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BAJWA & ORS.

v.

STATE OF U.P.

March 6, 1973

[A. ALAGIRISWAMI, I. D. DUA AND C. A. VAIDIALINGAM, JJ.]

B

Practice—Criminal Law—Appeal against acquittal—Appreciation of evidence by High Court—Approach of Supreme Court in further appeal—Faction cases—Precautions against implication of innocent persons.

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In dealing with appeals against acquittals the High Court has to bear in mind the presumption of innocence in favour of the accused person and cannot lose sight the fact that the said presumption is strengthened by the order of acquittal passed in his favour by the trial court, and so, the fact that the accused person is entitled to the benefit of a reasonable doubt must always be present in the mind of the High Court when it deals with the merits of the case. But, however circumspect and cautious the approach of the High Court may be in dealing with such appeals, it undoubtedly is entitled to reach its own conclusions upon the evidence adduced by the prosecution in respect of the guilt or innocence of the accused. The observations in the various decisions prescribing a cautious approach, on the part of the High Court, in dealing with appeals against acquittals, do not cut down, limit or qualify its statutory power under s. 423(a) Cr.P.C., which is co-extensive with that under cl. (b). It is not necessary that the High Court must hold that the trial Court's finding was perverse before reversing it. [581 A-D, F-H]

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This Court, on appeal from a judgment of conviction, after setting aside an order of acquittal, would examine the evidence only for seeing that the High Court has approached the question properly and applied the principles correctly. Once it is found that the High Court has applied correct principles in dealing with appeals against acquittals then this Court would not ordinarily go further into the evidence and weigh it for itself to substitute its own opinion for that of the High Court merely as to its sufficiency to support the conclusions arrived at by the High Court. It will do so only if there is some serious, infirmity leading to grave injustice. In case the High Court's judgment suggests that the correct principles were not kept in view then it would be open to this Court to examine the entire evidence for the purpose of assuring that justice does not fail [581 D-F]

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In the present case, in the judgment of the High Court there is no reference to the decisions of the Privy Council or of this Court laying down the principles which the appellate court is expected to keep in view when dealing with appeals against acquittal, but the judgment clearly shows that it went into all the aspects on which the prosecution evidence could be criticised and concluded that the evidence was fully trustworthy and that the medical evidence, though it might be shaky, did not throw any doubt on the trustworthiness of the prosecution witnesses as to the time, place, and circumstances in which the deceased was killed. The appreciation of the evidence by the High Court is unexceptionable and there is no question of any possibility of a reasonable doubt on the conclusions about the time and place of occurrence and the manner in which the deceased met his death. [584 A-H]

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But in cases like the present, where there are party factions, there is a tendency to include the innocent with the guilty and it is extremely difficult for the Court to guard against such a danger. The only real safeguard against the risk of condemning the innocent with the guilty lies in insisting on acceptable evidence which in some measure implicates such accused and satisfies the conscience of the court. [585 G-H]

In the instant case, the eye witnesses have named all the appellants and the approver has even named those acquitted by the High Court. But it would be safe only to convict those who are stated to have taken an active part and about whose identity there can be no reasonable doubt. [586 A-C]

Bhubaneshwar Mandal v. The State of Bihar, A.I.R. 1973 S.C. 399, *Sheo Swarup v. King Emperor*, I.L.R. 56 All. 645 (P.C.); *Sarwan Singh v. State of Rajasthan*, [1961] 3 S.C.R. 120, *State of U. P. v. Saman Dass*, A.I.R. 1972 S.C. 677, *Khedu Mahton v. State of Bihar*, A.I.R. 1971 S.C. 66, *Kanu Ambu Vish v. State of Maharashtra*, A.I.R. 1971 S.C. 2256, *Harbans Singh v. State of Punjab*, [1962] Supp 1 S.C.R. 104, *Shivji Guru Mohite v. State of Maharashtra*, A.I.R. 1973 S.C. 55, *M. G. Agarwal v. State of Maharashtra*, [1963] 2 S.C.R. 405, *Nur Mohammad v. Emperor*, A.I.R. 1945 P.C. 151, *Gopinath Gangaram v. State of Maharashtra*, Cri. A. 99 of 1969 decided on October 15, 1969, *Kashmira Singh v. State of M.P.* 1952 S.C.R. 526 and *Bhaban Sahu v. The King*, 76 I.R. 147, referred to.

CRIMINAL APPELLATE JURISDICTION : Criminal Appeal No. 189 of 1969.

Appeal by special leave from the judgment and order dated October 31, 1968 of the Allahabad High Court in Government Criminal Appeal No. 771 of 1965.

