ARMED FORCES TRIBUNAL, REGIONAL BENCH, CHENNAI

O.A.No. 21 of 2012

Thursday, the 21st day of November 2013

THE HONOURABLE JUSTICE V. PERIYA KARUPPIAH
(MEMBER-JUDICIAL)
AND
THE HONOURABLE LT GEN ANAND MOHAN VERMA

(MEMBER - ADMINISTRATIVE)

1. Gottala Mary Bharathi W/o No.14320003K Late Ex Naik (TS) Gottala Jagannadha Rao House No.3-53/1 Village-Thathipaka Matham Post-Thathipaka Mandal-Razole District-East Godavari(AP)-533249.

2. Miss Huldha Sumala
D/o Late Ex Naik Gottala Jagannadha Rao
aged 13 years, residing with 1st applicant
(Impleaded as 2nd applicant, by order
dt.19.7.2013 in M.A.No.28 of 2013)
rep.by Mother and Natural Guardian
being the 1st applicant as per order,
in M.A.No.111 of 2013 dt.19.7.2013
by this Tribunal as the Legal Guardian)

.. Applicants

By Legal Practitioner: Ms. Tonifia Miranda

VS.

1. Union of India, rep by the Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Defence New Delhi.

2. Officer-in-Charge Records Army Air Defence Records Nasik Road Camp Maharashtra-422102.

3. Smt. Sivakoti Giri Kumari
(Native Address)
W/o Sivakoti Nageshwara Rao
C/o late Y.Thamas (Father)
Village/PO-Gollaprolu (Near Ramkol)
Mandal-Gollaprolu
District-East Godavari (AP)-533445

4. Chief Controller of Defence Accounts Draupathi Ghat Allahabad.

5. Shilpa Devi

D/o Late Ex Naik Gottala Jagannadha Rao aged 32 years, permanently residing with the 3rd respondent at C/o Sivakoti Giri Kumari W/o Sivakoti Nageswara Rao, C/o Late Y. Thamas Father Gollaprolu near Ramkol, Gollaprolu Mandal, East Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh 533 445 Currently residing at H.No.54-20/6-9/3, Plot No.40 Gurunanak Nagar, Near Ramalaya Temple Vijayawada-520 008, Andhra Pradesh.

6. Gottala Rajesh, S/o Late Ex Naik
Gottala Jagannadha Rao, aged 29 years,
permanently residing with 3rd respondent
C/o Sivakoti Giri Kumari
W/o Sivakoti Nageswara Rao,
C/o Late Y.Thamas Father
Gollaprolu near Ramkol
Gollaprolu Mandal
East Godavari District
Andhra Pradesh-533445
Currently residing at H.No.54-20/6-9/3
Plot No.40, Gurunanak Nagar
Near Ramalaya Temple
Vijayawada-520 008, Andhra Pradesh

3

(Respondents-5 & 6 were impleaded by order of this Tribunal in M.A.28/2013, dt.19.7.2013, and amendment carried out in OA 21/2013 as per order in MA No.150/2013, dt.2.8.2013)

.. Respondents

By Mr. B.Shanthakumar, SPC

ORDER

(Order of the Tribunal made by Hon'ble Lt Gen Anand Mohan Verma, Member-Administrative)

- 1. This O.A. has been filed for quashing and setting aside the Army Air Defence(AAD) Records letters produced as Annexures-9 to 13 in the typed set of the petitioner and for issue of directions to the respondents to publish the occurrence regarding divorce of the petitioner's husband Gottala Jagannadha Rao with his first wife Smt Giri Kumari and his subsequent second marriage with the petitioner in Part-II order and grant family pension to the petitioner from the date of death of her husband.
- 2. The facts of the case are that late Nk (TS) Gottala Jagannadha Rao was enrolled in the army on 23.7.1974 and retired from service on 31.7.1989 with pension and other retirement benefits. While in service he got married to Smt. Giri Kumari, hereinafter referred to as "first wife", as per Hindu rites on 25.5.1977 and Part-II order regarding their marriage was

published. Late Gottala Jagannadha Rao was maternal uncle of the first wife. The couple was blessed with two children, viz., Shilpa Devi, daughter, about 31 years of age now and Gottala Rajesh, son about 28 years of age now. Presently, both children are married. On 11.7.1982, the couple took customary divorce by means of a mutual agreement in accordance with custom prevalent in their caste and community in the presence of community and village elders. Arrangements were made for the children to be taken care of by parents of the first wife and the first wife got remarried to one Mr.Sivakoti on 13.9.1982 according to Christian rites and left for UAE. The first wife and Mr.Sivakoti have two children, both now married. After retirement from army on 31.7.1989, late Gottala Jagannadha Rao married Petitioner No 1, hereinafter referred to as petitioner, on 2.10.1989 according to Christian rites. Out of this wedlock, a daughter by name Huldha Sumala was born on 7.10.2000. Gottala Jagannadha Rao executed a Will in favour of the petitioner on 1st February 2010. Gottala Jagannadha Rao passed away on 2nd May 2010. Though he was in receipt of service pension, family pension has not been given to the petitioner on the grounds that decree of divorce from a Court of Law of the first marriage of Gottala Jagannadha Rao has not been furnished.

3. The petitioner, through her application and pleadings of her counsel Ms.

Tonifia Miranda would enumerate the facts as stated above and would

plead that all efforts to amend the records of Gottala Jagannadha Rao had failed. In addition to several petitions, two affidavits stating that Gottala Jagannadha Rao, hereinafter referred to as husband, had obtained divorce from his first wife and had remarried the petitioner were of no avail. Zilla Sainik Welfare Officer of East Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh carried out investigation and found the above mentioned facts to be correct and recommended to the Records AAD to amend the entries in the personal documents of Gottala Jagannadha Rao. The petitioner also attended Pension Adalat in March 2011 which too recommended to the Records AAD to make suitable entries in the personal records of the husband to the effect that he, that is Gottala Jagannadha Rao had got married to the However, these recommendations too failed to bear fruit as Records AAD insisted that decree of divorce of the first marriage be The petitioner would plead that Gottala Jagannadha Rao produced. dissolved his first marriage as per custom and traditions of his caste and community and thereafter each was at liberty to remarry. The petitioner got married to Gottala Jagannadha Rao only after remarriage of the first wife. The petitioner would plead that notwithstanding the legal sustainability of customary dissolution of marriage, the said first marriage ipso facto stood dissolved by the marriage of the first wife with another person. The petitioner would plead that she and Gottala Jagannadha Rao lived as husband and wife till his death and that a daughter was born to them. They got married according to the Christian customs and rites and she would produce a Marriage Certificate to this effect. Their marriage was recognised by the society. During his lifetime, Gottala Jagannadha Rao made several attempts over many years to get the petitioner's name entered in his personal records held by AAD Records to ensure she gets the family pension upon his demise. Though the facts were well established and supported by affidavits and other supporting documents, the records were not amended as the authorities insisted on a decree of divorce from a Court of Law. Gottala Jagannadha Rao executed a Will bequeathing financial benefits of pension from the Government to his "second wife", i.e., the petitioner. The petitioner would quote Section 29(2) of Hindu Marriage Act 1955 which says, "Nothing contained in this Act shall be deemed to affect any right recognised by custom or conferred by any special enactment to obtain the dissolution of Hindu marriage....." Since the divorce with first wife was under the prevalent custom of the community to which Gottala Jagannadha Rao and the first wife belonged, the first marriage did stand dissolved and therefore, the marriage between Gottala Jagannadha Rao and the petitioner is valid and she is the legally wedded surviving wife of Gottala Jagannadha Rao. Now that Gottala Jagannadha Rao is no more, the pension that he was receiving has been stopped and the petitioner is left without any source of income and finds it extremely difficult to meet the expenses of her livelihood, raising and

education of their daughter, the second applicant in this case, etc. She would pray that the relief asked for by the applicant be granted.

