lords in *Quinn v Leathem*, 1901 AC 495 (HL).

Government, within those territories directions, orders or writs, including writs in the nature of *habeas corpus*, *mandamus*, prohibition, *quo warranto* and *certiorari*, or any of them, for the enforcement of any of the rights conferred by Part III and for nay other purpose.

(2) The power conferred by clause (1) to issue directions, orders or writs to any Government, authority or person may also be exercised by any High Court exercising jurisdiction in relation to the territories within which the cause of action, wholly or in part, arises for the exercise of such power, notwithstanding that the seat of such Government or authority or the residence of such person is not within those territories.”

(Emphasis added)

12. Even within the *Bandyopadhyay* case itself, there is an internal or intrinsic clue to support our view. In paragraph 20, the Court said, in the context of Article 226(2), that the law on that aspect was settled by the Supreme Court decisions in *Kusum Ingots & Alloys Ltd v Union of India & Anr*,⁷ *Nawal Kishore Sharma v Union of India & Ors*,⁸ and *Navinchandra N Majithia v State of Maharashtra*.⁹ Each of these authorities related to judicial review of executive action.

13. In *Majithia*, a writ petition was filed in this court to quash a criminal complaint filed in Shillong. The Supreme Court held that this court erred in dismissing the writ petition on the ground that it had no jurisdiction. In paragraph 27, the Supreme Court in *Majithia* held:

7 (2004) 6 SCC 254.

8 (2014) 9 SCC 329.

9 (2000) 7 SCC 640.

27. Tested in the light of the principles laid down in the cases noted above the judgment of the High Court under challenge is unsustainable. **The High Court failed to consider all the relevant facts necessary to arrive at a proper decision on the question of maintainability of the writ petition, on the ground of lack of territorial jurisdiction. The Court based its decision on the sole consideration that the complainant had filed the complaint at Shillong in the State of Meghalaya and the petitioner had prayed for quashing the said complaint. The High Court did not also consider the alternative prayer made in the writ petition that a writ of mandamus be issued to the State of Meghalaya to transfer the investigation to Mumbai Police. The High Court also did not take note of the averments in the writ petition that filing of the complaint at Shillong was a mala fide move on the part of the complainant to harass and pressurise the petitioners to reverse the transaction for transfer of shares. The relief sought in the writ petition may be one of the relevant criteria for consideration of the question but cannot be the sole consideration in the matter.** On the averments made in the writ petition gist of which has been noted earlier it cannot be said that no part of the cause of action for filing the writ petition arose within the territorial jurisdiction of the Bombay High Court.

(Emphasis added)

14. In paragraph 9 of *Nawal Kishore Sharma*, the Supreme Court said:

9. The interpretation given by this Court in the aforesaid decisions resulted in undue hardship and inconvenience to the citizens to invoke writ jurisdiction. As a result, clause (1-A) was inserted in Article 226 by the Constitution (Fifteenth) Amendment Act, 1963 and subsequently

renumbered as clause (2) by the Constitution (Forty-second) Amendment Act, 1976. The amended clause (2) now reads as under:

“226. Power of High Courts to issue certain writs.—(1) Notwithstanding anything in Article 32, every High Court shall have power, throughout the territories in relation to which it exercises jurisdiction, to issue to any person or authority, including in appropriate cases any Government, within those territories, directions, orders or writs, including writs in the nature of habeas corpus, mandamus, prohibition, quo warranto and certiorari, or any of them, for the enforcement of any of the rights conferred by Part III and for any other purpose.

(2) The power conferred by clause (1) to issue directions, orders or writs to any Government, authority or person may also be exercised by any High Court exercising jurisdiction in relation to the territories within which the cause of action, wholly or in part, arises for the exercise of such power, notwithstanding that the seat of such Government or authority or the residence of such person is not within those territories.

(3)-(4)***”

On a plain reading of the amended provisions in clause (2), it is clear that now the High Court can issue a writ when the person or the authority against whom the writ is issued is located outside its territorial jurisdiction, if the cause of action wholly or partially arises within the court’s territorial jurisdiction. Cause of action for the purpose of Article 226(2) of the Constitution, for all

intent and purpose must be assigned the same meaning as envisaged under Section 20(c) of the Code of Civil Procedure. The expression cause of action has not been defined either in the Code of Civil Procedure or the Constitution. Cause of action is bundle of facts which is necessary for the plaintiff to prove in the suit before he can succeed. The term “cause of action” as appearing in clause (2) came up for consideration time and again before this Court.

(Emphasis added)

15. Later, in paragraph 12, the Supreme Court in *Nawal Kishore Sharma* relied on *Kusum Ingots* to say:

12. In *Kusum Ingots & Alloys Ltd. v. Union of India* [(2004) 6 SCC 254], this Court elaborately discussed clause (2) of Article 226 of the Constitution, particularly the meaning of the word “cause of action” with reference to Section 20(c) and Section 141 of the Code of Civil Procedure and observed: (SCC p. 259, paras 9-10)

“9. Although in view of Section 141 of the Code of Civil Procedure the provisions thereof would not apply to writ proceedings, the phraseology used in Section 20(c) of the Code of Civil Procedure and clause (2) of Article 226, being in pari materia, the decisions of this Court rendered on interpretation of Section 20(c) CPC shall apply to the writ proceedings also. Before proceeding to discuss the matter further it may be pointed out that the entire bundle of facts pleaded need not constitute a cause of action as what is necessary to be proved before the petitioner can obtain a decree is

the material facts. The expression material facts is also known as integral facts.

