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Case Comment: Lenovo v RPD Workstations and the Safeguarding of Well-Known Marks

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian Trademark Law is one of the bases in the line of defence to protect brand identity and ensure fair competition to save consumers from confusion. This law, governed by the Trademarks Act passed in 1999, provides businesses with exclusive rights over their registered trademarks and a platform for third parties to challenge wrongful registrations.

Trademark Infringement can be proven when an entity uses a trademark that is precisely the same as one already registered and well-established without the authorisation of the legal owner. The competitor frequently gains an unfair advantage because the consumer links such a trademark to a well-known good or service. The established business that is being defrauded may also suffer as a result. Injunctions, restrictions limiting usage, and damages awarded to the legitimate brand owner are among the legal remedies for such trademark infringement. It is in the greater public interest to eradicate such violations to prevent misunderstandings and offer quality-assured goods and services susceptible to deception.

A significant ruling in the matter of *Lenovo (Singapore) Pte. Ltd. v RPD Workstations Private Limited*¹ was rendered by the Madras High Court on 03 December 2024, because of its confusing resemblance to its popular THINK family of marks. Lenovo is attempting to revoke the trademark THINBOOK, which was registered by RPD Workstations Private Limited.² The verdict strengthens the court's role in stopping trademark misrepresentation and improving trademark protection in India.

In this case, we see an application of trademark rights under Indian law. On appeal, Lenovo, a world-renowned laptop manufacturer, appealed to the Madras High Court for cancellation of the trademark THINBOOK registered under Class 9 by the first Respondent. Lenovo argued that the THINBOOK mark was deceptively similar to its well-established THINK Family of Marks, such as THINKPAD and THINKBOOK, in such a way as to induce confusion in the customer's minds. Lenovo argued that it had used the THINK trademarks since 1992 in India and since 1920 worldwide to ensure brand reputation.

FACTS OF THE CASE

Under Section 57 of the Trademarks Act 1999³, an appeal was filed before the Madras High Court in the case of *Lenovo (Singapore) Pte. Ltd. v RPD Workstations (P) Ltd.* By *Lenovo (Singapore) Pte. Ltd.*⁴ The petitioner in this concerned case asked the court to grant the following reliefs to correct, rescind, and remove the entry about the contested mark THINBOOK, bearing number 3558396 in Class 9, made in the first respondent's name from the Register of Trademarks; additionally, to pay the costs of the proceedings.

In this case, the petitioner is one of the world's top laptop manufacturers. The THINK Family of Marks, unique to the petitioner and not shared by anybody else, is for the petitioner's laptops, notebooks, iPads, etc. Several trademarks have been registered in the petitioner's favour for their THINK Family of Marks, as disclosed in the petition. The THINK Family of

¹ *LENOVO (Singapore) Pte. Ltd. v RPD Workstations Private Limited and Anr* 2024 SCCOnLine Mad 7336

² Bhavpreet Soni, 'Lenovo vs RPD Workstations: Key Insights from the Trademark Dispute Case in India' (*Soni's Vision*, 05 April 2025) <<https://www.sonisvision.in/blogs/lenovo-singapore-pte-ltd-v-rpd-workstations-private-limited>> accessed 24 May 2025

³ Trade Marks Act 1999, s 57

⁴ Apoorva, '[THINKBOOK v THINBOOK] Lenovo's THINK family of marks declared distinctive; Madras HC directs removal of infringing 'THINBOOK' Mark...' (*SCC Online Times*, 17 December 2024) <<https://www.sconline.com/blog/post/2024/12/17/lenovo-think-family-marks-infringing-thinbook-mark-madras-hc/>> accessed 24 May 2025

Marks has been used by the petitioner in India since 1992 and abroad since 1920. Additionally, as revealed in the petition, they have registered their THINK Family of Marks in India, and supporting documentation has been submitted with the petition. However, for the first respondent's trademark THINBOOK, which the first respondent also uses to sell laptops, the second respondent has given registration under Class 9 bearing No. 3558396.

Additionally, the first respondent tried registering the trademark using the mark THINBOOK-2. In response, the petitioner has filed a petition for objection before the Trademark Registry. However, the petitioner claims that the first respondent registered their mark THINBOOK under Class 9 with registration number 3558396 without their knowledge, which is contested in the petition. The first respondent has only used the mark above in the production and marketing of laptops.

