



The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

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Editor-in-Chief – Dr. Muktai Deb Chavan; Publisher – Alden Vas; ISSN: 2583-9896

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MAQBOOL HUSSAIN V. STATE OF BOMBAY (1953)

~ Vidhi Bhatnagar

CITATION:

AIR 1953 SC 325

Bench:

M. Patanjali Sastri, B.K. Mukherjea, S.R. Das, Ghulam Hasan, N.H. Bhagwati

INTRODUCTION

The case of *Maqbool Hussain v. State of Bombay*¹ is one of the earliest constitutional decisions interpreting Article(2) of the Constitution of India, which guarantees protection against double jeopardy. The judgement clarified that the constitutional protection against being “prosecuted and punished for the same offence more than once” applies only where the previous proceeding was a judicial prosecution before a court of law. The Supreme Court stated the difference between administrative proceedings from criminal prosecution and held that confiscation proceedings before customs authorities do not amount to prosecution within the meaning of Article 20(2).²

The case escalated when proceedings were initiated against the appellant for bringing undeclared gold into India from Jeddah. After customs authorities confiscated the gold under the Sea Customs Act, criminal proceedings were later initiated against him under the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, 1947 (FERA). The appellant argued that the second proceeding violated the constitutional protection against double jeopardy.³

The judgement remains substantial because it determines the difference between administrative adjudication and criminal prosecution. It also strengthens the power of State to pursue parallel administrative and criminal remedies in matters of customs violations and economic offences. However, the judgement has also been criticized for adopting a narrow interpretation of constitutional rights under Article 20(2).

¹ *Maqbool Hussain v. State of Bombay*, A.I.R 1953 S.C. 325.

² *Maqbool Hussain*, A.I.R 1953 S.C. at 329.

³ INDIA CONST. art, 20, cl. 2.

FACTS OF THE CASE

The appellant, Maqbool Hussain, arrived at the Santa Cruz Airport in Bombay from Jeddah carrying gold that had not been acknowledged to customs authorities according to the Indian law.⁴ Customs officials initiated proceedings under Section-167(8) of the Sea Customs Act, 1878 and confiscated the gold on the ground that it was been imported illegally.⁵

Consequently, criminal proceedings were initiated against the appellant under Section 23 of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, 1947 for bringing gold in India, illegally without authorization from the Reserve Bank of India.⁶ The appellant challenged the criminal prosecution on the ground that he had already been punished in confiscation proceedings before the customs authorities and that the second prosecution for the same offence, violated Article 20(2) of the Constitution of India.⁷

The matter subsequently reached the Supreme Court, where the primary issue was the interpretation of the doctrine of double jeopardy under Article 20(2).

ISSUES

The issues before the Supreme Court were:

- Whether proceedings before customs authorities under the Sea Customs Act amount to “prosecution” within the meaning of Article 20(2) of the Constitution.
- Whether confiscation by the customs authorities of the goods amounts to “punishment”.
- Whether a subsequent criminal prosecution under the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act for the same act violates the constitutional protection against double jeopardy.⁸

RULES

Article 20(2) of the Constitution of India states that “No person shall be prosecuted and punished for the same offence twice.”⁹ The constitutional provision includes the common law doctrine of *autrefois convict*, which protects individuals from being punished for the same offence after conviction.

The Sea Customs Act, 1878 enabled customs authorities to confiscate goods imported in violation of customs regulations.¹⁰ Similarly, Section 23 of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, 1947 states penalties for unauthorized import of gold and violations relating to foreign exchange regulation.¹¹

⁴ Maqbool Hussain, A.I.R. 1953 S.C. at 326.

⁵ Sea Customs Act, No. 8 of 1878, § 167(8) (India).

⁶ Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, No. 7 of 1947, § 23 (India).

⁷ Maqbool Hussain, A.I.R. 1953 S.C. at 327.

⁸ INDIA CONST. art. 20, cl.2.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Sea Customs Act, No. 8 of 1878, § 167(8) (India).

¹¹ Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, No. 7 of 1947, § 23 (India).

The state argued that proceedings before customs authorities were administrative proceedings and not criminal prosecutions. Therefore, confiscation of gold cannot be treated as punishment imposed by a judicial tribunal. Consequently, the prosecution under FERA did not violate Article 20(2).