R. K. Garg and *S. C. Agarwala*, for the appellant.

D. P. Uniyal and *O. P. Rana*, for the respondent.

The Judgment of the Court was delivered by

DUA, J.—The ten appellants have appealed to this Court by special leave under Art. 136 of the Constitution from the judgment and order of the High Court of Judicature at Allahabad dated October 31, 1968 allowing the appeal of the State of U. P. from the judgment and order of the Temporary Sessions Judge, Hamirpur dated January 15, 1965 acquitting all the 15 accused persons, including the appellants, of the charges under ss. 148 302/149 and 201, I.P.C. During the pendency of the State appeal in the High Court against the order of acquittal, Chandrapal Singh, accused no. 1 (in the trial court), died on September 30, 1967 with the result that appeal against him abated on his death. The appellants were, however, held liable to be convicted under ss. 302/149, 201/149 and 148, I.P.C. Against the remaining accused persons the order of acquittal was affirmed. Under ss. 302/149, I.P.C. each of the appellants was sentenced to imprison-

A ment for life and under ss. 301/149, I.P.C. sentence of two years' rigorous imprisonment was imposed on each one of them. They were also sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment each under s. 148, I.P.C. All the sentences were directed to be concurrent.

B According to the prosecution Pannalal and Gulzarilal, appellants nos. 7 and 8 are brothers: so are Achche Lal, Ramdhar and Bansi, appellants 4 to 6. Gurwa, appellant no. 3 is the first cousin of Bansi : Ramdayal, appellant no. 10 is also Bansi's cousin. Bajwa, appellant no. 1 too is related to Bansi: he is the son of Ramsahai who turned an approver and was examined as a
C prosecution witness. It is alleged that all the appellants, along with the other persons arrayed as accused in the trial court, belong to one party and there was some litigation under s. 107, Cr.P.C. between most of the accused persons on the one side and the deceased Ramratan and men of his party on the other. During the course of proceedings under s. 107, Cr. P.C. it appears that under
D pressure of Ramdayal, Achche Lal and Ramdhar on unwilling Ramratan, a compromise was signed in those proceedings but as there was no genuine change of heart amongst the rival parties the Station Officer of the Police Station did not agree to drop the proceedings. There was also another proceeding under s. 107, Cr. P.C. in which Gulzarilal, Pannalal, Gurwa and Ramgopal had been
E bound down. It is also alleged that on the murder of one Munni Banin, Chandrapal Singh, Gulzarilal, Pannalal, Banshi, Ramgopal and Gurwa were prosecuted and Ramratan, deceased, conducted the case for the prosecution. There was thus no love lost between the two factions. On August 16, 1963 at about 5.30 p.m. Shiv-
F ratan (P.W. 1) Jagroop Singh (P.W. 2) Maheshwar Din (P.W. 3), Sugar Singh and deceased Ramratan were proceeding to the house of one Sheoraj Singh for attending a recital of ALHA. On their way while proceeding from the direction of Korionwali Gali, they entered Banshiwali Lane. There they noticed accused Bansi and Gulzarilal standing in front of the door of Bansi's Gurwahi Bakhari. As soon as Shivratan (P.W. 1) and his companions turned into the Banshiwali Khor for going to Sheoraj Singh's house,
G Gulzarilal asked them to stop. Bansi is also said to have shouted "kill them". Thereupon Chandrapal Singh fired his gun hitting Ramratan, deceased, as a result of which the latter died at the spot. The ten appellants were said to be present in the company of Chandrapal Singh at the time of the occurrence. Gulzarilal, Pannalal, Bansi and Achche Lal were stated to be armed with
H *pharsa*, Ramdhar, Ramdayal, Gurwa and Ram Gopal had *kulharis* while Bajwa and Tej Singh were carrying *gandasas*. Chandrapal Singh was armed with a gun with which he shot down the deceased Ramratan. Sheoratan (P.W. 1) and his party men

