

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

Wednesday, the 5th day of November 2025 / 14th Karthika, 1947
WP(C) NO. 40608 OF 2025(A)

PETITIONER:

SUO MOTU AS PER THE ORDER DATED 21.10.2025 IN SSCR 23/2025 REGARDING
THE HEIST AND PLUNDERING OF GOLD FROM THE GOLD-CLADDED DWARAPALAKAS
PLACED ON EITHER SIDE OF THE SREEKOVIL, SABARIMALA, PIN - 682031

RESPONDENTS:

1. THE STATE OF KERALA, REPRESENTED BY THE PRINCIPAL SECRETARY TO GOVERNMENT, REVENUE (DEVASWOM) DEPARTMENT, GOVERNMENT SECRETARIAT, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM , PIN - 695001
2. THE TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD, REPRESENTED BY ITS SECRETARY, NANTHANCODE, KAWDIAR POST, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, PIN - 695003
3. THE CHIEF VIGILANCE AND SECURITY OFFICER (SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE), TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM HEAD QUARTERS, NANTHANCODE, KAWDIAR POST, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, PIN - 695003
4. THE STATE POLICE CHIEF, POLICE HEAD QUARTERS, VAZHUTHACAUD, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, PIN - 695010
5. THE SENIOR DEPUTY DIRECTOR, KERALA STATE AUDIT DEPARTMENT, TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, PIN - 695003.

BY GOVERNMENT PLEADER FOR R1 & R4

STANDING COUNSEL FOR R2, R3 & R5

This petition coming on for orders upon perusing the petition and the affidavit filed in support of WP(C) , the court passed the following:

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

WP(C) No. 40608 of 2025

Dated this the 05th day of November, 2025

ORDER

Raja Vijayaraghavan V, J.

This Writ Petition was ordered to be registered suo motu by this Court, by order dated 21.10.2025, based on the observations made in Sabarimala Special Commissioner Report No. 23 of 2025.

2. The above report was filed before this Court by the Special Commissioner, Sabarimala, informing that the gold-cladded copper coverings of the Dwarapalaka Idols, located on either side of the Sreekovil, had been removed without prior intimation to the Special Commissioner. It was stated in the report that the said action was a blatant violation of the order passed by this Court on 30.06.2023 in SSCR No. 13 of 2023.

3. Taking serious note of this grossly objectionable act, this Court directed the respondents to produce before it the entire files and records relating to the repairs and restoration of the Dwarapalaka Idols. What initially appeared to be a procedural lapse soon revealed a series of grave irregularities and possible acts of misappropriation, apparently carried out with the active connivance of officials of the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB), from the highest echelon of authority down to the subordinate staff

involved in the administration of temples in the State.

4. It would only be appropriate, at this stage, to delineate the chronology in which this disturbing saga unfolded. At the outset, the essential registers, records, and mahazars were unavailable. Only pursuant to this Hon'ble Court's directions ordering an investigation through the Chief Vigilance Officer, and upon his seizure of certain registers and mahazars, did it become possible to reconstruct, piece by piece, the clandestine manner in which temple valuables were removed, with impunity and in utter disregard of the Devaswom Manual and the binding orders of this Court. This belated recovery of material records, compelled by judicial intervention, not only enabled a coherent reconstruction of events but also underscores the deliberate suppression of mandatory documentation that should have been maintained and produced in the ordinary course.

5. Before proceeding further, it needs to be stated that it is a matter of public knowledge that the Sreekovil, Hundi, the depictions of Lord Ayyappa on both sides of the sanctum, the front door, the two Dwarapalakas etc. were all gold-cladded by McDowell & Co. Ltd. during 1998–1999. Anyone who has ever visited Sabarimala would be awestruck by the golden brilliance of the Sreekovil and its precincts. And if perchance one were unaware of it, the person standing beside would, with quiet pride, reveal that what gleams before them is gold itself. No officer of the Travancore Devaswom Board, former or present, can legitimately plead ignorance of this fact. The sequence of events, as revealed through the orders and reports placed before this Court, now deserves to be narrated, for only then can the attempts to conceal these acts from judicial gaze and scrutiny be fully

understood.

A. Order dated 12.09.2025

6. On 12.09.2025, after perusing the available records, this Court noted that the Dwarapalakas had been entrusted to a concern named “Smart Creations,” Chennai, and that the gold-plating work was purportedly being sponsored by one Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty, a resident of Bangalore. It was brought to the notice of this Court that the Dwarapalakas and associated plates had already been transported to Chennai on 08.09.2025, accompanied by Officers of the Board. As we had observed several loose ends and inconsistencies, this Court sought an immediate and comprehensive explanation from the Board.