JUDGEMENT

The Supreme Court dismissed the appeal and held that Article 20(2) had not been violated.¹² The Court stated that the protection against double jeopardy applies only when a person has been punished before a court of law or judicial tribunal. Proceedings held before customs authorities were administrative in nature and not judicial prosecutions.¹³

The court further held that confiscation of goods by customs authorities under the Sea Customs Act does not amount to punishment imposed after criminal prosecution. Therefore, the prosecution under the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act was constitutionally valid.¹⁴

Justice Bhagwati, speaking on behalf of the Court, stated that customs authorities merely exercise executive and administrative powers for enforcing customs regulations and do not function as criminal courts.¹⁵ Since the previous proceeding had lack of essential characteristics of criminal prosecution, the bar under Article 20(2) cannot apply.

The judgement established that the constitutional protection against double jeopardy applies only where both prosecution and punishment occur through judicial proceedings before a competent court.¹⁶

ANALYSIS

The judgement in *Maqbool Hussain* is one of the earliest constitutional interpretations of Article 20(2) and has had a long-lasting impact on the Indian administrative and criminal jurisprudence. The court determined and adopted a narrow interpretation of the doctrine of double jeopardy by limiting its application only to judicial proceedings before the court of law.¹⁷

The most significant aspect of the judgement is the difference drawn between administrative adjudication and criminal prosecution. The court held that customs authorities perform executive and regulatory functions rather than judicial functions. Therefore, proceedings before such authorities cannot be treated as prosecution in the constitutional sense.¹⁸ The difference later became important in cases of taxation, customs law, disciplinary proceedings, and regulatory adjudication.

However, the judgement has also faced criticism from constitutional scholars. Critics state that confiscation proceedings may practically be considered as punishment irrespective of

¹² *Maqbool Hussain*, A.I.R. 1953 S.C. at 328.

¹³ *Id.* at 329.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 330.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.* at 331.

¹⁷ M.P. Jain, *Indian Constitutional Law* 1387-89 (8th ed. 2018)

¹⁸ *Maqbool Hussain*, A.I.R. 1953 S.C. at 329.

whether they are imposed by administrative authorities or courts.¹⁹ The impact on the individual remains disciplinary in nature, and therefore a strict difference based solely upon institutional classification may damage the broader purpose of Article 20(2).

Another criticism of the judgement is that it prioritizes technical interpretation over substantive fairness. The constitutional guarantee against double jeopardy exists to protect individuals from being punished for the same offence twice. By allowing criminal prosecution to coexist, the judgement arguably weakens the protection under Article 20(2).

Despite such criticism, the judgement significantly strengthened the power of the State in handling with economic offences and customs violations. During the early years after independence, India was trying to regulate foreign exchange and prevent smuggling activities. This decision allowed the government to use administrative and criminal mechanisms for enforcement.

The principles laid down in *Maqbool Hussain* were reaffirmed in later cases such as *S.A. Venkataraman v. Union of India*²⁰ and *Thomas Dana v. State of Punjab*²¹ where the Supreme Court reaffirmed that departmental or customs proceedings do not amount to prosecution under Article 20(2).

Even today, the judgment continues to influence Indian jurisprudence related to taxation laws, customs regulations, and economic offences. Modern regulatory systems frequently involve administrative, parallel civil and criminal proceedings, and the reasoning adopted in *Maqbool Hussain* continues to provide constitutional support for such enforcement laws.

CONCLUSION

The judgment in *Maqbool Hussain v. State of Bombay* remains a landmark authority on the constitutional doctrine of double jeopardy under Article 20(2). The Supreme Court stated that the constitutional ban applies only where a person has been prosecuted and punished before a judicial tribunal. By distinguishing administrative proceedings from criminal prosecutions, the Court enabled the State to pursue parallel administrative and criminal remedies in cases of customs and economic offences.

Although the judgement gave power to the regulatory enforcement and administrative efficiency, it also narrowed the scope of constitutional safeguard available to individuals under Article 20(2). The decision shows the tension between effective governance and protection of individual rights within constitutional law.

Even after several decades, *Maqbool Hussain* continues to remain an authoritative precedent in Indian constitutional and administrative jurisprudence.

¹⁹ V.N. Shukla, *Constitution of India* 456-58 (13th ed. 2017).

²⁰ *S.A. Venkataraman v. Union of India*, A.I.R. 1954 S.C. 375, 378.

²¹ *Thomas Dana v. State of Punjab*, A.I.R.1959 S.C.375, 379.