10. Keeping in view the expressions used in clause (2) of Article 226 of the Constitution of India, *indisputably even if a small fraction of cause of action accrues within the jurisdiction of the Court, the Court will have jurisdiction in the matter.*”

(Emphasis added)

The Supreme Court in *Nawal Kishore Sharma* also said:

Their Lordships further observed as under: (*Kusum Ingots & Alloys Ltd.* case [(2004) 6 SCC 254] , SCC p. 264, paras 29-30)

“29. In view of clause (2) of Article 226 of the Constitution of India, now if a part of cause of action arises outside the jurisdiction of the High Court, it would have jurisdiction to issue a writ. The decision in *Khajoor Singh [Lt. Col. Khajoor Singh v. Union of India, AIR 1961 SC 532]* has, thus, no application.

16. This clearly shows that what was before the Court in *Bandyopadhyay* was an entirely distinct set of circumstances. The case at hand is closer to *Majithia*, *Nawal Kishore Sharma*, and *Kusum Ingots*. For the cause of action in the present Petition is clearly within the jurisdictional remit of this Court: wherever the impugned notices may have been issued, the situs of the origin of those notices is immaterial and by no means jurisdictionally determinative. The effect of the impugned notices is directly on the Western Zonal Bench and those litigating before that Bench.

17. When a Writ Court is tasked with judicial review of administrative action, the contours of Article 226(2) cannot possibly be fettered by a blind invocation of jurisdictional territoriality. Many tribunals are administratively centred in Delhi. Some tribunals do have a principal seat there. Others choose to use Delhi only as a matter on administrative convenience. An administrative exigency can never operate to denude a constitutional Court of its power to issue a high prerogative remedy. The administrative situs of a tribunal, adopted because of such an administrative need or exigency, will not operate to confer exclusive jurisdiction only on the Delhi High court nor rob other High Courts of their wide jurisdiction under Article 226, particularly Article 226(2). We do not believe that any Court has ever suggested that all Writ Petitions directed against the Union Government must only be filed in New Delhi before the Delhi High Court. Yet that would be the logical — albeit untenable — consequence of accepting Mr Joshi’s submission.

18. For this reason, we find Mr Joshi’s next submission to be incongruous, for he also says that it is not his case that merely because the NGT has a seat in Delhi therefore the Delhi High Court would have exclusive jurisdiction. If this be so, i.e., if this is not his case, then there is simply no basis for the submission based on *Bandyopadhyay*.

19. The last submission Mr Joshi makes at the threshold is based on Section 22 of the NGT Act. It reads:

“**22. Appeal to Supreme Court.**— Any person aggrieved by any **award, decision or order** of the Tribunal, may file an appeal to the Supreme Court, within ninety days from the

date of communication of the **award, decision or order** of Tribunal, to him, on any one or more of the grounds specified in section 100 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 (5 of 1908);

Provided that the Supreme Court may, entertain any appeal after the expiry of ninety days, if its is satisfied that the appellant was prevented by sufficient cause from preferring the appeal.”

(Emphasis added)

20. *Ex facie*, Section 22 is inapplicable because it speaks of an award, decision or order being appealable. That cannot extend to a Petition seeking judicial review of administrative action; nor can Section 22 ever be said to oust the *writ* jurisdiction of a High Court.

21. Consequently, we hold that the Petition is maintainable.

22. The context in which the NGT and its benches were constituted is this. The NGT Act replaced the National Environment Tribunal Act 1995. The Statement of Objects and Reasons (“**SOR**”) of the NGT Act inter alia notes that India was a party to the decisions taken at the Stockholm Conference in June 1972. Later, India participated in the United Nation’s Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, which led to the Rio Declaration. One of the resolutions was to demand that member states provide “effective access” to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, and develop national laws regarding liability and compensation for victims of pollution and other environmental damage. The SOR of the NGT Act also

recognises that the right to a wholesome and pollution-free environment has been pronounced by our Supreme Court to be part of Article 21, the fundamental right to life.¹⁰ Then the SOR goes on to say that the National Environmental Tribunal had a limited mandate. It was not established. There came a National Environment Appellate Authority Act 1997, but it had a narrow jurisdictional remit. Acknowledging that there were many environmental cases pending in higher courts and that these required a multi-disciplinary approach, the Supreme Court requested the Law Commission to consider the need to constitute special environmental courts.

23. Thus, there was a perceived need to establish a specialised tribunal to handle multi-disciplinary issues involved in environmental cases; and hence, the enactment of the NGT Act and the constitution of the NGT. The Chairperson is to be a Judge of the Supreme Court or to be a Chief of the High Court. He is a Judicial Member. A High Court Judge is also eligible to be appointed as a Judicial Member (though not as Chairperson). There are provisions for appointing Expert Members. The NGT has jurisdiction over all civil cases where substantial questions relating to the environment are involved and where such cases arise from the implementation of the enactments specified in Schedule I. The National Environment Act 1995 and the National Environment Appellate Authority Act 1997 stood repealed by the NGT Act.

