

MUNICIPAL CORPORATION OF DELHI AND ANR. A

v.

SHRI NARESH KUMAR AND ORS.

MARCH 10, 1997.

[B.P. JEEVAN REDDY AND K.S. PARIPOORNAN, JJ.] B

Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, 1957: Section 115 (4)(c).

Expression "Dwelling houses"—Scope of—General Tax—Levy of—Held : Dwelling houses situated on, over or in the midst of agricultural lands, not exempt from general tax—That such dwelling house was occupied only occasionally and only for purposes connected with agricultural operations, immaterial. C

"Dwelling houses"—Treatment of land adjacent to—As integral part thereof—For levy of general tax—Held : Such appurtenant land as was necessary for proper and convenient enjoyment of the dwelling house should be so treated—The extent of such appurtenant land is a question of fact to be decided in each case. D

Agricultural land—Held : Whether a particular land was agricultural land or not was a mixed question of fact and law to be decided in the facts and circumstances of each case. E

Words and Phrases :

"Dwelling house", "house" and "Farm house"—Meaning of—In the context of S. 115 (4)(c) of the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, 1957. F

The respondent was the owner of a piece of land on which he carried on agricultural operations. The respondent constructed a building on the said land, which was occupied by him not on a permanent basis but only occasionally for purposes connected with agricultural operations. G

The appellant-Corporation levied general tax on the said building under Section 115 (4)(c) of the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, 1957. The respondent filed a writ petition before the High Court contending that the said building despite being a "dwelling house" was exempt from the general tax under Section 115 (4)(c) of the Act. The High Court allowed H

A the petition holding that the exemption applied even to buildings or farm houses used substantially, if not solely, for agricultural purposes. Hence this appeal.

Allowing the appeal, this Court

B HELD : 1.1. Section 115 (4)(c) of the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, 1957 excludes "dwelling houses" from the purview of agricultural lands and buildings. Once it is a "dwelling house" it is outside the purview of exempted category. The very context in which the expression "dwelling houses" occurs shows that even the dwelling houses situated on, over or in the midst of agricultural lands were sought to be excluded from the exempted category of "agricultural lands and buildings". A dwelling house can also be occupied by persons carrying on agriculture i.e., to carry on or supervise the agricultural operation. But according to Section 115 (4)(c), the "dwelling house" as such are excluded from the category of agricultural buildings. Even if it is possible to say that a dwelling house in an "Agricultural building", yet it is excluded specifically by the statute from the fold of agricultural buildings. The High Court erred in holding that the exemption applied even to 'buildings' or farm houses used 'substantially', if not solely, for agricultural purposes. Application of the test evolved by the High Court would remove the distinction between "Agricultural buildings" and "dwelling houses" which are mentioned together in Section 115 (4)(c). [872-G-H, 873-A-B]

1.2. The respondent's argument of occasional (as compared to regular) occupation has no force, as it is not necessary that a house if adapted for residential purposes should be actually dwelt in. [873-F]

F *Tata Engineering and Locomotive Co. Ltd. v. The Gram Panchayat, Pimpri Waghere*, [1976] 4 SSC 177, relied on.

Daniel v. Coulsting, 135 ER 53, cited.

G 2. Such appurtenant land as is necessary for a proper and convenient enjoyment of the dwelling house should be treated as an integral part of the dwelling house for levy of general tax. The extent of such appurtenant land is a question of fact to be decided in each case. [874-A]

H 3. Whether a particular land is an agricultural land or not is a mixed question of fact and law to be decided in the facts and circumstances of

each case. [874-C]

A

CIVIL APPELLATE JURISDICTION : Civil Appeal No. 1834 of 1997.

From the Judgment and Order dated 2.12.94 of the Delhi High Court in C.W.P. No. 937 of 1994.

B

Ms. Madhu Tewatia and Ranbir Yadav for the Appellants.

Mukul Mudgal for the Respondents.

The Judgment of the Court was delivered by

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B.P. JEEVAN REDDY, J. Leave granted.

This appeal involves the interpretation of clause (c) of sub-section (4) of Section 115 of the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, 1957. Sub-section (4) levies, what is called, a "General Tax" on "all lands and buildings in Delhi except "(c) agricultural lands and buildings (other than dwelling houses)". The question is whether the farm houses within the Delhi Municipal Corporation area are exigible to general tax as "dwelling houses".

D

The respondent owns an extent of about 13 bighas in the Revenue estate of village Bijwasan, Tehsil Mehrauli, New Delhi. According to him, he carries on agricultural operations thereon. He constructed a building on the said land, which, according to him, is occupied for purposes connected with agricultural operations on the said land and wherein the respondent and his family members stay whenever they visit the farm. According to the respondent, further the building is not occupied on a permanent basis but only occasionally as and when they visit the farm. The contention of the respondent before High Court was that since the said building is connected with the agriculture being carried on over the said extent of 13 bighas, it is exempt from tax under Section 115 (4)(c) notwithstanding the fact that it is a "dwelling house". On the other hand, the case of the Corporation was that since the said building is a "dwelling house" within the meaning of Section 115 (4)(c), it is subject to general tax. According to the corporation, it is immaterial whether the dwelling house is occupied on a permanent basis or only occasionally. It is equally immaterial, says the corporation, whether the dwelling house is occupied for the purpose of agriculture being carried on over the adjacent lands or otherwise. It is

