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

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DBAR No. 1 of 2026 & SSCR No. 3 of 2026

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Dated this the 23rd day of September, 2026

O R D E R

Raja Vijayaraghavan V, J.

The Sabarimala Special Commissioner Report No. 3 of 2026 was registered on the basis of the report submitted by the Special Commissioner regarding the alleged misappropriation of money at the Ghee Sales Counter.

2. Devaswom Board Audit Report No. 1 of 2026 has been filed by the Joint Director of the Kerala State Audit Department, Travancore Devaswom Board Audit Wing, pursuant to the verification of Adiyashishtam Neyy Prasadam conducted during the 1201 M.E. Mandalam and Makaravilakku Festivals at Sabarimala.

3. Initially, this Court had ordered the registration of Vigilance Case No. VC 02/2026/PTA under various provisions of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988. The first phase of the investigation was conducted by a Special Investigation Team, with the Deputy Superintendent of Police, Vigilance and Anti-Corruption Bureau (V&ACB), Pathanamthitta Unit, as the Investigating Officer and the Superintendent of Police, V&ACB, Southern Range, Thiruvananthapuram, as the Supervisory Officer. Numerous witnesses were examined in the course of the investigation.

4. Thereafter, in the report dated 29.05.2026, the Investigating Officer detailed the steps taken during the investigation. It was stated that, though the Travancore Devaswom Board had suffered a loss of ₹17,14,460/- (Rupees Seventeen Lakh Fourteen Thousand Four Hundred and Sixty only), as revealed by the audit conducted and verified during the investigation, the Investigating Officer recommended that all further proceedings against accused Nos. 1 to 13 and 15 to 43 be dropped for the reasons stated in the report. The Vigilance, however, recommended the initiation of stringent disciplinary proceedings against all the accused under the Kerala Civil Services (Vigilance Tribunal) Rules, 1960. Permission was also sought to drop all further action in the criminal case.

5. When the matter was taken up on 09.06.2026, this Court was of the view that the matter required further reassessment and, accordingly, directed that the investigation be entrusted to a Senior Officer having proven integrity and the requisite experience and capability.

6. In compliance with the said direction, a detailed report has now been placed before this Court. In the concluding remarks, it is stated that the alleged loss in the sale proceeds of Adiyashishtam Ghee packets at Sabarimala during the period from 16.11.2025 to 27.12.2025 was not solely the result of intentional misappropriation by any of the employees deployed for counter duty. According to the report, the loss was attributable to serious carelessness in the handling of the various processes relating to the production, storage, transit, distribution and sale of Adiyashishtam Ghee.

7. It is further stated that no individual criminal liability can presently be attributed to any employee of the Travancore Devaswom Board or to the counter sales staff on duty in relation to the alleged misappropriation of the sale proceeds of the said packets. The report states that no dishonest intention can be attributed to any individual counter sales staff and that reliance can only be placed on the records presently available for audit, which themselves contain inter se discrepancies. On the basis of the material presently available, the report states that it is not possible to conclude that accused Nos. 1 to 43, except accused No. 14, had misappropriated the amounts received from the sale of Adiyashishtam Ghee during the relevant period.

8. It is further stated that there are presently no materials to establish that any conspiracy was hatched between the packing contractor, the counter sales staff, the Temple Special Officers and the Executive Officer with an intention to misappropriate Devaswom funds, so as to proceed against them under the relevant provisions of the Prevention of Corruption Act and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. The report nevertheless concludes that, based on the records maintained in this regard, there has been a loss of public money in the sale of Adiyashishtam Ghee packets at Sabarimala. Though some public servants may be responsible for the lapses resulting in such loss, the report states that it is not possible, on the materials presently available, to ascertain their individual criminal responsibility, the quantum of gain, if any, or the probable or exact date, time and place of the acts in question.

9. It is further stated that the loss sustained by the Travancore Devaswom Board was caused by the careless and callous conduct of its officials, including the

Executive Officer, the Temple Special Officers and the counter sales staff who were deployed during the relevant period for handling the production, storage and distribution of Adiyashishtam Ghee packets during the Mandala Makaravilakku Season 2025 2026, from 16.11.2025 to 27.12.2025.

