

IN THE HIGH COURT OF KERALA AT ERNAKULAM

PRESENT

THE HONOURABLE MR. JUSTICE RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V

&

THE HONOURABLE MR. JUSTICE K. V. JAYAKUMAR

Friday, the 10th day of October 2025 / 18th Aswina, 1947SSCR NO. 23 OF 2025

IN THE MATTER OF TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD - SABARIMALA SPECIAL COMMISSIONER REPORT - SM.NO.23/2025 - REPORT REGARDING DETACHING OF GOLD COVERING OF 'DWARAPALAKA IDOLS' ON EITHER SIDE OF SREEKOVIL WITHOUT INTIMATING COURT - SUO MOTU PROCEEDINGS INITIATED - REG.

PETITIONER:

SUO MOTU

**RESPONDENTS:**

1. STATE OF KERALA

REPRESENTED BY THE PRINCIPAL SECRETARY TO GOVERNMENT,
REVENUE (DEVASWOM) DEPARTMENT, GOVERNMENT SECRETARIAT,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695001

2. THE TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD, REPRESENTED BY ITS SECRETARY,
NANTHancode, KAWDIAR POST, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695 003

3. THE DEVASWOM COMMISSIONER

TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD, DEVASWOM BUILDINGS, NANTHancode,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695003

4. EXECUTIVE OFFICER

SABARIMALA, SABARIMALA P.O., PATHANAMTHITTA - 689 662

5. CHIEF VIGILANCE & SECURITY OFFICER (SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE)
TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM HEAD QUARTERS, NANTHancode, KAWDIAR POST,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695 003

***ADDL.R6 IMPLEADED**

6. THE THIRUVABHARANAM COMMISSIONER,
THIRUVABHARANAM OFFICE, ARANMULA, PATHANAMTHITTA, PIN- 689 533
*IS SUO MOTU IMPLEADED AS ADDITIONAL 6TH RESPONDENT VIDE ORDER
DATED 10/09/2025 IN SSCR.NO.23/2025

***ADDL.R7 & R8 IMPLEADED**

7. MR.UNNIKRISHNAN POTTY,
NO.27, SANKALP NRUSIMHA, SRIRAMAPURAM, BANGALORE,
KARNATAKA- 560021

8. SMART CREATIONS,
K34 1ST SECTOR, 10TH STREET, AMBATTUR INDUSTRIAL ESTATE,
AMBATTUR, CHENNAI, PIN- 600058
*ARE SUO MOTU IMPLEADED AS ADDITIONAL RESPONDENTS 7 AND 8 VIDE
ORDER DATED 12/09/2025 IN SSCR.NO.23/2025

***ADDL.R9 & R10 IMPLEADED**

9. SENIOR DEPUTY DIRECTOR
KERALA STATE AUDIT DEPARTMENT,TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM – 695003

10. STATE OF KERALA,
REPRESENTED BY THE SECRETARY TO GOVERNMENT,
REVENUE (DEVASWOM) DEPARTMENT, GOVERNMENT SECRETARIAT,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM – 695001
*ARE SUO MOTU IMPLEADED AS ADDITIONAL RESPONDENTS 9 AND 10 VIDE
ORDER DATED 15.09.2025 IN SSCR NO. 23/2025

***ADDL.R11 IMPLEADED**

11. STATE POLICE CHIEF,
POLICE HEAD QUARTERS, VAZHUTHACAUD, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM
PIN - 695 010
*IS SUO MOTU IMPLEADED AS ADDL.R11 AS PER ORDER DATED
10/10/2025 IN SSCR.NO.23/2025

BY SRI.S.RAJMOHAN, SENIOR GOVERNMENT PLEADER
BY SRI.G.BIJU, SC, TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD
BY SMT.SAYUJYA RADHAKRISHNAN, AMICUS CURIAE FOR SABARIMALA
SPECIAL COMMISSIONER
BY M/S.R.SUDHISH AND M.MANJU, Advocates for Addl.R7
BY ADVS.K.B.PRADEEP, KSHEMA ELIZABETH SAMUEL &
ANEETA NIRMAL MAMEN FOR ADDL.R8

