Party Autonomy In Arbitration: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: The author aims to examine critically the parties' autonomy in Arbitration. Further, to see that whether the Arbitration law gives absolute autonomy to the parties or gives some restrictions on that. To what extent the party autonomy principle is acceptable. The party autonomy principle given in the Arbitration law is not absolute and which is controlled by the important mandatory provisions. However, the party autonomy principle is somewhere violating the principle of natural justice and public policy as well which are the fundamentals of the law of the land. The author has formulated the following questions and has tried to find out the answer- Whether the parties may agree on everything for Arbitration. What is the autonomy available to the parties during Arbitration proceedings? Whether there is any restriction on such autonomy or it is absolute. Whether principle of natural justice apply to the Arbitration proceeding. Whether giving party autonomy is against the public policy of the

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Introduction

Almost all countries having their Arbitration law of their own have recognized the party autonomy principle. The author would like to begin his research paper with brief history of Arbitration law in India and impact of UNCITRAL Model Law. 1985 to the Arbitration law and also the important provisions regarding Party Autonomy. In India, Arbitration has a long history as a method of dispute resolution. In ancient time, the people used to submit their disputes to a group of wise persons of their community i.e. called the panchayat and their decision was having a binding effect. The present law of arbitration is the effect of Bengal Regulations in 1772 passed during British period. The Bengal Regulation provided that the court to refer to the arbitration the matters concerning accounts, breach of contract and partnership deed with the consent of the parties. Till 1996, there were three statutes governing the law of arbitration in India-

- The Indian Arbitration Act, 1940,
- The Arbitration (Protocol and Convention) Act, 1937 and
- The Foreign Awards (Regulation and Enforcement) Act, 1961

By repealing all the above laws the Government of India enacted The Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996 to modernize the arbitration law and to implement the UNCITRAL Model Law.

Party autonomy is a backbone and a corner stone of the Arbitration Law. It is a central point of Arbitration proceeding. The Arbitration is chosen and structured as a dispute resolution by the agreement of the parties for the procedure and authority. If the

parties to the dispute are failed to select Arbitration, their dispute would be settled by the court. The reason to select Arbitration rather than litigation is that Arbitration provides speedy justice with confidentiality. In constituting the Arbitration, the parties agree on the form of Arbitration institution. procedure to be followed by the Arbitration tribunal, place of Arbitration and the governing law etc. In other words we can say that the parties are free to choose the arbitrators, venue, law, procedure and almost everything regarding the resolution of the dispute. Thus the parties structure the Arbitration by their choice and as agreed by themselves. Arbitration is a private court which is presided over by private judge. The judgment of the arbitrator is known as the award which is binding on both the parties. Arbitration is a formation of agreement between the parties, therefore party autonomy is soul and heart of all Arbitration contract. However, this autonomy is not absolute and it is subjected to public policy and applicable law of the land. Further, the intervention of court is also necessary where there is biasness on part of the arbitrator, misconduct of the proceedings etc.

The CPC recognizes the Arbitration as a mode of dispute resolution¹. The judiciary also felt need of the alternative dispute resolution because of large number of pending cases before court, minimum number of judges and delays². The Arbitration permits the parties to adopt their own procedure during the Arbitration and does not allow the court to

¹ Section 89 CPC, 1908

² Salem Bar Association TN v. UOI, AIR 2003 SC 189

interfere except in few cases. It is recognized that the court shall refer the disputes to arbitration, when an action is brought by one party to the court in a matter which is the subject of an arbitration agreement, if another party so requests³. Party autonomy is the base of Arbitration but it does not mean that it is absolute. The Model Law as well as the national laws prescribes the provision in their Arbitration law which limits the autonomy of the parties for the betterment of Arbitration proceedings. Though, party autonomy is the base of the Arbitration agreement, it can be criticized on many grounds such as public policy, natural justice etc. Further, what we can say regarding party autonomy is power makes a man corrupt and absolute power makes a man absolutely.

1. **Rbitration And Party Autonomy** 1.1. The concept of Arbitration

The Arbitration can be defined as a "mechanism for the resolution of disputes which take place usually pursuant to an agreement between two or more parties, under which parties agree to be bound by the decision to be given by the arbitrator according to law or, if so agreed, other considerations, after a fair hearing such decision being enforceable by law"⁴.