24. On 5th May 2011, the Government of India issued a Notification under Section 4, specifying Delhi as the 'ordinary place

10 See: *Subhash Kumar v State of Bihar*, (1991) 1 SCC 74.

of sitting’ of the NGT. It was to exercise jurisdiction over the whole of India. Just a few months later, on 17th August 2011 came another Notification under Section 4(3) of the Act specifying the “ordinary places of sitting” of the NGT. Five zones were specified, and Delhi was said — parenthetically — to be the principal place. For completeness, the 17th August 2011 Notification is quoted below:

THE GAZETTE OF INDIA : EXTRAORDINARY
MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS
NOTIFICATION

New Delhi, the 17th August 2011

S.O. 1908(E).—In exercise of powers conferred by sub-section (3) of Section 4 of the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010 (19th of 2010), the Central Government hereby specifies the following ordinary places of sitting of the National Green Tribunal which shall exercise jurisdiction in the area indicated against each :—

Serial number	Zone	Place of Sitting	Territorial Jurisdiction
1.	Northern	Delhi (Principal place)	Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, National Capital Territory of Delhi and Union Territory of Chandigarh.
2.	Western	Pune	Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa with Union Territories of Daman and Diu and Dadra and Nagar Haveli
3.	Central	Bhopal	Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh.
4.	Southern	Chennai	Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Union

			Territories of Pondicherry and Lakshadweep.
5.	Eastern	Kolkata	West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, seven sister States of North-Eastern region, Sikkim, Andaman and Nicobar Islands:

Provided that till the Benches of the National Green Tribunal become functional at Bhopal, Pune, Kolkata and Chennai, the aggrieved persons may file petitions before the National Green Tribunal at Delhi and till such time the notification No. S.O. 1003(E), dated the 5th May, 2011 in the Ministry of Environment and Forests, shall continue to be operative.

[F.NO. 17(4)/2010-PL]

RAJNEESH DUBE, Jt. Secy.

25. With this background, we turn to an overview of the impugned notices. The first notice is of 6th September 2021. This is how it reads:

National Green Tribunal
Principal Bench
Faridkot House, Copernicus Marg
New Delhi- 110001

NGT/PB/JUDL./05/2020/339 Dated: 06th September, 2021

NOTICE

It is hereby notified for information of all concerned that the Competent Authority had been pleased to issue direction for constituting Special Bench in all the four Zonal Benches. It has been directed that Special Bench shall take-up such appropriate matters in consultation with the concerned Bench, which need to be taken-up by the Additional Bench till constitution of Additional Bench and/or till further orders. If necessary, sittings can continue as per requirement for such period as may be found necessary. It has been further directed that in case the hearing of any such matter(s) is/ are not concluded on the date

fixed then the matter(s) can be postponed to the next working day or to any other such date as may be directed by the Special Bench. In case Monday happens to be holiday, then the matters of that particular bench will be listed before Special Bench on the next working day. However the matters of Principal Bench and the matters of the respective Bench will continue to be heard on the said days after the hearing of matters fixed for hearing before the Special Bench in the respective Zonal Bench is concluded, unless otherwise directed.

It has directed that the sittings of Special Bench shall be as per the following schedule:

NAME OF THE BENCH	DAYS ON WHICH THE MATTERS ARE TO BE LISTED
Southern Zonal Bench, Chennai	Every working Monday (unless dispensed with on any particular scheduled Monday) in the first week of the month or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority.
Western Zonal Bench, Pune	Every working Monday (unless dispensed with on any particular scheduled Monday) in the second week of the month or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority.
Eastern Zonal Bench, Kolkata	Every working Monday (unless dispensed with on any particular scheduled Monday) in the third week of the month or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority.
Central Zonal Bench, Bhopal	Every working Monday (unless dispensed with on any particular scheduled Monday) in the fourth week of the month or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority.

This issues with the approval of the Competent Authority.

(Vidya Prakash)
Registrar General

Copy to:

1. PPS to Hon'ble Chairperson, NGT
2. PS to all Hon'ble Judicial Members and Hon'ble Expert Member
3. PA to Registrar General, NGT (PB)
4. The Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change
5. Ld. Registrars (all Zonal Benches)
6. Ld. Deputy Registrar (PB)
7. NGT Website
8. NIC team
9. Guard file

26. This tells us that there is to be a 'Special Bench' constituted for all four Zonal Benches except the Northern Bench. This 'Special Bench' is to take up 'appropriate matters'. The notice is confusing because it says that the Special Bench will take up those matters which need to be taken up "by the Additional Bench till constitution of the Additional Bench" or till further orders. What this Additional Bench is, or was meant to be, is unexplained. Then there are administrative directions scheduling the hearings. For instance, Southern Zonal Bench matters would be taken up by the Special Bench on every working Monday in the first week of the month unless otherwise ordered. On the second Monday of every month would be the cases of Western Zonal Bench, and the third Monday would be when the Special Bench would take up the matters of Eastern Zonal Bench. Central Zonal Bench matters were to be taken up by the Special Bench on the fourth Monday of each month. Only the Northern Zonal Bench was excluded.

27. Then came another notice of 4th January 2022, at page 132, also issued by this 'Competent Authority'. This notice is also incomprehensible, but seems to suggest that those matters that were being heard by the Special Bench in Delhi, now described as the

‘NGT (PB) New Delhi’, would be taken first, and that the Western Zonal Bench would take up its own work thereafter. The Notice of 4th January 2022 says this:

National Green Tribunal/
Western Zone Bench/
New Administrative Building, B-Wing/
1st floor, Opposite Council Hall/
Camp, Pune – 411 001/

NOTICE

Dated: 04th Jan, 2022.