6.1. The Thiruvabharanam Commissioner, by his report dated 30.07.2025, had earlier opined that Smart Creations lacked the technical expertise to remove the existing gold cladding and that the process could be carried out only through traditional methods. The Devaswom Smith had estimated that approximately 303 grams of gold would be required for re-cladding the Dwarapalakas, Peedam, Thangu Peedam, Lintel and Door Panels, Lakshmi Roopam, and Kamanam, based on the accepted standard of 3 grams of gold per sq.ft.

6.2. However, the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner abruptly reversed his position in a subsequent report dated 08.08.2025, recommending that the gold-cladded components be transported to Smart Creations for electroplating, and requested that an emergent meeting be convened for decision-making. Acting upon that recommendation, the

Travancore Devaswom Board, by order dated 03.09.2025, resolved to send the gold-cladded plates covering the Dwarapalakas, Thangu Peedam, and related items to Smart Creations, Chennai.

6.3. Since the affidavit filed by the respondents before this Court lacked the necessary particulars, and as the entire sequence of transactions appeared riddled with unanswered questions, this Court directed the Chief Superintendent of Police (Vigilance) and the Security Officer to seize all records connected with the gold-plating/gold-cladding of the Dwarapalakas, the Door Lintel, the Door Panel, the Lakshmi Roopam, and Kamanam, from the time of the original gold cladding by McDowell & Co. Ltd. in 1998–1999, and to produce the seized records before this Court.

B. Order dated 15.09.2025

7. When the matter came up on 15.09.2025, the Vigilance Officer reported that crucial records and mahazars, which could shed light on the original cladding process, were missing. The available materials revealed that Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty had approached the Board in 2019, seeking permission to undertake gold-plating of the Dwarapalaka Idols at his own expense, and that an order to that effect had been issued on 05.07.2019. However, in the mahazar prepared during the removal of the plates, the gold-cladded copper sheets were misleadingly described merely as “copper plates.” Furthermore, on 20.07.2019, the "Peedam" on which the Dwarapalakas were placed was also entrusted to Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty.

7.1. The Vigilance Officer sought additional time to trace records indicating the precise quantity and value of gold used for cladding the

Sreekovil in 1998–1999. Meanwhile, this Court came across a communication dated 12.06.2019 from Smart Creations to the Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board, stating that the Moolasthana Front Door of the Sree Ayyappan Temple was plated with 24-carat gold at 7 gms/sq.ft., with a 35-year warranty, and the back Door was plated at 3 gms/sq.ft. with a 15-year warranty commencing from 04.03.2019. The company further claimed that 80–90% of the deposited 24-carat gold could be recovered.

7.2. E-mail correspondence from Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty to the Board revealed that another set of Dwarapalakas was kept in the strong room. As the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer reported his inability to trace the above Dwarapalakas, this Court ordered a detailed inquiry to locate them. This Court also observed that the quantity of gold required under traditional methods was substantial, raising the troubling question of why the gold-cladded Dwarapalakas were removed from Sannidhanam in flagrant violation of the Devaswom Manual and previous judicial directions.

7.3. In the said circumstances, this Court directed the Chief Vigilance Officer to seize and produce before this Court all remaining records, including the relevant 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.

C. Order dated 17.09.2025:

8. When the matter was taken up for consideration on 17.09.2025, the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer (Superintendent of Police) submitted that he had managed to seize certain registers and mahazars. However, he candidly admitted that several other crucial records were yet to be traced and secured. From the mahazars placed before this Court, it was revealed that the copper plates covering the Dwarapalakas were indeed gold-cladded and had been installed pursuant to the sanction granted by the Travancore Devaswom Board to the Divisional Engineer.

8.1. The mahazar prepared at the time of the removal of the Dwarapalaka Idols on 19.07.2019 disclosed that twelve copper plates of the Dwarapalakas, weighing 25.400 kilograms, and two Peedams, on which the Dwarapalakas stood, weighing 17.400 kilograms, were handed over to Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty on 19.07.2019 and 20.07.2019 respectively. The total weight of the entrusted items thus came to 42.800 kilograms. The records further showed that the gold-cladded Dwarapalakas and Peedams were produced by him at Smart Creations, Chennai, only on 29.08.2019, more than one month and nine days later. The mahazar dated 29.08.2019 recorded the total weight of the items as 38.258 kilograms, showing an unexplained reduction of 4.541 kilograms from the weight recorded at

Sannidhanam. After the gold plating was carried out, a further mahazar was drawn up, wherein the combined weight of the Dwarapalakas and Peedams was recorded as 38.653 kilograms, which still reflected a deficiency of 4.147 kilograms compared to the original weight of 42.800 kilograms. Astonishingly, while the gold-plated items were being re-fixed at Sannidhanam, the weight of the Dwarapalakas and Peedams was not recorded at all. This Court expressed its apprehension that the plates produced by Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty before Smart Creations might have been another set of copper plates altogether. This Court observed that it is an elementary and mandatory procedure that, when such precious gold-cladded articles with specific weight measurements are removed for plating, the weight upon reinstallation must be duly verified and documented, ensuring that the very same items handed over are the ones that were returned. The failure to adhere to this basic safeguard constitutes a serious procedural lapse and points to grave administrative negligence.

