

IN THE HIGH COURT OF KERALA AT ERNAKULAM
PRESENT
THE HONOURABLE MR. JUSTICE RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V
&
THE HONOURABLE MR. JUSTICE K. V. JAYAKUMAR

Tuesday, the 21st day of October 2025 / 29th Aswina, 1947

SSCR 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,**
NANTHANCOD, KAWDIAR POST, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695 003
3. **THE DEVASWOM COMMISSIONER**
TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD, DEVASWOM BUILDINGS, NANTHANCOD,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695003
4. **EXECUTIVE OFFICER**
SABARIMALA, SABARIMALA P.O., PATHANAMTHITTA - 689 662
5. **CHIEF VIGILANCE & SECURITY OFFICER (SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE)**
TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM HEAD QUARTERS, NANTHANCOD, KAWDIAR POST,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695 003

***ADDL.R6 IMPEADED**

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

***ADDL.R7 & R8 IMPEADED**

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 IMPEADED AS ADDITIONAL RESPONDENTS 7 AND 8 VIDE
ORDER DATED 12/09/2025 IN SSCR.NO.23/2025

***ADDL.R9 & R10 IMPEADED**

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 IMPEADED AS ADDITIONAL RESPONDENTS 9 AND 10 VIDE
ORDER DATED 15.09.2025 IN SSCR NO. 23/2025

***ADDL.R11 IMPEADED**

11. STATE POLICE CHIEF,
POLICE HEAD QUARTERS, VAZHUTHACAUD, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM
PIN - 695 010
*IS SUO MOTU IMPEADED 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 21/10/2025, UPON PERUSING THE REPORT AND THIS COURT'S
ORDER DATED 10/10/2025, THE COURT ON THE SAME DAY PASSED THE FOLLOWING:**



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

SSCR No. 23 of 2025

Dated this the 21st day of October, 2025

ORDER

Raja Vijayaraghavan V. J.

By order dated 06.10.2025, invoking the powers under Article 226 of the Constitution of India, this Court constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) and directed the team to enquire into all aspects relating to the heist and plundering of gold from the gold-cladded Dwarapalakas placed on either side of the Sreekovil.

2. Subsequently, by order dated 10.10.2025, upon receiving further inputs, this Court directed the SIT to extend its investigation to the pilferage of gold from the side frames and to examine the possible complicity of officials of the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB). The SIT was also instructed to consider whether a separate crime ought to be registered concerning the side frames. Directions were issued to seize all documents, registers, and records referred to in earlier orders.

3. We deem it appropriate to state at the very outset that this Court has undertaken the monitoring of the investigation in this extraordinary case involving the pilferage of the sacred valuables of Lord Ayyappa, in a

well-considered and calibrated manner. This exercise was initiated not to direct or dictate the mode or manner of investigation, but to ensure that it proceeds in a proper, effective, and lawful course. The underlying purpose has been to sustain and reinforce public confidence in the impartiality and integrity of the inquiry, so that every accusation is investigated on a reasonable basis, irrespective of the position, influence, or status of the person involved, and that such inquiry or investigation is taken to its logical conclusion strictly in accordance with law. The objective was to lend credibility and transparency to the process undertaken by the Special Investigation Team (SIT), comprising officers of unimpeachable integrity hand-picked by this Court, so as to eliminate any perception of bias, lack of fairness, or objectivity. As held by the Hon'ble Supreme Court in **Manohar Lal Sharma v. Principal Secretary & Others**¹, in rare and compelling circumstances of this nature, the superior courts are vested with the jurisdiction to monitor investigations to ensure that the investigating agency functions in a free, fair, and time-bound manner, untainted by external influence or interference. Moreover, the Court-monitoring in a matter of such sensitivity and where passion runs high shall help in moving the machinery of inquiry/investigation at appropriate pace and its conclusion with utmost expedition without fear or favour.

4. We have interacted with the Officers heading the SIT *in camera*.

5. From the report of the SIT now before us, it is evident that two

¹ [(2014) 2 SCC 532]

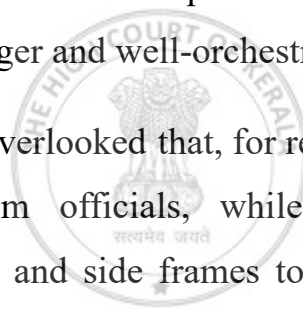
crimes have been registered thus far. The first, Crime No. 3700 of 2025, has been registered inter alia for offences under Sections 403, 406, 409, 466 and 467 read with Section 34 of the Indian Penal Code. This crime relates to events commencing with the irregular entrustment of the gold-cladded Dwarapalakas and Peedam to one Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty without following any prescribed procedure on 19.07.2019 and 20.07.2019, and continuing until the refixation of the said Dwarapalakas on 11.09.2019. The investigation reveals that only a perfunctory mahazar was prepared and that none of the relevant particulars were entered in the registers. The Devaswom officials, despite being fully aware of the glaring irregularities and the possibility that the gold plates had been substituted, wilfully chose to remain silent, thereby concealing the act of misconduct on the part of both the officials and the sponsor.

6. Insofar as the side frames are concerned, serious irregularities have also been revealed. Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty was wrongfully permitted by the Devaswom officials to retain approximately 409 grams of gold extracted from the gold-cladded side frames. The officials were fully aware of this fact yet took no steps to recover the gold. Notably, an e-mail from Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty seeking the Board's concurrence to utilise the said gold for the marriage of a girl known to him has been brought to our notice. Consequently, Crime No. 3701 of 2025 has been registered inter alia under Sections 403, 406, 409, 466 and 467 read with Section 34 of the IPC in relation to the said incident.

7. The SIT report further indicates that several crucial records,

namely, the Charge Mahazar Register (15.11.2017 to 15.06.2020), the Devaswom Mahazar (19.12.2018 to 20.11.2019), the Executive Officer's file concerning the gold cladding of the Sreekovil door, and the file relating to maintenance of the Dwarapalakas, have been seized. Having gone through the report and the inputs received from the officers heading the SIT, we record our satisfaction at the manner in which they are proceeding with the investigation.

8. Upon perusal of the materials, we direct the SIT to thoroughly investigate the aspect of criminal conspiracy, as the chain of events commencing in 2019 and the subsequent entrustment of the Dwarapalakas appear to be part of a larger and well-orchestrated scheme. The reasons are:

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- a) It cannot be overlooked that, for reasons best known to them, the Devaswom officials, while entrusting the precious Dwarapalakas and side frames to the seventh respondent, a person with dubious antecedents, chose to disregard the mandatory instruction contained in page No. 152 of the Travancore Devaswom Board Sub-Group Manual, which categorically stipulates that repair works of this nature shall be carried out within the Sannidhanam itself.
 - b) The record discloses that by letter dated 28.06.2019, the Deputy Devaswom Commissioner (Finance Inspection), acting on behalf of the Devaswom Commissioner, requested permission to allow Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty to undertake the gold-plating of the Dwarapalakas and copper plates on the

southern and northern corners of the Sreekovil. The Board, by its decision dated 03.07.2019, granted such permission, erroneously categorising the Dwarapalakas as “copper plates”. Subsequent orders reveal that despite the evident change in colour of the Peedams, the same individual was again entrusted with further gold-plating. These items were returned in 2021, yet no entries were made either in the Thiruvabharanam Register or any other register, an omission that cannot be treated as accidental.

- c) From the letter dated 25.08.2025 issued by the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner, reference is made to Orders ROC No. 11563/2024/M dated 27.09.2024, 01.11.2024, and 06.11.2024. It appears that as early as 2024, serious damages had been noticed on the Dwarapalakas, with visible marks at their lower portions. The Devaswom Commissioner and the Devaswom Smith inspected the idols and found that the gold plating had disappeared in several areas, exposing the underlying nickel coating. They further noted that portions of the Thangu Peedams had also lost their plating. The Devaswom Smith opined that fresh gold plating, along with extra lacquer coating, was required. Thereafter, instead of initiating a transparent tender or expert consultation, and without perusing the earlier records showing the retention of gold and the warranty, the officials once again approached Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty, who agreed to carry out the work.