tried to advance towards the dead body of Ramratan but the appellants and Chandrapal Singh rushed at them threatening to kill them as well. Sheoratan Singh and his partymen thereupon ran away towards their village raising an alarm. On their arrival in their own Mohalla Sheoratan Singh and his companions collected about 30 or 40 persons and returned to the place where Ramratan had been shot, dead. There they found that the dead body of Ramratan had been removed. They divided themselves into two groups. One party going towards the house of Sheoratan Singh in search of Ramratan's dead body and the other going towards Bansi's house for the same purpose. Outside the village both the parties met again and continued their search. Climbing over the "Jogi Nala" they noticed the appellants along with Chandrapal Singh going away with the dead body towards "Bari Bhawani". They also noticed that the dead body had been cut into pieces and its dismembered parts were carried in three baskets, one of the partymen carrying the head of the deceased in his hand. The party of Shivratn tried to chase the accused and on coming closer they recognised the persons running away with the different parts of the dead body. Ramgopal was carrying the head of the deceased in his hand whereas Bajwa, Tej Singh and Ramdayal were carrying three baskets. On seeing the party of Shivratn, the appellants are stated to have thrown away various parts of the dead body and escaped. Sheoratan Singh and his companions recovered the trunk but could not find the head and the thighs of the deceased. Picking up the parts of the dead body which they were able to recover, they returned to their village. A report of the occurrence was written out by Sheoratan Singh (P.W. 1) at his house and lodged by him at the police station about 8 miles away at about 12.30 midnight between August 16 and 17, 1963. He had gone there with the village chowkidar and five or ten other persons including Jagdeo Singh who was armed with a gun. The Station Officer not being present in the police station at that time, the report was handed over to the *moharar* Girinder Singh, constable (P.W.7). In that report the names of the ten appellants and Chandrapal Singh were specifically mentioned as the perpetrators of the alleged crime. On his return home P.W. 1 learnt that the head and thighs of the deceased had also since been recovered and kept with the other parts of the dead body. The papers relating to the report lodged with the police were sent to the Station Officer in village Guyari where he happened to be at that time. The said officer reached village Geondi at about 11.00 a.m. on August 17 and found the truncated body of the deceased under a peepal tree and, after preparing the inquest report, he despatched the recovered parts of the body for postmortem examination. At the place where Ramratan was alleged to have been shot down, blood stains were found by the investigating officer on the ground.

- A Blood stained and unstained earth was collected from that spot. He then went to "Gurwahi Bakhari" of Ramsahai where the dead body was suspected to have been dismembered. Blood was discovered inside the "Bakhari". Blood stains were also found on the *chaukat* and door leaves of the said "Bakhari" some bricks lying there were also found to have blood stains on them. There were
- B blood marks as well on the cattle fodder lying in that Bakhari. The investigating officer (P.W.8) took the blood-stained pieces of various articles from the said Bakhari and duly sealed them. The necessary recovery memos were prepared. The investigating officer also found four wads behind the said Bakhari in the vicinity of the place where Ramratan was stated to have been shot dead.
- C Those wads were sealed and the necessary recovery memos prepared. Search was made by the investigating officer (P.W.8) for the alleged miscreants but they were not traceable with the results that proceedings under ss. 87 and 88, Cr. P.C. were taken for the wanted accused. Accused nos. 12 to 15 in the trial court were arrested on August 25, 1963, the remaining accused having surrendered in court on various dates. The postmortem examination was performed on the dead body of Ramratan by Dr. J. S. Panwar, Medical Officer-in-charge of Mahoba on August 18, 1963 at about 9.30 a.m. Only seven different parts of the dead body were available for autopsy. Maggots were found on the injured parts of the dead body and fragments of skin with peeling off in several areas in big patches were also found. The following
- E ante-mortem injuries on the trunk of the dead body were observed by Dr. Panwar :

1. Bruise 6"×5" on the front side of the chest with thick layer of coagulated blood under it.
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2. Two gun shot wounds measuring 3/10"×3/10" on the chest left side 1/2" away from the fourth and fifth ribs. The two wounds are 1/5" apart and one was upon the other. Coagulated blood was present under the skin of those injuries.
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3. 8 gun shot wounds on the back left side, each measuring 4/10"×4/10" scattered in an area of 6½"×5".

H All the accused denied their complicity, Chandrapal Singh pleading *alibi*, claiming that on the morning of August 16, 1963 at about 5 a.m. he had left for village Kharela, where he remained for three or four hours, and in an auction there purchased a buffalo from the cattle pound. From there he went to Bambhari and as he happened to be a history sheeter he informed the village chowkidar of his arrival there at about 4 p.m.

The trial court again summoned Dr. Panwar and examined him as C.W. 1 on October 22, 1964. He had already been examined in the committing court on November 4, 1963. He had, however, not been cross-examined then, though full opportunity had been afforded, because, according to the defence counsel, he could effectively do so only after the examination of the other prosecution witnesses. During the course of his examination in the court of the committing magistrate Dr. Panwar had, after giving full details of the injuries on the person of the deceased as noticed by him and after proving the postmortem report, stated :—

“I cannot say it correctly which of the gunshot wounds was a wound of exit which was the wound of entrance. For this reason I have put these facts inside the bracket. It is my opinion that injury no. 2 is the wound of entry and injury no. 3 is the wound of exit. It might also be that injury no. 2 is the wound of exit and injury no. 3 is the wound of entrance”.

