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IN THE HIGH COURT OF PUNJAB AND HARYANA
AT CHANDIGARH

CRM-M-44737-2023
Date of decision: 07.12.2023

SARABJIT SINGH ALIAS SABBI ALIAS SARAVJEET KUMAR

...Petitioner

VERSUS

STATE OF PUNJAB

...Respondent

CORAM: HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE JASGURPREET SINGH PURI

Present:- Mr. H. S. Bhogal, Advocate for the petitioner.

Mr. Gurdarshan Singh Sidhu, AAG, Punjab.

JASGURPREET SINGH PURI, J. (Oral)

1. The present is a seventh petition (wrongly mentioned as sixth petition) filed under Section 439 of the Code of Criminal Procedure for the grant of regular bail to the petitioner in FIR No.2 dated 17.01.2019, under Sections 21, 25 and 29 of the NDPS Act, registered at Police Station Mukandpur, District SBS Nagar (Nawanshahr), Punjab.

2. Learned counsel for the petitioner submitted that the petitioner is in custody for more than 3 years and 10 months and the petitioner was not named in the FIR and his name was nominated on the basis of disclosure statement of other co-accused. He further submitted that the police had apprehended two accused and from them there was an alleged recovery of 1 kg. of *heroin*. He further submitted that thereafter, the name of the petitioner was wrongly nominated by way of false implication because the petitioner was earlier

involved in three more cases under the NDPS Act, out of which he was also convicted in two cases and that was the sole reason as to why he was falsely implicated in the present case. He also submitted that except for the disclosure statement of the co-accused, there is no evidence available with the prosecution to connect the petitioner with the present offence and disclosure statement of co-accused is not admissible in evidence *per se* in view of the judgment of the Hon'ble Supreme Court in **Tofan Singh versus State of Tamil Nadu, 2021 (4) SCC 1**. He further submitted that even as per the prosecution story, the role of the petitioner was limited to financing the drug trade and not for the supply of the narcotics.

3. Learned counsel for the petitioner also submitted vehemently that the charges in the present case were framed on 02.03.2021, which is more than 2½ years ago but only one prosecution witness has been examined out of total 19 cited prosecution witnesses and the person who has been examined was only a sample carrier but none of the material witnesses or anyone from the police party etc. have been examined in the present case. He further submitted that the net result of the same is that the petitioner had to face incarceration for more than 3 years and 10 months because of the fault of the prosecution witnesses. He referred to a judgment of the Hon'ble Supreme Court in **Satender Kumar Antil versus Central Bureau of Investigation and another, [2022 (10) SCC 51]** and contended that when there is a long custody, which is not attributable to the accused and the delay has been caused by the prosecution, then Rights under Article 21 of the Constitution of India are effected. He referred to another judgment of Hon'ble Supreme Court in **"Mohd. Muslim @ Hussain versus**

State (NCT of Delhi)”, 2023 AIR (SC) 1648, wherein the scope of Section 37 of the NDPS Act *vis-a-vis* Article 21 of the Constitution of India has been discussed by taking a serious view with regard to long trial. He further referred to a judgment of Hon’ble Supreme Court in “Dheeraj Kumar Shukla versus The State of Uttar Pradesh”, 2023 SCC Online SC 918 and also a judgment of Hon’ble Supreme Court in “Rabi Prakash versus The State of Odisha”, Special Leave to Appeal (Criminal) No.4169 of 2023 to contend that long custody itself is a ground for grant of bail notwithstanding the bar contained under Section 37 of the NDPS Act.

4. On the other hand, Mr. Gurdarshan Singh Sidhu, AAG, Punjab submitted that it is correct that the petitioner is in custody for more than 3 years and 10 months and more than 2½ years have elapsed after the framing of the charges but only one prosecution witness has been examined, who was only a sample carrier and not a part of the police party. He has however opposed the grant of regular bail to the petitioner on the ground that although the confiscation of 1 kg. of *heroin* was from the other co-accused but the same falls in the category of commercial quantity and therefore, the prayer of the petitioner is hit by the bar contained under Section 37 of the NDPS Act.

5. I have heard the learned counsel for the parties.

6. It is a case where the petitioner is in custody for more than 3 years and 10 months. The charges in the present case were framed by the learned trial Court on 02.03.2021, which is more than 2½ ago and only one prosecution witness has been examined till date, who was only a sample carrier. Although the present is a successive seventh bail petition and the earlier five bail petitions

were withdrawn by the petitioner and one bail petition was dismissed on merits by a Coordinate Bench of this Court vide order dated 27.05.2020 but the successive bail petition will be certainly maintainable in view of the long custody of the petitioner.