- 4. Respondents-1, 2 and 4 through their counter-affidavit and pleadings of the learned Senior Panel Counsel Mr. B. Shanthakumar would admit the facts mentioned above and state that the marriage of Gottala Jagannadha Rao with Smt. Giri Kumari, the first wife was published in DO Part-II in respect of the husband. At the time of retirement, Gottlala Jagannadha Rao was required to complete necessary documentation in which the beneficiary mentioned was Smt.Giri Kumari and there is no entry of divorce in the records. The petitions from the husband along with the affidavits The Zilla Sainik Welfare Officer also have been carefully examined. investigated the and their recommendations also the case as recommendations of the Pension Adalat were considered carefully. The extant rules do not provide for amending the personal records relating to marriage without a decree of divorce from a Court of law and hence, the records in respect of Jagannadha Rao were not amended. Hence, the petitioner, the second wife, cannot be considered legitimate heir/Next of Kin of the deceased husband. Family pension, consequently, cannot be granted to the petitioner as she is not entitled to it.
- 5. Respondent No.3 Smt Giri Kumari filed her reply as a Declaration and also appeared before this Tribunal on 11^{th} March 2013 as she was in India

at that time. She would state that she married Gottala Jagannadha Rao on 25.5.1977 and two children were born to them, viz., Shilpa Devi and Gottala Rajesh who were, consequent to the customary divorce, taken care of by her father and mother who were also brother-in-law and sister of her ex-husband, i.e., Gottala Jagannadha Rao. She would state that the relationship with her first husband was constrained and they decided to terminate their marriage by obtaining a customary divorce in the presence of village elders on 11.7.1982. She would produce a document which is a certificate of discontinuation of their marriage. She would state that she was aware that after the divorce, Gottala Jagannadha Rao got remarried with the petitioner on 2nd October 1989 and they have a daughter. She would humbly declare that her name may be removed from the records of the first husband since she is no longer his wife, having married Mr Sivakoti on 13.9.1982 according to Christian Marriage Act. They have from this wedlock two children. She would declare that she has no objection in granting all monetary benefits and other welfare measures that are to accrue upon the death of the husband to the petitioner who is the legally married wife of late Gottala Jagannadha Rao. She would state on behalf of the children born through the first marriage with Gottala Jagannadha Rao and her own behalf that they have no objection in the matter of family pension being granted to the petitioner.

- 6. Respondent Nos.5 and 6, viz., Shilpa Devi and Gottala Rajesh, daughter and son respectively of Gottala Jagannadha Rao and the first wife, through their affidavit and recorded statement duly attested appropriately would reiterate the facts of marriage of their father Gottala Jagannadha Rao with their mother Smt Giri Kumari, customary divorce and re-marriage of their mother with one Sivakoti. They would also state that their father Gottala Jagannadha Rao married the petitioner in 1989 and through this marriage, they have a daughter. They would declare that consequent to the death of their father, they have nothing to do with the pension of their father Gottala Jagannadha Rao and they have no objection to grant of family pension to the petitioner.
- 7. We heard all sides and perused the records. Further, we perused the evidence adduced on the side of the petitioner, P.Ws.1 to 3 were examined and through them, Exhibits A.1 to A.17 were marked and produced. Learned Senior Panel Counsel cross-examined the witnesses P.Ws.1 to 3. With this as background, the short fact that needs to be determined is,

"Whether or not the petitioner is entitled to Family Pension?"

8. According to Section 216 of the Pension Regulations for the Army 1961, a widow is eligible to receive Family Pension even if the marriage has taken place after retirement from service of the individual provided, as laid down in Section 219 of the said Pension Regulations, she is not in receipt of

another pension from Government or she is not employed under Government and has not remarried. We find under the extant provisions of Pension Regulations for the Army, the petitioner would be eligible for grant of Family Pension, if she was to be found to be the legally wedded wife of Gottala Jagannadha Rao and his legitimate heir. It needs to be determined that the petitioner is the legitimate heir.

- 9. In the PPO issued to Gottala Jagannadha Rao on his retirement the name of Giri Kumari is mentioned as his wife. The petitioner in her application would state that since the first wife had left for UAE, it was not possible for Gottala Jagannadha Rao to obtain a decree of divorce and therefore he could not amend his personal records while in service and consequently, at the time of retirement furnished the name of his first wife as Next of Kin and the legal beneficiary. After retirement he got married the second time, this time to the petitioner. All his attempts to amend his personal records held by AAD Records have turned futile in the absence of decree of divorce of his first marriage. Now that he is no more, decree of divorce cannot be obtained.
- 10. We proceed to examine the issue of customary divorce. It has been held by the Supreme Court that customary divorce has no legal sustainability. In 2002 (2) SCC 637 in the case of Y.H. Jadhav vs. Nirmala, the Supreme Court held,

"Prevalence of customary divorce in community to which parties belong contrary to general law of divorce must be specifically pleaded and established by persons propounding such customs."