In the trial court his examination-in-chief and cross-examination by the State counsel reads :

“As regards injury nos. 2 and 3 both I had stated in the court of committing magistrate that both of them could be the wounds of exit as well as wounds of entry. As regards wound no. 2 it is more probable to be the wound of entry than exit wound. At the time of post-mortem there was no such data with regard to all these gun wounds except their dimensions from which it could be ascertained as to which were entry wounds and which were exit wounds. These gunshot wounds were inflicted from a distance of more than four feet.

Cross-examined by State counsel :

As regards wound no. 2 I am telling it to be more probable to be entry wound because its dimensions are large and there is no other reason except this. By considering this fact, that there are 8 wounds on the back and two wounds on the chest and that they have been caused from a distance of more than 4 feet, it can also be said that in comparison to the wounds on the chest the wounds on the back have more probability to be entry wounds. No track formed by pellets have been found. It is possible that eight pellets might have entered from the back and two of them might have gone out of the chest and six of them might have fallen on account of the body being out into pieces or they might not have been detected at the time of postmortem.”

- A He was cross-examined on behalf of the defence at great length. It was elicited from him that it was not his practice to write in the postmortem report that the tracks of pellets are not traceable. He could not say whether or not the racks were visible in the present case as he could only remember about the track for about 2 or 4 days after the postmortem, indicating thereby that after such
- B a long time he could not say anything definite from memory. He had tried to find the pellets but none were available. From this he could deduce that no pellets were present in the body. He did not find any hole in the trunk of the dead body on the basis of which it could be said that the pellets had fallen out. He added that if it could be held that no pellets had fallen from the dead
- C body and none were present at the time of postmortem then it could be said with certainty that wounds on the chest were the entry wounds and the wounds at the back the exit wounds. We have stated the broad trend of the doctor's evidence.

- The trial court dealt with the medical evidence and came to the conclusion that there was nothing in the postmortem report to suggest that Dr. Panwar was in any way in doubt at the time of the postmortem. The court refused to accept the doctor's explanation that in the postmortem report he had written the wounds of exit and wounds of entry within brackets because he was doubtful. This conclusion was based on the ground that this doubt was not expressly stated in the postmortem report. On this reasoning
- D the trial court felt that the medical evidence instead of supporting the prosecution case, established that the prosecution version of Ramratan Singh having been shot at from behind was unbelievable. It may here be mentioned that in the trial court an application had been moved by the prosecution for a demonstration to be held by firing cartridges to show dispersal of the pellets. This was allowed
- E and a demonstration held when a shot was fired from a distance of 42½ ft. because, according to the prosecution story, Ramratan Singh, deceased, had been shot at from that distance. The first shot in the demonstration created ten holes in an area of 12"×12"; 9 of them being identical in size while one being a very big hole having an area in size as big as that of anyone of the other nine holes. Another cartridge was fired which created 8 holes in an
- F area of 9"×9". According to the defence the cartridges supplied by the prosecution for this demonstration were very likely not authentic. The court then commented upon the result of this demonstration and also referred to some observations in Modi's Textbook on Medical Jurisprudence and Toxicology and came to the conclusion that the dispersal of the pellets suggests that the deceased had been shot at from close range from the front and
- G not from behind from a distance of 42½ ft. The court then proceeded to discuss the prosecution evidence and expressed the view that as the original postmortem report suggested the wounds in
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the chest being the entry wounds, the prosecution tried to make out a case of the deceased having been fired at from the front. Later on, when it transpired that perhaps the wounds at the back were more likely to be considered as the entry wounds, the place of occurrence was also changed from the entrance of Korion Wali Gali to Banshi Wali lane and instead of deposing that Ramratan Singh had been shot at from the front the prosecution witnesses started deposing in court that he was shot at from behind. This inference was drawn by comparing statements of P.Ws 2 and 3 under s. 161, Cr. P.C. (Exs. Kha 7 and Kha 9) and the deposition of the witnesses in court. The trial court also expressed doubts about the evidence of the investigating officer that he had found some drops of blood at the site when he inspected it the day following the alleged occurrence and indeed considered this statement to be totally incorrect. In the opinion of the trial court it was just a matter of chance that the party of the accused persons had met Ramratan Singh and there could thus be no question of their having formed an unlawful assembly and having waited in front of Bansi's house for killing Ramratan Singh, deceased. The motive of the accused for the murder was not accepted by the trial court and it was observed that it was the court which did not accept the compromise in the proceedings under s. 107, Cr. P.C. between the party of the accused and that of the deceased. Lastly the court felt that the deceased Ramratan Singh having himself been a man of bad character the possibility of someone else killing him could not be ruled out. Chandrapal Singh's plea of *alibi* was also accepted as according to the trial court the entry about his visit to village Barwah could not be held to be untrustworthy. The trial court in a brief discussion of the evidence of P.Ws 1, 2 and 3, the eye witnesses, considered their statements to be unacceptable, being the statements of interested witnesses. The testimony of Ramsahai (P.W. 4) the approver was also considered to be unworthy of credence and it was observed that he had not implicated himself in the offence. The story of the blood having been washed by the ladies from the house was also not believed by the trial court. In these circumstances the trial court did not place any reliance on the testimony of, what it described, the "so-called approver". On this view all the accused persons were acquitted. We have dealt with the trial court's view at some length because on behalf of the appellant the principal argument urged was that the trial court's judgment was quite reasonable and that the High Court was in serious error in law in reversing it on its own appreciation of the evidence and material on the record.

