

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 19th day of November 2025 / 28th Karthika, 1947****SSCR NO. 37 OF 2025**

**IN THE MATTER OF TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD - SABARIMALA SPECIAL COMMISSIONER
REPORT - SM.NO.37/2025 - REGARDING THE CROWD MANAGEMENT DURING MANDALA-
MAKARAVILAKKU SEASON 2025-2026 - SUO MOTU - PROCEEDINGS INITIATED - REG:**

PETITIONER:**SUO MOTU****RESPONDENTS:**

1. **STATE OF KERALA**
REPRESENTED BY ITS SECRETARY TO GOVERNMENT,
REVENUE (DEVASWOM) DEPARTMENT, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM-695001
2. **STATE POLICE CHIEF**
POLICE HEAD QUARTERS, VAZHUTHACAUD, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM -695 010
3. **THE DISTRICT POLICE CHIEF, PATHANAMTHITTA - 689 645**
4. **THE DISTRICT COLLECTOR**
COLLECTORATE, PATHANAMTHITTA, KERALA - 689645
5. **THE TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD**
REPRESENTED BY ITS SECRETARY, NANTHANCOD, KAWDIAR POST,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695 003
6. **DEVASWOM COMMISSIONER**
TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD, NANTHANCOD, KAWDIAR POST,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695003
7. **THE EXECUTIVE OFFICER**
SABARIMALA, PAMPA TRIVENI P.O., PATHANAMTHITTA - 689670

8. THE CHIEF POLICE COORDINATOR
(ADDITIONAL DIRECTOR GENERAL OF POLICE, (POLICE HEADQUARTERS)
SANNIDHANAM, SABARIMALA, PATHANAMTHITTA, PIN - 689 713
9. EXECUTIVE MAGISTRATE
SANNIDHANAM, SABARIMALA, PATHANAMTHITTA - 689 713
10. CHIEF VIGILANCE AND SECURITY OFFICER
(SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE), TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD,
NANTHANCODE, KAWDIAR POST, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695 003
11. PRINCIPAL CHIEF CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS
FOREST HEADQUARTERS, VAZHUTHACAUD, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695014
12. FOREST RANGE OFFICER
PAMBA RANGE, VALLAKKADAVU P.O., VANDIPERIYAR (VIA),
IDUKKI - 685553
13. KERALA STATE ROAD TRANSPORT CORPORATION
REPRESENTED BY ITS MANAGING DIRECTOR, TRANSPORT BHAVAN,
FORT P.O., THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695 035
14. THE TRANSPORT COMMISSIONER, KERALA
TRANSPORT COMMISSIONERATE, VAZHUTHACAUD,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695 014
15. THE REGIONAL TRANSPORT OFFICER (ENFORCEMENT)
STADIUM JUNCTION, KAIPATTOOR ROAD, NH 183A,
PATHANAMTHITTA - 689 645
16. THE DIRECTOR OF HEALTH SERVICES
DIRECTORATE OF HEALTH SERVICES, GENERAL HOSPITAL JUNCTION,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695 035
17. KERALA WATER AUTHORITY
REPRESENTED BY ITS MANAGING DIRECTOR, JALABHAVAN,
VELLAYAMBALAM - 695033
18. EXECUTIVE ENGINEER
KERALA STATE ELECTRICITY BOARD, TRANSMISSION DIVISION,
AZHOOR ROAD, PATHANAMTHITTA - 689645

19. DIRECTOR GENERAL

**KERALA FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES HEADQUARTERS, FIRE FORCE JUNCTION,
PULIMOODU P.O., THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695001**

20. DEPUTY EXCISE COMMISSIONER

**EXCISE DIVISION OFFICE, 1ST FLOOR, DEVASWOM BOARD BUILDING,
PATHANAMTHITTA - 689645**

21. THE DIG OF POLICE

GROUP CENTRE, CRPF, PALLIPURAM, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM - 695 316

***ADDL.R22 IMPEADED**

22. DEPUTY DIRECTOR,

**OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR, (PERIYAR WEST DIVISION),
PERIYAR TIGER RESERVE, PEERUMEDU P.O., IDUKKI - 685531**

***IS SUO MOTU IMPEADED AS ADDITIONAL 22ND RESPONDENT VIDE
ORDER DATED 19/11/2025 IN SSCR.NO.37/2025**

BY DEPUTY SOLICITOR GENERAL OF INDIA

BY SRI.S.RAJMOHAN, SENIOR GOVERNMENT PLEADER

BY SRI.NAGARAJ NARAYANAN, SPECIAL GOVERNMENT PLEADER (FOREST)

BY STANDING COUNSEL FOR TRAVANCORE DEVASWOM BOARD

BY STANDING COUNSEL FOR KERALA STATE ELECTRICITY BOARD

BY STANDING COUNSEL FOR KERALA STATE ROAD TRANSPORT CORPORATION

BY STANDING COUNSEL FOR KERALA WATER AUTHORITY

BY SMT.SAYUJYA RADHAKRISHNAN, AMICUS CURIAE FOR SABARIMALA

SPECIAL COMMISSIONER

**THIS SABARIMALA SPECIAL COMMISSIONER REPORT HAVING COME UP FOR
ADMISSION ON 19/11/2025, UPON PERUSING THE REPORT, THE COURT ON THE
SAME DAY PASSED THE FOLLOWING:**

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

SSCR No. 37 of 2025

Dated this the 19th day of November, 2025

ORDER

Raja Vijayaraghavan V. J.