Further the Arbitration can also be defined as "the process by which a dispute or difference between two or more parties as to their mutual legal rights and liabilities is referred to and determined judicially and with binding effect by the application of law by one or more persons (arbitral tribunal) instead of by the court of law⁵."

It can be inferred from the above definitions that Arbitration is a method of dispute resolution through the arbitral tribunal between the parties and it is alternate to the litigation. Further, we can add that it is cost effective, speedy justice and less technical.

The notion Party Autonomy

The notion Party Autonomy can be defined as "freedom of the parties to construct their contractual relationship in the way they see fit⁶"

Further, it can also be defined as "self arrangement of legal relations by individuals according to their respective will7". Now we can say that it is all depend upon the parties themselves to

³Article 8 of UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration, 1985 and Section 8 of Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996

arrange their Arbitration agreement freely without any control. This principle has been recognized under UNCITRAL model law 8 and hence adopted by member states.

Party autonomy is a central point of Arbitration. The Arbitration is selected through an agreement of the parties. If the parties are failed to select the Arbitration then their contractual disputes would be settled by the court of law. The parties prefer the Arbitration because of confidentiality, speedy justice and sometimes the matter is very technical then it is to be decided by the expert arbitrator. In forming the Arbitration, the parties may agree on the ad hoc Arbitration or institutional Arbitration or self appointed arbitrators, the Arbitration procedure, governing law place of Arbitration etc. Thus the parties have a full right to form the Arbitration as they agreed. Furthermore, the principle of separability supports the party autonomy as Arbitration agreement survives even though the contract was declared invalid 9. The UNCITRAL Model Law 10, Arbitration Law of UK 11 and Arbitration Law of India 12 also recognize this principle.

Everybody has freedom to make a private contract. In selection of governing law in the contract the party autonomy was recognized. The principle of freedom to make a contract is closely related with the party autonomy. The party autonomy is affected by the regulatory laws if the private contract is regulated by laws of the land. The party autonomy in Arbitration has been developed and expanded since around 1980s13.

The author thinks that there are some problems that may arise out of Arbitration agreement. Generally the domestic bargains for Arbitration do not arise from the free process of market force. In many cases, Arbitration agreement reflects the position of the party who is economically dominant¹⁴. If the agreement is entered into the court has a very

⁹ Egbedi Tamara, An Analysis of The Effect of Public Policy on Autonomy International Arbitration. in (http://www.pdfebooksdownloads.com/Party-Autonomy-in--Arbitration.html)

10 Article 16(1) of UNCITRAL model Law

⁴ Bernstein: Handbook of Arbitration Practice, 3rd ed. (1998) p. 13.

⁵ Halsbury's Laws of England, (London, United Kingdom: Butterworths), 4th Ed. 1991, Para 601, 332.

⁶ Abdulhay, S., Corruption in International Trade and Commercial Arbitration, (London, United Kingdom: Kluwer Law International 2004) 159.

⁷ Flume, Allgemeiner Teil des BGB, Vol. II, 4th ed. 1992 § 1/1; BVerfGE 72, 155, 170

⁸ Supra note 4

Section 7 of Arbitration Act, 1996 (UK) states "Unless otherwise agreed by the parties, an arbitration agreement which forms or was intended to form part of another agreement (whether or not in writing) shall not be regarded as invalid, non-existent or ineffective because that other agreement is invalid, or did not come into existence or has become ineffective, and it shall for that purpose be treated as a distinct agreement."

² Section 16(1) of the Arbitration and Conciliation Act,1996

¹³ OKUMA Kazutake, Professor of Law, Seinan Gakuin University Law School Arbitration and Party Autonomy.

¹⁴ http://legalsutra.org/966/uncitral-model-law-and-indian-law/ last visited on 04.05.2011

limited power in respect of giving effect to that agreement and that the court turns a blind eye to their unilateral character. These are happening, generally, domestic consumer Arbitration and employment contract where the other party is always at the dominant position and that can abuse it. The damages is at least less. In such a situation, maintaining power balance and equality of the parties before Arbitration is the requirement as the economically dominant parties will otherwise make the rules in their support and further there are very limited ground to challenge the an Arbitration agreement and hence it may become unfair to the economically dominant party because there is no provision for appeal against the order¹⁵.