**THIS SABARIMALA SPECIAL COMMISSIONER REPORT HAVING COME UP FOR
ORDERS AGAIN ON 10/10/2025, UPON PERUSING THE REPORT AND THIS COURT'S
ORDER DATED 06/10/2025, THE COURT ON THE SAME DAY PASSED THE FOLLOWING:**



**RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V.,
&
K.V. JAYAKUMAR, JJ.**

SSCR No. 23 of 2025

Dated this the 10th day of October, 2025

ORDER

Raja Vijayaraghavan V. J.

Today, when the matter was taken up, the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer (Superintendent of Police) appeared before us in person and placed on record the investigation report prepared till date.

2. The officer also stated that vital information has emerged concerning the copper plates covering the door frames to the Sreekovil at Sannidhanam.

3. The Officer has placed before us a copy of a communication dated 16.02.2019 issued by the Executive Officer to the Devaswom Commissioner. It records that the repairs to the Sreekovil doors at Sannidhanam, undertaken pursuant to order dated 06.08.2018, had reached their final stages and that the doors would be brought to Sannidhanam on or before 11.03.2019. The communication further states that the gold-clad copper plates covering the door frames also required gold plating, and specifically records that the copper plates were earlier gold-clad. The Executive Officer requested that orders be issued to hand over the door frames to Sri. Unnikrishnan Potty. Acting on this request, the Devaswom

Commissioner, by communication dated 06.03.2019, recommended to the Travancore Devaswom Board that the gold-clad copper plates be handed over to Mr Potty. However, in that communication, the items were described merely as “copper plates,” contrary to the Executive Officer’s description of “gold-clad copper plates.” On the basis of the Commissioner’s request, the Board, by decision dated 20.03.2019 (R.O.C. 9097/18/M), approved the handing over the gold-clad copper plates covering the door frames to Sri. Unnikrishnan Potty. We also note that, in the Board decision, the door frames are referred to as “copper plates.” This discrepancy is a matter of serious gravity, particularly since in our earlier order we had recorded that a total of 30.291 kg of gold was utilised in the year 1998-1999. Prima facie, serious lapses and derelictions on the part of Board Officials are apparent and this warrant thorough investigation on all aspects and fronts.

4. Pursuant to the Board’s decision, on 20.03.2019, the Travancore Devaswom Board issued an order directing the handing over of the “copper plates” covering the side frames to Sri. Unnikrishnan Potty. A mahazar dated 18.05.2019, signed inter alia by Sri. Rajeev Kantararu (Thantri), V. N. Vasudevan Namboothiri (Melshanti), S. Jayakumar (Watcher), P. J. Rajeesh (Guard), Sulin Kumar K. (A.E., Sabarimala), B. Muraribabu (A.O., Sabarimala), R. Shankaranarayanan (H.A., Sabarimala), V. M. Kumar (Smith), C. R. Bijumon (LDC, TCO), and D. Jayakumar (AEO, Sabarimala), was prepared. This mahazar records these door frames as “copper plates” and not gold-clad plates.

5. The records further reveal that a detailed inquiry was conducted at “Smart Creations,” Chenlooknai. The inquiry shows that, in 2019, the front and back of the Sreekovil door were gold-plated and delivered on 04.03.2019 to one Mr. Govardhan, the sponsor, along with a gold certificate. The gold deposited on the door totalled 321.6 grams. It appears Mr. Govardhan supplied 200 grams of gold on 01.03.2019 and a further 125.5 grams on 04.03.2019 to Smart Creations for the plating work.