It is hereby notified for information of all concerned that the Competent Authority has been pleased to issue direction regarding functioning of the National Green Tribunal (WZB), Pune, through video conferencing w.e.f. 05/01/2022 as under:-

It has been directed that other than admission matter(s) of the NGT (WZB), Pune to be taken up by the National Green Tribunal (PB), New Delhi on every working Wednesday and Thursday of the month, till further order(s), after hearing of the matter(s), listed before the concerned bench is concluded, unless otherwise directed in the cause list.

Similarly, it has been directed that all admission matter(s) of the NGT (WZB) Pune to be taken up by the National Green Tribunal (CZ), Bhopal on every working Tuesday and Friday of the month, till further order(s), after hearing of the matter(s) listed before the concerned bench is concluded, unless otherwise directed in the cause list.

Registrar
NGT(WZB) Pune.

28. The notice of 11th April 2022 at page 133-A for the first time injected some reason, for it said that given the pendency of old matters instituted before 31st December 2017 pending before the respective Zonal Benches, further directions were being issued. The relevant portion of this notice, which we also find unclear, says this:

NATIONAL GREEN Tribunal
PRINCIPAL BENCH

Faridkot House
Copernicus Marg,

New Delhi-110001

No.: No.NGT(PB)/Judicial/05/20/112

Dated 11 04 2022

NOTICE

Keeping in view the pendency of old matters instituted on or before 31.12.2017 pending in the respective Zonal Benches, it is hereby notified for information of all concerned that the Competent Authority has been pleased to issue direction for constituting Special Bench for hearing of such old matters pending in the Zonal Benches. It has been directed that Special Bench shall take-up such appropriate matters in consultation with the concerned Bench. If necessary, sittings can continue as per requirement for such period as may be found necessary. It has been further directed that in case the hearing of any such matter(s) is/are not concluded on the date fixed then the matter(s) can be postponed to the next working day or to any other such date as may be directed by the Special Bench. However the matters of Principal bench and the matters of the respective Zonal bench will continue to be heard on the said days after the hearing of matters fixed for hearing before the Special Bench in the respective Zonal Bench is concluded, unless otherwise directed.

It has been directed that till further orders, the sittings of Special Bench shall be as per the following schedule:

NAME OF THE BENCH	DAYS ON WHICH THE OLD MATTERS ARE TO BE LISTED
Western Zonal Bench, Pune	Every working Tuesday or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority.
Southern Zonal Bench, Chennai	Every working Wednesday or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority.
Eastern Zonal Bench, Kolkata	Every working Thursday or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority

This issues with the approval of the Competent Authority

(Vidya Prakash)
Registrar General

Copy for information to:

1. PPS to Hon'ble Chairperson
2. PA to all Hon'ble Judicial and Hon'ble Expert Members
3. PA to Registrar General
4. The Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, New Delhi
5. Ld. Registrars (all Zonal Benches)
6. PA to Dy. Registrar & Assistant Registrar (PB)
7. NGT Website
8. Guard File"

29. Just a few days later, on 27th April 2022, came the fourth notice. This again spoke of a need to clear the backlog of pending cases instituted prior to 31st December 2017 in the Zonal Benches. It was said to be a partial modification of the notices of 6th September 2021 and 11th April 2022. It said this:

**"NATIONAL GREEN TRIBUNAL
PRINCIPAL BENCH**

**Faridkot House
Copernicus Marg,
New Delhi-110001**

No. : NGT(PB)/Judicial/05/2020/728

Dated 27.04.2022

NOTICE

It is hereby notified for information of all concerned that with a view to clear the backlog of the old pending cases instituted upto 31.12.2017 in the respective Zonal Benches, in partial modification of the directions issued vide Notices dated 06.09.2021 and 11.04.2022, the Competent Authority has been pleased to issue direction for constituting Special Bench for hearing such matters through Hybrid Option till further orders, as per schedule given below:

NAME OF THE BENCH	DAYS ON WHICH THE MATTERS ARE TO BE LISTED
Eastern Zonal Bench, Kolkata	Every working Monday or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority.
Western Zonal Bench, Pune	Every working Tuesday & Wednesday or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority
Southern Zonal Bench, Chennai	Every working Thursday & Friday or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority

The matters of the Principal Bench and the matters of the respective Bench will continue to be heard on the said days after the hearing of matters fixed for hearing before the Special Bench in the respective Zonal Bench is concluded, unless otherwise directed. However, the practice of listing the matters of the concerned Zonal Benches before Special Bench on every working Monday once in a month in terms of Notice dated 06/09.2021, shall be discontinued.

The Cause List will indicate that in Part-I of the list, the matters to be listed before Special Bench and in Part-II List, the matters before the Zonal Bench after the hearing of the matters of Special bench. The matters before Special bench will be heard at 10.30 AM onwards. The hearing of the matters of Part-II shall commence after the conclusion of the hearing of the matters of Part-I (tentatively 12.00 noon onwards). ***No request for adjournment will be entertained. However, in special circumstances, adjournment may be granted for a period not beyond one week before listing.***

The Special bench will start functioning w.e.f. 02.05.2022 as per the above proposed schedule.