KEY ISSUES OF THE CASE

1. Whether the petitioner's THINKPAD and THINKBOOK are eligible for protection under Section 2(1)(zg).
2. Whether the petitioner's THINK Family of Marks, specifically THINKBOOK and THINKPAD, are architecturally, aesthetically, phonetically, and conceptually comparable to the trademark under dispute, thus leading to confusion among the general public.
3. Whether Sections 9(1)(a) and 9(2)(a) of the Trademark Act were violated by the Trademark Registry's registration of the contested mark.

CONTENTIONS FROM THE PETITIONER'S SIDE

The petitioner has raised the following objections to the contested trademark registration:

1. The petitioner is the original creator, previous adopter, previous user, and previous registered proprietor of the THINK Family of Marks. Since 1992, the petitioner has used the THINK Family of Marks for a wide range of products, and as a result, the trademarks have been solely linked to the petitioner. According to Section 2(1)(zg) of the Act, the petitioner's

THINKPAD and THINKBOOK are therefore eligible for protection as well-known trademarks.⁵

2. The petitioner's THINK Family of Marks, specifically THINKBOOK and THINKPAD, are architecturally, aesthetically, phonetically, and conceptually comparable to the trademark under dispute.⁶ Due to the first respondent's apparent association with the petitioner's THINK Family of Marks, there is a significant chance that the consumer will become confused by the impugned mark and think it is just a new service or product offered under the petitioner's THINK Family of Marks.

3. Sections 9(1)(a) and 9(2)(a) of the Act are violated by the Trademark Registry's registration of the contested mark.⁷ Instead of declining to register the first respondent's trademark under those provisions, the Trademark Registry made the mistake of registering the mark THINBOOK in favour of the first respondent, completely ignoring the fact that the petitioner has been using and adopting the same trademark for many years.⁸

4. Additionally, the registration of the contested mark violates Section 11(1) of the Trademark Act.⁹ The petitioner argues that the Trademark Registry should not have registered the contested trademark in favour of the first respondent due to its extensive and consistent use, the petitioner has established distinctiveness for its THINK Family of Marks, and the public will undoubtedly become confused about which mark belongs to them.¹⁰

CONTENTIONS FROM THE RESPONDENTS' SIDE

1. This Court has set the first respondent ex parte since the first respondent has not appeared before the court despite being properly served with notice in the petition.

⁵ Trade Marks Act 1999, s 2(1)(zg)

⁶ T H Suhail, 'LENOVO (Singapore) Pte. Ltd. v RPD Workstations Pvt. Ltd. and An.: Case Analysis' (*Khurana and Khurana*, 02 January 2025) <<https://www.khuranaandkhurana.com/2025/01/02/lenovo-singapore-pte-ltd-v-rpd-workstations-pvt-ltd-and-an-case-analysis/>> accessed 24 May 2025

⁷ Trade Marks Act 1999, s 9

⁸ *LENOVO (Singapore) Pte. Ltd. v RPD Workstations Private Limited and Anr* 2024 SCCO online Mad 7336

⁹ Trade Marks Act 1999, s 11(1)

¹⁰ Upasana Sajeev, 'Lenovo Is Exclusive Proprietor Of "THINK" Family Of Marks: Madras HC Orders Removal Of Trademark Registration For "THINBOOK" Laptop' (*Live Law*, 19 December 2024)

<<https://www.livelaw.in/high-court/madras-high-court/madras-high-court-lenovo-exclusive-proprietor-think-family-of-marks-278837?from-login=879861&token=RDWEBHDCUSXYRPP5NUJUMUO895A1RPDKOZO85>> accessed 24 May 2025

2. Standing counsel representing the second respondent stated that the trademark being contested in this case was only given to the first respondent by adhering to the due process outlined in the Trademarks Act.