1.3. Principle of Party Autonomy under UNCITRAL Model Law and Arbitration Law

Under the UNCIRAL model law the party autonomy principle was adopted without any opposition. This is confirmed by the words stated in UNCIRAL model law that "Subject to the provisions of this law, the parties are free to agree on the procedure to be followed by the arbitral tribunal in conducting the proceedings¹⁶" and that "in matters governed by this law, no court shall intervene except where so provided in this law, ¹⁷" these provisions are making confirm the principle of party autonomy.

Awards made under the direction of the parties when contrary to the public policy of the state, would be refused recognition and enforcement. This poses to be a limit to party autonomy as parties' freedom is restricted.

Sections 18 and 19 of the Arbitration and Conciliation Act. 1996 corresponds to Articles 18 and 19 of UNCIRAL Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration, 1985 makes provision which extends the autonomy of the parties. Article 19 of UNCIRAL model law provides that parties are free to adopt their own procedure in Arbitration and also provides that the Arbitral tribunal is not bound to follow the procedure enshrined in the CPC, 1908 and Indian of Evidence Act, 1872.it is because the Arbitration emerges from the private contract between the parties and therefore the parties themselves determine the procedures to be followed in the arbitral proceedings. Thus we can say that this power of the parties to create procedures for their own remains uncontrolled by outsider. But section 18 of ACA, 1996 which corresponds to Article 18 of the UNCITRAL Model Law on International commercial Arbitration limits the powers of the parties to create their own procedure. This provides that all parties shall be treated equally and they shall be given full opportunity to present their case completely. This is the fundamental principles of fairness. Thus the tribunal must follow this fairness principle in their work and thereby limit the power of the parties to create the rules for the Arbitration.

Furthermore, the contents of the Arbitration agreement has a big impact on the parties' right because such an agreement eliminates the parties' right to recourse the judiciary to te great extent¹⁸.

Under Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996 which corresponds the UNCITRAL Model Law also, there are many provisions which give the party autonomy. These are as follows

The parties are free to agree on-

- Procedure for appointing arbitrator¹⁹
- Procedure for challenging arbitrator²⁰
- Procedure to be followed by the arbitral tribunal in conducting the proceedings²¹
 - Place of arbitration²²
 - Language to be used in arbitral proceeding²³
 - Number of arbitrators²⁴

Unless the parties have agreed that no reasons are to be given, the arbitral award shall state the reasons upon which it is based²⁵.

The author can criticize the above freedom of the parties on the basis of dominant position of one party on other that in case of determining place of Arbitration, language to be used in arbitral proceeding and number of arbitrator the party who is strong can frame the procedure as he wish and thus he can misuse his dominant position.

Furthermore, there is one provision that party can agree that no reasons to be recorded in the award. This autonomy is against the rule of natural justice i.e. there must be reasoned decision in all cases. The parties shall not be given such freedom because without any reason in the award no one can understand the award properly and hence it is harmful for both the parties. Finally, if the matter principles of natural justice are violated while deciding the case then that award shall be deemed to be passed without jurisdiction and hence award shall be annulled.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Article 19(1) of UNCITRAL Model Law On International Commercial Arbitration, 1985

¹⁷ Ibid, Article 5

¹⁸ http://legalsutra.org/966/uncitral-model-law-and-indian-law/ last visited on 04.05.2011.

¹⁹ Section 11(2) of Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996

²⁰ Ibid section 13

²¹ Ibid section 19(2)

²² Ibid section 20(1)

²³ Ibid section 22(1)

²⁴ Ibid section 10

²⁵ Ibid section 31(3)(a)

If we see Section 33²⁶ of the United Kingdom Arbitration Law which is the mandatory provision to be followed, we find that section 33(1) (b) makes provision that the arbitral tribunal shall adopt such procedures which is suitable to the situation and circumstances of the particular case for avoiding unnecessary delay or expense. Now we can say that to avoid unnecessary delay and expenses the arbitral tribunal can rule on such procedure which perhaps override the parties' agreement. However, this provision is made for the fairness of the parties. This can be done only where there is an agreement on the procedural point.