6. Thereafter, Sri. Unnikrishnan Potty, along with his associates, approached Smart Creations seeking gold plating of the side frames and the plate bearing the depiction of Lord Siva, totalling seven plates. These seven pieces were brought to Smart Creations. The concern initially indicated that it lacked the technical know-how to gold plate over the existing gold-clad sheets. However, on the insistence of Sri. Potty, who claimed to have requisite authorisation, proceeded with the gold plating. On his instructions, Smart Creations used a stripping solution to dissolve and remove gold from the gold-clad copper plates. As per the records of Smart Creations, for the subsequent gold plating, Mr. Govardhan supplied 186.587 grams of gold on 10.06.2019; Smart Creations deposited 184 grams and delivered the pieces on 15.06.2019 with a gold certificate in Mr. Govardhan’s name, returning some excess gold to the sponsor.

7. In the month of August 2019, 14 pieces of gold-clad Dwarapalaka copper plates were handed over to Smart Creations by Sri. Potty. Inspection revealed traces of gold on the copper sheets. Although

Smart Creations again indicated that it did not have the technical know-how to re-plate such items, Sri. Potty insisted that the work be undertaken and directions were issued to utilise the gold earlier extracted as well as any leftover gold from the Dwarapalakas.

8. After cleaning, gold plating was carried out in the presence of the donor and temple officials. The investigation records that, on 04.09.2019, 14 items of gold-plated copper plates were handed over to Sri. Unnikrishnan Potty along with a gold certificate reflecting 394.9 grams. The investigation also records that the recovery specialist extracted 409 grams of gold from the side frame initially handed over and 577 grams from the Dwarapalakas and other 14 items—totalling 989 grams. This total included 3 grams supplied by Sri. Potty. After securing permission, 393.9 grams was deducted for plating the Dwarapalakas and 9.9 grams for other Sabarimala items. Thus, 404.8 grams was used for plating. Labour charges, plating invoices and other expenses amounting to 109.243 grams (gold-equivalent) were deducted on the instructions of Sri. Potty, leaving a balance of 474.9 grams of gold. The inquiry states that, on 10.10.2019, this balance, in solid form, was handed to one Mr. Kalpesh, stated to be authorised by Sri. Potty.

9. Although the investigation was initially commenced with respect to the Dwarapalakas, the foregoing facts disclose serious malpractice regarding the door frames as well. The report indicates that a substantial quantity of gold, approximately 474.9 grams, was handed over to the donor, Sri. Unnikrishnan Potty. The records do not disclose that this gold was ever

re-entrusted to the Travancore Devaswom Board. The handing over of gold-clad items mischaracterised as “copper plates,” the unauthorised extraction of gold from gold-clad plates, and the misappropriation of extracted gold, *prima facie*, constitute serious offences under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023.

10. By our earlier order, we had appointed a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to inquire into all aspects relating to the Dwarapalakas. In view of the revelations concerning the side frames/lintel, these aspects shall also be investigated by the SIT, in addition to any further matters that may arise during investigation. We had also appointed a team of officers. It shall be open to the SIT to consider whether separate crimes are to be registered concerning the side frames.

11. Today, when the matter was taken up, an order dated 09.10.2025 issued by the Government was placed before us, evidencing the constitution of the team identified by us, in conformity with our directions. We interacted with Sri. S. Sasidharan, IPS, Assistant Director (Administration), KEPA, Thrissur, who is heading the investigation under the overall supervision of Sri. H. Venkatesh, ADGP (Law & Order). Sri. Sasidharan submitted that this Court has issued time-bound directions to investigate other cases as well and that, to complete the investigation within the period stipulated by us, he would require the assistance of Sri. P. Bijoy, Superintendent of Police, Crime Branch, and two subordinate officers, namely, S. Suresh Babu S.S., Dy. S.P., Crime Branch, Wayanad, and K. K.

Sajeev, Dy. S.P., KEPA. In the facts and circumstances, we deem it fit to suo motu implead the State Police Chief as an additional respondent. The Registry shall carry out the impleadment forthwith. The State Police Chief shall issue orders making available the assistance of the above officers to the SIT.