This report has been filed by the Special Commissioner concerning the crowd management issues witnessed during the Mandala–Makaravilakku Season 2025–2026.

2. From the report of the Special Commissioner, it is noted that the Mandala–Makaravilakku Festival ★ Season 2025–2026 commenced on 17.11.2025. The Sannidhanam has witnessed an unprecedented influx of devotees from the very day the temple was opened. It is reported that, despite earnest and sustained efforts to regulate the crowd, the tail end of the queue has, during the last two days, extended beyond Marakkootam. The number of pilgrims admitted through the Virtual-Q booking system, together with those permitted through spot booking, has exceeded one lakh. With respect to spot booking, although the prescribed limit is 20,000 pilgrims per day, the Special Commissioner reports that, considering the unexpectedly large turnout of devotees at Sannidhanam, the number admitted has crossed 30,000. The Special Commissioner has further reported that it has now become practically impossible to accommodate the heavy rush of pilgrims at both Sannidhanam and Pamba. In order to regulate the crowd and restrict spot booking, it has been

suggested that the real-time booking counters be shifted from Pamba to Nilakkal, where adequate space is available to manage and accommodate the incoming pilgrims.

3. We note that by Order dated 13.12.2023 in SSCR No. 29 of 2023 and connected cases, this Court had directed to restrict the spot booking to 10,000 when the Virtual-Q booking reaches 80,000 so as to regulate crowd management and to ensure safe and hassle-free darshan to the Sabarimala devotees. The Commissioner has recorded that it is necessary also to fix the number of pilgrims coming from the Erumeli Kanana Patha to 5000 per day and allow them to trek only after registering in the Virtual-Q or real-time registration at Erumeli.

4. The learned Standing Counsel appearing for the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) submitted that although the Virtual-Q booking cap was fixed at 70,000 and spot booking was limited to 20,000, the inflow of pilgrims was so overwhelming that more than 30,000 pilgrims were granted entry. He further submitted that several pilgrims who had obtained Virtual-Q bookings for future dates had, in disregard of their scheduled time slots, nevertheless reached Sannidhanam. Under the Virtual-Q system, pilgrims are permitted to reach Sannidhanam only within a window of 6 hours prior to, or 18 hours after, the scheduled date and time allotted to them.

5. The learned Standing Counsel then pointed out that on the first day of the season, when the Nada opened at 4:00 p.m., the permissible cap for entry was 30,000. However, on that very day, approximately 53,278 pilgrims reached Sannidhanam. He submitted that the Ghee Abhishekam at Sannidhanam is conducted only between 03:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.; therefore,

a substantial number of pilgrims who arrived on 17.11.2025 at 4:00 p.m. remained at Sannidhanam overnight in order to participate in the ritual the next morning. It is stated that more than 40,000 pilgrims stayed overnight at Sannidhanam, resting under the Nadapandhal and in the open grounds.

6. On 17.11.2025, although the Virtual-Q booking was capped at 70,000, the total footfall at Sannidhanam was 98,950, inclusive of spot bookings. The learned Standing Counsel points out that the “hold and release” method is being employed, whereby pilgrims are halted at Laha, Pathanamthitta, Panthalam, Erumeli, Elavunkal, and Nilakkal in order to regulate and stagger the inflow. Despite these measures, on 18.11.2025, a total of 84,863 pilgrims reached Sannidhanam. It is submitted that all available resources have reached breaking point, and given the continuous and overwhelming influx of pilgrims, neither the police nor the Devaswom Board is presently able to contain the inflow effectively. Even today, on 19.11.2025, before 01:00 p.m., the footfall at Sannidhanam had already touched 50,000.

7. Having regard to the enormous inflow of pilgrims, we are of the considered view that, for effective and safe crowd management, the Virtual-Q booking shall continue to be capped at 70,000, and that, with effect from tomorrow, the spot booking shall be limited to 5,000 per day until 24.11.2025.

8. It is further brought to our notice that spot booking counters are presently functioning at Erumeli, Nilakkal, Pamba, Vandiperiyar, and the Chengannur Railway Station. The Travancore Devaswom Board shall ensure that the aggregate number of spot bookings issued across all these counters does not exceed 5,000 per day until 24.11.2025. Strict compliance with this direction shall be ensured.

