BEFORE SHRI SUNIL KUMAR SINGH, SOLE ARBITRATOR

Nafed House, Siddhartha Enclave, Ashram Chowk, Ring Road, New Delhi-110014 Ref: ARBT/ELECTION DISPUTE/FISHCOPFED/2020-21

In the matter of Arbitration between

- Shri Ram Das Sandhe, Vice-President, FISHCOPFED, ground floor, Cement Chawl, Madhavrao, Rokde Street, Mnadvi Koliwada, Masjid Bunder (W), Mumbai- 400009.
- 2. Shri Rishikesh Kashyap, Board Member FISCOPFED, first floor, Meen Bhawan, West Boring Canal Road Patna -800023, Bihar.
- Shri Jayanti Bhai Kewat, Shree Khalasi Matsya Udyog Sahakari Mandi Ltd., Timla Street, Rander, Surat -395005.
- 4. Shri P.N. Janardhan, Governing Body Member, NFDB, Hyderabad, office- 10-5-804/1, Sai Nagar, Rio-Point, North Lallaguda, Secunderabad- 500017, Telangana.

..... Claimants

- Shri T Prashad Rao Dora, President, FISHCOPFED, 7, Sarita Vihar Industrial Area, New Delhi-110076.
- Shri Joseph Baxla, Returning Officer, FISHCOPFED, at Assistant Registrar, Office of the Registrar Cooperative Societies. Govt. of N.C.T. Of Delhi, Parliament Street, New Delhi-110001
- Members of the Board of Directors of FISHCOPFED through the Managing Director, FISHCOPFED, 7, Sarita Vihar Industrial Area, New Delhi-110076.
- 4. Shri B.K. Mishra, MD FISHCOPFED, 7, Sarita Vihar Industrial Area, New Delhi-110076.

Respondents

AWARD (23.07.2021)

- 1. The captioned proceeding pertains to a dispute amongst parties in reference to the election to the Board of Directors and office bearers of National Federation of Fishers Cooperatives Ltd. (hereinafter refer to as 'FISHCOPFED') as referred for Arbitration by Ld. Central Registrar of Cooperative Societies (hereinafter refer to as 'CRCS'). The Ld. CRCS vide order dated 25.02.2021 while exercising its powers under Section 84 (4) of the Multi-State Cooperative Societies Act of 2002 (hereinafter refer to as 'MSCS' Act) appointed this Arbitral Tribunal to settle the dispute of election of Board of Directors and office bearers of FISHCOPFED in the period of 60 days. Since, the proceeding could not completed within 60 days due to various reasons as mentioned in various orders of this Tribunal, the Ld. CRCS on the request of this Tribunal further extended the period of Arbitration upto 25.07.2021 vide order dated 07.06.2021.
- 2. Upon constitution of this Arbitral Tribunal, a Notice of Arbitration dated 05.03.2021 was issued to all concerned parties with directions to file their claims/counter-claims alongwith relevant supporting documentary evidence to substantiate their claims /counter-claims to the election dispute. Parties to the proceeding filed their respective submissions in response to the said Notice dated 05.03.2021 and same were taken on record.