This issues with the approval of the Competent Authority.

(Ravi Dahiya)
Deputy Registrar

Copy for information to:

1. PPS to Hon'ble Chairperson
2. PA to all Hon'ble Judicial and Hon'ble Expert Members
3. PA to Registrar General

4. The Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, New Delhi
5. Ld. Registrars (all Zonal benches)
6. PA to Dy. Registrar & Assistant Registrar (PB)
7. NGT Website
8. Guard File"

30. Finally, there is the last notice dated 26th August 2022 (at page 227 of Goa Foundation's Additional Affidavit dated 8th September 2022). This repeated the need to clear the backlog of old cases instituted up to 31st December 2017 and said it was a partial modification of the previous notices of 6th September 2021, 11th April 2022 and 7th April 2022. It constituted a Special Bench for hearing matters of the Western Zonal Bench through a hybrid option. The notice of 26th August 2022 reads:

**NATIONAL GREEN TRIBUNAL
PRINCIPAL BENCH**

**Faridkot House
Copernicus Marg,
New Delhi-110001**

No. : NGT(PB)/Judicial/05/2020/274

Dated 26.08.2022

NOTICE

It is hereby notified for information of all concerned that with a view to clear the backlog of the old pending cases instituted upto 31.12.2017 in respect of Western Zonal Bench, Pune, in partial modification of the directions issued vide Notices dated 06.09.2021, 11.04.2022 & 27.04.2022, the Competent Authority has been pleased to issue direction for constituting Special bench for hearing such matters of Western Zonal Bench, Pune through Hybrid Option on every working Monday, Tuesday & Wednesday w.e.f. 29.08.2022 till further orders.

It is also notified that such pending matters of the concerned Zonal Benches, which were earlier heard by Principal Bench through Video Conferencing and/or such other matters which are, in the opinion of the Hon'ble Members of the Principal Bench and/or of the concerned Zonal Bench

depending upon the issues involved in the matters or their date of institution etc. or any other matter in which an application is filed by the concerned party for conducting hearing before Special Bench, then such matters may be listed before the Special Bench headed by Hon'ble Chairperson as per the schedule given below:

NAME OF THE BENCH	DAYS ON WHICH THE MATTERS ARE TO BE LISTED
Eastern Zonal Bench, Kolkata	Working Wednesday in the first week of the Month or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority
Southern Zonal Bench, Chennai	Working Wednesday in the second week of the Month or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority.
Central Zonal Bench, Bhopal	Working Wednesday in the third week of the Month or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority
Western Zonal Bench, Pune	Working Wednesday in the fourth week of the Month or any other day as decided by the Competent Authority

However, the matters of Western Zonal Bench, Pune shall not be listed before the Special Bench on such first, second and third Wednesday of the month on which such matters of the categories as mentioned above, shall be listed for hearing before the Special Bench.

The matters of the Principal Bench and the matters of the respective Zonal Bench will however continue to be heard on the said days after the hearing of matters of the respective Zonal Bench before the Special Bench is concluded, unless otherwise directed.

This issues with the approval of the Competent Authority.

(Vidya Prakash)
Registrar General

Copy for information to:

1. PPS to Hon'ble Chairperson
2. PA to all Hon'ble Judicial and Hon'ble Expert Members
3. PA to Registrar General
4. The Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, New Delhi
5. Ld. Registrars (all Zonal benches)
6. PA to Dy. Registrar & Assistant Registrar (PB)
7. NGT Website
8. Guard File"

31. There are many things missing and much left to be desired in each of these notices and in all of them taken together. For one thing, there is a complete lack of clarity. There is no roster for the Special Bench. It is unclear to anyone, even to us, which matters are to be taken by the Special Bench or why, and which will continue before the Western Zonal Bench. Ms Alvares confirms that, in practice, this is indeed so and nobody knows on a day-to-day basis which Bench will take what matter or for what reason. We are told that the practice is for the so-called Special Bench in Delhi comprising two Judicial Members and one Expert Member to sit with the Judicial Member and the Expert Member of the Western Zonal Bench, to take up these 'Special Bench' matters. A cause list is indeed notified, but without any indication of which matter will enter that cause list or why.

32. Ms Alvares accepts that there were problems in the functioning of the Western Zonal Bench for some time until August 2021. Between August and December 2021, the Bench did function, though on VC. The Judicial Member resigned on 15th December 2021. The Chairman permitted the solitary Expert Member to continue.

33. In 2018, the NGT Bar Association challenged a similar constitution of a single-member Bench. On 31st January 2018, the Supreme Court ordered the Chairperson not to constitute a Single Member Bench and said that there would be a Division Bench consisting of one Judicial and one Expert Member.¹¹

34. We pause here to consider some of the statutory provisions in regard to the composition of any bench of the NGT. Section 4(4) of the NGT Act says:

“4. Composition of Tribunal-

(4) The Central Government may, in consultation with the Chairperson of the Tribunal, make rules regulating generally the practices and procedures of the Tribunal including—

(a) the rules as to the persons who shall be entitled to appear before the Tribunal;

(b) the rules as to the procedure for hearing applications and appeals and other matters including the circuit procedure for hearing at a place other than the ordinary place of its sitting falling within the jurisdiction referred to in sub-section (3), pertaining to the application and appeals;

(c) the minimum number of Members who shall hear the applications and the appeals in respect of any class or classes of applications and appeals;

Provided that the number of Expert Members shall, in hearing an application or appeal, be equal to the number of Judicial Members hearing such application or appeal;

11 Page 105 of the Petition.

(d) rules relating to transfer of cases by the Chairperson from one place of sitting (including the ordinary place of sitting) to other place of sitting.”