8.2. Considering that the irregularities unearthed strike at the very core of the integrity and transparency expected in the administration of a temple as sacred and renowned as Sabarimala, this Court directed the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer to undertake a comprehensive investigation into all the aspects noted above and to submit a detailed and reasoned report before this Court within a period of three weeks.

D. Order dated 29.09.2025:

9. The matter was thereafter taken up on 29.09.2025. On that day, the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer reported that, despite an exhaustive search, no additional Dwarapalaka Idols or Peedams had been traced.

However, it was brought to the notice of this Court that, during a search conducted on 27.09.2025 at the residence of one Mini, the sister of Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty, gold-plated Peedams concealed in a sealed cover were seized.

9.1. It was also noted that although Mr. Potty had been impleaded as the 7th respondent in SSCR No. 23 of 2025, he had failed to disclose that he was in possession of the Peedams. This Court observed that the Devaswom officials were equally, if not more, culpable, having placed such priceless sacred articles in the custody of a person with questionable antecedents, who had deliberately suppressed material facts.

9.2. This Court accordingly directed the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer to continue the investigation with utmost vigour and to uncover all instances of malpractice and complicity. It was further brought to the attention of this Court that the details of gold ornaments, silver articles, precious stones, antiques, and other valuables offered to the deity were not being properly maintained. Considering the gravity of such lapses, this Court ordered the compilation of a comprehensive and digitised inventory of all valuables at Sannidhanam and requested the assistance of Justice K.T. Sankaran, a former Judge of this Court, to oversee and carry out the said exercise, a request which was graciously accepted by the learned Judge.

9.3. The Vigilance Officer was also directed to examine in detail the lapses and omissions on the part of the Devaswom officials who had casually entrusted the priceless items of the deity, without maintaining the requisite registers and making the necessary entries, and to fix responsibility

for the irregularities brought to light during the course of investigation.

E. Order dated 06.10.2025:

10. Thereafter, when the matter was taken up on 06.10.2025, the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer (Superintendent of Police) produced before this Court a letter issued by the Manager (Finance), McDowell & Co. Ltd., addressed to the Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board. The said letter detailed the quantum of gold utilised for the gold cladding of the Sree Ayyappa Temple at Sabarimala, and reads as follows:

The Secretary
Travancore Devaswom Board
Thiruvananthapuram.

15.10.98

Dear Mr.V.S. Ramanujam,

We refer your letter ROC.3624/96/M dated 6.10.98 regarding the Gold Plating of the sreekovil of sree ayyappa swamy temple at sabarimala.

We give below the items and the gold used for the same.

		kg	gm	mlgrm
1. The roof of the Sreekovil (including the arch front & back view)	-	15219.980		
2. Rain gutter (above the hundi)	-	1155.510		
3. Hundi (in front of the sopanam)	-	1014.070		
4. Story of the Lord Ayyappa (both side of the sreekovil)	-	1750.000		
5. Front Door of the Sreekovil of Lord ayyappa and art above the Door.	-	2519.760		
6. Two Dwarapalakas in front of the sreekovil	-	1564.190		
7. Three Ghanadwarams (karnakudam)	-	1609.900		
8. Side beadings and 8 pillars around the sreekoil	-	4302.660		
9. 5nos of Kalasam including the kannimoola Ganapathy and Nagaraja. (kalasam handedover to officer incharge at sabarimala)	-	1154.930		

Total

- 30291.000

The total cost of the gold plating of the above items incurred by the company is Rs.190 lacs including the labour charges.

Thanking you
Yours faithfully,

S.R. JAYAKUMAR
MANAGER FINANCE

10.1. The above document conclusively establishes that the Dwarapalakas handed over by the Travancore Devaswom Board to Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty had been cladded with 1564.190 gms of gold, and therefore were not mere copper plates, as inaccurately and deliberately described in the mahazar dated 19.07.2019. This revelation fundamentally altered the complexion of the case and introduced elements indicative of the offences of theft, criminal misappropriation, falsification of records and criminal breach of trust. The unexplained reduction of approximately 4.5 kilograms in the recorded weight of the items upon their return after so-called “gold plating” was a matter of grave concern and demanded immediate judicial scrutiny.