On appeal to the High Court by the State, a division Bench closely went into the evidence. On scrutiny of the testimony of Dr. Panwar that court came to the conclusion that his evidence left the question as to whether the wounds on the chest or the

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A wounds on the back were the wounds of entry in a state of un-
certainty. In its opinion the doctor had oscillated in his deposi-
tion so many times that it was impossible to draw any definite
conclusion contrary to the evidence of the eye witnesses on the
basis of his testimony. The High Court felt on the appreciation
of the medical evidence that there were several explanations of
B the pellets being in the body and not traced by the doctor during
the postmortem. The pellets after they enter the human body
often take a very erratic course on account of their being deflected
by coming into contact with the bones and indeed according to
the High Court the doctor himself had admitted that it was not
unlikely that eight pellets entered the body through the back and
two of them came out of the chest, the remaining six having either
C fallen out of the body, because of its having been cut up or having
not been traced by him (the doctor) at the time of postmortem
examination. The High Court also took notice of the fact that
the maggots were found by the doctor, to be crawling on frag-
ments of the body and skin was peeling off in several places in
D big patches, with the result that there was a possibility of the
maggots having themselves played a part in bringing about the
change in the dimensions of the injuries. It further felt that there
was no hard and fast rule that the wounds of entry must necessarily
be smaller in size than the wounds of exit. After considering all
the relevant aspects the court felt that the dimensions of the in-
juries on the chest as compared to the wounds on the back were
E insufficient to justify the inference drawn by the trial court that
the shots had been fired from the front thereby discrediting the
testimony of the eye-witnesses with any degree of certainty. The
gun having not been recovered the court was not able to come
to any conclusion whether the cartridge fired was a factory manu-
factured one or refilled. On a full survey of the entire medical
F evidence and the other material on the record the High Court
did not find it possible to reject the evidence of the eye-witnesses
on account of its being "allegedly inconsistent with the shaky
medical evidence". The High Court went into the oral evidence
with great care and after fully considering it held that evidence
to be acceptable. It also observed that the trial court had un-
necessary importance to the question of motive on the part of
G someone else for the murder. The evidence made it clear that
there were a numbr of proceedings between the deceased Ramratan
Singh and members of his family on the one side and Chandrapal
Singh and members of his party on the other. The mere fact that
there was a possibility of some other persons also having a motive
in murdering Ramratan Singh was not a cogent reason by itself
H to doubt the testimony of the eye-witnesses which the High Court
found to have been corroborated by other unimpeachable evidence
on the record. Chandrapal Singh's plea of *alibi* which had been

upheld by the trial court was also carefully gone into by the High Court and rejected as unsupported by cogent evidence. In any event on the assumption that Chandrapal Singh had actually taken part in an auction held on August 16, 1963 at Kharela as pleaded, his presence there till 3 p.m. was held unacceptable. The State appeal was accordingly allowed in part but Chandrapal Singh having died in the meanwhile on September 30, 1967 the appeal against him was said to have abated. The appellants were convicted and sentenced, as already noticed, but the finding of acquittal against the other accused persons was not interfered with.

In this Court Shri R. K. Garg, learned counsel for the appellants addressed elaborate arguments in criticising the judgment of the High Court. The principal challenge was concentrated on the contention that the medical evidence in this case contradicted the version of the occurrence as given by the witnesses professing to have seen it. It was strenuously argued that even if two views were possible on this point the High Court was in serious error in reversing the judgment of acquittal recorded by the trial court into one of conviction, ignoring the law as uniformly enunciated in this Court in a number of decisions, the latest decision in which legal position has again been reiterated being *Bhubneshwar Mandal vs. The State of Bihar*⁽¹⁾. Emphasis was laid on paras 3 and 4 of that judgment where reference has been made to the decisions in *Sheo Swarup vs. King Emperor*⁽²⁾, *Sanwat Singh vs. State of Rajasthan*⁽³⁾ and *State of U.P. vs. Samman Dass*⁽⁴⁾ and relevant passages from those judgments reproduced. Shri Garg submitted that in the case before us also the High Court had failed to realise the limitation within which it had to function and the caution it had to observe in considering the appeal against the appellants' acquittal. The counsel also cited *Khedu Mahton vs. State of Bihar*⁽⁵⁾ and *Kanu Ambu Vish vs. State of Maharashtra*⁽⁶⁾ in which the guidelines for the High Courts in dealing with appeals against acquittals are laid down. Shri Garg in this connection took us through the judgments of the trial court and the High Court for the purpose of showing that the trial court's judgment proceeded on a possible view of the evidence on the record and, therefore, the High Court acted contrary to the observations made by this Court in the above decisions. We were also taken through the relevant evidence on the record by the appellants' learned counsel in his attempt to substantiate his contention.

Shri Garg then referred to certain passages from Modi's *Medical Jurisprudence and Toxicology* for sustaining the trial court's view that the testimony of the prosecution witnesses did not fit in with

(1) A.I.R. 1973 S.C. 399.

(3) [1961] 3 S.C.R. 120.

(5) A.I.R. 1971 S.C. 66.

(2) I.L.R. 56 All. 645 (P.C.)

(4) A.I.R. 1972 S.C. 677.

(6) A.I.R. 1971 S.C. 2256.

A the doctor's evidence. In this connection also we were taken through the evidence of the doctor at some length.

* Now first dealing with the scope of appeal by the State against acquittal, as this was the main basis of attack against the judgment of the High Court, the position in our view is well-settled and there is hardly any scope for controversy, notwithstanding the use of different languages in various decisions of this Court. The passages from the three authoritative judicial pronouncements of this Court quoted in *Bhubneshwar Mandal* (supra) clearly illustrate the basic line of approach the High Court is expected to adopt while dealing with the State appeals from the judgments of acquittal. This view has been consistently and uniformly taken ever since the basic decision of the Privy Council in *Sheo Swarup* (supra), laying down the broad guidelines of approach to be adopted by the High Courts. We would, however, like to emphasise that this Court on appeal from judgments of conviction after setting aside orders of acquittal would examine evidence only for seeing that the High Court has approached the question properly and applied the principles correctly. Once it is found that the High Court has applied correct principles in dealing with an appeal against acquittal then this Court would not ordinarily go further into the evidence and weigh it for itself to substitute its own opinion for that of the High Court merely as to its sufficiency to support the conclusions arrived at by the High Court. It would do so only if there is some serious infirmity leading to grave injustice [see *Harbans Singh vs. State of Punjab*⁽¹⁾ and *Shivji Guru Mohite vs. State of Maharashtra*⁽²⁾]. In case, however, the High Court's judgment suggests that the correct principles were not kept in view then it would be open to this Court to examine the entire evidence for the purpose of assuring that justice does not fail. We consider it necessary to make it clear that the observations in various decisions prescribing a cautious approach on the part of High Courts in dealing with appeals against acquittals do not cut down, limit or qualify its statutory power under s. 423(a), Cr. P.C. which is co-extensive with that under cl. (b). Those observations merely indicate the approach of the High Court leaving it free to reach its own conclusions upon the evidence. It is not necessary that the High Court must hold that the trial court's finding was perverse before reversing it. As some of those observations have very frequently been considered (wrongly in our opinion) to lay down in law a rigid limit on the power of the High Court while hearing an appeal against acquittal, we consider it necessary to refer to the decision of this Court in *M. G. Agarwal vs. State of Maharashtra*⁽³⁾ where Gajendragadkar J. (as he then was) speaking for a bench of five Judges, after referring to various

(1) [1962] Supp 1 S.C.R. 104.

(3) [1963] 2 S.C.R. 405.

(2) A.I.R. 1973 S.C. 55

decisions including *Sheo Swarup* (supra) and *Nur Mohammad v. Emperor*(¹), laid down the correct principle as follows :

“Section 423(1) prescribes the powers of the appellate Court in disposing of appeals preferred before it and clauses (a) and (b) deal with appeals against acquittals and appeals against convictions respectively. There is no doubt that the power conferred by clause (a) which deals with an appeal against an order of acquittal is as wide as the power conferred by clause (b) which deals with an appeal against an order of conviction, and so, it is obvious that the High Court’s powers in dealing with criminal appeals are equally wide whether the appeal in question is one against acquittal or against conviction. That is one aspect of the question. The other aspect of the question centres round the approach which the High Court adopts in dealing with appeals against orders of acquittal. In dealing with such appeals, the High Court naturally bears in mind the presumption of innocence in favour of an accused person and cannot lose sight of the fact that the said presumption is strengthened by the order of acquittal passed in his favour by the trial Court and so, the fact that the accused person is entitled to the benefit of a reasonable doubt will always be present in the mind of the High Court when it deals with the merits of the case. But the true legal position is that however circumspect and cautious the approach of the High Court may be in dealing with appeals against acquittals, it is undoubtedly entitled to reach its own conclusions upon the evidence adduced by the prosecution in respect of the guilt or innocence of the accused. This position has been clarified by the Privy Council in *Sheo Swarup vs. The King Emperor and Nur Mohammad vs. Emperor*”.

