

IN THE HIGH COURT OF KERALA AT ERNAKULAM
PRESENT
THE HONOURABLE MR. JUSTICE RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V
&
THE HONOURABLE MR. JUSTICE K. V. JAYAKUMAR
Monday, the 15th day of September 2025 / 24th Bhadra, 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. 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 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

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 ADVS.R.SUDHISH AND M.MANJU FOR ADDL.R7

THIS SABARIMALA SPECIAL COMMISSIONER REPORT HAVING COME UP FOR ORDERS AGAIN ON 15/09/2025, UPON PERUSING THE REPORT AND THIS COURT'S ORDER DATED 12/09/2025, THE COURT ON THE SAME DAY PASSED THE FOLLOWING:



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

SSCR No. 23 of 2025

Dated this the 15th day of September, 2025

ORDER

Raja Vijayaraghavan V, J.

In terms of our earlier directions, respondents 7 and 8 have appeared before us through counsel.

2. The learned counsel for the 7th respondent sought an adjournment to place on record his affidavit and supporting documents.

3. The Sales and Marketing Manager of Smart Creations, Ambattur, Chennai, was also present when the matter was taken up.

4. The Senior Deputy Director, Kerala State Audit Department, Travancore Devaswom Board, Thiruvananthapuram – 695003, and the 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. Registry is directed to carry out the impleadment. The learned Government Pleader shall take notice for additional respondents 9 and 10.

5. Pursuant to our earlier directions, the Chief Vigilance & Security Officer (Superintendent of Police) has seized the following records under mahazar dated 13.09.2025:

(i) The General Mahazar for the Sabarimala Devaswom for the period 19.12.2015 to 20.11.2019, comprising approximately 100 pages;

(ii) The Charge Mahazar for the period 15.11.2017 to 15.06.2020; and

(iii) The General Devaswom Mahazar dated 21.11.2019 to 17.12.2023, numbering about 100 pages.

6. The Officer has, however, stated that certain mahazars which could shed critical light on the gold cladding/plating of the copper plates covering the Dwarapalakas have not yet been traced. He further submitted that he has not been able to exhaustively verify the strong room to ascertain whether another set of gold-clad copper plates covering the Dwarapalakas is kept there.

7. We have examined the current file in the Maramath Section Office of the Travancore Devaswom Board, Thiruvananthapuram, seized under the mahazar dated 13.09.2025 by the Sub-Inspector of Police, Devaswom Board. We note a communication No. R.O.C.3624/95/M dated 04.05.1999, which records that, based on the letter of the Devaswom Commissioner dated 27.03.1999 (R.O.C.26431/97), the Secretary of the Travancore Devaswom Board granted permission to the Divisional Engineer to fix gold-cladded Dwarapalakas at the entrance of the Sreekovil. This document clearly reveals that the copper plates covering the Dwarapalakas were gold-cladded and installed on the basis of the said sanction as

early as in the year 1999.

8. Page No. 92 of the General Mahazar, prepared on 19.07.2019, records that the additional 7th respondent approached the Board seeking permission, at his own sponsorship, to carry out gold plating of the Dwarapalaka idols flanking the Sreekovil. An order dated 05.07.2019 (R.O.C.9097/18/M) was issued accordingly. In the presence of the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner, the Executive Officer, Sabarimala Devaswom, the Administrative Officer, the Thantri of the Sabarimala Temple, the Executive Engineer, the Assistant Executive Engineer, and the Devaswom Smith, the "copper plates" numbering 12 pieces and weighing 25.400 kg covering the Dwarapalakas were removed and entrusted to the 7th respondent for gold plating. The mahazar records the signature of Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty, who was entrusted with the work. It is pertinent to note that the mahazar refers only to "copper plates" and makes no mention of existing gold cladding. This is quite unusual and calls for a detailed enquiry.

9. On 20.07.2019, the "Peedam" on which the Dwarapalakas are placed was similarly removed and entrusted to Unnikrishnan Potty. The plates weighed about 17.400 kg. Prima facie, it appears that this Peedam also underwent gold plating by traditional methods in 1999 along with the Dwarapalakas.

10. Page No.89 of the Mahazar further records that the lintel was removed and handed over to Unnikrishnan Potty under R.O.C. No. 9097/18/M dated 20.03.2019 for gold plating. Documentary evidence indicates that the lintel, along with the plates covering the Dwarapalakas, had originally been cladded with gold in

the year 1999.

11. By our order dated 12.09.2025, we directed the Chief Vigilance & Security Officer to ascertain whether another set of gold-plated Dwarapalaka idols was stored in the strong room. This was issued as we had come across an e-mail dated 02.10.2024 issued by the additional 7th respondent requesting that the earlier set of gold-coated copper plates, allegedly lying idle in the strong room, be handed over to him for the extraction of the gold to reduce costs. This communication suggests that Unnikrishnan Potty was aware of a second gold-coated set. However, the Officer has reported that no such set was found on preliminary verification. Further enquiry is required concerning the same.