Furthermore, the Arbitration law of various countries imposes a time limit for declaring an award. But there are other laws such as UNCITRAL Model Law ²⁷, Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996(India)²⁸ and Arbitration Act, 1996(UK)²⁹ which imposes obligation on the arbitrator to act without unnecessary delay. The parties also agreed themselves on a long period of time for submission of memorial. Here, there is conflict of powers between the arbitrator and the parties' agreement. Now the question is that what will prevail? Here the parties' agreement shall be considered by the arbitral tribunal in the light of arbitrator's obligation and duties (to avoid unnecessary delay and expenses).

2. Various Restrictions On Party Autonomy Under Uncitral Model Law And Arbitration Law

It is very settled principle that party autonomy is the corner stone of the Arbitration. The question here is whether this autonomy is absolute and there is no limitation or restriction on them. Now we can say although the parties have a great deal of autonomy in the Arbitration agreement in the manner in which they agree, their autonomy is subject to many restrictions. Under the law there are certain basic principles which the party cannot ignore or violate under any situation. These principles are enumerated

under various provisions of Arbitration law and the UNCITRAL model law as well as the principles of natural justice which are applicable to all judicial and quasi-judicial authorities and tribunals which would also constitute a fair hearing³⁰.

Section 18 of Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996 which corresponds to Article 18 of the UNCITAL model law on International commercial Arbitration. In this section two principles are enshrined. These are as follows

i. Equality before Arbitration

Where the parties entered into an agreement to refer their matter before the Arbitration and they have created their own rule to apply thereon even though they are required to be treated equally otherwise there will be no justice at all. Thus in the Arbitration proceedings there should be bias less conduct on the part of the arbitrator and if the biasness of the arbitrator is proved then the appointment as well as award be annulled. The biasness may occur due to number of circumstances like friendship with other side, pecuniary relief taken from one side or hostility to a party that would affect the equality between the parties.

ii. Opportunity to present case

This is very important requirement of arbitration that each party shall be given full opportunity to present their case completely. If we section 18 and Section 34(2)(b) of the Arbitration and Conciliation Act,1996 we find that if a party was not given proper notice of the arbitral proceeding or otherwise failed to present the case before arbitral tribunal, then the resulting award to be annulled when challenged.

iii. Principles of natural justice

The Arbitration law defines the arbitral tribunal as a sole arbitrator or a panel of arbitrators³¹. The Arbitration tribunal is body being a quasi-judicial authority and hence we can say that the judges should not be appointed as arbitrators³². In India, all judicial as well as administrative authorities are required to follow the principles of natural justice in the proceedings³³. Further in case of D.C. Saxena v. State of Haryana³⁴, it was held by the court that if the statute is silent on the matter, the natural justice principle has to be followed. The principles which

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²⁶ Section 33(1) (b) Arbitration Act, 1996(UK) states "adopt procedures suitable to the circumstances of the particular case, avoiding unnecessary delay or expense, so as to provide a fair means for the resolution of the matters falling to be determined."

²⁷ Article 14(1) states "If an arbitrator becomes de jure or de facto unable to perform his functions or for other reasons fails to act without undue delay, his mandate terminates if he withdraws from his office or if the parties agree on the termination. Otherwise, if a controversy remains concerning any of these grounds, any party may request the court or other authority specified in article 6 to decide on the termination of the mandate, which decision shall be subject to no appeal."

²⁸ Section 14(1) (a) states" The mandate of an arbitrator shall terminate if he becomes de jure or de facto unable to perform his functions or for other reasons fails to act without undue delay.

²⁹ Supra note 14

³⁰ S.K. Agrwal, Arbitration: An option to resolve under Section 89 of CPC, AIR 2003, p. 187

³¹ Section 2(1)(d) of Arbitration and Conciliation Act,1996 and Article 2(b) of UNCITRAL Model Law on International commercial Arbitration, 1985

³² R.S. Bachawat, Law of Arbitration and Conciliation, Nagpur, Wadhwa & Co. 1999, p. 414.