10. From the report, we find that:

a. Out of the thirty-nine counter sales staff deployed for duty during the relevant period, ten had entered service only in November 2025. They were deployed at the sales counters in the very same month in which they joined service and were, therefore, wholly inexperienced in handling the responsibilities assigned to them.

b. Out of the three officials deployed as Temple Special Officers during the relevant period, one had a service of only five months, having been recruited through the Employment Exchange as Overseer Grade II.

c. It is also borne out from the investigation that most of the Senior Officers occupying managerial positions at Sannidhanam had initially entered service as last grade employees and had risen through the ranks by virtue of their length of service.

11. We have no doubt that, unless the supervisory positions are manned by officers possessing the necessary managerial capacity, experience and vision, incidents of this nature are likely to recur. The manner in which accounts, registers and other records are maintained at Sannidhanam also leaves much to be desired.

The deficiencies revealed in the present case demonstrate the need for a clearly defined system of responsibility, supervision, verification and accountability at every stage of the handling and sale of Adiyashishtam Ghee.

12. When the matter came up for consideration on 29.05.2026, we had directed the Devaswom Board to take effective steps to implement the following measures:

(a) The duties, responsibilities, and accountability of all personnel involved in the sale of Adiya Sishtam Ghee, including Assistant Temple Special Officers and counter staff, shall be clearly defined, documented, and notified.

(b) Formal proceedings shall be issued specifying the exact duty periods, dates, timings, and counters to which individual staff members are deputed, so as to ensure accountability and traceability.

(c) The practice of deploying newly recruited employees with minimal service experience as Temple Special Officers or counter staff shall be discontinued, except in exceptional circumstances, so as to ensure efficient and accountable functioning.

(d) At present, a single staff member issues both tickets and ghee packets at the Maramathu-II and Padinjarenada counters. This practice has evidently facilitated misappropriation and shall be discontinued forthwith. Separate personnel shall be assigned for ticket issuance and distribution of ghee packets.

(e) The six storage tanks presently used for storing purified ghee, having capacities of 14,700 litres, 19,700 litres, and 3,500 litres, do not contain visible graduation markings or storage indicators. All such tanks shall be scientifically calibrated and prominently marked to facilitate accurate determination of stock at any given point of time.

(f) A digital flow meter shall be installed in the ghee transfer pipeline to accurately record and monitor the quantity of ghee transferred to the packing unit, both instantaneously and cumulatively.

(g) A robust and verifiable accounting mechanism shall be introduced. Separate registers shall be maintained for receipt and supply of ghee packets. Every transaction shall be duly recorded, acknowledged, and periodically verified. Physical stock verification shall be conducted regularly, and all loss, wastage, or damage shall be properly quantified and accounted for.

(h) Individual registers shall be maintained at every counter to ensure transparency and accountability during shift changes. Every outgoing staff member shall record and certify the stock handed over, and the incoming staff member shall acknowledge the same.

(i) The Board shall accord priority to the comprehensive computerisation of all activities connected with the preparation, storage, accounting, and sale of offerings, including Adiya Sishtam Ghee, so as to ensure transparency, accuracy, and real-time monitoring.

(j) The packing machine shall be equipped with a digital display system capable of automatically recording the number of packets produced during specified intervals. Every packet shall mandatorily contain the batch number, packing date, and a unique QR code to ensure traceability. Periodic quality checks shall also be undertaken.

(k) The unauthenticated steel tank presently used for storage prior to packing, in respect of which the quantity of ghee stored cannot be independently verified, shall be replaced or supplemented with a properly calibrated and authenticated container equipped with visible measurement indicators.

(l) Though bookings can presently be made through the sabarimalaonline.org portal, the system does not identify the specific counter or staff member responsible for distribution. The portal shall therefore be upgraded by providing unique user credentials to all deputed staff, thereby ensuring a clear and auditable digital trail of every transaction.