12. We direct the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer (Superintendent of Police) to place the report before the Travancore Devaswom Board today itself. The Travancore Devaswom Board shall forward the report forthwith to the State Police Chief. The State Police Chief shall direct Sri. H. Venkatesh, who is also the ADGP, Crime Branch, to register a crime and conduct the investigation in accordance with law. The SIT shall endeavour to submit a report before this Court, in any event not later than six weeks from today. If the ADGP seeks to co-opt other officers, a request can be made before the State Police Chief, who shall provide the service of such officers. We expect the SIT to conduct a thorough, impartial, and expeditious investigation so that all persons having any role in theft, criminal misappropriation, or breach of trust are brought to justice. They shall leave no stone unturned in the matter. The officers of the team shall be directly answerable to this Court and shall ensure that the investigation is conducted with utmost discretion and integrity. They shall refrain from divulging any information to the public or media until completion of the investigation and shall file a status report before this Court in sealed cover once in two weeks.

13. Pursuant to our orders dated 10.09.2025 and 12.09.2025, we had directed seizure of the entire records relating to the Dwarapalakas. In view of the emerging instances of wrongdoing concerning the side frames/lintels, copies of all seized records shall be prepared, sealed, and one set forwarded to the Registrar General of this Court for safe custody, with respect to all documents, registers and references adverted to in our earlier orders.

14. We are informed by the learned Amicus Curiae appearing for the Special Commissioner that the Former Judge of this Court, Sri. K. T. Sankaran, will visit Sannidhanam to prepare the inventory as ordered. We are also informed that the media has sought permission to enter the Sannidhanam premises. We have been informed that sanction has not been granted to the media. We approve the same.

15. We would be failing in our duty were we not to address the sensationalism generated by segments of the print and digital media following our orders concerning the Dwarapalakas. The Hon'ble Apex Court has repeatedly observed that a free, independent, and fearless press is the sine qua non of a vibrant democracy. The right of the public to know is unquestionably served by the media. Equally, however, the courts have cautioned that “trial” or “investigation” by the press, electronic media, or untrained individuals is antithetical to the rule of law and risks miscarriage of justice. We note with concern that, although the Vigilance Officer’s report was placed before this Court only at 10:15 a.m. today, purported

“conclusions” from it have already been splashed across front pages.

16. These proceedings commenced upon the Special Commissioner’s report dated 09.09.2025, which sought a strict direction to the Travancore Devaswom Board not to undertake any important maintenance at Sannidhanam and Malikappuram without prior permission of this Court. On the strength of that report, we passed orders on 10.09.2025, 12.09.2025, 15.09.2025, 17.09.2025, 29.09.2025, and 06.10.2025. Our observations and *prima facie* conclusions in those orders were based on the Registers and records maintained by the Travancore Devaswom Board and documents from the concerns to which gold was entrusted for plating, as well as on the investigation conducted by the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer (Superintendent of Police). Notwithstanding this, portions of the media appear to be conducting a parallel inquiry by interviewing persons of their choosing, including former officers and individuals against whom allegations have been raised, and disseminating their versions. Such coverage, aimed at garnering viewership, risks distorting facts, influencing public opinion, and ultimately prejudicing the investigation.

17. We reiterate that while freedom of the press is vital, it cannot mutate into a parallel adjudicatory forum that overwhelms a court-monitored investigation. We request the media to adhere to the record and the orders of this Court, eschew partisan narratives, and refrain from unnecessarily making heroes of individuals who are constitutionally or

legally bound to discharge their duties conscientiously. Reporting of court orders may continue. However, parallel “investigation” should not. In matters sub judice, dissemination is not unfettered. The media bears a duty to ensure accuracy and to avoid infringing the rights of the accused, including the right to reputation and privacy, and to respect the law of contempt and related constraints under Article 19(2) of the Constitution of India. Inaccurate or sensational reporting can be counter-productive and may interfere with the course of justice, burdening both the investigating agency and the trial court. It is not for the media to declare any person guilty or innocent, that function lies with the judiciary.

We say no more.

Post on 21.10.2025.



sd/-
RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V,
JUDGE

sd/-
K.V. JAYAKUMAR,
JUDGE

PS/APM/10/10/25