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- By way of a response dated 15.03.2021 submitted by the Claimants in response to Arbitration Notice dated 05.03.2021 and has made following major contentions amongst others:
 - a. Shri T Prashad Rao Dora who presided the meeting of BoD held on 30.09.2020 had forfeited his right to act as a President of FISHCOPFED in view of the fact that he had been elected as the President of FISHCOPFED at the relevant time as he was the President Odisha State Fishermen's Cooperative Ltd. (FISHFED) and the term of Management Committee of FISHFED expired on 06.07.2020. As such, Shri T Prashad Rao Dora should have recused himself from attending the meeting of BoD on 30.09.2020 for his being contest officio but he kept everybody in dark and conducted and presided the Board Meeting dated 30.09.2020 of FISHCOPFED.
 - b. The Claimants relied upon bye-law of 28(viii) of FISHCOPFED which stipulates as, "A member of the Board shall cease to hold office, if he ceases to hold the office of Chairman, Chief Executive or Administrator of by whatever name called, as the case may be, in the society which he represents on general body of FISHCOPFED".
 - c. Since, the President Shri T Prashad Rao Dora initiated the process of election without even the matter being discussed in the Board Meeting; hence, this makes the entire process as bad in law.
 - d. The delegation of the Board of Directors authorising the President to take necessary action as required to conduct the election was bad in law as statutory functions cannot be delegated.
 - e. The entire process of election was bad in law as Board of Directors of FISHCOPFED failed to decide the date, time and place for convening the General Body Meeting for the conduct of election.
 - The Returning Officer who should have been appointed by the Board was appointed by the President.
 - g. The Returning Officer rejected the contentions of Claimants regarding cancelation of their candidatures without any valid reason.
 - h. The election to new office bearers and Board of Directors of FISHCOPFED were not conducted as per rules and results were declared in a completely arbitrary and discriminatory manner by rejecting the candidature of claimants by Returning Officer in an illegal manner and accepting the candidature of some others, who had finally been declared winners, in a biased fashion.
 - i. The Returning Officer declared the result post haste, despite a stay from Ld. CRCS.
- 4. By way of response dated 15.03.2021 filed by Ld. Counsel for Claimants, he claimed to represent 15 persons, however, as per the complaint of Claimants forwarded by Ld. CRCS to this Arbitral Tribunal, there are 4 complainants, viz, Shri Ram Das Sandhe, VC, FISHCOPFED, Shri Rishikesh Kashyap, Board Member of FISHCOPFED, Shri Jayanti Bai Kevat, representative of Shree Khalasi Matsya Udhyog Sahakari Mandi Ltd., Surat and

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Shri P N Janardhan, Governing Body Member of NFDB, Hyderabad. As such, 4 persons as named in the complaint submitted to Ld. CRCS are considered as Claimants/Complainants in the present proceedings and Ld. Counsel for Claimants has submitted that he had no objection for the same.

- The FISHCOPFED has filed its submissions dated 19.03.2021 in response to the Arbitration Notice dated 05.03.2021 and has made following major contentions amongst others:
 - a. FISHCOPFED through its President and MD requested Ld. CRCS for the appointment of Returning Officer to conduct the election of the BoD and office bearers of FISHCOPFED as the term of its existing Board was expiring on 08.01.2020.
 - The Ld. CRCS vide letter dated 07.12.2020 to the MD FISHCOPFED directing to appoint Returning Officer through Registrar of Cooperative Societies, Delhi.
 - c. Upon confirmation of Returning Officer by Registrar of Cooperative Societies, Delhi on 29.12.2020, a notification with copy to Ld. CRCS was issued by the Returning Officer.
 - d. The Returning Officer issued an office order dated 04.01.2021 calling upon all the stakeholders to nominate their authorised nominee/representative/delegate to file nomination to contest for the post of Director.
 - e. On 10.02.2021, the Returning Officer published the list of eligible voters and disqualified members containing the name of Claimants.
 - f. The election was completed and went un-opposed on 25.02.2021 but election was suspended on account of order dated 25.02.2021 by Ld. CRCS and the dispute was referred to the Arbitration before this Tribunal.
 - g. The suspension of the election by Ld. CRCS was modified by Hon'ble Delhi High Court vide order dated 03.03.2021 in WP (C) 2878/2021.
 - h. The election process started as per the directions of Ld. CRCS and approval of the Board. Had there been any irregularity in the election, Ld. CRCS should have given at least a single opportunity to RO to explain.
 - The nominations filed by Claimants in the present petition were rejected by the RO for not being proper and appropriate in terms of the bye-laws of FISHCOPFED and provisions of MSCS Act.
 - In AGM held on 27.09.2019, it was unanimously decided that Board Members will continue for 5 years.
 - k. Upon initiation of election process, joint complaints have no basis as on 22.02.2021 at an advance stage of the election process.
 - l. The extension of the term of MD was legal as per Board Resolution dated 30.06.2020.
 - m. Pursuant to the 97th Amendment to the Constitution, the term of Managing Committee/Board etc of the Cooperative Society is 5 years from the date of last