(Emphasis added)

35. The proviso emphasised above prima facie indicates that Judicial Members cannot out-number Expert Members.

36. We also notice Rule 3 of the Procedural Rules which speaks of distribution of business among different ordinary place or place of sittings of the Tribunal. Rule 3 reads thus:

“3. Distribution of business amongst the different ordinary place or places of sittings of Tribunal.—

(1) The Chairperson may constitute a bench of two or more Members consisting of at least one Judicial Member and one Expert Member:

Provided that in exceptional circumstances the chairperson may constitute a single Member bench.

(2) The Chairperson shall have the power to decide the distribution of the business of the Tribunal amongst the Members of the Tribunal sitting at different places by order and specify the matters which may be dealt with by each such sitting in accordance with the provisions of clause (d) of sub-section (4) of section 4 of the Act.

(3) If any question arises as to whether any matter falls within the purview of the business allocated to a place of sitting, the decision of the Chairperson shall be final.

Explanation.—The expression “matter” includes application for interim relief.”

(Emphasis added)

37. The proviso was inserted by an amendment of 1st December 2017. The 31st January 2018 Supreme Court order on the NGT Bar Association Petition did not notice any exceptional circumstances justifying a Single Member Bench.

38. We must read these provisions along with Section 21 of the NGT Act and its first proviso.

21. **Decision to be taken by majority.**—The decision of the Tribunal by majority of Members shall be binding:

Provided that if there is a difference of opinion among the Members hearing an application or appeal, and the opinion is equally divided, the Chairperson shall hear (if he has not heard earlier such application or appeal) such application or appeal and decide:

Provided further that where the Chairperson himself has heard such application or appeal along with other Members of the Tribunal, and if there is a difference of opinion among the Members in such cases and the opinion is equally decided, he shall refer the matter to other Members of the Tribunal who shall hear such application or appeal and decide.

(Emphasis added)

39. Finally, we note Rule 5 of the Procedure Rules:

“5. Minimum number of Members who shall hear application or appeal.—

(1) The Tribunal shall hear an application or appeal, as the case may be, consisting of at least by a Judicial and an Expert Member.

(2) Where the Chairperson considers it necessary that a particular case or cases be heard and decided by the Tribunal consisting of more than two Members he may by order in writing direct that such case or case, be heard by such Members of the Tribunal as may be specified in that order.”

40. Ms Alvares draws our attention to a Division Bench order dated 3rd August 2021 in *Meenava Thanthai KR Selvaraj Kumar v National Green Tribunal*¹² by the Madras High Court. That Court took the view, one that we affirm, that the Act and the Rules do not permit a Bench of an odd number of members. Ms Alvares’s submission is that if the number of expert Members on any Bench must be equal to the number of Judicial Members, then, by necessary arithmetic, the bench strength must be an equal number. That is the proviso to Section 4(4)(c). This is also why the first proviso to Section 21 speaks of an opinion ‘being equally divided’, a situation that can only arise if there are an even number of Members. The provision for a single Member sitting in the procedure rules only operates in exceptional circumstances. Ms Alvares submits that this entire framework has been thrown to the winds by the impugned notices. Even assuming that the Bench strength could be more than two, it is unclear how, under the Act and Rules, it can ever be an *odd* number.

¹² Writ Petition No. 15112 of 2021.

But if two Members sit and are available in the Western Zone, then the statute does not contemplate the cases on their docket being heard by a larger Bench of an odd number of members sitting at a different location; and especially where the number of Expert Members is not equal to the number of Judicial Members. That the Chairperson is a Judicial Member is accepted. Thus, for the so-called Special Bench, there would be three Judicial Members and two Expert Members of this Special Bench. The statute does not permit this.

41. Until 4th January 2022, there was therefore, following the Supreme Court order of 31st January 2018, no available bench for the Western Zone. Admission matters were diverted to the Central Zone and to the Northern Zone in Delhi. Even then, there was no clarity, as paragraph 13 of the Petition says, as to which matters would be placed before the Northern Bench. Not all non-admission matters were posted before that Bench. We find to our surprise that in the Petition there is a tabulation of cause lists prepared for the non-functional and non-existent Western Bench at that time. It shows that matters were in fact listed before a non-existent bench and internally adjourned. Then some matters went off to the Northern Bench and some to the Central Bench. In the first week of April 2022, a Judicial Member was appointed for the Western Zone Bench. It is after this that there came the third impugned notice of 11th April 2022 (at page 133A) and the further notices that then followed. The result was the sudden composition of a five-member bench in the Northern Zone, with two members of the Northern Zone, the Chairperson, and the two members of the Western Zone. We believe Ms Alvares is correct that nothing in the NGT Act or the Procedure Rules permits this.

