IN THE HIGH COURT OF KERALA AT ERNAKULAM

PRESENT

THE HONOURABLE MR. JUSTICE RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V

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THE HONOURABLE MR.JUSTICE K. V. JAYAKUMAR

WEDNESDAY, THE 15TH DAY OF JULY 2026 / 24TH ASHADHA, 1948

SSCR NO. 14 OF 2026

(IN THE MATTER OF TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD- SABARIMALA SPECIAL COMMISSIONER REPORT SM NO. 14/2026- REPORT SUBMITTED BY THE SPECIAL COMMISSIONER, SABARIMALA REGARDING UNAUTHORIZED SUPPLY OF POOJA MATERIALS BY SUNIL KUMAR @ SUNIL SWAMY AND MISAPPROPRIATION IN PURCHASING THE POOJA MATERIALS. SUO MOTU PROCEEDINGS INITIATED- REG.)

PETITIONER:

SUO MOTU

RESPONDENTS:

1 STATE OF KERALA
REPRESENTED BY THE SECRETARY TO GOVERNMENT, REVENUE (DEVASWOM) DEPARTMENT, GOVERNMENT SECRETARIAT, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM-695001.

2 CHIEF POLICE CO ORDINATOR(ADDITIONAL DIRECTOR GENERAL OF POLICE) (POLICE HEADQUARTERS)
SABARIMALA, PATHANAMTHITTA, PIN-689713.

3 DEPUTY DIRECTOR
LOCAL FUND AUDIT,TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM-695003.

4 TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD
REPRESENTED BY ITS SECRETARY, NANTHANCODE, KAWDIAR

POST, THIRUVANANTHAPURM-695003.

5 DEVASWOM COMMISSIONER
TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD, DEVASWOM
BUILDINGS,NANTHANCODE, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, PIN-695003.

6 EXECUTIVE OFFICER
SABARIMALA, SABARIMALA.P.O., PATHANAMTHITTA-689662.

7 CHIEF VIGILANCE & SECURITY OFFICER(SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE), TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM HEAD QUARTERS, NANTHANCODE, KAWDIAR POST, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM-695003.

BY ADVS.
SHRI.S.RAJMOHAN, SENIOR G.P.
SHRI.G.BIJU,SC,TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD
ADV. SAYUJYA RADHAKRISHNAN (AMICUS CURIAE)
ADV. K.R. SUNIL, SPL, GP, DEVASWOM

THIS SABARIMALA SPECIAL COMMISSIONER REPORT HAVING COME UP FOR ADMISSION ON 15.07.2026, THE COURT ON THE SAME DAY DELIVERED THE FOLLOWING:

<u>O R D E R</u>

<u>Raja Vijayaraghavan V, J.</u>

The instant SSCR was registered on the basis of a special report submitted by the Special Commissioner, Sabarimala, regarding the supply of pooja materials by one Sunil Kumar @ Sunil Swami and the alleged misappropriation in the purchase of pooja materials.

2. Two statements have been filed by the Senior Deputy Director, Kerala State Audit Department.

3. In the statement dated 19.06.2026, after detailing the facts and circumstances, it is stated that insofar as Ashtabhishekam is concerned, the devotees are charged a sum of ₹6,000/- for conducting one Ashtabhishekam, out of which a sum of ₹300/- is earmarked towards procurement of pooja materials. Out of the 8 materials required for pooja, 5 items are being issued through the Devaswom store itself, whereas the remaining 3 items, i.e., milk, tender coconut and panineer are allegedly procured independently by the Administrative Officer concerned.

4. It is stated that the Audit had requested the Executive Officer, Sabarimala, to furnish the details of the Vazhipadu articles received from the Devaswom main store and those received through sponsorship vide Audit Requisition No. 1 dated 01.06.2026. The Ashtabishekam Vazhipadu ledger, Main

store ledger, etc. were produced and the Administrative Officer reported that no Vazhipadu articles for conduct of Ashtabhishekam Vazhipadu were received through donation or sponsorship. The Audit has reported that no Stock Register or Ledger was maintained for the Vazhipadu articles viz., milk, panineer and tender coconut procured directly by the Administrative Officer. To the audit, the Administrative Officer reported that only the amount sanctioned by the Board towards supplier costs was drawn and therefore, no ledger was maintained for the articles procured and no purchase bills and other supporting documents relating to the procurement of Vazhipadu articles were furnished along with the Koottu bill preferred for drawal of supplier costs. The audit has recommended that instructions are to be issued for the proper maintenance of records relating to stock accounting for all Vazhipadu articles to facilitate effective inventory control and accountability. The audit has also reported, after perusing the records for the past 10 years that a total number of 31,313 Vazhipadus were conducted during this period and the supplier cost claimed by the Administrator is to the tune of ₹93,93,900 by the various Administrative Officers.