Similar view was held in the case of **Subramani vs Chandralekha** reported in **2005 (9) SCC 407**. In the instant case, though the petitioner did mention the customary divorce as also have the 3rd, 5th and 6th respondents, this issue of customary divorce was not specifically pleaded before the Tribunal and was not established as prevalent in the society to which Gottala Jagannadha Rao and his first wife belonged, and therefore, petitioner's claim that the records of the husband be amended based on this customary divorce may not be legally sustainable. In **2005 (2) SCC 33** in the case of **Ramesh Chandra Daga vs. Rameshwari Daga**, the Hon'ble Supreme Court noted that existence of customary divorce in Vaish community was not established and held,

" First marriage of respondent having not been dissolved by any decree of Court, subsisted when she went through the second marriage, hence a second marriage is liable to be declared null and void."

In the case of Mahendra Nath Yadav vs Sheela Devi reported in **2010 (9)**SCC 484, the Hon'ble Apex Court held that,

"Customary dissolution of marriage through Panchayat cannot be the basis for divorce."

In the backdrop of these judgments of the Supreme Court, it is evident that the first marriage of Gottala Jagannadha Rao with Giri Kumari subsisted when he got married for the second time to the petitioner in 1989. Resultantly, the first wife may be eligible for family pension and not the petitioner.

11. We examine the eligibility of the first wife and the children born from the first wedlock for being heir upon demise of Gottala Jagannadha Rao. The Section 216 of Pension Regulations for the Army 1961 that if a widow has remarried she is not eligible for pension. In the instant case, the first wife was not a widow when she remarried. Admittedly, she got married to another person consequent to the customary divorce of the first marriage. She would become the remarried widow of the individual on his death with two children living. Also, she has stated in Court and through her Declaration filed before the Tribunal that she has no claim over the financial benefits accruing upon demise of Gottala Jagannadha Rao. In the light of the above facts, she is not eligible to receive family pension in the instant case. She also has two children from the first marriage. The two children, Shipla Devi and Gottala Rajesh are majors and are married. They too are not eligible to receive family pension.

- 12. We examine the marriage of the petitioner and Jagannadha Rao. The Marriage Certificate of the marriage shows that it was issued by one James Ambrose and it mentions that 'Jermiah' (Jagannadha Rao)' got married to 'Mary Bharathi' on 2nd October 1989. Admittedly, the first marriage of Gottala Jagannadha Rao with Giri Kumari was solemnised under Hindu rites. Also Gottala Jagannadha Rao in his affidavit mentioned that he is a Hindu. No evidence has been produced before this Tribunal to state when and where did Gottala Jagannadha Rao convert to Christianity. However, the Act under which the second marriage took place is not a matter of dispute. There are other documents to establish that Gottala Jagannadha Rao and the petitioner were husband and wife and lived as a married couple from 1989 till husband's death. However, in the light of Supreme Court judgment in 2005 (2) SCC 33 quoted above the marriage of the petitioner with Gottala Jagannadha Rao is liable to be declared null and void, though as far as the society is concerned the marriage may be valid. For grant of Family Pension the petitioner has to be declared the legitimate heir.
- 13. On the eligibility of Huldha Sumala, we turn to the case of SPS Balasubramanyam vs. Suruttayan reported in AIR 1992, SC 756, in which the Supreme Court held that if a man and woman are living under the same roof and cohabiting for a number of years, there will be a presumption that they have lived as husband and wife and the children

born will be legitimate. It is an admitted fact that the petitioner lived as husband and wife with Gottala Jagannadha Rao from 2nd October 1989 till his death in May 2010 and a daughter was born to them. At this stage Huldha Sumala, being a legitimate child, is legal heir to Late Jagannadha Rao.

14. We examine the eligibility of the petitioner to receive family pension. A No Objection Certificate by Tehsildar P. Ganavaram, Andhra Pradesh certifies the petitioner to be the chief legal heir to the deceased Gottala Jagannadha Rao. Long cohabitation is established by the investigations of the ZSWO, East Godavari Distt too. On long cohabitation, the Supreme Court held in the case of **Tulsa vs Durghatia** reported in **2008 (4) SCC 520**,

"Where the partners lived together for long spell as husband and wife, there would be a presumption of wedlock"

In the case of Chellamma vs. Tilaga reported in **2009 (9) SCC 299**, the Hon'ble Supreme Court held,

"A long cohabitation and acceptance of the society of a man and a woman as husband and wife was a long way in establishing a valid marriage."

In the case of **Gokal Chand vs. Parveen Kumari** reported in **AIR 1952 SC 231**, the Hon'ble Supreme Court held that,

"continuous cohabitation for a number of years may raise presumption of marriage."

In Crl.Appeal No.219 of 2007, the Hon'ble Supreme Court held,

"Under the law, a second wife whose marriage is void on account of survival of the previous marriage of her husband with a living wife is not a legally wedded wife and she is, therefore, not entitled to maintenance under Section 125 Cr.P.C. for the sole reason that 'law leans in favour of legitimacy and frowns upon bastardy'. But, the law also presumes in favour of marriage and against concubinage when a man and woman have cohabited continuously for a long number of years and when the man and woman are proved to have lived together as man and wife, the law will presume, unless the contrary is clearly proved, that they were living together in consequence of a valid marriage and not in a state of concubinage."

The fact of the petitioner and Gottala Jagannadha Rao living together as husband and wife for a number of years has been established not only by the statements of the respondents-3, 5 and 6, but also by the ZSWO, East Godavari District in their communication to AD Records and an affidavit by the petitioner before the Additional JFC Magistrate, Rajamundry, dated 12th October 2012. The Pension Adalat which heard the petitioner's claim on 17th March 2011, mentions the petitioner as second wife of the individual.

The petitioner produced cover of a letter received by her from AAD Records which mentions her name as wife of Gottala Jagannadha Rao. Pension Adalat also mentions that the first wife was divorced by mutual consent in the presence of the village heads and thereafter, the second marriage was solemnised on 2nd October 1989. The Pension Adalat mentions that the petitioner is the legally wedded wife of the petitioner and recommends necessary Part-II order be published. The petitioner would produce the canteen card of Gottala Jagannadha Rao in which we find that there is a joint photograph of the petitioner along with Gottala Jagannadha Rao. The Birth Certificate of Ms. Huldha Sumala mentions Gottala Jagannadha Rao as father and Mary Bharathi as mother. All these documents establish that Gottala Jagannadha Rao and the petitioner lived as husband and wife from October 1989 to till his death. However, since there was no decree of divorce from his first wife, the second marriage is liable to be declared null and void and consequently, the petitioner would not be eligible for receipt of pension until she is declared a legitimate heir.

15. Now, we examined the Will executed by Gottala Jagannadha Rao on 1st February 2010 before Sub-Registrar, Mamidikuduru, Andhra Pradesh State. In the Will, the executant mentions the fact of his first marriage, second marriage and birth of his daughter Huldha Sumala. We note that there is no mention of the customary divorce in the Will. The executor states, '…some disputes arose between us and separated and living separately'. He also

mentions that he submitted application to the Govt to nominate his second wife as nominee. He declares, 'So after my lifetime all the benefits, pension and other benefits from the Government to be devolved upon my second wife Mary Bharathi'. To examine the legal validity of the Will, under the provisions of Indian Evidence Act Section 68, the petitioner was examined as a witness and thereafter cross-examined by the learned Senior Panel During her examination, she stated that the Will had been Counsel. executed on 1st February 2010 and Gottala Jagannadha Rao had handed over the Will to her as he was not keeping well. In this examination, she also reiterated the facts of Gottala Jagannadha Rao's first marriage, customary divorce and would produce her health card issued by Government of Andhra Pradesh which mentions her name as the wife of Gottala Jagannadha Rao. When asked whether she wanted family pension only for her daughter, the petitioner stated that she wants pension for herself and thereafter for her daughter and she undertook to take care of her minor daughter. She reiterated that she was the legally wedded wife of Gottala Jagannadha Rao and denial of family pension would cast aspersions on their marriage. The learned Senior Panel Counsel when suggested to the petitioner in the cross-examination that the customary divorce is not valid in law, she replied that such a custom was prevalent in her community. One of the two attesters, Mr. Bommidi Krishna who was examined as P.W.2 adduced that he lived in the same village where Gottala Jagannadha Rao

was living and he signed the Will as attesting witness and would confirm that the signature in Ex.A.5 was his. He saw the Will being signed by Gottala Jagannadha Rao before he attested it. P.W.2 in the crossexamination was asked whether the executor was in sound state of body and mind, he replied that though the executor was physically not well, but he was in sound state of mind when executing the Will. This Will in Telugu had been translated by a person by name Kasibhatta Rajagopalam, Razole whose identity is not known. The counsel for the petitioner sought the assistance of a Telugu and English knowing advocate of Madras High Court, viz., Ms. K.V.Vani who read the Telugu version of the Will and the English translation and suggested to the petitioner's counsel to carry out some amendments. The advocate Ms. K.V.Vani, who was examined as P.W.3 by the counsel for the petitioner, confirmed that the English version of the Will was in consonance with the Telugu version. According to the Will, after his life time, all the benefits of pension and other benefits are to devolve upon his second wife Mary Bharathi. The legal validity of the Will thus having been established as required by Section 68 of the Indian Evidence Act, the petitioner emerges as Heir Testamentary and the legal recipient of all the benefits that would accrue to her upon the death of the executor, Gottala Jagannadha Rao. Thus we find that the petitioner is eligible for receiving benefits consequent to the death of Gottala Jagannadha Rao.

16. The purpose of Family Pension is that the family must not suffer upon the demise of the individual. Therefore, it is only in the fitness of things that the petitioner and her daughter being the heirs of Gottala Jagannadha Rao receive Family Pension. Both are found to be eligible. Grant of pension to the daughter alone would be tantamount to inflicting the status of concubine on the petitioner which would be humiliating for her in the society for no fault of hers as she lived as legally wedded wife of Gottala Jagannadha Rao from 1989 to 2010, almost for 24 years. Huldha Sumala being a minor is under the care of her mother. Therefore, we are inclined to grant the Family Pension upon the death of Gottala Jagannadha Rao to the petitioner being his Heir Testamentary. Accordingly, we direct the respondents-1, 2 and 4 to grant Family Pension to the petitioner with effect from 2nd May 2010, i.e., the date of death of Gottala Jagannadha Rao.

14. In fine, the petition is ordered accordingly. No order as to costs.

Sd/

LT GEN ANAND MOHAN VERMA MEMBER (ADMINISTRATIVE)

JUSTICE V. PERIYA KARUPPIAH MEMBER (JUDICIAL)

21.11.2013 (True copy)

Member (J) – Index : Yes / No Internet : Yes / No **Member (A)** – Index : Yes / No Internet : Yes / No

To:

- The Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Defence New Delhi.
- 2. Officer-in-Charge Records Army Air Defence Records Nasik Road Camp Maharashtra-422102.
- 3. Smt. Sivakoti Giri Kumari
 (Native Address)
 W/o Sivakoti Nageshwara Rao
 C/o late Y.Thamas (Father)
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- 4. Chief Controller of Defence Accounts Draupathi Ghat Allahabad.
- 5. Shilpa Devi
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East Godavari District Andhra Pradesh-533445 Currently residing at H.No.54-20/6-9/3 Plot No.40, Gurunanak Nagar Near Ramalaya Temple

- 7. Ms. Tonifia Miranda Counsel for petitioner
- 8. Mr. B.Shanthakumar, SPC For Respondents
- 9. OIC, ATNK & K Area HQ, Chennai.
- 10. Library, AFT/RBC, Chennai

HON'BLE JUSTICE V. PERIYA KARUPPIAH (MEMBER-JUDICIAL) AND HON'BLE LT GEN ANAND MOHAN VERMA (MEMBER – ADMINISTRATIVE)

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