³³ Indu Ramchandra Bharwani v. UOI (1988) 4 SCC 1

³⁴ AIR 1987 SC 1463

constitute the essential norms of Arbitration, they are as follow

- Nemo judex in causa sua, i.e. no man can be a judge in his own cause
- No party shall be condemned unheard, i.e. each party must have opportunity of cross examination of witnesses examined by other side.
- Each party is entitled to know the reasons for the decisions.
- The person who hears the case must decide finally.

If the matter principles of natural justice are violated while deciding the case then that award shall be deemed to be passed without jurisdiction and hence award shall be annulled.

Other Mandatory Provision Under Uncitral Model Law And Arbitration Law

The UNCITRAL Model Law was not intended to grant absolute party autonomy in Arbitration proceedings. It was intended to promote balanced autonomy to the parties with safeguards in the form of mandatory provisions which must be followed. The Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996 as well as the UNCITRAL Model Law make some mandatory provisions which limit the autonomy of parties. These are as follows³⁵

- a) Arbitration agreement shall be in writing³⁶
- b) The parties shall be treated equally and be given full opportunity to present his case³⁷
- c) The exchange of statements of claim and statements of reply between the parties to the arbitration³⁸;
- d) Advance notice of tribunal to be given to the parties and such statement to be communicated to the parties³⁹.

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- e) Assistance of the court by tribunal for getting fair hearing 40 .
- f) The award under Arbitration law is equated with an ordinary award⁴¹
- g) Arbitration award must be in writing and signed by the arbitrator and copy to be delivered to the parties⁴².
 - h) Termination of proceedings⁴³
 - i) Correction and interpretation of award⁴⁴.

Principle Of Public Policy

The Arbitration is based on the party autonomy principle. However, the party autonomy is not protected if it is exercised against the public policy as we can say that the public policy is a good defense to recognize and enforce the arbitral award. Public policy restricts the parties not to legalize immoral and illegal agreements. However, the public policy is interpreted by the judiciary to encourage the party autonomy. The principle of public policy includes different types of social, culture and moral values. It is very much dynamic and it varies with time and place. The principle of public policy limits the autonomy of the parties. It is because the procedure formed by the parties for the resolution of their dispute must not be inconsistent with the public policy. Public policy is the fundamental principle of the country and hence any award which is against it then that award shall not be recognized and enforced.

other party. Also any expert report or evidentiary document on which the arbitral tribunal may rely in making its decision shall be communicated to the parties.

Clause (3) The arbitral award shall state the reasons upon which it is based

Clause (4) The arbitral award shall state its date and the place of arbitration as determined in accordance with section 20 and the award

shall be deemed to have been made at that place.

³⁵ Supra note 12

³⁶ Article 7(2) of Model Law states "The arbitration agreement shall be in writing."

³⁷Ibid Article 18 states "The parties shall be treated with equality and each party shall be given a full opportunity of presenting his case."

³⁸ Section 23(1) of ACA,1996 and Article 23(1) of UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration which state, "Within the period of time agreed upon by the parties or determined by the arbitral tribunal.

the claimant shall state the facts supporting his claim, the points at issue and the relief or remedy sought, and the respondent shall state his defence in respect of these particulars, unless the parties have otherwise agreed as to the required elements of those statements".

³⁹ Section 24(2) and (3) of ACA,1996 and Article 24(2) and (3) of UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial, 1985.

Clause (2), the parties shall be given sufficient advance notice of any hearing and of any meeting of the arbitral tribunal for the purposes of inspection of goods, other property or documents.

Clause (3), all statements, documents or other information supplied to the arbitral tribunal by one party shall be communicated to the

⁴⁰ Section 27 of ACA, 1996 and Article 27 of UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial, 1985 states "The arbitral tribunal, or a party with the approval of the arbitral tribunal, may apply to the Court for assistance in taking evidence."

⁴¹ Section 30(2) of ACA, 1996 and Article 30(2) of UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial, 1985 states "If, during arbitral proceedings, the parties settle the dispute, the arbitral tribunal shall terminate the proceedings and, if requested by the parties and not objected to by the arbitral tribunal, record the settlement in the form of an arbitral award on agreed terms."

⁴² Section 31 of ACA, 1996 and Article 31 of UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial, 1985,

Clause (1) An arbitral award shall be made in writing and shall be signed by the members of the arbitral tribunal.