The learned Judge then referred to some of the decisions of this Court in which various expressions were used for the purpose of expressing the cautious approach of the High Court and observed that those expressions were not intended and should not be read to have intended to introduce an additional condition in cl. (a) of s. 423(1) of the Code. All that the said observations are intended to emphasise is that the approach of the High Court in dealing with an appeal against acquittal ought to be cautious because as Lord Russell observed in *Sheo Swarup* (supra) the presumption of innocence in favour of the accused “is not certainly weakened by the fact that he has been acquitted at his trial”. After stating the principle the learned Judge dealt with the case before the Court thus :

(1) A.I.R. 1945 P.C. 151.

A “Therefore, the question which we have to ask our-
 selves in the present appeals is whether on the material
 produced by the prosecution, the High Court was justi-
 fied in reaching the conclusion that the prosecution case
 against the appellants had been proved beyond a reason-
 able doubt and that the contrary view taken by the trial
 B court was erroneous. In answering this question, we
 would no doubt consider the salient and broad features
 of the evidence in order to appreciate the grievance made
 by the appellants against the conclusions of the High
 Court. But under Art. 136 we would ordinarily be
 reluctant to interfere with the finding of fact recorded by
 the High Court particularly where the said findings are
 C based on appreciation of oral evidence.”

It is in this background that we have to consider the arguments
 advanced at the bar on the material on the record.

Now the High Court has in this case examined the entire evi-
 dence at great length. In its opinion the trial court was wrong
 D in disbelieving the prosecution evidence led to establish the re-
 covery of blood stains from the scene of occurrence and from
 Gurwahi Bakhari of Ramsahai. On appreciating the evidence for
 itself the High Court felt that the evidence fully established the
 recovery of blood stains from the places as deposed by the prose-
 cution evidence with the result that the murder should have appro-
 E priately been considered to have taken place at the spot alleged.
 The High Court, then dealt with the medical evidence and after
 a thorough scrutiny of that evidence did not feel convinced that
 the testimony of the eye-witnesses could be discarded on the basis
 of the testimony of Dr. Panwar. The medical evidence was consid-
 ered by the High Court to be shaky and it came to the consid-
 ered conclusion that the evidence of the eye-witnesses could not
 F be rejected on this ground. The testimony of the eye-witnesses
 was also closely scrutinised by the High Court and after consider-
 ing the relevant aspects canvassed before it this evidence was
 considered reliable and trustworthy. The fact that there might
 have been motive on the part of some others also to murder
 Ramratan was considered by the High Court not to be a sufficient
 G reason to doubt the testimony of the eye-witnesses who were cor-
 roborated by “other unimpeachable evidence”, as the High Court
 put it. The defence evidence was also scrutinised and held unim-
 pressive and unacceptable; it was not so persuasive as to induce
 the High Court to discard the prosecution evidence which had
 proved beyond reasonable doubt that, on the date, time and place
 H alleged by it, Ramratan had been murdered by accused no. 1 and
 his associates in prosecution of the common object of the unlawful
 assembly of which they were members and that subsequent to the
 murder they cut up the dead body and removed it from the scene

of the murder with the object of screening themselves from legal punishment.