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- election. Hence, Rule 21 (iv) of the Bye-Laws to be applicable which is in consonance to the 97^{th} Constitutional Amendment.
- The election process started as per the Guidelines of Ld. CRCS while following all the norms. The name of RO was recommended by ARCS Delhi.
- o. No irregularity on the part of RO has been cited in any of the complaints.
- The Returning Officer published the list of eligible voters and disqualified members on 10.02.2021.
- q. 0n 25.02.2021, the election process was completed.
- 6. The Returning Officer has filed his interim submissions dated 15.03.2021 in response to the Arbitration Notice dated 05.03.2021 and has made following major contentions amongst others:
 - He was assigned the task of Returning Officer of FISHCOPDED vide letter dated 30.12.2020.
 - b. The election process continued with the issue of notification to all member societies on 04.01.2021 to nominate delegates with fresh resolution.
 - c. The nominations were received upto 27.01.2021 and on 10.02.2021, the list of eligible voters and disqualified members containing the name of Petitioners/Claimants was published.
 - d. All the disqualified members were given a chance to represent their respective cases on 19.02.2020 in person and only few persons turned up, but their justifications were not found satisfactory to include their names in the voter list.
 - All the formalities were completed and at, no point of time, Ld. CRCS had reprimanded him for any irregularity.
 - f. The Election went an opposed on 25.02.2021 and 11 candidates from 6 Zones were declared elected unopposed on 25.02.2021 at 4:30 P.M. Certificates were issued to the 11 newly elected Board of Directors same day.
 - g. Representatives were notified to attend the Board Meeting on 26.02.2021 at 10:30 A.M. to elect the office bearers as per the Rule 7 of MSCS Act.
 - h. The election was suspended on account of direction by Ld. CRCS vide order dated 25.02.2021. However, the said suspension was modified by Hon'ble High Court of Delhi vide order dated 03.03.2021.
 - The nominations of 4 complainants in the present matter were rejected for not being proper. Once the election process is started it cannot be stopped.

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- Had there been any issue regarding the irregularity of the election, the concerned authority should have reprimanded RO between 22.02.2021 to 24.02.2021.
- k. Election of President and Vice President was over but results have not been announced and same were kept in a sealed cover with MD Incharge of the Federation.
- The Respondent FISHCOPFED has also submitted para-wise reply to the complaints made to Ld. CRCS by the Claimants.
- 8. The order dated 25.02.2021 passed by Ld. CRCS was challenged in the Hon'ble High Court of Delhi vide WP (C) 2878/2021 and vide order dated 03.03.2021, the Hon'ble High Court directed as under:
 - "c. The direction of the Registrar in the impugned order that the election be suspended until the completion of the arbitration proceedings is modified, and the parties are at liberty to approach the Arbitrator under Section 17 of the 1996 Act for appropriate interim measures.
 - d. The Arbitrator will consider any application made under Section 17 in this regard expeditiously, and endeavour to dispose of the same within a period of three weeks from the date of filing, after giving all other parties an opportunity to submit their replies and to be heard.
 - e. Subject to any orders passed by the Arbitrator in this regard, status quo regarding the process of elections will be maintained. The contention of Ms. Birbal is that the election to the Board of Directors has been concluded, but the elections of certain office bearers, including the President and the Vice President, remain pending. Status quo in this regard will be maintained until the Arbitrator decides the interim applications filed by any of the parties."
- No parties to the proceeding filed any application under Section 17 of 1996 Act for interim measures as directed by the Hon'ble High Court.
- 10. It was brought to the notice of this tribunal that the Respondent FISHCOPFED further filed an OMP (I) of 4/2021 in the Hon'ble High Court of Delhi under Section 9 of the Arbitration and Conciliation Act of 1996 praying for setting aside of the Order dated 12.03.2021 passed by Ld. CRCS. Vide judgment dated 21.05.2021, the Hon'ble High Court set aside directions issued by Ld. CRCS in paragraph 11 of order dated 12.03.2021. The para 11 of the impugned order dated 12.03.2021 states as, "11. In the meantime, the President and Incharge MD are barred from acting on behalf of the federation, discharging any function of the federation or from participating in any Board meeting or proceedings of the federation. The Vice Chairman of the Board officiate as the Chair person and nominee of the Central Govt. shall act as Incharge MD till the adjudication of dispute by the Arbitrator."
- 11. In order to settle the issue of authorised representation of FISHCOPFED, this tribunal relied on proviso to Section 45 (5) of MSCS Act, 2002, the directions of Hon'ble Delhi High Court vide order dated 03.03.2021 in WP(C) 2878/2021 to maintain the status quo and judgement dated 21.05.2021 in OMP (I) -04/2021, setting aside Para 11 of the Order dated 12.03.2021 of Ld. CRCS.