12. The Officer has sought additional time to trace records detailing the quantity and value of gold used for the 1999 cladding.

13. The 8th respondent produced a communication from Smart Creations dated 12.06.2019 to the Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board, stating that the Moolasthan Front Door of the Sree Ayyappan Temple was plated with 24-carat gold at 7 g/sq ft, with a 35-year warranty on the gold plating and lacquer; the Back Door was plated at 3 g/sq ft with a 15-year warranty from 04.03.2019. It is further stated that 80–90 % of the deposited 24-carat gold can be recovered.

14. Sri. Biju, the learned Standing Counsel for the Travancore Devaswom Board, submitted that the restoration work has been halted, and he requested permission to continue with the same. He reported, on the basis of information from Smart Creations, that of the twelve pieces, four (Nos. 1, 4, 5, 6) have been

lacquer-coated and can be returned safely; four (Nos. 2, 3, 9, 10) have been polished but not lacquered and therefore risk damage during transport; and the remaining four (Nos. 7, 8, 11, 12) show significant wear and required the gold plating to be removed for repair before re-plating. The separated gold is presently in liquid form in a cyanide solution and can be returned only after conversion into ingots, which will require 7–10 days. Re-plating on the repaired copper shields will take approximately two days. Transporting gold in liquid form is risky and could result in loss. The gold-plated items are to be kept in the strong room at Aranmula until the Nada opens for Kannimasa Pooja, after which the coverings may be refitted on the Dwarapalakas following the Sudhi rituals prescribed by the Thantri and with Anujna from the deity.

15. We have considered the submissions advanced.

16. The proceedings originated from the report of the Sabarimala Special Commissioner that the gold plating was removed without prior intimation. On examination of the records and inspections conducted by the Chief Vigilance & Security Officer (Superintendent of Police), the following emerge:

- a) The Dwarapalaka idols were indisputably Gold cladded in 1999. In 2019, pursuant to the 7th respondent's request, the gold-plated copper coverings were transported to Smart Creations. However, the mahazar records describe the items merely as "copper plates," with no mention of gold cladding. Critical transportation details are still being traced, and the investigating officers seek further time. If the copper plates were in fact cladded with

Gold, there must be documents for the same, including the quantity of gold involved, as it was done by the traditional method.

- b) Communications from the 7th respondent suggest that another set of Dwarapalaka idols is kept in the strong room. The Chief Vigilance & Security Officer (Superintendent of Police) has, however, been unable to locate such a set. A detailed enquiry needs to be conducted to trace out the same.
- c) It needs to be borne in mind at this juncture, the quantity of gold required for gold cladding using traditional methods is substantial. In traditional Methods, a base is prepared on which Gold Leafing / Sheathing is carried out by which artisans hammer extremely thin sheets of nearly pure gold (22–24 k) and wrap them over the copper surface. Sheets are joined with manual burnishing and sometimes a mild adhesive resin. The gold is pressed and burnished repeatedly so that it cold-welds to the copper. The overlapping seams are chased until invisible, creating the appearance of a single, solid gold surface. This is effectively a continuous skin of gold and the quantity of precious metal required is substantial. The thickness protects against Kerala's heavy monsoon rains, coastal salinity, and the abrasion caused by daily rituals. The 8th respondent, however, adopts Nano Tech Golden Deposition (NTGD) to apply an ultra-thin layer of gold onto a base material.
- d) If the Dwarapalakas were gold clad using traditional methods in the year 1999, what persuaded the TDB to permit the 7th respondent to subject the same to gold plating, by taking the same out of the State and without

seeking the permission of the Court, is an issue that requires a probe.

17. As further records are awaited and the gold is presently in liquid form, we find it necessary to direct Smart Creations from completing the process already underway. This is because no purpose would be served by retaining the Dwarapalakas with the 8th respondent. Nevertheless, we strongly deprecate the removal of gold plating without notifying the Special Commissioner and express our strong discontent that the Gold cladded plates were handed over without a precise inventory of the gold content.

18. We direct the additional 8th respondent to complete the pending work forthwith. Upon completion, the items shall be immediately transported back to Sabarimala. The Superintendent of Police shall seize and produce before this Court all remaining records, including mahazars, revealing -

- (i) the quantity of Gold used in the year 1999 for cladding the Dwarapalakas and the name and details of the sponsor and the artisan who carried out the work,
- (ii) the quantity of Gold used in the year 2019 for plating,
- (iii) the quantity required for the ongoing 2025 process, and
- (iv) the manner of recovery and reuse of the gold, along with all related records.
- (v) The second set of Dwarapalakas and Peedam, which are stated to be retained in the strong room.

19. The TDB and its officials shall aid the Chief Vigilance & Security Officer (Superintendent of Police) and hand over all the records in their possession to the Chief Vigilance & Security Officer (Superintendent of Police) so that he can place the records before this Court.

Post on 17.09.2025.

Sd/-

**RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V,
JUDGE**



Sd/-

**K.V. JAYAKUMAR,
JUDGE**

PS/APM