9. The learned Amicus Curiae for the Special Commissioner submitted that, insofar as the "Pathinettam Padi" is concerned, experienced police personnel ought to be deployed to manage and regulate the movement of pilgrims ascending the holy steps.

10. The learned Government Pleader, in response, submitted that, with effect from today, officers of the Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB), who had been overseeing the ascent of pilgrims through the holy steps in previous years, will once again be entrusted with managing the flow of pilgrims ascending the holy steps at the Pathinettam Padi.

11. The learned Amicus Curiae further pointed out that the distribution of "Chukkuvellam" and biscuits is presently less than satisfactory. We direct the Travancore Devaswom Board to ensure that a sufficient number of personnel, whether part-time or otherwise, are deployed to guarantee uninterrupted and adequate distribution of drinking water and refreshments to the pilgrims.

12. Insofar as the condition of the toilets is concerned, serious concern has been raised by the learned Amicus Curiae. The learned Standing Counsel for the TDB submitted that earnest efforts are being taken to ensure that the toilets remain sanitary and clean. We direct the Head of the Sanitation Squad to conduct an immediate inspection and file a report before this Court indicating the actual state of cleanliness and upkeep of the toilets. The Special Commissioner shall also ensure that a proper and independent report is obtained, reflecting the true conditions prevailing on the ground.

13. Insofar as the pilgrims travelling through the Traditional Route (Kanana Patha) are concerned, they shall obtain the requisite pass from the Forest Department. The Travancore Devaswom Board shall ensure that the number of pilgrims permitted to traverse the Kanana Patha is strictly limited to 5,000 per day. It is made clear that such pilgrims must also have either a valid Virtual-Q booking or fall within the limits of spot bookings as prescribed by this Court.

14. The learned Standing Counsel for the TDB submitted that the assistance of the Central Forces has been sought. The District Collector shall take necessary follow-up action without delay.

15. The learned Government Pleader, appearing for the Police Department, submitted that numerous complaints have been received with respect to the operation of the dolly service. It has been suggested that a prepaid counter be established for availing the dolly service. The learned Standing Counsel for the TDB submitted that measures will be taken to set up a prepaid counter; however, in the interim, the Board shall take all necessary steps to streamline the functioning and regulation of the dolly service. We record the said submission.

16. The learned Standing Counsel for the TDB further submitted that the season commenced on 17.11.2025 and that the Minister for Devaswoms is the authority who can effectively coordinate with all departments to ensure seamless functioning of all services. It is pointed out that if the Minister is prevented from carrying out such coordination, it would adversely affect the management of the pilgrimage and the smooth conduct of various activities at Sabarimala. However, by notice dated 14.11.2025 issued by the State Election

Commission, the Devaswom Minister has been permitted to visit Sabarimala only for non-election-related purposes, but he has been interdicted from giving interviews to the media, and has also been restrained from convening such coordination meetings.

17. We are of the view that, insofar as the restriction on the Minister engaging with the media is concerned, we see no necessity to interfere. However, the interdiction preventing the Minister from convening meetings for the purpose of coordinating essential activities at Sannidhanam has to be relaxed. Given the scale of operations and the need for effective real-time coordination across departments, the involvement of the Devaswom Minister is indispensable.

18. We therefore permit the Devaswom Minister to convene meetings for the proper coordination of all activities relating to the pilgrimage at Sannidhanam. However, the Minister shall strictly refrain from speaking to the media in terms of notice dated 14.11.2025 or engage in any form of election-related canvassing.

Framework for Sustainable, Safe, and Scientifically Managed Pilgrimage Systems:

19. Having taken note of the submissions placed before us, the alarming surge in pilgrim inflow, the infrastructural and ecological constraints inherent to the region, and the recurring challenges in crowd regulation, we are constrained to observe that temporary, stop-gap, and reactive measures are wholly inadequate to meet the realities of a pilgrimage of this magnitude. The Sannidhanam, where more than 50 lakh devotees annually seek solace and

spiritual rejuvenation, is situated within the pristine and ecologically fragile Periyar Tiger Reserve, where forest conservation is of paramount and of the utmost importance. In such a setting, pilgrimage management cannot be treated as a seasonal, cursory administrative exercise; it must be approached as a scientific, professional, and year-round planning endeavour.

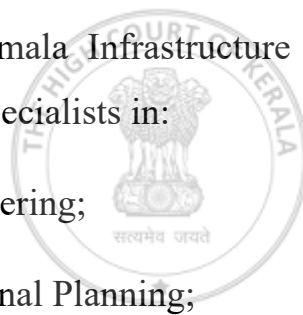
20. From the issues repeatedly surfacing before us, and from the evident absence of long-term preparedness, we have no hesitation in stating that neither the Travancore Devaswom Board nor the police, acting in isolation, can ensure a safe, peaceful, and dignified pilgrimage of such unprecedented scale. What is required is an institutional, expert-driven, future-ready system and not ad hoc responses triggered only when the situation becomes unmanageable.