10.2. This Court also noted that an e-mail had been sent by Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty to the President of the Travancore Devaswom Board, in which he admitted that he had retained gold in his possession after completing the gold work of Sabarimala and had even requested permission to utilise the said gold for the purpose of a girl’s marriage. The President of the Board, upon receiving the said communication, merely made an endorsement calling for a report from the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner. Shockingly, no further steps were taken by the Board to initiate criminal

proceedings against the said sponsor for unlawfully retaining gold belonging to the deity.

10.3. This Court observed that the above revelation demonstrated the alarming extent of collusion between Devaswom officials and Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty, reflecting a complete betrayal of the sanctity of temple property and the trust reposed in the institution by millions of devotees. Having regard to the extreme gravity of the matter, this Court ordered the constitution of a Special Investigation Team (SIT) comprising officers of unquestionable integrity to conduct a thorough, independent, and effective probe into the entire episode. The SIT was directed to complete its investigation within a period of six weeks.

F. Order dated 10.10.2025:

11. When the matter was next taken up on 10.10.2025, a copy of a communication dated 16.02.2019, issued by the Executive Officer, was placed before this Court. The said communication was to the effect that repairs to the Sreekovil doors at Sannidhanam, undertaken pursuant to the order dated 06.08.2018, had reached their final stages and that the doors would be brought back to Sannidhanam on or before 11.03.2019. It was further stated that the gold-cladded copper plates covering the door frames also needed gold plating.

11.1. The communication specifically recorded that the door frames were earlier gold-cladded, and the Executive Officer requested that orders be issued to hand over the said frames to Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty. Acting upon this request, the Devaswom Commissioner, by communication dated

06.03.2019, recommended to the Travancore Devaswom Board that the gold-cladded copper plates be handed over to Mr. Potty. However, in that communication, the items were erroneously and misleadingly described as “copper plates”, contrary to the Executive Officer’s description. On the basis of this recommendation, the Board, by decision dated 20.03.2019, approved the handing over of the gold-cladded copper plates covering the door frames to Mr. Potty. Shockingly, in the Board’s decision, the items were again referred to merely as “copper plates”. This Court noted that it was a matter of extreme gravity, as the door frames had also been cladded with gold using traditional methods involving substantial quantities of gold.

11.2. Pursuant to the said decision, a mahazar dated 18.05.2019 was prepared and signed by officers of the Board. Even therein, the door frames were described as “copper plates” and not as gold-cladded plates. Thereafter, Mr. Potty approached Smart Creations, Chennai for gold plating the side frames and the plate bearing the depiction of Lord Shiva, totalling seven plates. Although the concern had indicated that it lacked the technical expertise to carry out gold plating over already gold-cladded sheets, they nevertheless proceeded with the work on the insistence of Mr. Potty. A stripping solution was used to dissolve and remove the existing gold from the gold-cladded copper plates. Subsequently, 184 grams of gold were used for re-plating, and the plates were delivered on 15.06.2019, accompanied by a gold certificate issued in the name of Mr. Govardhan. The excess gold recovered in the process was stated to have been handed over to the sponsor.

11.3. Immediately thereafter, in August 2019, Mr. Potty handed over 14 pieces of gold-cladded Dwarapalakas to Smart Creations for plating. As

in the earlier instance concerning the door frames, the technicians of Smart Creations again expressed their lack of technical capability to perform such plating. However, on the insistence of Mr. Potty, the work was carried out. The records revealed that 394.95 grams of gold were used for plating the said items, while Smart Creations utilised 404.8 grams in total. Labour charges, plating invoices, and other incidental expenses, together amounting to 109.243 grams of gold (equivalent), were deducted on the instructions of Mr. Potty, leaving a balance of 474.9 grams of gold, which was handed over in solid form to one Mr. Kalpesh, who was stated to have been authorised by Mr. Potty.

11.4. Though the investigation initially commenced in respect of the Dwarapalakas, the facts unearthed revealed serious irregularities concerning the door frames as well. This Court further noted that the gold handed over to Mr. Potty was never re-entrusted to the Travancore Devaswom Board. The facts thus revealed that the handing over of gold-cladded articles mischaracterised as copper plates, the unauthorised extraction of gold, and the misappropriation of the extracted gold constituted clear offences under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023. This Court, therefore, directed the Special Investigation Team (SIT) to register appropriate crimes forthwith and to conduct a comprehensive, impartial, and expeditious investigation, ensuring that all individuals involved in the acts of theft, criminal misappropriation, breach of trust, falsification of records, and related offences are brought to justice.

