

IN THE HIGH COURT OF PUNJAB AND HARYANA
AT CHANDIGARH

129

CWP-5727-2024
Date of Decision: 12.03.2024

Sarabjeet Singh ...Petitioner

Versus

State of Punjab and others ...Respondents

CORAM: HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE JAGMOHAN BANSAL

Present:- Mr. Parminder Singh Sekhon, Advocate for the petitioner
Mr. Aman Dhir, Deputy Advocate General, Punjab

JAGMOHAN BANSAL, J. (Oral)

1. The petitioner through instant petition under Articles 226/227 of the Constitution of India is seeking setting aside of:-

- i. order dated 23.11.2020 (Annexure P-2) whereby Disciplinary Authority has awarded punishment of dismissal;
- ii. order dated 10.02.2021 (Annexure P-3) whereby Appellate Authority has dismissed appeal of the petitioner; and
- iii. order dated 18.05.2022 (Annexure P-4) whereby revision petition of the petitioner has been dismissed.

2. The petitioner was working with respondent-department as Constable. Departmental proceedings came to be initiated against the

petitioner for accepting bribe. An FIR No.5 dated 12.09.2019 under Sections 7 and 7-A of Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988 (as amended by Amendment Act, 2018) was registered against the petitioner. The Commissioner of Police dismissed him from service by order dated 23.11.2020 (Annexure P-2). He unsuccessfully preferred appeal and revision before the departmental authorities. The Trial Court vide judgment dated 09.11.2023 (Annexure P-5) has acquitted the petitioner in the above-said FIR.

3. Learned counsel for the petitioner submits that as per Rule 16.3 of Punjab Police Rules, 1934 (for short '**1934 Rules**'), the petitioner could not be departmentally punished because he has been acquitted in the criminal trial. The foundation of departmental proceedings and criminal trial was same. The evidence led by the department in criminal as well as departmental proceedings were same, thus, he could not be punished in view of his acquittal in the criminal trial.

4. *Per contra*, learned State counsel submits that the petitioner was departmentally punished prior to judgment of acquittal, thus, he cannot claim benefit of Rule 16.3 of 1934 Rules. The departmental proceedings were adjudicated on different parameters. The petitioner has been acquitted on the ground of benefit of doubt. He concedes that petitioner was departmentally punished on account of registration of FIR and evidence in both the proceedings were common.

5. I have heard the arguments of learned counsels for both sides and perused the record with their able assistance.

6. The entire dispute revolves around interpretation of Rule 16.3 of 1934 Rules, thus, it would be inevitable to look at aforesaid Rule which is reproduced as below:

“16.3. Action following on a judicial acquittal. –

(1) When a Police Officer has been tried and acquitted by a criminal court he shall be not be punished departmentally on the same charge or on a different charge upon the evidence cited in the criminal case, whether actually led or not, unless –

*(a) the criminal charge has failed on technical grounds;
or*

(b) in the opinion of the Court or of the Superintendent of Police, the prosecution witnesses have been won over; or

(c) the Court has held in its judgment that an offence was actually committed and that suspicion rests upon the police officer concerned; or

*(d) the evidence cited in the criminal case discloses facts unconnected with the charge before the court which justify departmental proceedings on a different charge;
or*

(e) additional evidence admissible under rule 16.25(1) in departmental proceedings is available.

(2) Departmental proceedings admissible under sub-rule (1) may be instituted against Lower Subordinates by the order of the Superintendent of Police but may be taken against Upper Subordinates only with the sanction of Deputy Inspector General of Police, and a police officer against whom such action is admissible shall not be deemed to have been honorably acquitted for the purpose of rule 7.3 of the Civil Services Rules (Punjab), Volume I, Part I.”

7. The acquittal from criminal proceedings does not automatically entitle immunity from departmental action. A police officer may be subjected

departmental punishment despite acquittal in criminal proceedings as per exceptions carved out in Rule 16.3 of 1934 Rules. If acquittal is not based upon exceptions carved out in Rule 16.3 of 1934 Rules, a police officer is entitled to immunity from departmental action.

8. The contention of the respondent that the petitioner was acquitted after adjudication of departmental proceedings cannot be countenanced because there would be discrimination if contention of the respondent is accepted. On the same set of allegations, two employees in different districts may be subjected to departmental and criminal proceedings or there may be a case where on the identical set of allegations two employees in the same district are subjected to department and criminal proceedings. In case, both the employees are acquitted from the criminal trial and in case of one employee departmental proceedings are still pending he would be entitled to benefit of Rule 16.3 of 1934 Rules whereas an employee against whom departmental proceedings have already concluded would not be entitled to benefit of Rule 16.3 of 1934 Rules. It would be violative of fundamental right of equality guaranteed by Article 14 of the Constitution. The State cannot make hostile discrimination.

9. From the perusal of impugned orders and facts on record, it is evident that appellate authority had no opportunity to advert with Rule 16.3 of 1934 Rules while passing said order. Rule 16.3 of 1934 Rules is directly applicable to every departmental proceedings as soon as criminal proceedings are dropped. The competent authority is duty bound to ascertain applicability of Rule 16.3 of 1934 Rules in the departmental proceedings. As the appellate authority has not adverted with Rule 16.3 of 1934 Rules while passing

impugned orders, the impugned orders dated 10.02.2021(Annexure P-3) and 18.05.2022 (Annexure P-4) deserve to be set aside and accordingly set aside. To cut short the litigation, instead of disciplinary authority, the appellate authority is directed to pass a fresh order within three months from today.

(JAGMOHAN BANSAL)
JUDGE

12.03.2024
Mohit Kumar

<i>Whether speaking/reasoned</i>	<i>Yes/No</i>
<i>Whether reportable</i>	<i>Yes/No</i>