42. Ms Alvares's next objection is to the ad-hoc assumption, unwarranted and unsupported by the Act or the Procedure Rules, of jurisdiction by the Northern Zone Bench of matters that pertain to the Western Zone. There is no source of power, she says, to take away matters within the territorial jurisdiction of one Bench. If a particular Bench is non-functional (as indeed often happens with many tribunals) then surely the Writ Courts are available.

43. The answer on affidavit from the NGT is, first, to claim that the matter is one of 'convenience'; or, more accurately, of *inconvenience*. Whose convenience or inconvenience, we are not told. It is certainly not convenient — and it is certainly most inconvenient — for litigants and advocates from Goa not to know which matter is to be heard where by what Bench and for what reason, and to find that matters in a defined jurisdiction have suddenly been removed or withdrawn to some other bench with a differently defined jurisdiction.

44. The second submission by Mr Joshi is that the arrangement was purely temporary while there was a vacancy and insufficiency of Bench strength in the Western Zone. None of the notices say this and they have continued after there is an adequacy of Bench strength at the Western Zonal Bench in Pune. Then we were told that in keeping with the notices and their plain wording the Special Bench was only taking pre-2017 matters. This argument is negated by NGT's own Affidavit in paragraph 22 from pages 190 to 193 where table after table per bench shows that the so-called Special Bench has been taking post-2017 matters as well.

45. This does not even begin to answer the questions of jurisdiction and of the statutory requirement for equalized bench strength.

46. Mr Joshi lays some emphasis on Rule 3 and Section 4 to suggest that it is the Chairperson who decides the distribution of business of the Tribunal amongst Members of the Tribunal sitting at different places. The argument is misconceived. If there are multiple Benches in one zone, then it is for the Chairperson to distribute work between such local benches (just as the Chief Justice or Presiding Judge of any Court distributes work between the multiple benches in the court over which he presides). The Rule does not mean that the Chairperson can randomly cherry-pick matters from any Bench and withdraw them to himself or to a Bench over which he presides. This is particularly so if the Benches are co-equal as at least one High Court has noted.¹³ The submission is by no means and no stretch of the imagination, at least not without doing considerable violence to the language, a legitimate exercise of the power to ‘decide the distribution of business of the Tribunal’. That is not even the stated purpose of the notices.

47. We are told by Mr Joshi that these notices are the results of “internal decisions of the Chairperson”. That adds no value whatsoever to a discussion on law. The Special Bench has no defined time limit. It is not a pro-tem provision until the temporary manpower crises is resolved. Strangely, only the Northern Bench has only

13 Madras High Court, paragraph 6 of the order dated 25th June 2021 in *K Saravanan v The National Green Tribunal*, Writ Petition No 13266 of 2021, pp. 162-169 of the petition, at p. 164.

Northern Bench matters; there is no explanation or rationale provided why the Western Zonal Bench is not allowed to hear regular matters when there is a sufficiency of coram, or why some part of its cause-lists — on no known, disclosed, or discernible basis — should be taken up by a wholly improperly constituted bench sitting somewhere else.

48. Mr Joshi claims that the jurisdiction of the Western Zone Bench is not taken away by these notices. True; it is not. And it cannot be taken away. The ingenious workaround seems to be to leave the jurisdiction intact, but to take selective matters away from the jurisdictional bench. So the jurisdiction remains in Pune, but the matter goes to Delhi; and that, we are expected to accept, is perfectly all right and within the administrative power of the Chairperson. What is really happening is that by this administrative legerdemain, the so-called Special Bench, dominated by the Northern Bench, with an unlawfully odd number of members acquires seizin of matters beyond its jurisdiction. It actually does not matter whether the Special Bench has members from the Northern, Eastern or any other Bench. Matters within the Western Zonal Bench must be heard by the Western Zonal bench. It is perfectly legitimate for any Member of any Bench to sit at any other Bench; but the sitting must be of the Bench at its place of sitting to hear matters filed at that Bench.

49. There is one final telling circumstance, and it is to our mind entirely dispositive of the issue. We now set out Section 4 in its entirety.

4. Composition of Tribunal.—

- (1) The Tribunal shall consist of—
 - (a) a full time Chairperson;
 - (b) not less than ten but subject to maximum of twenty full time Judicial Members as the Central Government may, from time to time, notify;
 - (c) not less than ten but subject to maximum of twenty full time Expert Members, as the Central Government may, from time to time, notify.
- (2) The Chairperson of the Tribunal may, if considered necessary, invite any one or more person having specialised knowledge and experience in a particular case before the Tribunal to assist the Tribunal in that case.
- (3) **The Central Government may, by notification, specify the ordinary place or places of sitting of the Tribunal, and the territorial jurisdiction falling under each such place of sitting.**
- (4) **The Central Government may, in consultation with the Chairperson of the Tribunal, make rules regulating generally the practices and procedure of the Tribunal including—**
 - (a) the rules as to the persons who shall be entitled to appear before the Tribunal;
 - (b) the rules as to the procedure for hearing applications and appeals and other matters **including the circuit procedure for hearing at a place other than the ordinary place of its sitting falling within the jurisdiction referred to in sub-section (3)**, pertaining to the applications and appeals;
 - (c) the minimum number of Members who shall hear the applications and appeals in respect of any class or classes of applications and appeals:

Provided that the number of Expert Members shall, in hearing an application or appeal, be equal to the number of Judicial Members hearing such application or appeal;

(d) rules relating to transfer of cases by the Chairperson from one place of sitting (including the ordinary place of sitting) to other place of sitting.