No doubt in the judgment of the High Court we do not find any reference to the decisions in which the Privy Council and this Court have laid down the principle which the appellate court is expected to keep in view when dealing with an appeal against the order of acquittal. But the judgment of the High Court clearly shows that it went into all aspects on which the prosecution evidence could be criticised and concluded that the evidence was fully trustworthy and that the medical evidence, shaky as it is, did not throw any doubt on the trustworthiness of the prosecution witnesses as to the place, time and circumstances in which Ramratan was killed. This, in our view, should be sufficient to justify interference by the High Court with the judgment of the trial court. This Court had in *Gopinath Gangaram vs. State of Maharashtra*⁽¹⁾ adopted a similar approach. However, in the peculiar circumstances of this case, we have also ourselves considered the evidence to which our attention was drawn and in our opinion the trial court seems to have attached undue importance to some of the observations of Dr. Panwar in the witness box, extracted in cross-examination in the trial court long after the postmortem, without correctly and fully appreciating the overall effect of his evidence considered as a whole along with the post-mortem report, which had been prepared contemporaneously with the autopsy. Without examining any ballistic expert and without even knowing what kind of fire arm had actually been used for the murder in question, the trial court had also, in our view, erroneously discredited the testimony of the eye-witnesses on the basis of the medical evidence. The evidence of the eye-witnesses was not fully and correctly evaluated : it was discredited on the basis of somewhat unsatisfactory testimony of the doctor which on proper judicial appraisal does not contradict the version of the prosecution witnesses as to the manner in which the deceased was shot at. The evidence of *alibi* of Chandrapal Singh was also wrongly considered to prove his absence from the place of occurrence at the time of the crime. Similarly the testimony of the investigating officer was doubted for reasons which appear to us unsubstantial and insupportable. The High Court on the other hand paid closer attention to the evidence and material on the record, scrutinised it with greater care and held the testimony of the eye-witnesses to be acceptable with respect to the time, place and manner of the murder of the deceased. This evidence, in our view, was not rendered untrustworthy because of its inconsistency with the medical evidence which was also scrutinised by the High Court with greater care and anxiety. The appraisal of

(1) CrI. A. 99 of 1969 decided on October 15, 1969.

A the evidence of the investigating officer by the High Court carries greater conviction, being more rational and objective.

B The trial court was also in error in observing that the words in the F.I.R. "Muka Pa Kar Ram Ratan Ko Mar Dala" merely suggest that the "accused had got a chance to kill him and had killed him on account of that chance" and that the said statement negatives the prosecution case of the accused having assembled for the purpose of killing Ramratan. This view is wholly misconceived and is based on a misreading of the first information report read as a whole. The words quoted have been taken out of their context. Considered along with the preceding sentence
C in the F.I.R. these words merely suggest that the accused found an opportunity of killing Ramratan on this occasion against whom they had been nursing a grudge since a long time. The context by no means suggests that the accused persons had not assembled for the purpose of killing Ramratan if he happened to come their way.

D Shri Garg, while commenting on the appreciation of evidence by the High Court, criticised its conclusions on various circumstantial facts by submitting that these facts were not established beyond reasonable doubt. The evidence with regard to the manner in which the party of Ramratan, deceased, and the prosecution witnesses, proceeded from Korionwali Gali was specifically criticised and it was contended that unless each one of those circumstances could be held proved beyond reasonable doubt the accused should be given the benefit of doubt and the prosecution case should fail on that ground alone. The submission is not easy to accept. The appreciation of the evidence by the High Court, in our view, is unexceptionable and there is no question of any possibility of reasonable doubt on the conclusions about the time and place of the occurrence and the manner in which the deceased met with his death. In our view, therefore, there is hardly any cogent ground for holding that the conclusions of the High Court in this respect are in any way tainted with any infirmity which would justify their reversal.

G But this does not conclude the appeal. The evidence through which we have been taken by the learned counsel at the bar has been examined by us with care and anxiety because in cases like the present where there are party factions, as often observed in authoritative decisions there is a tendency to include the innocent with the guilty and it is extremely difficult for the Court to guard against such a danger. The only real safeguard against the risk of condemning the innocent with the guilty lies in insisting on acceptable evidence which in some measure implicates such
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accused and satisfies the conscience of the court. (see *Kashmira Singh vs. State of M.P.*⁽¹⁾ and *Bhaban Sahu vs. The King*⁽²⁾). In the case in hand, no doubt, the prosecution witnesses claiming to have seen the occurrence have named all the appellants and the approver has even named those acquitted by the High Court, but in our view it would be safe only to convict those who are stated to have taken active part and about whose identity there can be no reasonable doubt. Gulzarilal and Bansi exhorted his companions as a result of which Chandrapal Singh shot at Ramratan, deceased. They could be considered to be guilty beyond any reasonable doubt. Ramratan was seen to be carrying the head of the deceased when the prosecution witnesses chased the party of the accused. He too can thus be considered to be guilty without giving rise to any doubt about his complicity. So far as the others are concerned we feel that they are entitled to benefit of doubt as it is difficult to come to a positive conclusion about their identity amongst those who actually either assaulted the deceased or dismembered and carried away his dead body. There is, however, no doubt in our mind that some out of those to whom the benefit of doubt is given were clearly amongst the party of the assailants and actively took part in the occurrence though their identity cannot be safely fixed without the risk of implicating the possible innocent. In the final result, therefore, the appeal of Gulzarilal, Bansi and Ramgopal is dismissed but that of the others is allowed and they are acquitted.

V.P.S.

(1) [1952] S.C.R. 526.

(2) 76 I.A. 147.