⁴³ Section 32 of ACA, 1996 and Article 32 of UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial, 1985 state that The arbitral proceedings are terminated by the final award

⁴⁴ Section 33 of ACA provides some time period under which the parties have to go for correction of award etc.

The expression public policy is very vague in nature, however the SC has interpreted "contrary to public policy" when it is against

- The fundamental policy of the country
- Interest of the country
- Morality or justice
- Legal norms

3. Effect Of Public Policy On Party Autonomy

Before we start the effect of public policy on party autonomy we have to know about the public policy first and then the implication of it.

3.1. Public Policy

It is sociological concept which comprises the society's culture, moral, values, belief etc. which is accepted and applied in the society. Public policy is dynamic in nature which varies with time and place. Many almost all countries have accepted it as a fundamental principle of the country and hence any violation of this principle will lead the order or award as null and void. In case of Arbitration proceedings it makes limit on the party autonomy. It is a good ground for challenging the award and then makes the award unenforceable. The Judiciary of different States has interpreted the expression 'public policy' in different way. The public policy is very vague in nature, however the SC of India has interpreted "contrary to public policy" when it is against the fundamental policy of the country, Interest of the country, Morality or justice, Legal norms.

3.2. Judicial interpretation: Party autonomy and public policy

If we see the history of party autonomy, it was not always approved and accepted by the judiciary because they felt that the arbitration which was based on part autonomy is a dangerous for the judiciary regarding their jurisdiction. They were feeling fear that party autonomy will restrict the power of judiciary to intervene to the Arbitration agreement. The judges of many country was not allowing to the parties to choose the law for their own.

In America, the court used to invalidate the Arbitration agreement observing it as encroachment on the judicial power and hence against the public policy. This view was gradually changed when the US Arbitration Law⁴⁵ came into existence. The court then felt the importance of party autonomy and recognized it and further held that the court's role is limited in Arbitration agreement only to ensure that the agreement is enforced according to their terms. But the court held in a case⁴⁶ that the parties to the Arbitration are free to form their Arbitration

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agreement as they think fit but with certain limitations. The court further suggested that one of the limitations is public policy. Where the choice of the parties is against the public policy of the country, it would not be enforced.

In India, the public policy principle is well established. The SC of India in a case⁴⁷ struck down the judgment of the High Court wherein it was held that the arbitrator could not be removed on the ground of bias because of lack of specific provision in the Arbitration agreement. The SC applied the public policy principle and allowed the case and held that any agreement violating the public policy principle shall be declared invalid.

Conclusion

On the basis of above analysis the author comes to the conclusion that since the party autonomy is the base for the Arbitration and it cannot be discarded due to some irregularities in the Arbitration proceedings. However, the Arbitration law makes provision which limit the party autonomy because that provision must be followed anyhow. Further the author has tried to criticize the party autonomy on the basis of principle of natural justice and the public policy principle. The Judiciary of different States has interpreted the expression 'public policy' in different way. The public policy is very vague in nature. however the Supreme Court of India has interpreted "contrary to public policy" when it is against the fundamental policy of the country, Interest of the country, Morality or justice, Legal norms. The author thinks that Arbitration agreement reflects the position of the party who is economically dominant. If the agreement is entered into the court has a very limited power in respect of giving effect to that agreement and that the court turns a blind eve to their unilateral character. These are happening, generally, domestic consumer Arbitration and employment contract where the other party is always at the dominant position and that can abuse it. Finally the author is of the view that there must not be an absolute autonomy to the parties. Though the Arbitration law has given the party autonomy, there are some other provisions which limit that autonomy. We can say that to some extent the party autonomy principle is controlled by the same Arbitration law but sometimes it is uncontrolled without the express provision in the Arbitration law. Finally the author is of the view that there must be some additional provision in the Arbitration law on the basis of principle of natural justice and public policy to control the party autonomy.

⁴⁵ United States Federal Arbitration Act, 1925.

⁴⁶ Mastrobuonu v Shearson Lehman Hutton Inc, 514 US 52, 55 (1995)

 $^{^{\}rm 47}$ Bharat Heavy Electricals v. C.N. Garg, (2000) 3 Arb. L.R. 674

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