(Emphasis added)

50. Section 4(3), emphasised above, makes it abundantly clear that the Chairperson has no authority whatsoever to specify the place of sitting of the Tribunal or the territorial jurisdiction under each such place of sitting. That can only be done by the Central Government, and it can only be done by notification. It is incapable of being done by administrative action. Further, Section 4(4)(d) also requires that rules be made by the Central Government, though in consultation with the Chairperson, for the *transfer of cases by the Chairperson from one place of sitting, including the ordinary place of sitting, to any other place*. Absent such rules made by the Central Government and duly notified, the Chairperson has no power or authority to simply transfer cases from one place to another, nor to change the territorial jurisdiction of any bench. Any such executive or administrative jurisdictional gerrymandering is proscribed by the statute itself.

51. “*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*,” says Ms Alvares; “The more it changes, the more it stays the same.” In 2017, the NGT attempted to take away cases coming from Goa, Daman Diu, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and assign them to the bench that sits in Delhi. This Court, in its seat at Goa, took up the matter as a Suo Motu Writ Petition No. 1 of 2017 and issued directions on 21st August 2017

(page 53). One of us, GS Patel J, was a member of that Bench. Ultimately, the Division Bench rendered a final decision dated 11th October 2017 (copy at page 57 of the Petition).¹⁴ The Goa Foundation was the lead petitioner. Rule was made absolute and the administrative direction of jurisdictional transfer, at least as it pertained to Goa, was quashed. Nobody has ever challenged that decision.

52. This is critical, Ms Alvares says, for between 2017 and 2022 there has been no change in circumstances and nothing at all has happened to justify an administrative move to hear some Western Zone cases, i.e., those properly filed and lodged with the Western Zone Bench in Pune, before a bench or Special Bench with an entirely different composition in Delhi.

53. Late in the hearing, we were furnished some statistics by Mr Joshi. To our mind, these completely negate the ostensible reason given for constituting the Special Bench, i.e., to clear some alleged backlog. For we find from these notices that while the pendency at the Western Zonal Bench on 21st July 2022 was 654 cases, that of the Northern Bench as on 30th June 2022 was 821 cases. The statistics also show that there were 47 fresh filings in the Western Zone Bench in August 2022 and that the disposal in that month by the Special Bench was 78 cases, clearly meaning that the Special Bench was taking newer as well as older cases. This is also clear from the tabulations in the NGT Affidavit as well. There is, therefore, no

14 *The Goa Foundation v Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change & Anr*, 2017 SCC OnLine Bom 8815 : (2018) 1 Bom CR 232.

question of any administrative exigency in having matters — unknown, unspecified and with no clarity — being selectively taken and cherry-picked for listing before any so-called Special Bench.

54. On both counts, viz., the jurisdictional aspect as well as the illegal composition of the ‘Special Bench’, the notices are vulnerable. All five notices are ultra vires the NGT Act and the Procedure Rules.

55. We also find that they are violative of Article 14 and suffer from the impermissible vice of manifest arbitrariness. One of the crucial components to the administration of justice is transparency. A second is accountability.¹⁵ The third is certainty. All three are conspicuous by their absence in the regime set up in these notices. Nobody knows which case will go to the Special Bench and which will not, or which might cycle back, when, or why. There is no reason why the Western Zone Bench should have to wait online on VC till the work of the Special Bench is over except to lend some colour of legitimacy that the Special Bench is not usurping jurisdiction because the two Western Zone Bench Members are also present online. In fact, this is a complete usurpation of jurisdiction of the Western Zonal Bench, and it fails every test of law and judicial review.

56. Rule is made absolute in terms of prayer clause (a). All five impugned notices dated 6th September 2021, 4th January 2022, 11th April 2022, 27th April 2022 and 26th August 2022 are quashed and set aside. The constitution of the Special Bench seated at New Delhi is illegal. Only the Members of the Western Zonal Bench can hear

15 *Swapnil Tripathi v Supreme Court of India*, (2018) 10 SCC 639.

matters pertaining to the Western Zonal Bench, including matters arising from Goa and Maharashtra.

57. In this Court's Judgment of 11th October 2017, a recommendation was made, although no mandamus was issued, that the authorities must consider in all seriousness a proposal to establish a circuit bench at Panaji in Goa. It is fair to say that the environmental concerns of Goa have been pivotal in shaping the face of environmental law in this country. Those struggles to preserve that land and its environment have continued; as indeed they should. We, therefore, reaffirm such recommendation, that far from moving Goa-centric matters away from Pune, every endeavour must be made to set up a circuit bench in Panaji. This is the only way that true access to justice can be achieved; and access to justice has been held to be a "part and parcel of the right to life".¹⁶ That purpose is not achieved by taking courts further and further away from litigants, lawyers and the very people who come to the NGT to seek environmental justice. It is most appropriately achieved by bringing courts of law to the litigants' doors. This, in our view, is best done by establishing a circuit bench at the nerve-centre of this environmental litigation.

58. The Petition is disposed of in these terms. There will be no order as to costs.

(M. S. SONAK, J.) (G. S. PATEL, J.) (CHIEF JUSTICE)

16 *Anita Kushwaha v Pushap Sudan*, (2016) 8 SCC 509 (5-Judge Bench);