OBSERVATION OF THE COURT

After examining the submissions, the Madras High Court agreed with Lenovo's claim that the mark THINBOOK was confusingly similar to its THINK Family of Marks in both phonetics and meaning. Under Section 2(1),¹¹ the Madras High Court acknowledged Lenovo's THINK marks as well-known trademarks. Their widespread use, intensive marketing, and worldwide reach influenced their uniqueness. Due to the phonetic and visual similarity between THINBOOK and THINKBOOK, the court found a substantial chance of consumer confusion. The court discovered evidence indicating that RPD Workstations registered THINBOOK to profit from Lenovo's well-known brand. This violated Sections 9 and 11 of the Trade Marks Act and amounted to misleading.

Additionally, the Court noted that the first respondent registered its mark THINBOOK under Class 9 with registration number 3558396 by deceiving the Trademark Registry. The Registrar made a mistake that needed to be fixed by neglecting to acknowledge Lenovo's earlier ownership rights over the THINK Family of Marks. Ultimately, the court decided in Lenovo's **favour**, upholding its sole ownership of the THINK Family of Marks. It concluded that the Trade Marks Register's listing of the mark THINBOOK would confuse customers and may weaken Lenovo's brand identity.¹² And directed that the second respondent annul the challenged mark THINBOOK, which was created in the first respondent's name and has Class 9 registration number 3558396, and remove the mark from the Register of Trademarks within four weeks of receiving a copy of this judgment.

ANALYSIS OF THE JUDGMENT

The Madras High Court considered that the petitioner has multiple trademark registrations in different classes for their THINK Family of Marks, as stated in this petition. Furthermore, by utilising the THINK Family of Marks, the petitioner has established a reputation for itself

¹¹ Trade Marks Act 1999, s 2(1)(zg)

¹² Amrita Chowdhury, 'Trademark Showdown: Lenovo Defends THINK Brand, 'THINBOOK' Scrapped' (Puthran Associates, 07 April 2025) <<https://www.puthrans.com/trademark-showdown-lenovo-defends-think-brand-thinbook-scrapped/>> accessed 26 May 2025

domestically and internationally for its products, including laptops, notebooks, iPads, and more. The Court held that the petitioner has a reputation domestically and internationally for its products and that any further use of the mark THINBOOK by the first respondent will confuse the public.

Moreover, the Court also stated that by misrepresenting the Trademark Registry, the first respondent registered its mark THINBOOK under Class 9 with registration number 3558396. The second respondent, who completely ignored the petitioner's status as the registered owner of the THINK Family of Marks, also allowed the first respondent to register the mark THINBOOK under Class 9.

Thus, the petitioner has complied with Section 57¹³ Procedures to have the first respondent's trademark, THINBOOK, revoked. The court observed that any further continuance use of the mark 'THINKBOOK' by the first respondent will undoubtedly hamper the interest of the Petitioner and will harm the Petitioner's reputation in the Indian and international markets related to the production and distribution of laptops, notebooks, iPads, etc.

CONCLUSION

The case of *Lenovo (Singapore) Pte. Ltd. v RPD Workstations (P) Ltd.* highlighted that trademark protection holds importance in law in India and imparted a good fillip in protecting renowned trademarks. The judgment passed on Lenovo's account by the Madras High Court leaves other crucial aspects of the Trademark Act, 1999¹⁴, comparatively less relevant dilution, confusion, etc, that could nip its buds off, too.

In this case, the plaintiff successfully established that the THINK Family, namely, the THINKPAD and the THINKBOOK, has a distinctive character and has acquired wide recognition in India and across the globe. The Court went so far as to express concern regarding the phonetic and conceptual similarities of Lenovo's trademarks and those of the first respondents' THIN BOOK. It was decided that the continued use of THINBOOK could mislead consumers and harm Lenovo's reputation irreparably.

¹³ Trade Marks Act 1999, s 57

¹⁴ The Trade Marks Act 1999

The court ordered the removal of the mark in contention from the Register of Trademarks, thus providing ample protection for Lenovo's trademark rights. The decision emphasises the intent of the Trademarks Act, 1999 provisions, enabling counterfeit products to be curbed from confusing the public into believing that they are of better quality and from an established brand.¹⁵ The decision firmly supports trademark protection and fair competition in India, in addition to upholding the monopoly value of well-known marks. It emboldens businesses to protect their intellectual property by restraining wrongful trademark registrations that can cause consumer confusion and may, even more than that, subject their trademarks to adverse reputational damages.

¹⁵ Suhail (n 6)