Consequently, the Dwarapalakas were again handed over to him, despite his previous lapses.

- d) We have also come across a letter issued by Thazhaman Kandararu Mahesh Mohanaru, the Thantri, addressed to the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner, wherein he stated that the Dwarapalakas and Peedams could be removed from the Sannidhanam for repair works, while specifically directing that the repair of the door, lintel, Kamanam, and Lakshmi Roopam must be undertaken within the Sannidhanam itself. He also specified the dates for removal and refixation, though the actual dates were not subsequently recorded in the letter.
- e) The records clearly reveal that the gold cladding of the roof of the Sreekovil, including the front and rear arches, the rain gutter above the Hundi, the Hundi in front of the Sopanam, the narrative panels depicting the story of Lord Ayyappa on both sides of the Sreekovil, the front door and arch above it, the two Dwarapalakas in front of the Sreekovil, three Gandharvams (Kamakudam), the side beadings and surrounding pillars, and five Kalasams including those of Kannimoola Ganapathy and Nagaraja were executed using 30.291 kilograms of gold. Every Devaswom official and every devotee of Lord Ayyappa is aware that this gold cladding was carried out during 1998-1999. Despite this, by mischaracterising these gold-cladded items as “copper

plates,” they were handed over to Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty without proper verification. No records were duly maintained; no weighing of the returned idols was undertaken; and no officer accompanied Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty to “Smart Creations,” the concern entrusted with the work. He was allowed over a month to transport the Dwarapalakas across states, to exhibit them publicly, and to solicit donations. We harbour serious doubts whether the Dwarapalakas returned were the same as those entrusted. By failing to weigh the idols at the time of re-fixation and to record the same in the Mahazar, every Devaswom official, including those in the highest hierarchy, bears responsibility. After the gold cladding of the side frames was removed, Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty retained 474.9 grams of gold. The Board cannot plead ignorance of the fact that “Smart Creations” received 109.243 grams of gold from Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty for re-plating. No steps have been taken to retrieve the remaining 474.9 grams, despite Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty having communicated his intention to re-use the same for his purposes with the consent of the board.

- f) It is further noted that as early as 2024, serious damage and removal of gold plating were recorded by the Devaswom Commissioner and Devaswom Smith, despite the articles carrying a forty-year warranty. This likely motivated the TDB officials to secretly re-entrust the idols to Mr.

Unnikrishnan Potty in 2025, in an apparent attempt to conceal the pilferage of 2019. This is a distinct possibility as revealed from the sequence of events.

- g) The record reveals that though the Devaswom Commissioner initially opined, by letter dated 30.07.2025, that “Smart Creations, Chennai” lacked the requisite technical expertise and that the work should be executed only through traditional methods, he reversed his stance within seven days, on 08.08.2025. Subsequently, by letter dated 21.08.2025, the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner referred to directions from the President of the Devaswom Board to expedite the gold-plating work as proposed by the sponsor. Thereafter, the Board, by decision dated 03.09.2025, formally handed over the Dwarapalakas and Thangu Peedams to the sponsor.
- h) We also note that on 02.10.2024, Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty informed the Board that another set of Dwarapalakas was kept in the strong room and suggested that handing it over would reduce costs. The sequence of events unmistakably indicates that the TDB officials consciously attempted to hand over the gold-cladded Dwarapalakas secretly to Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty in 2025 to suppress the earlier gold pilferage. This explains why the permission of the Special Commissioner was not sought, despite a binding order of this Court in SSCR No. 13 of 2023.

- i) In view of the above, we direct the Special Investigation Team (SIT) not to confine its inquiry to the Dwarapalakas and side frames alone. The investigation shall extend to uncovering the larger conspiracy, identifying the officials of the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) who may have colluded to conceal the misappropriation of gold from the gold-cladded plates, and determining whether the entrustment of the Dwarapalakas in the year 2025 formed part of a broader scheme to suppress the pilferage that occurred in 2019. The SIT shall examine every facet of the matter and ascertain the role and complicity, if any, of each officer of the TDB, from the highest echelons downwards. It would be profitable to note at this juncture that, under Section 15A(ii) of the Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions Act, one of the statutory obligations of the Board is to exercise effective supervision and control over its administrative officials and employees. The higher officials of the Board cannot absolve themselves of responsibility or shift the blame onto subordinate officers, for each of them bore a collective duty to ensure that the sacred valuables of the deity were neither pilfered nor wasted.