G. Order dated 21.10.2025

12. When the matter was taken up on 21.10.2025, it was brought to

the notice of this Court that Crime No. 3700 of 2025 had been registered to investigate the offences arising out of the irregular entrustment of the gold-cladded Dwarapalakas and Peedams to Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty on 19.07.2019 and 20.07.2019, and their subsequent re-fixation on 11.09.2019, in violation of the Devaswom Manual. In respect of the side frames, a separate case, Crime No. 3701 of 2025, was registered. In our order dated 21.10.2025, we had specifically drawn attention to the suspicious circumstances surrounding this case and expressed our serious apprehension that the chain of events beginning in 2019, and culminating in the subsequent entrustment of the Dwarapalakas in 2025, formed part of a well-orchestrated and premeditated scheme. It now appears that after removing substantial quantities of gold from the originally gold-cladded Dwarapalakas, peedams, side frames, and doors, the perpetrators conducted superficial gold plating using only minimal quantities of gold. When this thin plating inevitably faded and revealed discrepancies, an attempt was made to cover up the earlier pilferage by clandestinely transporting the artefacts to Chennai under the pretext of re-plating. The entire sequence of actions unmistakably points to a systematic and deliberate misappropriation of temple assets executed under the guise of renovation and restoration. In that order, this Court had directed the SIT to thoroughly investigate the aspect of criminal conspiracy, noting that the chain of events commencing in 2019 and culminating in the subsequent entrustment of the Dwarapalakas in 2025, in defiance of the Devaswom Manual and earlier judicial orders, appeared to form part of a larger and well-orchestrated scheme. This Court had recorded detailed reasons for entertaining such a strong apprehension.

12.1. As the aforesaid orders were passed in SSCR No. 23 of 2025, based solely on the report filed by the Special Commissioner, Sabarimala, and since, in the course of the proceedings, Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty, Smart Creations, Chennai, and certain officers of the Travancore Devaswom Board were impleaded as respondents, this Court deemed it appropriate to direct the Registry to register a Writ Petition suo motu in relation to the facts and materials arising from SSCR No. 23 of 2025 invoking the powers of this Court under Article 226 of the Constitution of India.

H. Report of the SIT:

13. Today, when the matter was taken up, the team of officers heading the Special Investigation Team (SIT) appeared before us. We have interacted with them in-camera. A report detailing the progress of the investigation in CB PS Cr.3700/CB/CU-IV/TVPM/D/2025 and CB PS Cr.3701/CB/CU-IV/TVPM/D/2025 has also been placed before us. We have perused the report and find that the investigation is proceeding on the right lines.

I. Failure to keep the minutes book in order:

14. In the order dated 21.10.2025, this Court had directed the immediate seizure of the Minutes Book and other connected records. Pursuant to the said directions, the Minutes Book of the Travancore Devaswom Board has been seized, and a soft copy thereof has been produced before this Court. Upon a careful perusal of the Minutes and the relevant registers, we have noted serious discrepancies. The Minutes Book of the TDB has been updated only up to 28.07.2025, and even those entries

are found to be irregular and incomplete. We observe that the prevailing practice appears to be that Board Notes are prepared containing specific prayers, which are then signed by the President and the Members of the Board. Immediately thereafter, the decision so recorded is entered in the Minutes Book. The failure to maintain the Minutes in a regular and contemporaneous manner constitutes a grave lapse on the part of the TDB. The Minutes of a meeting are not a mere formality; they are a vital instrument of transparency and good governance. Properly maintained Minutes serve as an audit trail of decisions taken and actions implemented. The omission to record accurate and meaningful Minutes is symptomatic of deeper systemic deficiencies within the institution, and, at its worst, may reflect a deliberate attempt to obscure or conceal irregularities. It is particularly alarming that the communication of the Board Order dated 02.09.2025, granting permission to undertake repair works and gold plating of the Dwarapalakas at Smart Creations, Chennai, finds no entry whatsoever in the Minutes Book of the Board. This omission, in our considered view, is a matter of the utmost seriousness and warrants close scrutiny.

15. After having gone through the copies of the available minutes book, the various registers that have been seized and the mahazars, certain new aspects, which were not noticed earlier, have come to light.

J. The replacement of the Main Door to the Sreekovil:

16. We find that the records relating to the gold cladding of the Sreekovil, Dwarapalaks, Hundi etc., have indeed been carried out by McDowell & Co. Ltd. in the year 1998-1999. Those records clearly reveal that about 30 kg of 24-carat Gold was used for cladding using traditional

methods.