7. Hon'ble Supreme Court in **Satender Kumar Antil's case (supra)** has discussed this serious issue with regard to delay in trial and its effect on the Right to Life of an individual under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. Para 49 of the aforesaid judgment is reproduced as under:-

“49. Sub-section (1) mandates courts to continue the proceedings on a day-to-day basis till the completion of the evidence. Therefore, once a trial starts, it should reach the logical end. Various directions have been issued by this Court not to give unnecessary adjournments resulting in the witnesses being won over. However, the non-compliance of Section 309 continues with gay abandon. Perhaps courts alone cannot be faulted as there are multiple reasons that lead to such adjournments. Though the section makes adjournments and that too not for a longer time period as an exception, they become the norm.

We are touching upon this provision only to show that any delay on the part of the court or the prosecution would certainly violate Article 21. This is more so when the accused person is under incarceration. This provision must be applied inuring to the benefit of the accused while considering the application for bail. Whatever may be the nature of the offence, a prolonged trial, appeal or a revision against an accused or a convict under custody or incarceration, would be violative of Article 21. While the courts will have to endeavour to complete at least the recording of the evidence of the private witnesses, as

indicated by this Court on quite a few occasions, they shall make sure that the accused does not suffer for the delay occasioned due to no fault of his own”.

8. Hon'ble Supreme Court in **Mohd. Muslim @ Hussain's case** (**supra**) has dealt with this issue with regard to delay in trial and long custody of the accused person *vis-a-vis* the bar contained under Section 37 of the NDPS Act. The relevant portion of the aforesaid judgment contained in para Nos.19 and 20 are reproduced as under:-

19. A plain and literal interpretation of the conditions under Section 37 (i.e., that Court should be satisfied that the accused is not guilty and would not commit any offence) would effectively exclude grant of bail altogether, resulting in punitive detention and unsanctioned preventive detention as well. Therefore, the only manner in which such special conditions as enacted under Section 37 can be considered within constitutional parameters is where the court is reasonably satisfied on a prima facie look at the material on record (whenever the bail application is made) that the accused is not guilty. Any other interpretation, would result in complete denial of the bail to a person accused of offences such as those enacted under Section 37 of the NDPS Act.

20. The standard to be considered therefore, is one, where the court would look at the material in a broad manner, and reasonably see whether the accused's guilt may be proved. The judgments of this court have, therefore, emphasized that the satisfaction which courts are expected to record, i.e., that the accused may not be guilty, is only prima facie, based on a reasonable reading, which does not call for meticulous examination of the materials collected during investigation

(as held in Union of India v. Rattan Malik). Grant of bail on ground of undue delay in trial, cannot be said to be fettered by Section 37 of the Act, given the imperative of Section 436A which is applicable to offences under the NDPS Act too (ref. Satender Kumar Antil supra). Having regard to these factors the court is of the opinion that in the facts of this case, the appellant deserves to be enlarged on bail.

9. The Hon'ble Supreme Court in **Dheeraj Kumar Shukla's case** (**supra**) has observed as under:-

“3. It appears that some of the occupants of the 'Honda City' Car including Praveen Maurya @ Puneet Maurya have since been released on regular bail. It is true that the quantity recovered from the petitioner is commercial in nature and the provisions of Section 37 of the Act may ordinarily be attracted. However, in the absence of criminal antecedents and the fact that the petitioner is in custody for the last two and a half years, we are satisfied that the conditions of Section 37 of the Act can be dispensed with at this stage, more so when the trial is yet to commence though the charges have been framed.”

10. The Hon'ble Supreme Court in **Rabi Prakash's case** (**supra**) has also discussed the effect of Section 37 of the NDPS Act in such like cases of long custody. The relevant portion of the aforesaid judgment contained in para No.4 is reproduced as under:-

“4. As regard to the twin conditions contained in Section 37 of the NDPS Act, learned counsel for the respondent – State has been duly heard. Thus, the 1st condition stands complied with. So far as the 2nd condition re: formation of opinion as to whether there are reasonable grounds to believe that the

petitioner is not guilty, the same may not be formed at this stage when he has already spent more than three and a half years in custody. The prolonged incarceration, generally militates against the most precious fundamental right guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution and in such a situation, the conditional liberty must override the statutory embargo created under Section 37(1)(b)(ii) of the NDPS Act.”

11. After considering the aforesaid totality and circumstances of the present case, this Court is of the view that considering the long custody of the petitioner and the stage of the trial, the bar contained under Section 37 of the NDPS Act will not apply to the present petitioner in the light of Article 21 of the Constitution of India and also in the light of aforesaid judgments of Hon’ble Supreme Court. Furthermore, it is not the case of the learned State counsel that in case the petitioner is released on bail, then he may influence any witness or may tamper with evidence or may flee from justice.

12. Consequently, the present petition is allowed. The petitioner shall be released on regular bail, if not required in any other case, subject to furnishing bail bonds/surety bonds to the satisfaction of the learned trial Court/Duty Magistrate concerned.

13. However, anything observed hereinabove shall not be treated as an expression of opinion on the merits of the case and is meant for the purpose of deciding the present petition only.

07.12.2023
Chetan Thakur

(JASGURPREET SINGH PURI)
JUDGE

Whether speaking/reasoned : Yes/No
Whether reportable : Yes/No