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A enough that it is a dwelling unit, says the corporation. It is taxable. The High Court has not accepted the contention urged by the corporation. The High Court has opined that a dwelling unit is exempted from general tax if it is mainly or pre-dominantly occupied or used for agricultural purposes. This what the High Court said:

B "We are therefore of the view that so far as the exemption
 C provision in Section 115 (4)(c) is concerned, the test is not whether
 D buildings or Farm houses are used 'solely' in connection with
 E agricultural operations. In our view, the said exemption applies to
 F 'buildings' or farm houses used "substantially", if not solely, for
 agricultural purposes. If this test is satisfied, the building or farm
 house falls outside the tax-net. So far as the exclusionary words
 'other than dwelling houses' are concerned, we are again of the
 view that the buildings or farm houses must be solely or substan-
 tially used for 'dwelling purposes, that is to say, with a degree of
 continuity and permanency, and not solely or substantially for
 agricultural purposes, then such buildings will fall inside the tax
 net. We do not visualise any third category of 'buildings' or farm
 houses which do not fall into one or other categories above stated.
 Assuming however that any such intermediate category arises, we
 are of the view that the person claiming the exemption will not be
 entitled to exemption from property tax unless he proves that the
 building is solely or substantially used for 'agricultural purposes'.
 Whether a given building is used substantially for agricultural
 purposes, is a question depending upon the facts and circumstan-
 ces of each case and on what, according to general principles of
 law could be said to be the meaning of the words 'agricultural
 purposes'."

G With respect we are unable to agree with the High Court. Clause (c)
 H exempts "agricultural lands and buildings" from the levy imposed by Section
 115 (4). Clause (c), however, contains an exception within itself. The
 "dwelling houses" are excluded from the purview of agricultural lands and
 buildings. In other words, once it is a "dwelling house" it is outside the
 purview of exempted category. The very context in which the expression
 "dwelling houses" occurs shows that even the dwelling houses situated on,
 over or in the midst of agricultural lands were sought to be excluded from
 the exempted category of "agricultural lands and buildings". An agricultural

building may be a godown where the agricultural produce is stored, it may be warehouse or it may be a building housing the machinery used for purposes the agriculture. A dwelling house can also be occupied by persons carrying on agriculture i.e., to carry on or supervise the agricultural operation. But according to Section 115 (4)(c), the "dwelling houses" as such are excluded from the category of agricultural buildings. In other words, even if it is possible to say that a dwelling house is an "agricultural building", yet it is excluded specifically by the statute from the fold of agricultural buildings. Application of the test involved by the High Court would remove the distinction between "agricultural buildings" and "dwelling houses" which are mentioned together in Clause (c). An agricultural building is a building used mainly or pre-dominantly for the purpose of agriculture. If the same test is applied to dwelling houses then the very purpose and object behind excluding dwelling houses from the purview of agricultural buildings would disappear. We, therefore, agree with the Corporation that once a building is a dwelling house, no further enquiry need be made whether it is used mainly or predominantly for agricultural purposes or not. It is enough that it is a dwelling house. It becomes exigible to general tax. This would be so even if the dwelling house is situated in the midst of a farm or is a part of the farm or it may be, what is called, a "farm house".

So far as the argument of occasional (as contrasted with regular) occupation is concerned, we may refer to the decision of this Court in *The Tata Engineering And Locomotive Company Limited v. The Gram Panchayat, Pimpri Waghere*, [1976] 4 S.C.C. 177. In Para 18, the following statement occurs: "It may be stated generally that the word "house" is a structure of a permanent character. It is structurally served from other tenements. It is not necessary that a house if adapted for residential purposes should be actually dwelt in see *Daniel v. Coulsting*, (1845) 14 LJ CP 70 : 135 ER 53. *A building in Covent Garden had formerly been a dwelling house but was converted into a fruitstore warehouse and offices in which no one slept and was held to be a 'house' as regards assessment to the rector's rate within the provisions of the relevant statute.*"

The next question is-if a "dwelling house" is exigible to levy of general tax, how much of the adjacent land should be treated as an integral part of the dwelling house. In other words, the question is whether the entire land surrounding or abutting a farm house is subject to general tax alongwith the dwelling house. The answer to this question is: a dwelling

A house includes within its ambit such appurtenant land as is necessary for a proper and convenient enjoyment of the dwelling house. The extent of such appurtenant land is naturally a question of fact to be decided in each case. We have only stated the test. It is for the appropriate assessing authority to determine the extent of land which can be called appurtenant land to a given dwelling house.

The third question urged before us is as to the meaning of the expression "agricultural land". This question has not been really gone into by the High Court. When can a land be called an agricultural land has been the subjected matter of good amount of debate under various enactments including the Income Tax Act and the Wealth Tax Act. Whether a land is an agricultural land or not is a mixed question of fact and law, which has to be decided in the facts and circumstances of each case. We are not prepared to go into details, to determine whether the land involved in this appeal is "agricultural land", since that question has not been gone into by the High Court. The three issues set out by the High Court do not take in this issue. It is enough to say for the purposes of this appeal that a dwelling house situated on an agricultural land is not exempt from general tax and that a dwelling house includes within its ambit such appurtenant land as is necessary for a proper and convenient enjoyment of the dwelling house. No more can be said, nor need he said, in this appeal.

The appeal is allowed in the manner indicated above. The matter should go back to the Assessing Authority for appropriate orders in the light of the law laid down herein. No order as to costs.

V.S.S.

Appeal allowed.