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12. Opportunities were given to parties to file proposed issues to be decided in the matter but none of the parties filed proposed issues. Accordingly, on the basis of pleadings filed by parties, this Tribunal framed following sole issue with the consent of parties:

ISSUE: Whether the Election of Board of Directors of FISHCOPFED has been initiated and conducted in terms of the bye-laws of FISHCOPFED, read with relevant provisions of MSCS Act of 2002?

- 13. Pursuant to the framing Issue as above, FISHCOPFED through Shri BK Mishra and Shri Joseph Baxla, the Returning Officer filed their respective affidavits by way of evidence and same were taken on record. The Ld. Counsel for Claimants Shri Tushar R Mohanti filed a compilation dated 13.07.2021 duly supported by his affidavit and same was taken on record.
- 14. Since, Shri B K Mishra had informed and submitted on 12.07.2021 that he ceased to be the MD of FISHCOPFED and handed over the charge to next Sr. Director Shri S.S. Mahhour on 30.06.2021 in the afternoon, the FISHCOPFED was directed to nominate and authorise concerned person to represent FISHCOPFED. However, Shri Mishra along with Shri SS Mahhour presented themselves on 14.07.2021 and submitted that Shri Mishra continues to remain MD, FISHCOPFED, therefore, be considered to argue the matter on behalf of FISHCOPFED. Without going into the merit of his continuance after stepping down as reported on 12.07.2021, this Tribunal with the consent of parties allowed Mr. Mishra along with Mr. Mahhour to participate in the proceedings.
- 15. Since, pursuant to the completion of the pleadings and framing of the Issue, none of the parties in the matter desire to cross-examine each other, the matter was fixed for final arguments which were heard on 12.07.2021 & 14.07.2021 and the matter was reserved for judgment on 14.07.2021 upon completion of arguments by parties.
- 16. During the course of arguments, the Ld. Counsel for Claimants drew the attention of this Tribunal to letter dated 10.02.2021 of the Returning Officer and submitted that the time schedule as given in Para 6 of the said letter was not followed by Returning Officer during the election process. He further submitted that as per notice dated 10.02.2021 issued by the Returning Officer, the last date and time of filing of nomination was 12:30 hours on 25.02.2021, scrutiny of the nomination were to be done at 14:00 hours on 25.02.2021 and the list of eligible candidates was to be notified at 15:00 hours of 25.02.2021 and the election was to be conducted, if required, on 26.02.2021. However, it was claimed by RO that election results were declared at 13:10 hours on 25.02.2021 which shows post haste, as such, malafide and making the entire process bad in law. He further submitted that there is no evidence that members were served notices by Registered/speed post as stated in the notice, making the entire process bad in law. He further submitted that the entire election process is also bad in law as date and place of election was not decided by the Board. The Ld. Counsel for Claimants further submitted while relying upon bye-law of 28(viii) of FISHCOPFED that Shri T Prashad Rao Dora who presided the meeting of BoD held on 30.09.2020 had forfeited his right to act as the President of FISHCOPFED in view of the fact that he had been elected as the President of FISHCOPFED at the relevant time as he was the President Odisha State Fishermen's Cooperative Ltd. (FISHFED) and the term of Management Committee of FISHFED expired on 06.07.2020. As such, Shri T Prashad Rao Dora should have recused himself from attending the meeting of BoD on 30.09.2020 for his being contest officio but he kept everybody in dark and conducted and presided the Board Meeting dated 30.09.2020 of FISHCOPFED.