21. Accordingly, before the commencement of the next Mandala-Makaravilakku Season, the Travancore Devaswom Board shall undertake a comprehensive, multidisciplinary planning exercise, with the assistance of expert personnel drawn from among the most competent professionals serving the State Government.

22. For a sustainable and modern management system at Sabarimala, the safety, dignity, and welfare of pilgrims must be the first and overriding priority. No devotee must be subjected to unreasonable waiting times without adequate shade, drinking water, sanitation, medical facilities, or rest areas. Equally, considering the temple's location within the Periyar Tiger Reserve, all planning must strictly conform to ecological sensitivities, statutory restrictions, and conservation norms.

23. It is evident from the materials placed before us that decision-making is frequently uncoordinated and that the burden of managing an enormously complex pilgrimage is being placed almost entirely on the Devaswom Board. This paradigm must change. Decision-making must shift from fragmented, crisis-driven mechanisms to structured, data-driven, engineering-based planning, supported by continuous monitoring, transparency, accountability, and systematic feedback from devotees.

24. To enable this transformation, there must be an institutional framework premised on professionalisation of planning. The Devaswom Board shall constitute a Sabarimala Infrastructure & Crowd Management Expert Committee, comprising specialists in:

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- a) Transport Engineering;
 - b) Urban and Regional Planning;
 - c) Civil Engineering;
 - d) Disaster and Crowd Science;
 - e) Environmental Science;
 - f) Public Health; and
 - g) IT Systems and Data Analytics.

These experts, who shall be the most competent and sourced from various departments/ institutions, shall analyse data, undertake field studies, and devise a comprehensive management plan in coordination with the TDB, Police, Forest Department, Health Services, and District Administration. This

Committee shall prepare a Scientific Master Plan for each season, after determining the carrying capacity of all nodes, and shall conduct both pre-season and post-season reviews to continually improve facilities. The establishment and utilisation of this Committee is critical to move away from the current reactive, repetitive, and fragmented mode of functioning.

25. From the submissions placed before us, we find that no comprehensive dataset presently exists, though such data is indispensable for informed decision-making. It is essential to obtain accurate Footfall and Crowd Flow Data Mapping across all nodes, including Nilakkal, Pamba, the trekking routes, and Sannidhanam. The Committee shall conduct a detailed survey to determine the area available in each of these zones and the optimum number of pilgrims each zone can safely accommodate. There is an urgent requirement to scientifically measure waiting times and dwell times, particularly at critical bottlenecks such as the Sannidhanam flyover.

26 Further, the Committee shall conduct a Geographical Information System (GIS)-based Amenity Audit, identifying, mapping, and geo-tagging all toilets, drinking water points, shelters, and medical kiosks, to detect “blind zones” and assess overall efficiency. In addition, a structural safety audit of walkways, barricades, railings, stairways, and holding areas is essential. This combined baseline dataset shall form the backbone for all future decisions.

27. In keeping with internationally recognised principles of crowd science, the Committee shall fix node-specific carrying capacities for Nilakkal, Pamba, the trekking segments, and Sannidhanam. It shall also determine Density-Based Safety Thresholds, in accordance with accepted global standards. These thresholds represent the maximum number of people who can

safely occupy a given space without risking dangerous pressure buildup, suffocation, falls, or crowd crush. As per global safety norms:

Green Zone: ≤ 2 persons/sq.m

Amber Zone: 2–4 persons/sq.m

Red Zone: > 4 persons/sq.m (high-risk crush zone)

28. We are informed that on days when pilgrim inflow exceeded one lakh, the density in parts of Sannidhanam crossed into the red zone, posing an unacceptable risk to public safety. The Board shall therefore publish seasonal capacity limits, real-time advisories, and take corrective measures to prevent dangerous overcrowding.

29. The Committee shall also strive to establish an Integrated Control Room, connecting all departments and equipped with live density dashboards, GPS-linked staff deployment, and QR/wristband tagging during peak days, so that real-time decisions can be taken based on scientifically measured crowd behaviour.

30. We suo motu implead the Deputy Director, Office of the Deputy Director, (Periyar West Division), Periyar Tiger Reserve, Peerumedu. P.O. Idukki - 685531, as an additional respondent. The Senior Government Pleader shall take notice.

Post on 24.11.2025.

Sd/-

**RAJA VIJAYARAGHAVAN V,
JUDGE**

Sd/-

**K.V. JAYAKUMAR,
JUDGE**

APM