(m) Similar deficiencies exist in the onlinetdb.com portal, which presently lacks functionality for tracking actual disbursement of ghee packets, including Adiya Sishtam Ghee. Necessary modifications shall be carried out forthwith to ensure comprehensive transaction tracking and accountability.

(n) High-definition CCTV cameras shall be installed at all counters, and the recorded footage shall be preserved for a minimum period of ninety days to facilitate audit, vigilance scrutiny, and investigation whenever required.

13. The learned Standing Counsel appearing for the Devaswom Board submitted that the Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board, has placed on record a detailed procedure purportedly prepared by the Executive Officer, Sabarimala, with a view to streamlining the operations at Sannidhanam.

14. We direct the Board to examine the modalities contained in the said report prepared by the Executive Officer and to formulate a detailed Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), incorporating the directions issued by this Court as well as the suggestions made by the Executive Officer. The SOP shall clearly define the duties and responsibilities of the officers and staff at each stage of the process and

shall incorporate appropriate mechanisms for supervision, stock verification, accounting, digital tracking and accountability. The same shall be formulated and placed before this Court within a period of three weeks from today.

15. Coming back to the Vigilance Report, we find that the Vigilance has finally concluded that the conduct of the officials of the Devaswom, though serious in nature, is insufficient to warrant initiation of criminal prosecution. They have not been able to fix individual responsibility or to ascertain the precise mode and manner in which the loss occurred to the Devaswom Board in the sale of "Adiyashishtam Ghee packets. In that view of the matter, we accept the report dated 22.09.2026 submitted by the Superintendent of Police, V & ACB, and direct the Vigilance to proceed accordingly.

16. The Travancore Devaswom Board may consider initiation of disciplinary proceedings against all the employees arrayed as accused in the case and may also consider the initiation of measures to recoup the loss sustained by the Travancore Devaswom Board.

17. Before parting, we would like to state that having regard to the findings and conclusions arrived at in the Vigilance report and after going through the mechanism now in place and the competency of the officers manning the Devaswom, we are of the view that the Travancore Devaswom Board should seriously consider engaging, at least on a contractual basis, competent persons possessing the requisite managerial, administrative, technical and supervisory skills to assist in the effective management of the various activities connected with the administration of the temple

and the pilgrimage. From the materials placed before us, it appears that several persons presently occupying managerial and supervisory positions have reached such positions primarily by virtue of their long years of service and progression through the service hierarchy, rather than on the basis of demonstrable managerial or supervisory expertise. While experience in service is undoubtedly valuable, the scale and complexity of the administration at Sannidhanam require persons with specialised skills and proven managerial capability.

18. The magnitude of the pilgrimage itself makes this imperative. More than one lakh devotees congregate at Sannidhanam every day during the pilgrimage season, and thousands during the Masapoojas. Millions of devotees visit the Sannidhanam over the course of the season. The Devaswom is required to manage a wide range of pilgrim-centric activities, including crowd management, accommodation, food preparation and distribution, offerings, procurement, storage, transportation, sanitation, health and safety, financial administration, infrastructure and various other services. Such a large and complex system cannot be effectively managed merely through conventional administrative arrangements without adequate professional expertise and modern management practices.

19. We are, therefore, of the view that it is high time for the Travancore Devaswom Board to undertake a comprehensive review of its existing administrative and supervisory structure and consider whether suitably qualified professionals may be engaged, at least on a contractual basis, in areas where specialised managerial or technical expertise is required. Such a measure may substantially strengthen

supervision, accountability and operational efficiency and, more importantly, help prevent the recurrence of incidents arising from inadequate systems, supervision or managerial oversight. The Board shall give serious consideration to this aspect while undertaking the proposed review of its administrative arrangements and formulation of the Standard Operating Procedure.

20. The Travancore Devaswom Board may also consider obtaining the services of the Centre for Management Studies or the Indian Institute of Management for providing appropriate training to the Senior Officers, particularly in the areas of managerial supervision, financial accountability, process management and institutional administration.

Let the Travancore Devaswom Board respond.

Post on 23.10.2026.

Sd/-

RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V,
JUDGE

Sd/-
K.V. JAYAKUMAR,
JUDGE

APM