17. From the records now made available, we note that there are serious discrepancies insofar as the repairs to the main door to the Sreekovil as well. From the records, we have come across a letter dated 17.06.2019 issued by Mr. Unnikrishnan Potty addressed to the Executive Officer. In the said letter, Mr. Potty states that he has already gold-plated the door to the Sreekovil and the lintels. He also offers to gold plate the Dwarapalakas and also the copper coverings on the South and Northern corners of the Sreekovil under his sponsorship. In response, the Administrative Officer has issued a letter to the Executive Officer, wherein also the mentioning of the repair work carried out to the Door of the Sreekovil has been mentioned. The records reveal that Mr. Potty was granted the permission to carry out the repair works to the doors of the Sreekovil. On the basis of the said permission, Mr. Potty employed one Mr. Nandan, a carpenter, and he was brought to Sannidhanam to take the measurements of the main door. As Nandan had come to Sannidhanam during the period when the "Nada" was open, the Keezhsanthis had removed the Doors and handed over to him for taking the measurements, and thereafter the doors were placed back. This was possible because the doors were hung from an inverse lock and could be easily removed without much intervention. He then went back and purchased Teak wood from a timber merchant in Thrissur, and then the wood was taken to the Sree Ramapuram Ayyappa Temple at Bangalore. After finishing the work, the door was brought back to Sannidhanan via Thrissur and its fitting was tested. After confirming that everything was in order, the doors were taken to Hyderabad for carrying out the copper

plating. The doors were then brought back to Sannidhanam, and it was again latched onto the lock to check its fitting. After finding that the fitting was in order, the copper-plated doors were taken to Chennai for gold plating. The gold plating was carried out at Chennai on 01.03.2019 and 02.03.2019. For witnessing the gold plating, Mr. Potty issued a letter to the Board on 26.02.2019 requesting for the presence of the Board President and its Officers and offered to arrange accommodation for them. The Board, by its letter No. ROC No. 9097/18/M dated 28.02.2019 directed the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner and other Officers to be present at Chennai to witness the gold plating. A mahazar was prepared on 03.03.2019, as per which 324.400 gms of gold was used for gold plating the doors of the Sreekovil. In the mahazar prepared by the then Thiruvabharanam Commissioner, Sri. K.S. Baiju, it is stated that the gold plated doors are being handed over back to Mr. Potty for producing the same at Sabarimala. However, Mr. Potty has not subscribed his signature on the same. Though the plating was carried out on 03.03.2019, the doors were produced at Sannidhanam only on 11.03.2019. When the doors were brought to Sabarimala, a mahazar was prepared by Sri. Sudheesh Kumar, the Executive Officer and Sri. Murari Babu, the Administrative Officer. The investigation also revealed that during the period during which the doors were in the custody of Mr. Potty, a function was organised at Elampally Temple, Kottayam, and the same was attended by an actor, the then President of the TDB and members. As per practice and the manual, the repair of the door can only be carried out under the strict supervision of the Maramath Department. In the case on hand, a free reign was given to Mr. Potty to carry out the work of the main door. In this context, it would be profitable to note

that the front Door of the Sreekoil of Lord Ayyappa and art above the Door was cladded with 2519.760 gms of Gold by McDowell & Co. Ltd. in the year 1998-1999 using 24K Gold. It was after this Court had ordered the investigation by the Vigilance that the old doors to the Sreekovil were found lying exposed to the seasons near the Ashtabhishekam Counter. It was only then that the doors were shifted to the strong room. It needs to be ascertained whether the doors seized by the SIT after commencement of the instant proceedings is the door to the Sreekovil, which was cladded with 2519.760 gms of gold in the year 1998-1999. It has also to be ascertained whether the Main Door was permitted to be taken away by Mr. Potty by the TDB officials after replacing the gold clad main door with a door brought by Mr. Potty plated with just 324.400 gms of gold. The SIT shall investigate into the above aspects to pin the role of the perpetrators.

18. From the above, it is evident that Mr. Potty commenced his dubious activities in collusion with certain Devaswom Board officials, beginning with the so-called “sponsorship” of gold-plating the main door of the Sreekovil. What appears at first glance to be an act of devotion has, on closer scrutiny, all the hallmarks of a calculated deceit. It is deeply alarming that the Devaswom Board authorities have been shockingly casual and negligent in permitting an individual of questionable integrity to take measurements and produce replicas of sacred and invaluable temple elements, including the main doors, Dwarapalakas, Peedams, and other sanctum artefacts. Records show that in one of Mr. Potty’s own communications, he acknowledged that a set of Dwarapalakas was stored in the strong room and demanded that they be handed over to him under the

pretext of extracting gold for plating a second set. Further, the Devaswom Vigilance Department seized two Peedams from the residence of Mr. Potty's sister, reinforcing the pattern of irregular and unauthorized possession of temple property. It is by now clear that Mr. Potty and his associates were granted unrestricted access by complicit officials, enabling them to take precise measurements and fabricate replicas of sacred artefacts. Such replicas, crafted under the guise of temple work, could readily be sold in international markets at astronomical prices, a well-documented modus operandi of art smugglers and conmen worldwide. This bears disturbing resemblance to the operations of notorious figures like Subhash Kapoor, the international temple-art thief, who similarly exploited religious patronage to loot and traffic priceless heritage objects. We direct the SIT to also make part of their investigation the entrustment of the repairs of the main door to the Sreekovil to Mr. Potty in the first quarter of the year 2019.

K. The further irregularities in connection with the gold plating of Dwarapalakas in September, 2025:

19. We have carefully perused the Board notes and the mahazars concerning the gold plating of the Dwarapalakas, which was undertaken in September 2025.

20. From the records placed before us, it is seen that on 03.09.2024, the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner addressed a communication to the Secretary, reporting that numerous cracks had appeared on the Dwarapalakas and that several copper plates had detached. The plating had also worn off. He further stated that the President had instructed that the repair works be completed before the commencement of

the temple season, beginning on 15 November 2024, and requested urgent orders to that effect.

21. Subsequently, on 27.09.2024, the Board passed an order permitting the execution of the repair works under sponsorship. On 02.10.2024, the Executive Officer addressed the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner, informing him that the sponsor, Mr Potty, who had earlier carried out the electroplating of the doors and Dwarapalakas was willing to undertake the repair works and had conveyed his concurrence by email. It was further stated that Mr. Potty had offered to transport the copper plates to his factory in Chennai, if permitted, for electroplating and repair, with an undertaking to return them before the season commenced.

22. In a letter dated 09.10.2024, the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner confirmed that the Board had granted sanction to execute an agreement and proceed with the repair. The letter referred to serious damages identified by the Devaswom Smith and recorded Mr. Potty's undertaking to return the Dwarapalakas after the repairs. However, it also acknowledged that the Devaswom Board Sub-Group Manual expressly prohibits the shifting of sacred artefacts outside temple premises for repair. Despite this, citing the urgency of the season, the Commissioner sought permission to allow the sponsor to take the items out of the Sannidhanam.

23. Following this, on 16.10.2024, the Executive Officer requested that the Dwarapalakas be handed over to the sponsor on 21.10.2024, to ensure reinstallation before Mandala Pooja on 15.11.2024. By order dated 01.11.2024, the Board approved the proposal and permitted removal of the Dwarapalakas from the Sannidhanam for repairs, directing that officers of

the Board accompany and supervise the works. The President and Members of the Board had already signed and approved the request on 30.10.2024.

24. It must be borne in mind that this Court had explicitly directed that, under no circumstances, shall such sacred artefacts be removed or repaired without prior intimation to the Special Commissioner. The Board, therefore, cannot plead ignorance, either of the Devaswom Sub-Group Manual or of the binding order dated 30.06.2023 in SSCR No. 13 of 2023. The Board and its officers were fully aware that Mr. Potty was a person who had retained the leftover gold amounting to approximately 474.97 grams. Nevertheless, in flagrant disregard of both statutory and judicial mandates, the Board proceeded to approve the removal of the artefacts, thereby acting in conscious violation of the directions of this Court.

25. Despite the purported urgency, the Dwarapalakas were never taken for repair before the commencement of the temple season on 15 November 2024, which concluded in January 2025. This, by itself, clearly demonstrates that the plea of urgency was contrived, lacking in bona fides, and intended only to circumvent the judicial safeguards in place.

26. Matters assumed a more dubious complexion in July 2025, when steps were once again initiated to fabricate a false sense of emergency. The Board, in fact, had ample time between January 2025 and November 2025 to undertake the necessary repair work at the Sannidhanam itself, in full compliance with the Devaswom Manual and the binding directions of this Court. The 2025–2026 temple season was scheduled to commence on 15 November 2025, and it was evidently with that impending date in view that fresh proceedings were initiated to send the Dwarapalakas for repair.

The objective appears to have been to remove the Dwarapalakas without seeking the permission of this Court and in direct violation of the Devaswom Manual, by raising the bogey of the approaching temple season. In his report dated 30.07.2025, the Thiruvabharanam Commissioner observed that Smart Creations lacked the technical expertise to remove the existing gold cladding, which could only be undertaken through traditional methods. The Devaswom Smith estimated that approximately 303 grams of gold would be required to re-clad the Dwarapalakas, Peedam, Thangu Peedam, Lintel, Door Panels, Lakshmi Roopam, and Kamanam, applying the accepted standard of three grams per square foot. Strikingly, in a complete reversal, the same Commissioner, by his subsequent report dated 08.08.2025, recommended that the gold-cladded components be transported to Smart Creations for electroplating and urged that an emergent meeting be convened to finalise the decision. Acting upon that recommendation, the Travancore Devaswom Board, by order dated 03.09.2025, resolved to send the gold-cladded plates of the Dwarapalakas, Thangu Peedam, and associated items to Smart Creations. At no stage during this entire process was there any reference to the Devaswom Sub-Group Manual or to the binding judicial orders, both of which the Board and its officers were duty-bound to observe and enforce.

27. It can only be reasonably inferred that those in positions of authority were apprehensive that compliance with statutory and judicial mandates would inevitably expose the irregularities committed in 2019. This inference assumes even greater significance in light of the discrepancy in weight between the Dwarapalakas, the set returned in 2019 being over 4

kilograms lighter than when originally removed. If, as the records suggest, an entirely different set of Dwarapalakas was substituted under the guise of repair, it would amount not merely to a grave breach of fiduciary and statutory obligations, but to an act of criminal misappropriation of sacred temple property of profound cultural, artistic, and spiritual value. Such a course of conduct could not have been accomplished without the active connivance, knowledge, or deliberate inaction of officials of the Board. In **A.A. Gopalakrishnan v. Cochin Devaswom Board**¹, a Three-Judge Bench of the Apex Court has held that the properties of deities, temples and Devaswom Boards require to be protected and safeguarded by their trustees/archakas/shebaites/employees. The Apex Court has also observed that it is the duty of courts to protect and safeguard the properties of religious and charitable institutions from wrongful claims or misappropriation. Every official who played any role, whether by authorising, facilitating, or wilfully overlooking these violations, has thereby aided and abetted the commission of the act, rendering themselves jointly and severally responsible for the desecration and misappropriation of sacred property entrusted to their care.

28. We have no doubt that the Travancore Devaswom Board, being a statutory body constituted under the Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions Act, 1950, is the trustee of temple property, holding it in fiduciary capacity for the deity and the devotees. Its officers, including the President and Members of the Board, are trustees in law, though appointed by the Government. They owe a threefold duty—to the deity, as the juristic

¹ [(2007) 7 SCC 482]

owner of temple property; to the devotees, as beneficiaries of the trust; and to the State, as the appointing authority responsible for statutory compliance and constitutional accountability. We direct the SIT to look into the above aspects that we have highlighted as well.

L. Need to conduct scientific investigation:

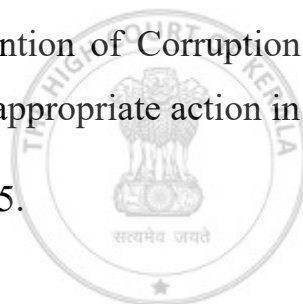
29. The SIT has requested that permission be granted to the SIT to carry out scientific investigation and to arrive at a conclusion with regard to the actual loss of gold in 2019. As the Dwarapalakas, which were gold plated in 2025, were refixed after obtaining orders from this Court, it is necessary to carry out the scientific examination in a diligent manner. We direct the SIT to ensure completion of all tests on or before 15.11.2025, on which day the Nada opens for the Mandala-Makaravilakku Season. We permit the SIT to carry out the following tests:

- i. Weighing the Dwarapalaka idol plates and side pillar plates which were gold plated during 2019 and 2025.
- ii. Weighing the side door frame plates and connected plates (as the weight of the same has not been taken at the time of re-installation) which were gold plated during 2019.
- iii. Taking a certain piece of the cladded gold from any of the similar pillars (on which gold was cladded by McDowell & Co. Ltd. in 1998) for assessing the actual quantity of gold plated on the questioned plates and the actual loss of gold during the transaction in 2019.

- iv. Measuring the area of the plates involved in the case.
- v. Taking samples of Copper from the Dwarapalaka idol plates, side door frames along with any of the existing plates which were not handed over for gold plating, in order to verify the actual facts on the allegation that the Dwarapalaka idol plates might have been swapped (for subjecting the pieces for physical, Chemical tests such as electrical conductivity test, spectroscopic analysis, micro structure examination etc.)

30. The Special Investigation Team (SIT) shall also examine whether the facts and circumstances of the present case attract the provisions of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, against any of the officers, and, if so, take appropriate action in accordance with law.

Post on 03.12.2025.



Sd/-

**RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V,
JUDGE**

Sd/-

**K.V. JAYAKUMAR,
JUDGE**

APM