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- 17. The Ld. Counsel for Claimants has filed written submission affirming his oral arguments advanced in the matter. He has further contended that prescribed procedure regarding the conduct of election to the Board of FISHCOPFED was not followed. He further submitted that statutory powers of the Board cannot be delegated, hence, authorising the President to initiate the process of election would be illegal and non-est in law. The meeting dated 30.09.2020 of the BoD is not legally tenable as same was called and headed by Shri Dora who was not eligible to act as the President at that time as he forfeited his right to act as the President of FISHCOPFED. He further contended that Shri T Prashad Rao Dora filed his nomination in the subject election from some society as Khurda, not from FISHFED, hence Shri Dora admits that he is no longer remained the President of FISHFED and consequently President of FISHCOPFED. He further contended that the members of FISHCOPFED did not receive notice issued by the RO on 04.01.2021 and 10.02.2021. There was an undue haste in declaring the results of election. The Ld. Counsel for Claimants further relied upon the judgment of Hon'ble Supreme Court of India in the matter of Noida Entrepreneurs Association vs. Noida and Others, 2011 (6) SCC 508 wherein the Hon'ble Supreme Court held in para 30 that in case an authority proceeds in undue haste, the court may draw an adverse inference from such conduct. He further contended that the haste in declaring the election result was orchestrated to circumvent the stay order issued by Ld. CRCS.
- 18. In reply to the submission of Ld. Counsel for Claimants regarding fixing of date and place of election by the BoD, Shri BK Mishra submitted that due to covid-19 situation, BoD could not give date, time and place of election. Regarding the incompetence of Shri T Prashad Dora to preside and conduct meeting dated 30.09.2020, Shri Mishra submitted that though there was no as such incompetence on the part of Shri Dora to preside the meeting of BoD of FISHCOPFED held on 30.09.2020 as the office bearers are elected for 5 years, Shri Dora did not inform FISHCOPFED about his incompetence, if any, till the issue cropped up and brought to notice by the Complainant. Other Directors also did not take up the issue.
- 19. The Returning Officer while submitting his arguments in reply to contentions of Ld. Counsel for Claimants admitted technical lacuna in the notification regarding the General Body Meeting. However, he submitted that schedule of election was duly complied and publication was affixed on the notice board. The Returning Officer submitted that he came to know about Ld. CRCS order dated 25.02.2021 at 4:30 P.M. and office of FISHCOPFED did not inform him about the said order. The Returning Officer filed written submission on 19.07.2021 and contended that no arguments on the related issues made in the complaint by the complainants to Ld. CRCS were advanced. During the whole process of arbitration, the matter was discussed either on the mismanagement and manipulative acts of Shri B K Mishra as MD and Shri T Prashad Rao Dora as President of FISHCOPFED or on the declared schedule of election made on 25.02.2021. He further submitted that the contentions of Ld. Counsel for Complainants/claimants on the election schedule were not considered by Hon'ble High Court in its order dated 03.03.2021. The Returning Officer further reiterated his contentions regarding conduct of the election as mentioned in his interim reply followed by affidavit of evidence.

FINDINGS

- 20. This Tribunal perused and examined the pleadings filed by the parties and heard rival submissions of the parties to the election dispute. The findings of this Tribunal on the sole Issue to be decided in the matter whether the election of BoD of FISHCOPFED was initiated and conducted in terms of the bye-laws of FISHCOPFED r/w. relevant provisions of MSCS Act of 2002 are as under:
 - a. As evident from the records and pleadings of parties, Shri T. Prashad Rao Dora was President of Odisha State Fishermen's Cooperative Ltd. (FISHFED), thus eligible as delegate to General Body of FISHCOPFED. He was elected to the Board of Directors of FISHCOPFED and later as its President. However, due to expiry of his term as President of FISHFED 06.07.2020, he became ineligible to continue as the President of FISHCOPFED as per Rule 28 (viii) of the bye-laws of FISHCOPFED which stipulates as, "A member of the Board shall cease to hold office, if he ceases to hold the office of Chairman, Chief Executive or Administrator of by whatever name called, as the case may be, in the society which he represents on general body of FISHCOPFED". Since his continuance as the President of FISHCOPFED was non-est beyond 06.07.2020, convening, conducting and presiding the Board meeting dated 30.09.2020 by Shri T Prashad Rao Dora wherein the decision regarding election to the BoD and office bearers was taken cannot be held legally tenable. As such, the contention of Ld. Counsel for the Claimants that Shri Dora was incompetent to preside the Board meeting dated 30.09.2020 is established. The contentions of FISHCOPFED that their AGM on 27.09.2019 unanimously deciding that Board Members would continue for 5 years does not have any co-relation with Rule 28(viii)of Bye-Laws of FISHCOPFED, defining the continuance as Board member of FISHCOPFED. Further, Rule 21(iv) of Bye-Laws of FISHCOPFED deals with general term of elected members of the Board not exceeding 5 years and does not over-ride Rule28(viii) of Bye-laws of FISHCOFED.
 - As such, the election to the Board of FISHCOPFED and office bearers which was held on the basis of decision taken on 30.09.2020 cannot legally be held valid.
 - c. The Returning Officer failed to give a satisfactory answer to the objection of Claimants that the time schedule given in election notice dated 10.02.2021 was strictly followed.
 - d. The contention of Returning Officer in his written submission to the effect that no arguments on the related issues made in the complaint viz. mismanagement and manipulative acts of MD and President of FISHCOPFED were heard in the arbitration proceedings, is not tenable as this Tribunal has adjudicated related matters concerning the election dispute right from initiation of election process to the developments reported up to 25.02.2021.
 - e. As stipulated in the clause 1 of the Schedule that BoD in office shall meet at least 60 clear days in advance of the date of expiration of its terms and by resolution determine the date, time and place for convening a General Body meeting for the conduct of election of its successor Board. But in the instant case, the BoD of