5. It is stated that since the total amount for Ashtabhishekam Vazhipadu was fully remitted to the Devaswom Fund and only the admissible supplier cost amount was claimed by the Administrative Officer after conducting the Vazhipadu, no loss has been sustained to the Devaswom Board in this regard. The Audit Department has also recommended that in view of the established supply

arrangements, the possibility of procuring all the Vazhipadu articles through the Devaswom main store should be carried out.

6. In the statement dated, 29.06.2026, the Senior Deputy Director has perused the accounts related to the conduct of Ganapathi Homam, Nithyanidhanam and Mahanivedyam in Sabarimala Devaswom and the drawal of supplier cost for the period from 2016-2017 to 2025-2026. Insofar as the Ganapathi Homams were concerned, it is stated that during the period from 16.11.2016 to 31.03.2026, an amount of ₹5,07,304 had been sanctioned as supplier cost for Departmental Ganapathi Homam at the rate of ₹456 per day. Further supplier cost amounting to ₹60,89,115 was sanctioned in respect of ₹1,31,182 Ganapathi Homam Vazhipadus performed as 'Puramvaka' during the above period. The details have also been furnished.

7. It is stated by the audit that the item-wise details of materials obtained through sponsorship, cash bills/invoice of material, quantity procured thereof were not provided for audit verification and therefore, audit could not ascertain the veracity of the actual expenditure that has been incurred.

8. It is further stated that Audit Enquiry No. 37 dated 17.06.2026 was issued, requesting production of purchase bills, vouchers and other supporting records. The auditor has reported that no reply has been furnished and the required records have not been produced for verification. It is stated that in the absence of

supporting documents, the correctness and authenticity of the expenditure amounting to ₹65,96,419/- could not be verified in audit, which was carried out pursuant to the directions issued by this Court.

9. Insofar as Mahanivedhyam and Nithyanidhanam/Pathivu Vazhipadu is concerned, it is stated that the Mahanivedhyam and Nithyanidhanam/Pathivu is currently regulated by the conditions mentioned in ROC No. 4750/25/SAB dated 11.06.2025. Insofar as Mahanivedyam is concerned, it is stated that though ROC No.4750/2025/SAB dated 11.06.2025 was issued, the same was implemented only from May 2026. The audit has not been furnished with any information as to the delay in implementation of the same. Insofar as Nithyanidhanam is concerned, it is stated that Audit Enquiry No. 33 dated 17.06.2026 was served and the Travancore Devaswom Board was requested to furnish certain records and clarifications. However, the records sought for in the Audit Enquiry were not supplied except the Nithyanidhanam Ledger relating to the period from 17.07.2025 to 19.05.2026.

10. The Nithyanidhanam Ledger produced for audit records that all materials required for Nithyanidhanam were sponsored by Sri. Sunil Kumar. Though the Board order authorising or approving the said sponsorship was requested for verification and copies of general orders issued by the Travancore Devaswom Board was requested for verification, the same was not furnished. Insofar as other Vazhipadu which are conducted through sponsorships are concerned, it is stated

that the core issue is with regard to using materials received through sponsorship arising from the lack of transparency and proper accounting at major temples including Sabarimala. Sponsorship includes in kind donations in addition to cash contributions, and it is imperative that TDB should ensure all non-cash items are properly received and accounted for. To verify the authenticity and volume of all the items received via sponsorship at Sabarimala during the Mandalam-Makaravilakku festival of 1201 ME, an Audit Enquiry was issued vide No. 59/07-01-026 to the Executive Officer, Sabarimala. Subsequently, another Audit Enquiry vide No. 80/17-01-26 was issued for production of Nadavaravu Vazhipadu Register, which is the register meant to record all the offerings made within the temple sanctum. The audit has reported that to date the requested documents have not been furnished nor a formal reply has been furnished.

11. After conducting the audit, the following recommendations have been made by the audit department:

(i) The existing practice of sanctioning supplier cost must be discontinued and practice of supply of items through Sabarimala Devaswom store must be effected. The items for all Vazhipadu may be procured through wide publicity and in accordance with Store Purchase Manual. Appropriate records should be maintained for the issue of items through department stores with proper supervision and accounting.

(ii) There should be absolute adherence to Sections 25, 26, 31, 32 and 35 of the TCHRI Act, 1950, along with its Devaswom Manual and Rules.