9. This proceeding originated upon a report filed by the Special Commissioner concerning the removal of the gold-plated copper coverings of the Dwarapalaka idols. Pursuant thereto, this Court passed a series of orders in SSCR on 10.09.2025, 12.09.2025, 15.09.2025, 17.09.2025,

29.09.2025, 06.10.2025, and 10.10.2025. During the course of these proceedings, this Court deemed it necessary to carry out the impleadment of the sponsor as well as the concern to which the Dwarapalakas and Peedams were entrusted for gold plating for getting to the root of the matter. Thereafter, on 06.10.2025, upon evaluation of the reports submitted by the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer, this Court constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to enquire into all facets of the matter, in exercise of its jurisdiction under Article 226 of the Constitution of India. We are of the considered view that the investigation is required to be carried out under the direct and continuous supervision of this Court to ensure fairness, transparency, and expeditious progress.

10. We are also of the view that it may not be appropriate for us to pass further orders in this SSCR as some of the prospective accused were impleaded as additional respondents in the course of proceedings. In that view of the matter, we deem it appropriate to direct the Registry to register a Writ Petition *suo motu* in the matter of the facts relating to SSCR 23 of 2025 after appending the orders passed in the SSCR as Exhibits, as it would facilitate this Court in passing further orders for effective monitoring of the investigation.

11. Accordingly, the Registry is directed to suo motu register a Writ Petition in the matter of the facts relating to SSCR 23 of 2025 after obtaining the orders of the Hon'ble the Chief Justice. In the writ petition so registered : (i) The State of Kerala, Represented by the Principal Secretary to Government, Revenue (Devaswom) Department, Government Secretariat,

Thiruvananthapuram - 695 001, (ii) The Travancore Devaswom Board, Represented by its Secretary, Nanthancode, Kawdiar Post, Thiruvananthapuram - 695 003, (iii) The Chief Vigilance and Security Officer (Superintendent of Police), Travancore Devaswom Head Quarters, Nanthancode, Kawdiar Post, Thiruvananthapuram - 695 003, (iv) The State Police Chief, Police Head Quarters, Vazhuthacaud, Thiruvananthapuram - 695 010, and (v) The Senior Deputy Director, Kerala State Audit Department, Travancore Devaswom Board, Thiruvananthapuram - 695 003 shall be arrayed as respondents.

12. The learned Standing Counsel appearing for the TDB submitted that, in compliance with earlier directions issued by this Court, the Dwarapalaka plates have been refixed on the idols on either side of the Sreekovil on 17.10.2025. The Chief Vigilance and Security Officer (Superintendent of Police) and the Superintendent of Police in charge of the investigation have informed this Court that mahazars recording the weights and conditions of the Dwarapalakas have been duly prepared. It is also submitted that Sri. Justice K. T. Sankaran, who was appointed by this Court to prepare a comprehensive inventory of all valuables, has also inspected the Dwarapalakas.

13. The report filed before this Court on 21.10.2025 by the Special Investigation Team shall be sealed and kept in safe custody by the Registry.

14. In view of the grave nature of the offenses involved, we deem it necessary to direct the SIT to forthwith seize the Minutes Book of the TDB and to keep it in safe custody. Copies of the Minutes Book shall also be

forwarded to the Registrar General, who shall ensure that the same is kept sealed and in safe custody.

15. In our order dated 10.10.2025, we had directed the SIT to take copies of all seized records and one set be forwarded to the Registrar General of this Court for safe custody with respect to all documents, Registers and referred to in the earlier orders.

Post on 05.11.2025, on which day, the Officers heading the SIT shall be personally present. The Registry shall note in the cause list that the proceedings shall be held *in camera*.



Sd/-

**RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V,
JUDGE**

Sd/-

**K.V. JAYAKUMAR,
JUDGE**

PS/APM/21/10/25