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FISHCOPFED held meeting on 30.09.2020 deciding to conduct the election without determining the date, time and place for convening a General Body meeting. In the said meeting of the Board, the authority of conducting the election was delegated upon the President of the FISHCOPFED, Shri Dora. As has been established at Para 20(a) above, the presiding officer, i.e. Shri Dora, of the meeting of BoD held on 30.09.2020 was functus officio. Hence, the powers of the Board cannot be delegated to the President who was functus officio at the time of such delegation. Even, assuming that the President was not functus officio at the time of such delegation of powers by the BoD for conduct of election, such delegations should have been exercised by the President himself in consonance with Clause 1 of the above Schedule which clearly mandates for determination of the date, time and place for convening a General Body meeting for the conduct of the election of its successor Board, at least 60 clear days in advance. No records to substantiate the compliance of this requirement have been produced by the Respondent FISHCOPFED.

- f. The contentions of Claimants disputing the dispatch of notices issued by the Returning Officer have been found incorrect as the postal proof of dispatch has been submitted by the Respondents...
- g. Ld. Counsel for Claimants has pointed out that the Returning Officer exercised undue haste in declaring the result of election by pre-poning the same without adhering to the Schedule announced by him vide election notice dated 10.02.2021 and same was carried out with ill-intention to frustrate the Order dated 25.02.2021 passed by the Ld. CRCS staying the election process and appointing this tribunal to settle the dispute. As transpires from the election notice dated 10.02.2021, the result of the election was to be declared on 26.02.2021 in the General Body Meeting but the Returning Officer declared the result of election on 25.02.2021 in undue haste without waiting for General Body Meeting scheduled for 26.02.2021 for the said purpose. It has even been submitted by the RO that the election of President and Vice-President has been conducted and kept in sealed cover with the MD I/C of FISHCOPFED. It is surprising as to when the meeting of newly Board of Directors took place to elect the President and Vice-President, which was to follow after the announcement of the Election result in the General Body convened on 26.02.2021. As such, the contention of the Claimants that the Returning Office failed to adhere to the schedule announced by him and exercised an undue haste in declaring the result of election by pre-poning the same, is established, thus, casting doubt on the fairness of election process.

AWARD

- 21. In view of the above, it is established beyond doubt that due legal process in terms of Bye-Laws of FISHCOPED read with relevant provisions of MSCS Act was not followed in conduct of the election to the Board of FISHCOPED and its Office bearers and accordingly the following Award is being passed:
 - a. The election of the Board of Directors of FISHCOPFED and its office bearers as conducted and declared on 25.02.2021 is adjudged as null and void.
 - The fresh election to the Board of FISHCOPFED and its office bearers may be conducted by Ld. CRCS in terms of Rule 21(v) of bye-laws of FISHCOPFED and Section 45(6) of the MSCS Act.
 - c. Parties to the proceedings shall bear their respective costs incurred in the Arbitration proceedings.

THE AWARD IS ANNOUNCED TODAY ON 23RD DAY OF JULY, 2021 AND A SIGNED COPY OF THE AWARD IS BEING SENT TO THE PARTIES/COUNSEL BY E-MAIL/SPEED-POST. A COPY OF THIS AWARD IS BEING FORWARDED TO THE OFFICE OF LD. CRCS FOR INFORMATION AND FURTHER NECESSARY ACTION.

(SUNTE KUMAR SINGH) or Sole Arbitrator