(iii) DFF No.3 receipt shall be issued for the materials offered by sponsors as Vazhipadu.

12. In the additional report submitted by the Special Commissioner, the report dated 01.07.2026 of the Chief Vigilance and Security Officer, prepared pursuant to a detailed enquiry, has been produced. We have carefully perused the said report. The Chief Vigilance and Security Officer has, upon enquiry, made the following recommendations:

(i) The milk, panineer (rose water) and tender coconuts required for Ashtabhishekam Vazhipadu shall be procured only from authorised vendors, and only branded products shall be used.

(ii) The panineer used for Ashtabhishekam shall conform to the prescribed quality standards and shall bear the ISI certification.

(iii) The custody of the Nithyanidhana Store shall be entrusted to the Store Superintendent.

(iv) The vessels used for supplying the materials required for Ashtabhishekam Vazhipadu shall be standardised and of uniform capacity.

(v) With regard to the use of plantains in the preparation of Appam, it has been reported that, during the rainy season, plantains are not used in the manufacturing process to avoid moisture-related deterioration. If that be so, the cost of plantains shall not be included in the cost of the Vazhipadu or recovered from the devotees.

(vi) All purchases shall be supported by proper bills and documentary records.

13. The learned Standing Counsel has placed before us a copy of Order No. EOP No.543/2026/SAB dated 14.07.2026, together with Board Order No. ROC.04/2026/SAB dated 13.07.2026.

14. From the said proceedings, it is evident that the Travancore Devaswom Board, by its decision dated 10.07.2026, has resolved that all materials required for the conduct of Vazhipadus at Sabarimala shall henceforth be procured, stored and issued exclusively through the Central Store. This effectively brings to an end the existing practice of entrusting the procurement of such materials to the Administrative Officer or any other officer in the capacity of a supplier or contractor.

15. The proceedings further reveal that items such as milk, flowers, tender coconuts and plantains shall be procured and distributed solely through the Central Store. It is also provided that the entire inventory management and transactions of the Central Store shall be fully digitised. Materials received from sponsors shall be accepted only through the Central Store, and receipts in DFF No.3 shall be issued to the sponsors. The materials so received shall be subjected to quality and safety

checks by the officers of the Food Safety Department stationed at Sannidhanam before being utilised for temple purposes.

16. It is submitted that the Board Order dated 13.07.2026 shall be implemented with effect from the commencement of the Chingamasa Pooja. Insofar as the audit objections are concerned, the learned Standing Counsel has also produced before us the response dated 14.07.2026 submitted by the Executive Officer.

17. We find that, insofar as Sannidhanam is concerned, the long-standing practice whereby the Administrative Officer himself functioned as the supplier or contractor for the procurement of materials required for Vazhipadus has now been discontinued. We are firm in our view that the practice of permitting an officer of the Devaswom Board to function simultaneously as a supplier or contractor is wholly inappropriate and has no place in the administration of a public religious institution. Such an arrangement is a grossly unholy practice in a holy place. The said practice violates the principles of transparency, accountability and institutional integrity, and gives rise to conflicts of interest and the distinct possibility of abuse of official position.

18. We commend the Travancore Devaswom Board for taking the decision to abolish this practice at Sabarimala. We direct the Board to undertake a comprehensive review of the procurement practices followed in all other temples

under its administration and to ensure that similar arrangements, if existing elsewhere, are discontinued in a phased and time-bound manner so as to eliminate avenues for arbitrariness, favouritism and corruption.

19. We direct the Travancore Devaswom Board to faithfully implement the decisions contained in the Board Order dated 13.07.2026 in its letter as well as spirit and to ensure strict compliance with the safeguards and procedural reforms introduced therein.

The Special Commissioner Report stands closed.

Sd/-

RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V

JUDGE

Sd/-

K. V. JAYAKUMAR

JUDGE

msp

APPENDIX OF SSCR NO. 14 OF 2026

RESPONDENT ANNEXURES

Annexure R4(a)	TRUE COPY OF THE ORDER VIDE ROC NO. 5600/26/EST-1 DATED 12.06.2026 ISSUED BY THE SECRETARY, TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD
Annexure R4(b)	TRUE COPY OF THE ORDER VIDE ROC NO. 5600/26/EST-1 DATED 16.06.2026 ISSUED BY THE SECRETARY, TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD
Annexure R4(c)	TRUE COPY OF THE ORDER VIDE ROC NO. 5600/26/EST-1 DATED 30.05.2026, REGARDING TRANSFER AND POSTING OF OFFICERS IN THE CADRE OF DEPUTY DEVASWOM COMMISSIONERS ISSUED BY THE SECRETARY, TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD