

EIGHTEENTH REPORT
PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE
(2005-2006)

(FOURTEENTH LOK SABHA)

PILGRIMAGE TO SABARIMALA—
HUMAN PROBLEMS AND ECOLOGY

MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS



Presented to Lok Sabha on 1 December, 2005
Laid in Rajya Sabha on 1 December, 2005

LOK SABHA SECRETARIAT
NEW DELHI

November 2005/Kartika 1927 (Saka)

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**LOK SABHA SECRETARIAT
NEW DELHI**

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COMPOSITION OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE
(2005-2006)

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INTRODUCTION

I, the Chairman of Public Accounts Committee, having been authorised by the Committee to submit this Report on their behalf, do present this Eighteenth Report (Fourteenth Lok Sabha) on "Pilgrimage to Sabarimala—Human Problems and Ecology."

2. The Committee had presented to the House a Preliminary Report on the subject on 4 February, 2004. The Preliminary Report was based on the findings of the Public Accounts Committee during their study visit to Kochi and Sabarimala in October, 2003 and January, 2004. Subsequently, the Committee further examined the subject and the issues arising therefrom in the context of the action taken replies on the Preliminary Report. Based on the deposition made by the representatives of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and the Travancore Devaswom Board before the Committee, their written submissions and the findings of the Committee during their study visit to Kochi/Sabarimala from 18—20 October 2005, this Report has been prepared. The Committee considered and adopted this Report at their sitting held on 14 November, 2005. Minutes of the sitting form Part II of the Report.

3. For facility of reference and convenience, the Observations and Recommendations of the Committee have been printed in thick type in the body of the Report and have also been reproduced in a consolidated form in the Appendix to the Report.

4. The Committee would like to express their thanks to the Officers of Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board for the cooperation extended by them in furnishing information to the Committee.

NEW DELHI;
17 November, 2005
26 Kartika, 1927 (Saka)

PROF. VIJAY KUMAR MALHOTRA,
Chairman,
Public Accounts Committee.

REPORT

Background

Shri Dharma Sastha temple at Sabarimala in the State of Kerala, where the presiding deity is Lord Ayyappa is situated on a hilltop at a height of 467 metres above sea level deep in the dense forest in the southern most part of the Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary in the Western Ghats. The Shrine located at a distance of over 200 kms. from Cochin is situated amidst the reserved forest area in Ranni Taluk of Pathanamthitta district of Kerala. The temple is accessed by a footpath starting from the foothill Pampa which gets its name from the river flowing around it. The distance between the foothill and the temple located at the top of a steep hill is around 5 kms., which is covered on foot by the pilgrims.

2. This internationally famous Shrine, believed to be of great antiquity, attracts millions of pilgrims from all over India and abroad. The unique feature of this temple is that it is open for worship to people of all faiths irrespective of caste, creed or social status. This, indeed, is a very rare and unusual instance of communal harmony and excellent example of national integration.

3. The Travancore Devaswom Board which is responsible for managing the affairs of the Sabarimala Shrine, is an autonomous body constituted under the Travancore Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions (ICHRI) Act XV of 1950. The constitution of the Devaswom Board was based on a covenant entered into by the Maharaja of Travancore (an erstwhile princely State) in May 1949, which was concurred and guaranteed by the Government of India. As per the ICHRI Act, Travancore Devaswom Board has the full authority to administer the temples under its control. Sabarimala is one among those temples. The income derived from here is approximately Rs. 70 crores in one season. Of this, more than 50% is expended every year at Sabarimala. There are 1208 temples under the Travancore Devaswom Board and about 5000 employees. All these depend mainly on the income of Sabarimala as the income from other temples are comparatively less. Audit of Travancore Devaswom Board is undertaken by the auditors appointed by the Hon'ble High Court of Kerala.

4. The Public Accounts Committee (2003-2004) had undertaken a study visit to Cochin on 20 October, 2003 wherein the Committee *inter-alia* took up for discussion paragraph 3.1 of the Report of the Committee and Auditor General of India (Report No. 5 of 2002) relating to the Zoological Survey of India under the Ministry of Environment and Forests. This audit paragraph *inter-alia* dealt with the survey on the faunal resources in the various eco-systems of the country with particular reference to the status survey of endangered species conducted by the Zoological Survey of India. The faunal survey covered the Western Ghats region also. In this regard, the

Committee were informed by the Ministry of Environment and Forests that the Zoological Survey of India did not conduct any survey of the faunal resources or endangered species in the Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary. The Committee wanted to look into the reasons as to why such a survey has not been conducted. In the course of this study, a serious issue was brought to the attention of the Committee relating to the pilgrimage to the world famous Sabarimala, located in this Sanctuary and the controversy relating to the impact of this pilgrimage on the eco-system of the sanctuary. Realizing the importance of this issue, the Committee decided to examine it in all its dimensions.

5. It was brought to the notice of the Committee that this ancient hill shrine has attracted pilgrims over many centuries. In the earlier stages, the number of pilgrims was less due mainly to the lack of road communication and hazardous nature of the trek through dense forest which was infested with wild animals. But as per a report submitted to the Committee (Sabarimala Enclave Management prepared by the School of Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, 2001) by the Department of Forests, Government of Kerala, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of pilgrims during the past 40 years. According to the estimate submitted to the Committee by the Devaswom Board, about 3 crores of pilgrims have visited the temple during the festival season beginning from November 15, 2003 and ending on 14th January, 2004. In terms of the number of pilgrims visiting this temple, Sabarimala is one of the major pilgrim centres in the world.

6. Further, according to the Travancore Devaswom Board, this massive inflow of pilgrims into the temple area has created serious problems of spatial and logistical management resulting in unimaginable miseries to the devotees. Since the Sabarimala Shrine formed part of the Periyar Tiger Sanctuary, the strict law of conservation came into force and the State forest authorities did not allow any kind of repairs maintenance or development work in the temple area, which has aggravated the problems of the pilgrims who are deprived of even the minimum basic amenities. The demand of the Travancore Devaswom Board for additional forest land to develop facilities for pilgrims had thus been rejected by the State Forest Department on the ground of “conservation of wild life and ecological protection”.

7. The Committee during the aforesaid study visit to Cochin heard the representatives of the Devaswom Board and the Government of Kerala as well as the representatives of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests. The officials of the Devaswom Board led by its President, Dr. N. Babu submitted a note to the Committee containing the legal status of the Board, a brief history of the temple at Sabarimala and the nature of the problems being faced by the pilgrims. This note also contained a request that the holy Sabarimala Shrine and its surrounding areas should be delinked from the Periyar Sanctuary for the proper development of Sabarimala.

8. The Committee visited Sabarimala on 13th January, 2004 on the occasion of Makara Sankranti during the peak pilgrim season in order to get a first-hand view of the problems of the pilgrims. While at Sabarimala, the Committee held a meeting with the representatives of the Government of Kerala as well as of the Devaswom Board.

The Minister in charge of Devaswom, Government of Kerala also participated in the discussions which *inter-alia* dealt with the inhuman conditions in which the pilgrims stay at the temple precincts and the surrounding area. The environmental issues relating to the pilgrimage also came up for discussion. During this meeting, Dr. N. Babu, the President of the Travancore Devaswom Board, in his oral presentation, emphasised the point that Sabarimala and its sacred forest was included in the Periyar Sanctuary in 1978 ignoring the views of the Board which is the principal agency responsible for providing basic amenities to the pilgrims. He further stated that the Department of Forests, Government of Kerala have adopted an unreasonable attitude towards the basic needs of Sabarimala's pilgrims and have turned down all proposals submitted by the Board in this regard.

9. During the aforesaid meeting at Sabarimala, the Travancore Devaswom Board submitted a note to the Committee stating *inter-alia* that prior to promulgation of the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980, the Devaswom Board could provide adequate facilities to the lakhs of pilgrims visiting the Shrine. But thereafter the situation has changed as the State Forest Department did not even consider the legitimate rights and privileges of the Devaswom Board with regard to utilisation of even the area under their title (13.35 acres) not to mention the area under lease and possession (168.35 acres) and the area under permission (63.00 acres). The Board submitted that since the temple was situated in the southernmost fringe of the Tiger Reserve, it is easy and practicable to delink 500 hectares of forest land from the Periyar Tiger Reserve. The Board gave an undertaking to protect the entire allotted area in an eco-friendly manner with least disturbance to the flora and fauna existing there. Drawing attention of the Committee to the magnitude of the problem of overcrowding in the temple area aggravated by shortage of land available for development, the President of the Travancore Devaswom Board referred to the accidents which took place at Sabarimala during the festival season in the year 2000 in which 52 persons died in a stampede.

10. The representatives of the Government of Kerala, took the position that what pilgrims expect at Sabarimala is not a "leisure sojourn" but a "modicum of facilities to enable them to complete the pilgrimage to their satisfaction". They were of the view that the demand made by the Devaswom Board for additional land was never ending and unreasonable. They further state that the Forest Department has already released 55.9 hectares of forest land to the Devaswom Board and further requested the Committee to advise the Devaswom Board to adopt a strategy for sustainable and eco-friendly development of Sabarimala pilgrimage facilities. In this connection, in a detailed note on Sabarimala pilgrimage management and ecological conservation of the surrounds submitted to the Committee, the Government of Kerala sought to explain that what was needed at Sabarimala was a sensible and humanitarian approach, which can solve the problems of both humans and nature. They informed that the Supreme Court in WPC No. 212/2001 has directed the Central and State Governments and the Devaswom Board not to carry out any non-forest activity at Sabarimala, which are not permitted by the Central Government under the Forest (Conservation) Act.

11. During the course of their on-the-spot visit to Sabarimala, on 13th January, 2004, the following facts came to the notice of the Committee:—

- (i) The total area available at Pampa, which is a base camp for pilgrims, is only 10 acres and during the peak season this area becomes an ocean of humanity. Similarly, the total area available at the temple site (Sannidhanam) is only 50 acres which has to hold a few lakhs of devotees every day during the season.
- (ii) Thousands of devotees were sleeping on hard ground in the forest in the night without any protective roof all along the hilly footpath. At Sannidhanam, it was a shocking sight to see countless number of people of all ages sleeping on the ground and the Members of the Committee had to literally walk over them. On enquiry, it was found that these pilgrims have been staying there for a number of days in this condition. There were no toilet facilities, clean drinking water or hygienic food available to them. Every inch of available space around the temple was occupied by the devotees, many of whom had come from different States. The whole area was stinking as it was not possible to undertake any kind of cleaning of the open drains with the limited infrastructure available there. Accommodation being extremely limited in the temple precincts, each room was occupied by 40 to 50 people.
- (iii) Two extremely rough, stony and steep tracks connect Pampa and Sannidhanam. Most of the pilgrims trek barefoot along these tracks. These tracks were found to be too narrow to contain the heavy flow of pilgrims. Railings have been put up only on some stretches of the track and some very steep stretches have no railings at all to hold on to while climbing up and down the steep slopes. On enquiry as to why the railings have not been put up all along the track, the Devaswom Board officials informed that the Department of Forests had prohibited further fixing of the railings as it would obstruct the movements of elephants and leopards.
- (iv) The temple authorities informed that their requests for permission to widen the tracks was turned down by the Department of Forests on the ground that it would lead to destruction of forest. It was further informed that during the peak season, the pilgrims have to stand in the queue for 12 to 18 hours in the hot sun without any toilet facility, water or food or any protective roof. A proposal to construct a queue complex to avoid this situation was reportedly rejected by the State Government. There were no toilet facilities anywhere along the hill track which is used by millions of pilgrims including old women. Besides, there was no proper arrangement for the supply of clean drinking water on the route. As a result, the pilgrims had to depend upon poor-quality bottled and other water available in the makeshift stalls en-route at exorbitant rates. Adequate medical facilities were not available either on the route or at Sannidhanam.
- (v) The major source of water supply was river Pampa, which gets extremely polluted during the festival season as the huge mass of pilgrims, who converge at Pampa, use the river for taking a ritual bath as well as cleaning

themselves after easing themselves in the vicinity of the river. They were compelled to do it because adequate toilet facilities were not available in this area. The same water which gets polluted with human excreta and other filth due to mass defecation of pilgrims in and around the river is said to be used for cooking as well.

12. In the light of the findings of the Committee during the study visit and, in view of the seriousness of the problem involving huge inflow of pilgrims and inability of the authorities to provide the basic amenities to them due to various reasons, the Committee had an apprehension that the present condition at Sabarimala might lead to some great tragedy. They, therefore, decided to bring it to the urgent notice of Parliament through a Preliminary Report on the subject. Accordingly, under Rule 276 read with Rule 277(2) of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha, 63rd Report of PAC relating to “Pilgrimage to Sabarimala – Human Problems and Ecology” was prepared and presented to House on 5th February, 2004. This Report contained the brief description of the problem and the preliminary observations of the Committee on the subject. Observations contained in Preliminary Report have been summed up as under :—

- (i) Recognising the crucial importance of Conservation of the Eco-system, the Committee made it very clear that they do not approve of any unrestrained attempts to destroy the forest for whatever purpose.
- (ii) The conflicting perspectives of the Forest Department and the Travancore Devaswom Board on the issue of a proper solution to the problems of the pilgrims and the overall development of Sabarimala as a National Pilgrim Centre have come in the way of any serious and genuine attempt in this direction. In the opinion of the Committee, the problems relating to the Sabarimala Pilgrimage should not be looked at merely from the environmental angle.
- (iii) Total lack of sanitation, clean drinking water, hygienic food, toilets facilities etc. in a place visited by a staggering number of devotees within a short span of two months cannot be explained away by saying that the concept of ‘comfort’ is alien to the ethos of Sabarimala Pilgrimage.
- (iv) The Committee were given to understand that the inclusion of temple area in the Sanctuary was really coming in the way of all developmental activities in Sabarimala. It was therefore observed that the temple area should be delinked from the Sanctuary and developed without causing environmental degradation, particularly since the Shrine does not fall in the core area of the Sanctuary and is situated only in the buffer zone.
- (v) Long term development at Sabarimala could be undertaken on the basis of Master Plan in consonance with the broader considerations of the ecology of the region. The implementation of this Master Plan could be done under the supervision of an expert body.

- (vi) In the meantime, certain short term measures should be taken to alleviate the miseries of pilgrims by way of lack of widened hill tracks, toilet facilities, clean water, food, medical facilities etc. Scientific methods may be applied to undertake waste management in the area, to clean the river Pampa and raise the level of water table in the area.
- (vii) Sabarimala should be developed like Vaishno Devi Temple in Jammu or other major Pilgrim Centres in India. A Committee consisting of the Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, the Minister of Forests and the Minister of Devaswom, Government of Kerala should be constituted at the apex level to give necessary impetus to the process of development of Sabarimala.

Action Taken by the Ministry of Environment & Forests

13. Pursuant to the presentation of Preliminary Report to the Parliament, the Ministry of Environment & Forests furnished action taken notes on the Observations of the Committee.

According to the Ministry of Environment and Forests, the major action taken by them included constitution of a Committee for suggesting a viable strategy to redress the problems relating to Sabarimala keeping in mind the conservation values and problems faced by the pilgrims. This Committee was mandated to assess the magnitude of pilgrim visitation, the impact of such visitation on the wildlife habitat, review of institutional and other administrative mechanism in place for regulating such tourist visitation, and to suggest a viable strategy for ensuring conservation status of the area, facilitating the pilgrim visitation. This Committee was stated to have met several times and subsequently, the Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests also made a field visit to Periyar Tiger Reserve, Sabarimala and the nearby areas from 25 to 27 July, 2004 for a spot appraisal of the Sabarimala Temple Complex and the traditional pilgrim route from Pampa to Sannidhanam. The senior officials from the Forest Department and the National River Conservation Directorate, Ministry of Environment & Forests also accompanied the Secretary during the field visit, in addition to officials from the State Government and the Travancore Devaswom Board. Subsequently, a detailed discussion was held with the President, Travancore Devaswom Board at Pampa, where implementation of the Pampa River Action Plan under the National River Conservation Plan was also reviewed. Later, a detailed discussion was held in Trivandrum with senior officials from the State Government and representatives of Travancore Devaswom Board, apart from the Chief Secretary, Government of Kerala.

14. The Ministry have further stated in their Action Taken Note that the experience of travelling through the forest is an inseparable part of Sabarimala pilgrimage, which should not be deprived to the pilgrims on account of unplanned masonry structures in the area. The situation also warrants regulation of pilgrim crowd size, through a holistic, professionally drawn "Master Plan" for a period of at least 50 years, which can also consider the wise practices being followed elsewhere in similar situations at

Tirumala-Tirupati and Vaishno Devi Shrines. Therefore, it has been agreed upon that the concerns of the PAC could be addressed amicably by resorting to the following line of action:—

- (i) Evolving a holistic Master Plan for facilitating Sabarimala pilgrim visitation drawn by professionals in the field for a time period not less than fifty years, which should also include institutional mechanisms for day-to-day management and crowd regulation.
- (ii) Creating a high level coordination mechanism by the State Government of Kerala for shaping and implementing the proposed Master Plan and coordinating the Pampa River Action Plan.

As a short term measure, considering the pilgrimage season, the State Government was asked by the Central Government to examine the issues relating to sewage treatment and related works in the leased out area and take a view *vis-à-vis* the clearance under Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980.

15. The Committee have been further informed by the Ministry in their Action Taken Note that a high level coordination Committee has been constituted by Government of Kerala for shaping and implementing the Sabarimala Master Plan and coordinating Pampa River Action Plan under the Chairmanship of the Chief Secretary to Government of Kerala. The Government of Kerala has also entrusted the task of preparing a Master Plan to a professional agency called Ecosmart India Limited.

16. In their Action Taken Note, the Travancore Devaswom Board have explained their position in the matter as under :—

“There will not be much damage to the ecology due to the phenomenal increase in the flow of pilgrims, since the festival season falls during November, 15th to January, 20th —mainly in dry season. The authorities with the help of pilgrims have taken all precautionary measures to prevent any probable fire occurrence. The Sabarimala region is a fully protected one from any kind of devastating activities such as illicit felling, poaching, encroachments etc., because of the presence of pilgrims and authorities of Travancore Devaswom Board throughout the year.”

On the delinking of the requisite area from the Periyar Tiger Reserve, they have sought to explain that : —

“Sabarimala area which is situated in the southern most part of the Periyar Tiger Reserve in the buffer zone, is well connected with good roads. Due to its position in the sanctuary it will be possible to de-link the required area very easily and add sufficient area from the nearby forest or even acquire a private cardamom estate which is positioned approximately in the middle of the sanctuary at Pachakkanam which is having an area of 800 acres. After de-linking from sanctuary the area is to be declared as a National Pilgrim Centre and facilities to that extent also are to be provided. Hence the only remedy is to de-link the required area. Travancore Devaswom Board has requested an area of 500 hectares.”

17. The Action Taken Notes of the Ministry of Environment and Forests did not address the key issues raised by the Committee in their Preliminary Report, namely:—

- (a) delinking of the temple area from the Periyar Tiger Reserve and its development without causing environmental degradation; and
- (b) constituting a Committee consisting of the Minister of Environment and Forests, Government of India, the Minister of Forests and the Minister of Devaswom Department, Government of Kerala at the apex level to give necessary political impetus to the process of development of Sabarimala.

The Action Taken Notes not having addressed the core concern of the Committee and as also mentioned in the Preliminary Report, the subject required further examination by the Committee to arrive at their final Observations and Recommendations after hearing the views of the concerned Organisations/ Departments. The Committee therefore decided to take oral evidence of the representatives of the concerned Departments/Organisations, namely Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and the Travancore Devaswom Board. The oral evidence was held on 21st December, 2004.

18. The Secretary, Ministry of Environment & Forests informed the Committee during the evidence that proposals had been received from the Government of Kerala for diversion of 24.15 hectares of forest land in the Periyar Tiger Reserve and other reserved forests for provision of necessary facilities to pilgrims. These were under consideration in the Ministry as per statutory provisions and orders of the Supreme Court.

19. When asked about the follow-up action taken by the Ministry subsequent to the presenting of the Preliminary Report on the subject, the Secretary informed that :—

“A professional Agency has been appointed by the Kerala Government on the advice of the Union Ministry to prepare a Master Plan for pilgrim management and development of the entire Sabarimala Complex. This Master Plan will have three phases, namely, immediate requirement for the first 1-2 years, medium-term requirement of 5-10 years and long-term re-development of the entire complex up to 50 years. The approved Master Plan will set forth any requirement for diversion of forest land clearly specifying the location, extent and purpose for which it has to be used.”

20. When the Committee made a pointed query on the diversion of forest land required for operationalising the Master Plan, the representative of the Government of Kerala, who was also present in the evidence, explained that :—

“After studying the Master Plan in consultation with the Travancore Devaswom Board, taking the final view and then moving the Environment Ministry of the Government of India through our own Forest Department and asking for alienation or de-linking of the area, which is deemed to be necessary, would be the only way we can go forward.”

21. On a specific query by the Committee in this regard, the Secretary, Ministry of Environment & Forests assured the Committee that: —

“If the Master Plan requires de-linking of the area from the tiger reserve, that will be done.”

22. During the evidence, the Committee sought to know details about the proposed Master Plan. The representative of the agency entrusted with the formulation of the Master Plan, namely, ‘Ecosmart’ explained as under :—

“The aim of the concept plan is to develop a comprehensive Master Plan for the Sabarimala pilgrims. The most important aspect in this is undoubtedly to cater to the comfort of the pilgrims and making the pilgrimage as an enjoyable experience, while doing so to see that the environment is protected. We are working on the basis of preparing a list of immediate interventions that would need to be undertaken in order to augment the situation. We will be outlining the development plan to be undertaken in the next five to ten years which we believe will bring about a drastic improvement to the current situation.”

23. Emphasising upon the need to decongest the temple area, he further explained :—

“The Master Plan itself can unfold over the next fifteen years. The evolution of the temple at Sabarimala shows that it has been growing in an *ad-hoc* manner, currently occupying more than ten times of the area that it had occupied when it was initially formed. The current situation is that the entire pressure of the pilgrimage is felt on two spots only, which is Pampa and Sannidhanam. There are no facilities at these two places to cater to the pilgrims. What we are suggesting is to de-congest this area and adopt a regional perspective to its development. What we are suggesting is development of peripheral areas such as Erimeli, Vandiperiyar and Nilackal to accommodate the rush of the pilgrims. Nilackal* where land is available to the tune of 25 hectares, can be developed as a primary base camp. Towns such as Erimeli and Pampa can be the secondary or additional base camps where facilities can be provided. The purpose of this land is also to provide a very rapid shuttle service to transport pilgrims from Nilackal to Pampa and back as well as to provide a token system. Our Organisation visited both Tirupati and Vaishnodevi to understand how pilgrimage is organised there. Both these places are recognised as top class pilgrim centres in this country. Our aim is to bring Sabarimala into that league. The facility that we envisage to provide at the base camps are the accommodation, dining hall facilities, commercial facilities, parking, token distribution centres and to provide infrastructure to make the pilgrims comfortable and to make the whole journey a pleasant experience. We do recognise that Pampa will always remain the focal point for the pilgrimage as the base camp for trekkers arriving from Erumeli as well as the transit camp for pilgrims arriving by road.”

*Nilackal, the base camp is about 17 kilometres from Pampa, the foothill, from where trekking to the Shrine starts.

24. On the point relating to management of vehicular traffic in the area, he *inter-alia* informed as under :—

“We suggest that once the concept plan is put into perspective, a rapid shuttle service should be provided from Nilackal to Pampa which means that a lot of space at Pampa will be released. We suggest that only a shuttle service and emergency TDB service vehicles should be allowed entry into Pampa. Parking of these vehicles will take place at a parking lot that already exists. It is more than sufficient to cater to the vehicles. We also would like to explore the possibility of an alternative system for the transportation of goods.”

25. Responding to the concern expressed by the Committee on lack of accommodation for pilgrims as well as ‘Jyoti darshan’ facilities, he stated as follows:—

“We propose to undertake an area planning of Pampa and Sannidhanam in order to increase the pilgrim accommodation that is currently available there; to provide common facilities such as dining hall facilities, lockers etc. As the hon. Member has mentioned, these are very important facilities to the pilgrims who visit to see the “Jyoti”. Currently, all the pilgrims have no choice but to congregate at a very few spots. It leads to a great deal of congestion. We propose to de-congest this by making it possible for the people to view the ‘jyoti’ from several outlying spots as well.”

26. When the Committee desired to know whether the Ministry will ensure that the funds for the plan are adequate, the Secretary, Ministry of Environment & Forests assured the Committee as follows : —

“Whatever funds are required for implementation of the Master Plan, whether they are from the State Government or they are from the Central Government or they are from the Devaswom Board, we will expect that each partner will make these funds available.”

27. When questioned about the time-frame of implementation of the proposed measures to augment the facilities for pilgrims, the Secretary once again assured the Committee that “*there will be visible improvement before the next pilgrim season*”.

28. With a view to find out the extent of progress with regard to the Sabarimala Master Plan and to ensure creation of basic facilities for the pilgrims before the pilgrim season in November, the Committee decided to take further evidence on the subject on 20 June 2005. Accordingly, when the communication of the oral evidence was sent to the Ministry of Environment and Forests on June, 2005, the Ministry furnished to the Committee a written note dated 20.06.2005 stating that they have given in principle approval for 110.524 hectares of forest land at Nilackal for the base camp and the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife had given their consent for using 12.675 hectares of Periyar Tiger Reserve land in the Pampa—Sannidhanam area. The Ministry further informed that parallel processing of the case (12.675 hectares) under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 shall be taken up by them after receipt of proposal from the State Government and as the Hon’ble Supreme Court of India has imposed a ban on diversion of forest land in National Parks and

Sanctuaries, the user agency, namely Travancore Devaswom Board is required to obtain case-specific permission from the Apex Court for this purpose.

29. The Ministry in their aforesaid written note also stated that in order to begin construction of the proposed temporary works before the pilgrim season (November, 2005), the Government of India have given final clearance for diversion of 60.14 hectares (out of 110.524 hectares) of forest land at Nilackal for the base camp. As for the remaining area of 50.384 hectares at Nilackal, the Ministry have apprised that compliance is awaited from the State Government. They have given a broad list of the immediate and short-term interventions that have been proposed at Nilackal base camp for the coming season as follows:

- Provision of parking facilities
- Solid waste management
- Water supply network
- Toilet blocks and sanitation facilities
- Building for administrative purposes

30. As regards the status of the Master Plan, the Ministry informed that the proposal for preparing a long-term regional Master Plan, that will encompass all aspects of regional development in the context of the Sabarimala pilgrimage, was submitted to the Government of Kerala on 15 February, 2005 by the appointed agency, M/s Ecosmart. However, till the date of this note from the Ministry, they did not receive approval from the Government of Kerala.

31. During his deposition before the Committee during the oral evidence held on 30th June, 2005, the representative of the appointed expert agency Ecosmart indicated the progress in the Master Plan as under: —

“The first and fundamental step that we have achieved since then is the fact that an outline of the master plan for the Sabarimala has been prepared. The report has been approved and accepted by all stakeholders and this includes the Government of Kerala including the Devaswom Board as well as the Forestry Department of the Government of Kerala. Several other stakeholders including the Ministry of Environment & Forests at the Centre as well have also accepted it.”

32. The Committee took further oral evidence of the representatives of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and the Travancore Devaswom Board on the subject on 30 June, 2005 and again on 14 July, 2005 to apprise themselves on the progress of the Sabarimala Master Plan; the steps taken to implement the plan including the immediate interventions required in the area for the benefit of the devotees before the pilgrim season starts in November; the nodal agency which will be responsible for coordination and speedy implementation; the funding mechanism and finally the legal action required to be taken to de-link the requisite forest area for undertaking development works at Pampa and the Sannidhanam.

33. Enumerating the various facilities proposed in the outline of the Master Plan, the representative of Ecosmart stated that:—

“The plan also looks at several other aspects such as regional roads, health services including a cardiac centre where several pilgrims in the past have lost their lives while attempting this steep climb. So, there is health facility, water, special sanitation, solid waste management, and emergency and disaster management in addition to these. The plan also looks at providing for Queue Complex, which will house about 15,000 pilgrims.”

34. About the proposed queue complex and kiosk complex, the Committee were further informed as under:—

“As you are aware, the pilgrims have to wait for over 13 to 14 hours which causes an immense amount of hardship. This is a queue that is absolutely packed with and no facility is available in terms of either sanitation or water supply. As a consequence of which, what we are suggesting is we build a queue complex, which will enable us to house about 15,000 pilgrims in over five chambers where we would be in a position then to regulate the flow of the pilgrims into the Sannidhanam area. We are looking at a traditional road pathway itself, which is extremely narrow, and I think, the PAC Report had also recommended that these track roads be widened. That is something we have provided for in the 12.675 hectares proposed for diversion in the Periyar Tiger Reserve Area. Another is a kiosk complex, which is provided before entering the sanctum area.”

35. In response to a related query regarding provision of other facilities to pilgrims, the representative of Ecosmart explained as follows:—

“We have also looked at augmenting both the solid and liquid waste management practices, construction of at least an additional thousand toilet blocks and bath facilities at both Pampa and Sannidhanam. We are also proposing the widening of trek passes and also some safety barriers and retaining walls that will provide greater safety to the pilgrims. We are also looking at the ropeway for transportation of goods. Over 40,000 tonne of goods are transported to the temple at Sannidhanam each pilgrimage season. This is predominantly for preparing the prasadam. What we are suggesting is that we could also do it through a ropeway. We are also looking at widening of all the roads that lead to Pampa and Sannidhanam in order to make it easier for the pilgrimage to reach Pampa. We are looking at a detailed base camp at Nilackal to start with and later on in other spheres.”

36. On the question of widening of roads, the Committee were further informed as under:—

“..... the road widening will have to be done uniformly to about 7.0 metre with metal shoulders 1.5 metre on either side.”

37. Summing up the different stages of the outline of the Master Plan, the representative of Ecosmart stated:—

“.....in a very broad nutshell, what we have attempted to do in the outline of the Master Plan is to de-congest Sannidhanam and Pampa and the way we have done is by looking at setting up of base camps at Nilackal, Uppupara, Sathram and Vandiperiyar with the largest base camp at Nilackal and that would bear the entire flow of the pilgrims to come and there would be a regulated flow of the pilgrims from Nilackal to Pampa and Sannidhanam. If you look at the stages of the Master Plan itself, as I had mentioned, we have started with the immediate interventions which look at what can be done for the ensuing pilgrimage season in November, 2005 and we looked at pilgrim management, water and sanitation and health care facilities. All of which were needed critically to improve the current situation.”

Explaining the long-term planning as envisaged in the outline of the Master Plan for bringing about improvements in the Sabarimala region as a whole, he stated:—

“The Interim Plan which is up to 2015 would probably look at the implementation of some of the infrastructure proposals in great detail and then the Master Plan itself, which still remains to be done, would look at the entire pilgrimage in a holistic manner and covers the entire region which I had mentioned spans close to 150 miles from Sannidhanam area. It would look at land resources, transportation, pilgrim facilities and infrastructure and that would cover a time span of up to the year 2050.”

38. The Committee, enquired whether adequate drinking water could be made available to all the pilgrims in the proposed Nilackal base camp. The representative of the Travancore Devaswom Board responded as under:—

“Water supply is a major problem at Nilackal. We have identified water sources and construction work is on, which will be completed before November 15. So, the water problem will be solved for all the pilgrims who camp at Nilackal. Pipeline is being laid and treatment plant is going on. So, for all the pilgrims assembled there, purified drinking water will be made available. If necessary, additional pipelines will also be laid.”

39. Elaborating further on this issue, he stated that:—

“The other concern, was the scarcity of water during the pilgrim season. We have proposed several interventions there including the optimisation of the Triveni water supply scheme. In the immediate and long-term we are looking at four check dams upstream of Pampa and the Kakki river to capture water during the monsoon that would provide water for the pilgrims in the season. We are also exploring the possibility of sourcing water from other areas upstream of Sannidhanam so that instead of pumping it up, we could get water from upstream areas as well.”

40. In response to a related query by the Committee on toilet facilities, he informed that:—

“As regards sanitation, toilets have to be constructed. We have to do that now because we got the land two week’s back. Now the tenders are to be floated as we were not permitted to float the tenders before we get the land. So, we have done the work. It will be done on war footing basis. In the first phase, we propose to construct 300 latrines at Nilackal for this season.”

41. When the Members expressed concern on the lack of medical facilities for Sabarimala pilgrims, he informed that:—

“We also propose to construct hospitals but that is a long term planning. We will not be able to do this before this season. In Pampa, we have got a hospital and with the help of that we will be able to provide medical facilities at Pampa and en route Sannidhanam. There will be two cardiology units. That is already there and we want to make it a pucca arrangement. But we are not sure because Pampa and Sannidhanam area of 12.67 hectares belongs to Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR). After the sanction of the Government of India, the Supreme Court has to clear it since it is a sanctuary. Once the Supreme Court opens on 11th, we would be filing an interlocutory application for permission to get the 12.67 hectares land. After getting that, we propose to construct two complexes, toilets, sanitation treatment plants and permanent cardiology units. At present, there are two cardiology units and this for first aid. Then the persons are shifted to Kottayam. Once we get the land, we will be able to do that. But during this season, we will not be able to do much work.”

42. With regard to a pointed query by the Committee on arrangements to control/prevent any mishap/accident in Sabarimala. During the evidence held on 30th June, 2005, the Secretary, Devaswom Board responded as follows:—

“There is already a crisis management team which includes the District Collectors & others.”

43. During the evidence held on 30th June, 2005, when the Committee expressed concern over the fact that concrete results of the efforts made so far are yet to show, the Principal Secretary, Government of Kerala admitted as under:—

“I agree with you that on the ground so far we have nothing to show. There are many reasons. One of the reasons is that we have got the final approval for Nilackal only on 7th of June. Now the Government of Kerala has constituted two committees – one at the apex level with the Chief Secretary as the Chairman and TDB President and other persons from various Departments and at the working level under my chairmanship, there is another committee which is supposed to monitor. We have been meeting frequently but as can be seen, we do not have any physical work done so far. As the Commissioner has pointed out, I am confident that before the onset of this pilgrimage season, we will have these limited facilities, which have been detailed before you, in place so that the experience of the pilgrims is better.”

44. When asked specifically about the funds required to implement the Master Plan, the Committee were informed that about Rs. 200 crore are required. The Secretary, Ministry of Environment & Forests clarified in this regard that:—

“This plan has been detailed for the short-term, medium-term and long-term. Detailing is under progress. The Rs. 200 crore relates to what is invested in the short-term, the medium-term and the long-term. The point of detailing the medium-term and long-term is underway and the detailing for the short-term has been done. Then there is an estimated cost that we are looking for the immediate short-term intervention which involves up-gradation of solid waste management system, sanitation services, pilgrim management, and transportation services, including widening of trek path.

All that can be done before November, 2005. We have an indicative cost close to Rs. 23 crore. This is just for the short-term that needs to be done. What needs to be done in the immediate is here. For this, a sum of Rs. 13 crore is required. Out of this, there would be about Rs. 6 crore which is available under the Pampa Action Plan which could be used for solid waste management, sanitation including provisioning of toilet blocks, bathroom facilities at Pampa, Sannidhanam and along the trekking route. It also involves public awareness and provision of mobile latrines as well. Out of Rs. 13 crore, roughly Rs. 6 crore could come from the PAP fund which are available, as I mentioned, close to Rs. 18 crore under the scheme currently. The rest of the Rs. 7.5 crore would have to come from different sponsorships. For upgrading health care infrastructure, we have been approached by Dhanalakshmi Bank which are the bankers to the TDB and Maa Amrithananda Ashram. They would like to contribute and help in putting up facilities. Last time, the Hon’ble Member had also mentioned that there was a lot of interest from the pilgrims themselves to contribute to this effort.”

45. On the funding issue, the Secretary, Ministry of Environment & Forests further clarified that:—

“With respect to the funding, the Central Government is responsible for funding those elements of the Pampa Action Plan which relate to this Master Plan. The Pampa Action Plan includes a part of the Pampa Action Plan. But the Pampa Action Plan has elements which are outside the Master Plan and which address issues going beyond the project area. What has been posed for external funding is the entire Pampa Action Plan of which some component is part of the Master Plan. But what is needed in the immediate time horizon is, we have issued sanctions and if we receive a more detailed proposal from the Kerala Government to meet the requirements in the short term to medium term, we would not wait for the JBIC funding. JBIC funding is for the elements which will come after five years or 15 years. This is what we have proposed to the JBIC.”

46. The Tranvancore Devaswom Board, in a subsequent written note, have further explained in this regard that:—

“Various projects under solid waste management, water supply, sanitation and public awareness have been identified under Pampa Action Plan to be implemented in Pampa, Sabarimala and surrounding region. The projects have been listed on a priority basis and the implementation has been decided to be taken up in phases. The projects under phase – I worth Rs. 18.45 crores has already been sanctioned.”

47. Answering a specific question regarding the sources of funding various projects under the Master Plan, the Travancore Devaswom Board, in their written note, have informed as under:—

“Projects worth Rs. 319.7 crores under Pampa Action Plan have been identified. The financing of these projects is on 70 : 30 ratio (Centre-State Government/Local Bodies) under phase-I, out of the sanctioned amount of Rs. 18.45 crores, Rs. 75 lakhs has been released as a first instalment to the nodal agency (Kerala Water Authority) for the execution of the sanctioned projects, out of which 35 lakhs has been utilised till now by them. As regards the works at Nilackal, Pampa and Sannidhanam, Devaswom Funds are utilised for the same except the works under the Pampa Action Plan. Funds to the tune of Rs. 1614.49 lakhs is assigned under Pampa Action Plan for Nilackal.”

48. About allotment of land, the Travancore Devaswom Board, informed in their written note furnished to the Committee on 11th July, 2005 that pursuant to the recommendations in the outline of the Master Plan, they have submitted separate proposals to this effect to the Government of India through the State Government. These proposals are: (i) for diversion of 110.524 ha. at Nilackal and (ii) 12.675 ha. in the Pampa-Sabarimala area coming under Periyar Tiger Sanctuary. The proposals were submitted on 14.03.2005, 15.03.2005 and 24.03.2005. The Government of India have accorded stage I clearance on 05.03.2005 for the land at Nilackal. Based on the stage-I clearance, the Forest Department has directed the Travancore Devaswom Board on 23.05.2005 to remit 6.41 crores of rupees as net present value (NPV). Accordingly, Travancore Devaswom Board has remitted the NPV. As per the conditions of diversion of forestland, equal extent of land has to be given alongwith afforestation cost. State Government have issued orders on 20.05.2005 transferring 305 acres of Revenue Land to the Forest Department at Kampakkal in lieu of the land to be diverted.

49. The Travancore Devaswom Board, in the aforesaid written note, have further stated that the Government of India have permitted the Travancore Devaswom Board to undertake works for immediate intervention at Nilackal in 60.14 ha. land only. For the remaining 50.384 hectares land, Government of India clearance is still awaited. As regards the land of 12.675 ha. to be diverted from the Periyar Tiger Reserve area, Government of India have accorded preliminary sanction on 15.06.2005, subject to approval of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India. Being Periyar Tiger Reserve area, prior permission from the Supreme Court is needed for the diversion of land from there, for which the Travancore Devaswom Board was moving the Hon'ble Supreme Court. Subsequently, the Committee have been informed that the Interlocutory Application was filed in the Supreme Court on 1 August, 2005. In this regard, the Ministry of Environment & Forests have apprised the Committee *vide* their letter dated September 9, 2005 that the Hon'ble Supreme Court have directed the Government of India to issue orders for diversion of the aforesaid 12.675 ha. land from the Periyar Tiger Reserve.

50. As per the latest communication received from the Travancore Devaswom Board and the outline of the Master Plan submitted to the Committee by Eco Smart., in a nutshell, the following facilities will be provided to the Sabarimala

pilgrims under the proposed Master Plan in different stages involving different time schedule as specified below:—

<u>Facility</u>	<u>Stage</u>
(i) Parking of vehicles.	Immediate
(ii) Medical facilities.	Immediate/Medium-term
(iii) Drinking water at all points.	Immediate
(iv) Accommodation and resting places.	Immediate/Medium-term
(v) Toilet, Bathrooms etc. at Pampa, Sannidhanam & Nilackal.	Immediate/Medium-term
(vi) Sewage clearance and treatment.	Medium-term/long-term
(vii) Garbage disposal (Solid waste management).	Immediate
(viii) Widened trekking paths.	Immediate
(ix) Drinking water facilities and toilet en-route the trekking paths.	Immediate
(x) Construction of Queue Complex.	Short-term
(xi) Improved Darshan facilities.	Medium-term/long-term

51. With regard to the Committee's query on the implementation aspect of the proposals envisaged in the Master Plan and monitoring thereof, the representative of Ecosmart informed during the evidence held on 30th June, 2005 as under:—

“In terms of the implementation Committees, the apex level Steering Committee has Chief Secretary as its Chairman. It also has the President, TDB as a member. The other members include the Principal Secretary, Devaswom Department, the Secretary, Forest and Wildlife and the Principal Secretary, Finance Department. It was also decided that a representative of the Central Ministry of Environment and Forests would be an observer on the steering level Committee. There is also a working level Committee. These Committees have been made after getting a Cabinet approval. The working level Committee is also being constituted where the Principal Secretary, Devaswom Department and the Commissioner, TDB are also members. Also, the Chief Conservator of Forests and the Secretary of Forests are also members of this Committee. If necessary, the Committee would include members from Ecosmart as well as the Police Department, the District Collectorate and the Pollution Control Board. As I see, in some sense these two Committees are key to implement this whole process because it is very much a multi-departmental effort that will have to be launched in order to achieve the immediate interventions. I think perhaps even the apex level Steering Committee unfortunately has not met formally so far. So, now that the implementation plans are ready, there is a need to activate the Committee. The working level Committee has met two to three times. But now I think there is a need to meet more frequently in order to get down to the nitty-gritty of the implementation.

.....the apex Committee needs to have formal terms of reference, and it needs to meet more frequently in terms of getting these actions done. The working level Committee needs to coordinate among various different bodies. These involve Forestry Department, Irrigation Department, and several State Government agencies – Kerala Water Authority, Kerala State Electricity Board. The entire coordination effort will have to be done by these two Committees. Perhaps, a fortnightly monitoring mechanism has to be put in place if we have to achieve this target before November, 2005.”

He further added:—

“We have prepared a detailed priority list of immediate interventions that need to be taken up. This list is also being discussed with the Travancore Devaswom Board, and the Government of Kerala. There is a consensus with everybody on the implementation of this list.”

52. On this issue, Travancore Devaswom Board have stated in their written note that a full-fledged works wing of the Board will implement the projects and an officer who has retired as Chief Engineer from State PWD has been appointed as Technical Consultant. M/s Ecosmart has been appointed by the State Government for the preparation of detailed estimates, sketches, Plan etc. and for rendering all necessary assistance for the proper implementation for the intervention during this season and for preparation of details relating to second phase.

53. In response to a query whether any separate agency is required for implementation of the Master Plan, the Travancore Devaswom Board have submitted that:—

“There are 1208 temples under the Travancore Devaswom Board and about 5000 employees. Since the administration of Sabarimala is fully within powers of Travancore Devaswom Board as per the Act, it has been stated that the question of engaging any Agency/Committee or authority to administer/ implement any scheme does not arise. Moreover, legally also it is not correct. Travancore Devaswom Board can complete the works as per the Master Plan with their own machinery, provided the land is made available as requested for.”

54. With regard to the immediate works to be completed before the pilgrim season beginning in November 2005, the representatives of the Travancore Devaswom Board assured the Committee during the oral evidence held on 14 July, 2005 that the required number of toilets, bathrooms, drinking water facility and parking facility will be provided at the Nilackal base camp before the ensuing pilgrim season. Further, in a written note furnished subsequently to the Committee the Travancore Devaswom Board stated that a schedule of works has been prepared by M/s Ecosmart (India) for the implementation of immediate intervention/ requirements for the ensuing pilgrim season. The Travancore Devaswom Board has committed to complete the immediate requirements before November, 2005, cost of which is approximately estimated as Rs. 5 crores. According to them, immediate

works proposed to be undertaken at Nilackal base camp for the ensuing season are as under:—

- I. **Road**— Widening and repairs of the existing roads.
- II. **Parking**—Clearing the area of 30 acres by cutting un-yieldy Rubber trees for parking of vehicles. 2500 vehicles can be parked in this area. Apart from this 13000 heavy vehicles can be parked in the remaining estate area without cutting trees.
- III. **Water Supply**— There are four ponds in the estate area. These ponds will be developed and maintained. Water from three ponds is for drinking purpose. This will be after treating the water scientifically. Water of one pond is to be used for other purpose. Apart from this, the possibility of constructing one check dam in the stream near the boundary of the estate is also under consideration. Four tube wells will also be constructed for uninterrupted water supply.
- IV. **Toilets**— At present there are 70 toilets. In addition, 400 toilets will be constructed before November 15, 2005.
- V. Solid Waste Management Facilities.
- VI. Fueling facilities and a full-fledged communication installation will be made in Nilackal areas.
- VII. In order to have law and order, pilgrim movement, control and traffic control, a police station will be set apart and fire control station will also be provided.
- VIII. **Shelters**—Construction of a ‘nadapandal’ and other accommodation for pilgrims staff, drivers etc. will be provided.
- IX. Medical facilities at the base camp.

55. The Committee undertook a Study Visit to Kochi in the second week of October, 2005. They held informal discussion with the representatives of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala (Forest Department) and the Travancore Devaswom Board on 18th October, 2005 and made an on-the-spot visit to Sabarimala via Nilackal on 19th /20th October 2005.

56. During the discussion at Kochi, the Committee, at the outset, desired to be apprised of the progress of the implementation of the various projects/facilities and their completion before the ensuing pilgrim season as per the assurance given by the Travancore Devaswom Board during oral evidences held earlier. The representatives of the Travancore Devaswom Board informed that the entire stretch of land at Nilackal was transferred to the Devaswom Board only about a month back and that the work with

regard to the following facilities had been already initiated and all the requisite steps are being taken by them with a view to complete the same by 10th November, 2005:—

Sanitation

- (i) Construction of toilet blocks each having 40 units (Total 400 latrines).
- (ii) Construction of bio-reactor (Advanced version of septic tank).
- (iii) Construction of effluent collection sump at Nilackal.
- (iv) Construction of oxidation pond and earthen pond at Nilackal.
- (v) Providing sewage network.

Water supply facilities

- (i) Providing water supply network and toilet flushing network at Nilackal.
- (ii) Construction of borewell at different locations at Nilackal.

Shelters

Construction of Nadapandal at Nilackal.

Pilgrim Management and Transportation

- (i) Formation of Parking ground at Nilackal
- (ii) Improvement of road at Nilackal.

Solid waste management

- (i) Supply of litter bins.
- (ii) Supply of pet bottle grinding machine.
- (iii) Supply of Dumber bin placer trolley without prima mover and dumber bin.
- (iv) Developing composing yard.

Other facilities

Supply of 320KVA Generator set at Nilackal.

57. The representative of the Travancore Devaswom Board also stated that presently all the work being carried out at the base camp are in the nature of immediate interventions and are in accordance with the outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan, which has been approved by all stakeholders.

58. In a written note, the Travancore Devaswom Board have further informed that certain facilities like upgradation of toilet blocks, water treatment unit at Nilackal, construction of more borewells, pilgrim shelters, solid waste management facilities like auto tippers, incinerator etc. will be ready only by the next pilgrim season at the Nilackal base camp.

59. The Committee were informed that the Travancore Devaswom Board have not initiated any action on the Pampa-Sannidhanam area. In this regard, the representative of the Travancore Devaswom Board brought to the notice of the Committee that although the Hon'ble Supreme Court has issued an order dated 26th August, 2005 for diversion and transfer of 12.675 ha. of forest land at Pampa-Sannidhanam area directing the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests to issue clearance

for transfer of land, the Ministry have agreed in-principle to hand-over this piece of land. It was further stated that the final clearance has not been issued by the Ministry inspite of the fact that the Devaswom Board has fulfilled all the conditions, namely, payment of Net Present Value (NPV) and transferring equal area for afforestation. The representative of the Devaswom Board explained that since the requisite area had not been made available to the Board, they would not be in a position to undertake any construction work for immediate intervention at the Pampa-Sannidhanam area before the ensuing pilgrim season. He added that even if the requisite area was eventually transferred to the Board before the season commences, they would not be able to complete the works in time.

60. When the Committee specifically enquired during the discussion about the pending clearance in the matter and the consequent delay in taking up essential works in the Pampa-Sabarimala area, the representative of the Ministry of Environment and Forests assured the Committee that the final clearance in the matter would be issued as soon as the proposal was received from the Forest Department, Government of Kerala. The representative of the Forest Department, Government of Kerala then indicated that they would forward the proposal immediately to the Ministry of Environment and Forests. He also sought to impress upon the Committee that all the land proposed and approved in the outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan had been cleared by the Forest Department for transfer to the Devaswom Board and that there would be no hitch whatsoever in this regard. The representative of the Ministry of Environment & Forests assured the Committee that final clearance would be issued within 3 days of receiving the proposal from the State Government.

61. The Ministry of Environment & Forests subsequently informed the Committee in a written note that they received the proposal from the State Government on 18th October 2005 (when the Committee discussed the matter at Kochi) and they have given final clearance for diversion and transfer of 12.675 ha. of forest land in Periyar Tiger Reserve on 24th October, 2005.

62. With regard to the medium/long term interventions under the Master Plan, the representative of the Travancore Devaswom Board informed the Committee that the full-fledged Master Plan was expected to be ready only by July, 2006, which would specify medium-term projects to be completed in a period of 10 years and long-term projects to be undertaken in 50-year period.

63. On 19th/20th October, 2005, the Study Group of the Committee visited Nilackal (enroute Sabarimala), where a base camp for the pilgrims is to be developed. After visiting Nilackal, the Members proceeded to Pampa, the foothill, where the pilgrims congregate before trekking to the Shrine, about 5 kms. away.

64. During this visit, the Committee noticed the following activities/deficiencies;
- (i) At the base camp at Nilackal, work relating to the facilities like toilets, drinking water, parking area, shelters etc. has been initiated.
 - (ii) The trekking paths were narrow, rough and fragile.
 - (iii) Medical facilities including chemist shops were non-existent at Nilackal as well as Pampa-Sannidhanam area.
 - (iv) There were no toilets on the way to the Shrine.
 - (v) Travancore Devaswom Board had not made any arrangements for drinking water enroute the Shrine. There were only a few private vendors selling mineral water.

OBSERVATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

65. Shri Dharma Sastha temple at Sabarimala in the State of Kerala, where the presiding deity is Lord Ayyappa, is situated on a hill-top in a dense forest in the southern most part of the Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary in the Western Ghats. This internationally famous shrine, believed to be of great antiquity, attracts millions of pilgrims cutting across religions, castes and classes, exhibiting a remarkable instance of communal harmony and national integration. According to the Travancore Devaswom Board, the statutory body responsible for the management of the shrine, about 3 crore pilgrims visited the shrine during the festival season beginning from November 15, 2003 and ending on 14th January, 2004. The number of pilgrims has been steadily increasing over the years as people have an unflinching faith that Lord Ayyappa fulfils all their wishes and aspirations which inspires them to make frequent visits to Sabarimala. No wonder, Sabarimala has acquired the status of a major pilgrim centre.

66. Surprisingly, a pilgrim centre of such great significance and popularity attracting a large number of devotees from all over the country lacks even basic facilities like clean drinking water, hygienic food, medical facilities, shelters, dormitories and toilets. This state of affairs has continued unattended over the years causing avoidable suffering to the pilgrims, several of whom undertake the pilgrimage year after year. The Committee believe that efforts required to mitigate the suffering of pilgrims wherever possible within the available resources did not seem to have been made over the years by the State Government and the Devaswom Board. In spite of having enough resources at their command, the Devaswom Board could not provide even basic facilities like temporary toilets, shelters, drinking water and normal medical facilities to the pilgrims under the pretext of non-availability of requisite land for development. The fact that timely steps were not taken by the Travancore Devaswom Board and the Government of Kerala despite the magnitude of the problem is nothing but regrettable.

67. Whatever steps have now been sought to be initiated to create the basic facilities at Sabarimala were done only after the Public Accounts Committee took notice of the genuine problems faced by pilgrims and decided to examine the issue in all its dimensions. This subject relating to the problems faced by the devotees for a pilgrimage to Sabarimala Shrine first came up before the Public Accounts Committee in October, 2003, during the course of a discussion at Kochi with the officials of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Government of Kerala regarding faunal surveys in the Periyar Tiger Sanctuary. It was then brought to the Committee's notice that the Forest Department did not allow the Sabarimala Shrine authorities to undertake any kind of repairs, maintenance or development work in the area surrounding the Shrine due to its location on the peripheral areas of the Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary although there was an urgent need to develop the area to mitigate the problems of the pilgrims. The Committee were given to understand by the Travancore Devaswom Board that proposals for creating infrastructure to develop proper facilities for the pilgrims were rejected by the Government on the ground of "conservation of ecology and wild life", despite the

fact that no faunal survey was carried out in the area for several years. The Travancore Devaswom Board lamented that lack of even basic amenities for the ever-growing number of pilgrims around the temple area created serious problems of spatial and logistical management resulting in avoidable suffering to the pilgrims, particularly while trekking their way to the Shrine on a steep hill track.

68. Considering the importance of the subject and the magnitude of the problem, the Committee thought it proper to visit the Sabarimala Shrine in the peak pilgrim season in January, 2004 to see for themselves the nature and extent of the problems faced by the pilgrims there. During their visit, they noticed the plight of pilgrims coming from different parts of the country, who had congregated in large numbers to pay their obeisance to Lord Ayyappa on Makara Sankranti day. The Committee during the journey up the hill saw countless number of devotees sleeping on hard ground in the forest at night without any protective roof along the hilly footpath. Further, they noticed total lack of clean drinking water or hygienic food available to them. The tracks were too narrow to bear the massive flow of pilgrims. The infrastructure available in the temple precincts was extremely sparse. In view of the alarming nature of the problems faced by the pilgrims visiting the holy Shrine and due to the lackadaisical approach hitherto adopted by the authorities to provide a viable solution, the Committee had an apprehension that the prevailing condition at Sabarimala may lead to a major tragedy similar to the stampede in the year 2000 in which 52 persons had died. The Committee, therefore, considered it appropriate and necessary to bring the matter to the urgent notice of Parliament by way of a Preliminary Report on the subject.

69. Before finalizing their Preliminary Report on the subject, the Committee had taken into account the written notes submitted by the Travancore Devaswom Board and the Kerala Government apart from their oral submissions made before the Committee at Sabarimala. In this connection, the Travancore Devaswom Board had submitted a note to the Committee stating *inter-alia* that prior to promulgation of the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980, the Devaswom Board could provide adequate facilities to the lakhs of pilgrims visiting the Shrine. But, thereafter, the situation had changed as the State Forest Department did not even consider the legitimate rights and privileges of the Devaswom Board with regard to utilisation of even the area under their title (13.35 acres), not to mention the area under lease and possession (168.35 acres) and the area under permission (63.00 acres). The Board submitted that since the temple was situated in the southernmost fringe of the Periyar Tiger Reserve, it is easy and practicable to delink 500 hectares of forest land from the Tiger Reserve. The representatives of the Government of Kerala, took the position that what was needed at Sabarimala was a sensible and humanitarian approach, which could solve the problems of both humans and nature. They informed that the Supreme Court in WPC No. 212/2001 had directed the Central and State Governments and the Devaswom Board not to carry out any non-forest activity at Sabarimala, which were not permitted by the Central Government under the Forest (Conservation) Act. Taking into account both the submissions and the ground realities noticed by the Committee during their on-the-spot visit, a Preliminary Report on the subject was thus finalized and presented to Parliament.

70. The Committee in their Preliminary Report had suggested certain measures which *inter-alia* included de-linking the Sabarimala temple area from the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary and the subsequent long-term development of the area on the basis of a Master Plan in consonance with the broader considerations of the ecology of the region. The Committee had opined that Sabarimala could be developed like Vaishno Devi Temple or other major pilgrim centres in the country. As the long-term development was bound to take some time, it was emphasized that certain short-term measures should be expeditiously taken to alleviate the sufferings of the pilgrims.

71. Responding to the suggestions of the Committee in their Preliminary Report, the Ministry of Environment and Forests in their Action Taken Notes stated that the problems faced by the pilgrims can be addressed by evolving a holistic Master Plan for facilitating Sabarimala pilgrim visitation including institutional mechanisms for day-to-day management and crowd regulation as well as by creating a high level coordination mechanism under the control of the State Government of Kerala for implementing the Master Plan. The Ministry also asked the State Government to take a view *vis-a-vis* the environmental clearance required under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 for transferring forest land to the Travancore Devaswom Board, the statutory body for managing the affairs of the Sabarimala Shrine. The Travancore Devaswom Board, while explaining their position in this matter, indicated that Sabarimala area, situated in the southern most part of the Periyar Tiger Reserve, was actually in the buffer zone and therefore it would be very much possible to delink the required area for development works from the Sanctuary and transfer the same to the Devaswom Board, while adding sufficient substitute area from the nearby forest. The Devaswom Board assured that they would undertake to protect the entire area that would be allotted to them in an eco-friendly manner with the least disturbance to the flora and fauna existing there.

72. The Committee were surprised that the Ministry of Environment and Forests in their Action Taken Replies conveniently avoided the main issue of de-linking the requisite area from the Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary to facilitate development works in the area. Neither was there any mention about the short-term measures to be initiated to alleviate the suffering of the pilgrims on account of lack of toilet facilities, clean water, food, medical facilities etc. as had been desired by the Committee. Instead, the Ministry merely asked the State Government to examine the issues and take a view *vis-a-vis* the clearance under Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. There was also no response from the State Government in this regard. The Committee was thus inclined to conclude that the response of the Ministry of Environment and Forests was unsatisfactory and rather vague and it failed to address the core concerns expressed by the Committee in their Preliminary Report. This strengthened the Committee's resolve to have the matter examined further with a view to making the concerned authorities realize the urgency and importance of the concrete steps to be taken in the matter. Accordingly, the Committee decided to discuss the issues in detail with the representatives of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, State Government of Kerala and the Travancore Devaswom Board.

73. During the first oral evidence held in December 2004, the Ministry of Environment and Forests submitted that the situation at Sabarimala warranted regulation of flow of pilgrims through a holistic “Master Plan”, drawn by professionals, which should also include institutional mechanism for day-to-day management. The Committee were given to understand that the “outline of the Master Plan for Sabarimala”, to take care of the next 50 years, was prepared by a professional agency, namely, M/s Ecosmart of India Ltd., Mumbai at the instance of the State Government of Kerala. It was explained that the Master Plan outline mainly dealt with the twin issues of pilgrim-management and crowd-regulation. As the entire pressure of the pilgrimage is being felt on two spots only, namely Pampa (the foothill) and the Sannidhanam (sanctum sanctorum), it was proposed to de-congest this area under the Master Plan outline and develop peripheral areas such as Erimeli, Vandiperiyar and Nilackal as base camps to accommodate the rush of pilgrims and regulate their movement towards Pampa and the Sannidhanam. For this purpose, a rapid shuttle service was being proposed to transport pilgrims from the primary base camp at Nilackal to Pampa and back with the provision for a token system for ‘darshan’.

74. Following this oral evidence, the Committee did not hear anything on the subject from the Ministry of Environment & Forests or the Government of Kerala for about six months. They then decided to call them again to apprise themselves of progress, if any, made by them in the matter. On receipt of a communication from the Committee in this regard, the Ministry of Environment & Forests furnished a written note dated 20.06.2005 stating that they have given in principle approval for 110.524 hectares of forest land at Nilackal for the base camp and the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife had given their consent for using 12.675 hectares of Periyar Tiger Reserve land in the Pampa - Sannidhanam area. The Committee were also informed by the Ministry that parallel processing of the case (12.675 hectares) under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 shall be taken up by them after receipt of proposal from the State Government. In this connection, it was informed that as the Hon’ble Supreme Court of India has imposed a ban on diversion of forest land in National Parks and Sanctuaries, the user agency, namely Travancore Devaswom Board was required to obtain case-specific permission from the Apex Court for this purpose. Obviously, the Ministry of Environment & Forests woke up only after the Committee pursued the matter further and decided to take stock of the progress made by them in this regard. Subsequently during the evidence held in June-July, 2005, the Committee were given to understand that the ‘Outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan’ has since been accorded approval by all concerned authorities, which in fact implied that the Outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan had acquired the necessary status to set the stage for the holistic development of the Sabarimala region.

75. The Committee note that broadly there are two stages proposed in the outline of the Master Plan and its eventual development into a full-fledged Master Plan, namely, (i) Immediate interventions by January, 2006 to upgrade the present level of services *i.e.* pilgrim management, parking facilities, solid waste management, water and sanitation facilities, health care etc. to improve the current situation and the

setting up of a base camp at Nilackal (ii) Medium and long term interventions upto the year 2015 & 2050 respectively to implement infrastructural proposals including select Pampa River Action Plan proposals with required technical inputs. This includes further development of main base camp at Nilackal, establishing transit camps along the pilgrimage route in Uppupara, Erimeli and Vandiperiyar; improvement in trek routes, Shuttle services, Queue Complex, Jyothi viewing points, emergency & disaster management and rope way for transportation of goods.

76. With regard to the provision of funds to undertake construction and other works as proposed in the outline of the Master Plan, the Committee note that the Devaswom Board have stated that they are capable of bearing the expenditure for short and medium term interventions. In this connection, the Committee feel that the cost for short term schemes/projects, which are required before the pilgrims season begins in November, may not be much. However, the Committee believe that the medium and long term interventions, for which detailing is yet to be done, may require substantial funds. The Committee therefore, expect that the Ministry of Environment and Forests and Government of Kerala may extend all possible financial assistance and the cooperation to the Devaswom Board to mobilize the requisite funds. Efforts may also be made to examine the feasibility of building a corpus out of sponsorships, donations from pilgrims etc. in order to ensure that the implementation of the proposed Sabarimala Master Plan does not suffer on account of paucity of funds.

77. The Committee have been informed that the implementation of the outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan during the short-term has commenced under the aegis of the Travancore Devaswom Board, which is the designated nodal agency for this purpose. The Travancore Devaswom Board have contended that they have the wherewithal to implement the Sabarimala Master Plan. The Committee, however, feel that since the Master Plan is a gigantic project involving several works and schemes, both over the medium-term (upto 2015) and the long-term (upto 2050), clarity of purpose coupled with very sound and efficient organizational capabilities are necessary for its smooth implementation. Even though the Travancore Devaswom Board have assured the Committee that they are capable of implementing the proposed Sabarimala Master Plan, the Committee feel that considering this ambitious project, it would be better if the Devaswom Board involves professional and competent agencies for the implementation of the Master Plan so that the project is completed timely and successfully.

As the implementation of the Master Plan may involve different Departments/ Agencies of the State Government as well as outside agencies, the Committee apprehend that coordination among them may pose a problem. They would, therefore, urge the Government of Kerala to extend all possible technical and material help required by the Travancore Devaswom Board to meet the onerous responsibility undertaken by them. The Committee also desire that the Government should consider conferring statutory status to the proposed Sabarimala Master Plan by enacting a State Act for this purpose with a view to providing the necessary legal sanction for its smooth and expeditious implementation, particularly since the Master Plan covers a wide time-span of 50 years involving steady financing and effective inter-departmental coordination.

78. In their Preliminary Report, the Committee had recommended that a Committee consisting of the Minister of Environment and Forests, Government of India, the Minister of Forests and the Minister of Devaswom, Government of Kerala should be constituted at the apex level to give necessary impetus to the process of development of Sabarimala. The Committee, however, note that instead of constituting a high level political body suggested by them, only a coordination Committee comprising of officials at the state level has been constituted by the Government of Kerala under the Chairmanship of the Chief Secretary, with the President, Travancore Devaswom Board and representatives from different Departments as Members. Further they note that at the working level, another Committee comprising of various officials under the Chairmanship of the Principal Secretary, Devaswom Department has been constituted to monitor the implementation of the projects/ schemes envisaged in the Master Plan outline. The Committee feel that the two-tier arrangement presently made at the State level for monitoring the implementation of the proposed Master Plan is rather inadequate and thus, needs to be suitably upgraded. They desire that at the first level, a Committee under the Chairmanship of the Minister, Devaswom to facilitate decision-making may be constituted and, another Committee may be formed at the working level with the Chief Secretary as the Chairman and the Principal Secretaries of all concerned Departments as Members for regular monitoring and control of the implementation. The Committee believe that such an arrangement will facilitate necessary political as well as administrative impetus to the implementation of the Sabarimala Master Plan. The Travancore Devaswom Board, the statutory body responsible for the affairs of Sabarimala and the implementation of the Master Plan should work under the guidance of the two-tier Committees proposed above.

79. The Committee note that the Master Plan outline envisages development of a base camp at Nilackal, which is about 17 kms from Pampa, the foothill. The requisite land for this purpose (110.524 hectares) was allotted to the Travancore Devaswom Board by the State Government. The Committee are given to understand that the Government of Kerala have charged a price as Net Present Value for the land transferred to the Devaswom Board at Nilackal for the base camp, as according to them the nature of land transferred to them at Nilackal was forest land and that it was done in accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry of Environment and Forests. Keeping in view the larger public interest, the Committee would like the Ministry of Environment & Forests and the State Government of Kerala to examine the feasibility of treating the transferred land at Nilackal as "Revenue land" instead of "Forest land" and consider waiver of the price charged as "Net Present Value".

80. At the instance of the Committee, the Travancore Devaswom Board had given an assurance during the oral evidence that they would be in a position to complete the immediate interventions envisaged in the Master Plan outline before the ensuing pilgrim season. As the Sabarimala long-term Master Plan was to be ready only by July, 2006, the Committee were anxious that atleast the immediate interventions proposed in the Master Plan outline should be completed in time before the ensuing pilgrim season. Consequently the Committee undertook a study visit to Kochi/ Sabarimala from 18-20 October 2005 for an on-the-spot appraisal of the progress

made in the creation of the proposed facilities by way of immediate interventions for the pilgrims. The Committee noticed that the construction of basic facilities like toilets, drinking water pipelines, parking space for vehicles, shelters, sanitation has been initiated by the Travancore Devaswom Board at Nilackal, where a base camp is being developed for the pilgrims. According to the Travancore Devaswom Board the land at Nilackal was transferred to them only in September and they are trying their best to complete these works before the beginning of the pilgrim season. The Committee would expect the Travancore Devaswom Board to fulfill the commitment made by them with regard to the immediate interventions at the base camp. Furthermore, the Committee would like to emphasize that no untoward incident should happen due to the presence of staggering number of pilgrims expected to congregate in the shrine this season. They therefore desire that the Travancore Devaswom Board should also take immediate disaster-prevention measures for the ensuing pilgrim season pending the commencement of projects over the medium/long-term.

81. Apart from the base camp, the outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan also envisages development of certain facilities on the way from Pampa (the foothill) enroute the Sannidhanam (the temple complex) like the Queue Complex, Cardiology Units, drinking water facilities, widening of trekking paths, sewage treatment plants etc. In this connection, the Committee note that the Supreme Court *vide* their order dated 26th August 2005, in response to the Special Leave Petition filed by the Devaswom Board has directed the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests to grant permission to the Board to divert 12.675 hectares of land in the Periyar Tiger Reserve for the development of road and for providing infrastructure facilities for pilgrims visiting the Sabarimala Shrine. However, during their recent visit to Sabarimala on 18th October, 2005, the representative of the Devaswom Board informed that the final clearance for the transfer of the aforesaid land had not been given till then by the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Government of Kerala. While taking a serious view of the delay in effecting the transfer of the requisite land and the lack of proper coordination between the Union Ministry and the State Government, the Committee directed the representatives of both the Union Ministry and the Forest Department, Government of Kerala to take immediate action in the matter so that the proposed works to develop basic facilities in the Pampa-Sannidhanam area can be executed without further delay. The Committee understand that on 18th October 2005, the State Government sent the proposal which was eventually cleared by the Ministry of Environment and Forests on 24th October 2005. The Committee deprecate the delay on the part of the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Government of Kerala to give the final clearance in the matter due to which it would not be possible to alleviate the problems faced by the pilgrims in the Pampa-Sannidhanam area for the ensuing season. As the clearance has finally been given, the Committee would now expect the Travancore Devaswom Board to take up the immediate interventions proposed in the Master Plan outline at the temple area (Pampa-Sannidhanam) in right earnest and execute the works on a war footing so that a perceptible change is visible in the temple area very soon. The requisite facilities may include widening the trekking tracks leading to the shrine,

broadening the “darshan” space available for pilgrims and provision of alternate points for viewing the auspicious “jyothi” in the distant horizon on Makara Sankranthi day.

As considerable concern has been expressed by the environmentalists, the Committee desire that the Travancore Devaswom Board, in accordance with the Supreme Court directive, should take utmost care to protect the fragile ecosystem of the area while carrying out development works in the allotted land. All the works to be executed in the allotted area should be of essential nature only and strictly done in accordance with the outline of the Master Plan and the detailed long-term Master Plan to be formulated in due course, while keeping the flora and fauna of the area intact. The Committee would also expect the Travancore Devaswom Board authorities to ensure that any commercial exploitation of the allotted land does not take place in the area at any cost.

82. The Committee note that the Outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan envisages several projects and schemes in the Sabarimala region which *inter-alia* include schemes for sewage, sanitation and drinking water. These projects are proposed to be taken up on both the short-term and the medium-term basis and these are linked to the Pampa River Action Plan, which is a separate centrally sponsored scheme under the National River Control Directorate of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, entailing reduction of pollution in the holy river Pampa, where pilgrims take their ritualistic holy dip before visiting the shrine. It is also the only source of drinking water for the pilgrims. It has been informed that the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests is mainly responsible for funding those elements of the Pampa Action Plan which relate to the Sabarimala Master Plan and that sanctions have been issued by the Ministry for funding those components which are to be taken up immediately. The Committee desire that the Pampa Action Plan, which has significant schematic linkages with the Sabarimala Master Plan, should be properly dovetailed with the related components of the Master Plan so that the development of the region takes place in an integrated and holistic manner. Steps should also be taken to promote and ensure moisture-retention and raising of water-table in the region so that ground-water can be developed and utilized as a source for the use of pilgrims. For this purpose, the Committee would like representatives from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (National River Conservation Directorate) as well as the Ministry of Water Resources (Central Ground Water Board) to be included in the empowered Committees constituted at the State level to ensure proper coordination with regard to the schemes under the Pampa Action Plan.

83. With a staggering number of pilgrims visiting the Sabarimala shrine every day during the pilgrim season from November to January, crowd management and regulation assumes top priority for the local Administration. In this connection, the Committee recall the stampede in the year 2000 in which 52 lives were lost. Strangely enough, the authorities did not bother to take requisite steps to improve the situation, leave alone the measures for disaster prevention, until the matter came up before this Committee. According to the Travancore Devaswom Board, a crisis management team exists with District Collectors of the concerned areas as

its Members. It has also been informed now that the outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan provides for queue complexes as a medium/long-term intervention for crowd management. While underlining the seriousness of this issue as well as the fact that the steps taken hitherto in this regard were grossly insufficient, the Committee would strongly recommend enforcement measures including adoption of modern disaster management techniques in order to ensure a smooth and incident-free pilgrimage. They further recommend that a well-equipped disaster management cell should be set up in the Travancore Devaswom Board to oversee the proper implementation of all disaster-prevention measures.

84. The Committee have been seized of this matter for almost two years and have been concerned about the problems faced by the pilgrims due to lack of basic amenities in the area. They have been urging the concerned agencies, namely the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, the State Government of Kerala and the Travancore Devaswom Board to work together and coordinate among themselves with a view to making Sabarimala pilgrim-friendly. To begin with, the Committee presented a Preliminary Report on the subject so as to bring to the notice of the Parliament the problems faced by the Sabarimala Pilgrims and the immediate steps required to alleviate the same. After this Preliminary Report and subsequent examination by the Committee of the various issues involved, the concerned authorities sprung into action and the requisite land for the base camp at Nilackal and the Pampa – Sannidhanan area has been cleared and handed over to the Travancore Devaswom Board. In the meantime, the Outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan has been prepared and approved by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and The Travancore Devaswom Board. The Travancore Devaswom Board is now in a position to implement the short-term measures by way of immediate interventions specified in the Outline to the Master Plan. Further, a detailed Master Plan for medium as well as long term measures is being prepared and would be ready only by July, 2006. The Committee desire that they should be apprised about the details of the Master Plan and the specific steps taken to operationalise the Plan. The Committee now *vide* this Report have stressed the need for timely completion of immediate interventions as outlined in the Master Plan. The Committee will continue to closely watch the execution of these immediate interventions and the progress made thereon. The preparation, approval and commencement of the implementation of the full-fledged Master Plan will also continue to be monitored by the Committee until the issues taken up by them are resolved and taken to their logical conclusion. The Committee may like to give a final Report on the subject in due course after making an on-the-spot appraisal, if necessary.

NEW DELHI;
17 November, 2005
26 Kartika, 1927 (Saka)

PROF. VIJAY KUMAR MALHOTRA,
Chairman,
Public Accounts Committee.

PART II

MINUTES OF THE TENTH SITTING OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE (2004-2005) HELD ON 21ST DECEMBER, 2004

The Committee sat from 1600 hrs. to 1730 hrs. on 21 December, 2004 in Committee Room No. 139, Parliament House Annexe, New Delhi.

PRESENT

Prof. Vijay Kumar Malhotra — *Chairman*

MEMBERS

Lok Sabha

2. Shri Ramesh Bais
3. Dr. M. Jagannath
4. Shri Naveen Jindal
5. Shri Magunta Sreenivasulu Reddy
6. Dr. R. Senthil
7. Shri Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh
8. Shri Tarit Baran Topdar

Rajya Sabha

9. Dr. K. Malaisamy
10. Shri C. Ramachandraiah

SECRETARIAT

1. Shri P.D.T. Achary — *Additional Secretary*
2. Shri S.K. Sharma — *Joint Secretary*
3. Shri Ashok Sarin — *Director*
4. Shri N.S. Hooda — *Under Secretary*
5. Smt. Anita B. Panda — *Under Secretary*

Representatives of the Ministry of Environment & Forests

1. Dr. Pradipto Ghosh — *Secretary*
2. Shri N.K. Joshi — *Director General (Forests) & Special Secretary*

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| 3. Dr. Rajesh Gopal | — | Inspector General Forests & Director
(Project Tiger) |
| 4. Shri Naresh Dayal | — | Addl. Secretary |

Representatives of the State Government of Kerala

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| 1. Shri B.S Corrie | — | Chief Wild Life Warden |
| 2. Dr. V.S. Varghese | — | Chief Conservator of Forests |

Representatives of the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB)

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| 1. Shri G. Raman Nair | — | President (TDB) |
| 2. Shri E. Bharat Bhushan | — | Principal Secretary (TDB) |
| 3. Shri C.G. Sachidanadan | — | Commissioner (TDB) |

2. At the outset, the Chairman welcomed all the Members of the Committee and the witnesses representing Ministry of Environment & Forests, State Government of Kerala and Devaswom Board to the sitting of the Public Accounts Committee. The Chairman also extended hearty welcome to Shri Naveen Jindal on his election to PAC. The Chairman then apprised the Members about the background of the Preliminary report of the Committee (63rd Report of PAC—13th Lok Sabha) relating to “Pilgrimage to Sabarimala—Human Problems and Ecology”, which was presented to Parliament on 5th February, 2004 by the predecessor Committee. He also informed the Members that the predecessor Public Accounts Committee had visited the temple shrine at Sabarimala on 13-14 January, 2004 to get a closer view of the problems faced by pilgrims who visit the temple in millions during the pilgrim season. The Chairman gave a brief account of the observations and recommendations made by the Committee in their Preliminary Report. Thereafter, the Committee took the evidence of the representatives of Union Ministry of Environment & Forests, Officers of State Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board on the issues arising out of 63rd Report (A Preliminary Report) regarding “Pilgrimage to Sabarimala—Human Problems and Ecology.”

3. Since the Chairman, PAC had to attend a meeting called by Hon'ble Speaker, he left the sitting of the Committee in mid-way and authorized Dr. M. Jagannath to Chair the remaining part of the sitting.

4. A copy of the verbatim proceedings of the sitting has been kept on record.

5. The Committee informed the witnesses that they would undertake a visit to Cochin next month and would hold further discussion with officials of the Government as well as the representatives of the Devaswom Board on the subject. The Committee intended to undertake a study tour during January, 2005 to some other places including Cochin in connection with subjects under their examination.

The Committee then adjourned.

MINUTES OF THE THIRD SITTING OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS
COMMITTEE (2005-2006) HELD ON 30TH JUNE, 2005

The Committee sat from 1600 to 1715 hours on 30th June, 2005 in Committee Room 'C', Parliament House Annexe, New Delhi.

PRESENT

Prof. Vijay Kumar Malhotra — *Chairman*

MEMBERS

Lok Sabha

2. Shri Ramesh Bais
3. Shri Khagen Das
4. Shri Raghunath Jha
5. Shri Brajesh Pathak
6. Shri Madal Lal Sharma
7. Shri Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh
8. Dr. Ramlakhan Singh
9. Kunwar Rewati Raman Singh
10. Shri Tarit Baran Topdar

Rajya Sabha

11. Shri R.K. Dhawan
12. Shri V. Narayanasamy
13. Shri C. Ramachandraiah
14. Shri Jairam Ramesh
15. Prof. R.B.S. Verma

SECRETARIAT

1. Shri P.D.T. Achary — *Secretary*
2. Shri Ashok Sarin — *Director*
3. Smt. Anita B. Panda — *Under Secretary*

Representatives of the Ministry of Environment and Forests

1. Dr. Prodipto Ghosh — *Secretary*
2. Shri Naresh Dayal — *Addl. Secretary*

Representatives of the State Government of Kerala

1. Shri E.K. Bharat Bhushan — Principal Secretary
2. Shri L. Radhakrishnan — Secretary, Deptt. of Forests and Wild Life

Representatives of Travancore Devaswom Board, Kerala

1. Shri G. Raman Nair — President
2. Shri C.G. Sachidanandan — Commissioner

2. To begin with, the Chairman, PAC welcomed the Members and informed them about the retirement of Shri P.D.T. Achary, Secretary that day. The Committee then placed on record their appreciation of the services rendered by Shri Achary for the Lok Sabha Secretariat in general and the Public Accounts Committee in particular.

3. Thereafter, the representatives of the Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, State Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board were called and the Committee took their oral evidence on the issues arising out of 63rd Report (A Preliminary Report) of Public Accounts Committee (13th Lok Sabha) relating to "Pilgrimage to Sabarimala-Human Problem and Ecology" as well as the progress achieved by them on various issues raised by the Committee during previous oral evidence held on the subject.

4. As the evidence remained inconclusive, the Committee decided to take further oral evidence of the representatives of the Ministry of Environment & Forests, officials of State Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board on the same subject on 14 July, 2005.

5. A copy of the verbatim proceedings of the sitting has been kept on record.

The Committee then adjourned.

MINUTES OF THE FIFTH SITTING OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE
(2005-2006) HELD ON 14th JULY, 2005

The Committee sat from 1600 to 1700 hours on 14th July, 2005 in Room No. "139", Parliament House Annexe, New Delhi.

PRESENT

Prof. Vijay Kumar Malhotra — *Chairman*

MEMBERS

Lok Sabha

2. Shri Ramesh Bais
3. Shri Magunta Sreenivasulu Reddy
4. Shri Madan Lal Sharma
5. Shri Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh
6. Dr. Ramlakhan Singh
7. Shri Tarit Baran Topdar

Rajya Sabha

8. Shri Prasanta Chatterjee
9. Dr. K. Malaisamy
10. Shri V. Narayanasamy
11. Shri C. Ramachandraiah
12. Prof. R.B.S. Verma

SECRETARIAT

1. Shri Ashok Sarin — *Director*
2. Smt. Anita B. Panda — *Under Secretary*

Representatives of Ministries/Departments/Organisations

Ministry of Environment & Forests

1. Shri Naresh Dayal — Addl. Secretary
2. Shri R.K. Vaish — Joint Secretary
3. Shri R.P.S. Katwal — Addl. DGF (Wild Life)
4. Shri G.K. Prasad — Addl. DGF (Forest Conservation)

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| 5. Shri Jagdish Kiswan | — | IGF (Forest Conservation) |
| 6. Dr. Rajesh Gopal | — | IGF & Director (Project Tiger) |

State Government of Kerala

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| 1. Shri Harihara Mahadevan | — | Additional Secretary, Devaswom Department |
| 2. Shri V. Gopinathan | — | Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) |
| 3. Shri P.K. Bharadwaj | — | Director, Project Tiger, Kottayam |

Travancore Devaswom Board, Kerala

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| 1. Shri G. Raman Nair | — | President |
| 2. Shri Punalur Madhu | — | Member |
| 3. Shri M.B. Sreekumar | — | Member |
| 4. Shri C.G. Sachidanandan | — | Commissioner |

Consultants from M/s. Eco-Smart

1. Shri Mahesh Babu
2. Shri Chetan Zaveri
3. Ms. Sapna Rastogi

2. At the outset, the Chairman welcomed the Members and the officials from the Ministry of Environment & Forests, State Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) to the sitting, which was convened to take further oral evidence on the points arising out of 63rd Report (13th Lok Sabha) of PAC relating to "**Pilgrimage to Sabarimala-Human problems and ecology**".

3. Thereafter, consultants from ECOSMART, the agency which has prepared the Master Plan for the development of infrastructure and facilities around Sabarimala, made an audio-visual presentation to the Committee on the outline of the Master Plan, highlighting various facilities proposed to be developed and the progress made thereon so far. The representatives of the Ministry of Environment & Forests, Kerala Government and the Travancore Devaswom Board then explained various points relating to the subject and responded to queries raised by the Chairman and the Members of the Committee. The representatives of the Travancore Devaswom Board assured the Committee that as a short-term measure, requisite facilities like drinking water, toilets, medical assistance, parking space and shelters will be developed and provided for the pilgrims before the season which would begin in November this year. The Committee expressed the view that they might visit the Shrine before the pilgrim season so as to see for themselves the steps taken in this regard.

4. A copy of the verbatim proceedings of the sitting has been kept on record.

The Committee then adjourned.

MINUTES OF THE THIRTEENTH SITTING OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS
COMMITTEE (2005-2006) HELD ON 14TH NOVEMBER, 2005

The Committee sat from 1600 hrs. to 1630 hrs. on 14th November, 2005 in Committee Room 'C' Parliament House Annexe, New Delhi.

PRESENT

Prof. Vijay Kumar Malhotra — *Chairman*

MEMBERS

Lok Sabha

2. Shri Khagen Das
3. Dr. M. Jagannath
4. Shri Tarit Baran Topdar

Rajya Sabha

5. Shri R.K. Dhawan
6. Dr. K. Malaisamy
7. Shri V. Narayanasamy
8. Shri C. Ramachandraiah
9. Shri Jairam Ramesh
10. Prof. R.B.S. Verma

SECRETARIAT

1. Shri S.K. Sharma — *Additional Secretary*
2. Shri Ashok Sarin — *Director*
3. Smt. Anita B. Panda — *Under Secretary*
4. Shri M.K. Madhusudhan — *Under Secretary*

Representatives of the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India

1. Shri U. Bhattacharya — ADAI (RC)
2. Dr. A.K. Banerjee — DG of Audit
3. Shri Roy Mathrani — Pr. Director (AB)
4. Shri R.K. Ghose — AG (Audit), Delhi

Representatives of the Ministry of Urban Development

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| 1. Shri Anil Baijal | — | Secretary |
| 2. Shri P.K. Pradhan | — | Joint Secretary |
| 3. Smt. Neena Garg | — | Joint Secretary & Financial Adviser |

Representatives of Delhi Development Authority

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| 1. Shri A.K. Patnaik | — | Finance Member |
| 2. Shri V.K. Sadhoo | — | Pr. Commissioner |

Representatives of Department of Education, Government of NCT of Delhi

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| 1. Ms. Reena Ray | — | Secretary (Edu.) |
| 2. Shri Vijay Kumar | — | Director (Edu.) |

2. At the outset, the Chairman, PAC welcomed the Members and Audit Officers to the sitting of the Committee.

3. The Committee observed silence for a minute in memory of Shri K.R. Narayanan, former President of India as a mark of respect to the departed soul.

4. Thereafter, the Committee took up for consideration the following Draft Reports:—

- (i) "Pilgrimage to Sabarimala —Human Problems and Ecology".
- (ii) C&AG's Report No. 3 of 2004 relating to "National AIDS Control Programme."
- (iii) "Excesses Over Voted Grants and Charged Appropriations (2003-04)".
- (iv) Action Taken on 46th Report (13th Lok Sabha) relating to "Procurement of Defective Sleeping Bags".
- (v) Action Taken on 58th Report (13th Lok Sabha) Relating to "Excesses Over Voted Grants and Charged Appropriations (2001-02)".

5. Barring Report on "National AIDS Control Programme", the Committee adopted all the Draft Reports without any changes. As regards, draft Report on "National AIDS Control Programme", the Committee after some deliberation adopted the same subject to some minor additions. The Committee, then authorised the Chairman to finalise these Draft Reports in the light of changes suggested by Audit through factual verification, if any, or otherwise and to present the same to Parliament.

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| 6. | *** | *** | *** | *** |
| 7. | *** | *** | *** | *** |
| 8. | *** | *** | *** | *** |

9. A copy of the verbatim proceedings of the sitting has been kept on record.

The Committee then adjourned.

APPENDIX

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sl. No.	Para No.	Ministry/Department concerned	Observations and Recommendations
1	2	3	4
1.	65	Introduction	<p>Shri Dharma Sashtha temple at Sabarimala in the State of Kerala, where the presiding deity is Lord Ayyappa, is situated on a hill-top in a dense forest in the souther most part of the Periyar Wild Life sanctuary in the Western Ghats. This internationally famous shrine, believed to be of great antiquity, attracts millions of pilgrims cutting across religions, castes and classes, exhibiting the remarkable instance of communal harmony and national integration. According to the Travancore Devaswom Board, the statutory body responsible for the management of the shrine, about 3 crore pilgrims visited the shrine during the festival season beginning from November 15, 2003 and ending on 14th January, 2004. The number of pilgrims has been steadily increasing over the years as people have an unflinchin faith that Lord Ayyappa fulfills all their wishes and aspirations which inspires them to make frequent visits to Sabarimala. No wonder, Sabarimala has acquired the status of a major pilgrim centre.</p>
2.	66	Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>Surprisingly, a pilgrims centre of such great significance and popularity attracting a large number of devotees from all over the country lacks even basic facilities like clean drinking water, hygienic food, medical facilities, shelters, dormitories and toilets. This state of affairs has continued unattended over the years causing avoidable suffering to the pilgrims, several of whom undertake the pilgrimage year after year. The Committee believe that efforts required to mitigate the suffering of pilgrims wherever possible within the available resources did not</p>

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			<p>seem to have been made over the years by the State Government and the Devaswom Board. Inspire of having enough resources at their command, the Devaswom Board could not provide even basic facilities like temporary toilets, shelters, drinking water and normal medical facilities to the pilgrims under the pretext of non-availability of requisite land for development. The fact that timely steps were not taken by the Travancore Devaswom Board and the Government of Kerala despite the magnitude of the problem is nothing but regrettable.</p>
3.	67	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>Whatever steps have now been sought to be initiated to create the basic facilities at Sabarimala were done only after the Public Accounts Committee took notice Accounts Committee took notice of the genuine problems faced by pilgrims and decided to examine to the issue in all its dimensions. This subject relating to the problems faced by the devotees for a pilgrimage to Sabarimala Shrine first came up before the Public Accounts Committee in October, 2003, dring the course of a discussion at Kochi with the officials of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Government of Kerala regading faunal surveys in the Periyar Tiger Sanctuary. It was then brought to the Committee's notice that the Forest Department did not allow the Sabarimala Shrine authorities to undertake any kind of repairs, maintenance or development work in the area surrounding the Shrine due to its location on the peripheral areas of the Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary although there was an urgent need to develop the area of mitigate the problems of the pilgrims. The Committee were given to understand by the Travancore Devaswom Board that proposals for creating infrastructure to develop proper facilities for the pilgrims were rejected by the Government on the ground of "conservation of ecology and wild life", despite the fact that no faunal survey was carried out in</p>

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			the area for several years. The Travancore Devaswom Board lamented that lack of even basic amenities for the ever-growing number of pilgrims around the temple area created serious problems of spatial and logistical management resulting in avoidable suffering to the pilgrims, particularly while trekking their way to the Shrine on a steep hill track.
4.	68	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	Considering the importance of the subject and the magnitude of the problem, the Committee thought it proper to visit the Sabarimala Shrine in the peak pilgrim season in January, 2004 to see for themselves the nature and extent of the problems faced by the pilgrim there. During their visit, they noticed the plight of pilgrims coming from different parts of the country, who had congregated in large numbers to pay their obeisance to Lord Ayyappa on Makara Sankranthi day. The Committee during the journey up the hill saw countless number of devotees sleeping on hard ground in the forest at night without any protective roof along hilly footpath. Further, they noticed total lack of clean drinking water or hygienic food available to them. The tracks were too narrow to bear the massive flow of pilgrims. The infrastructure available in the temple precincts was extremely spares. In view of the alarming nature of the problems faced by the pilgrims visiting the holy Shrine and due to the lackaisical approach <i>hitherto</i> adopted by the authorities to provide a viable solution, the Committee had an apprehension that the prevailing condition at Sabarimala may lead to a major tragedy similar to the stampede in the year 2000 in which 52 persons had died. The Committee, therefore, considered it appropriate the necessary to bring the matter to the urgent notice of Parliament by way of a Preliminary Report on the subject.
5.	69	-do-	Before finalizing their Preliminary Report on the subject, the Committee had taken into account the written notes submitted by the Travancore Devaswom Board and the Kerala Government

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			<p>apart from their oral submissions made before the Committee at Sabarimala. In this connection, the Travancore Davaswom Board had submitted a note to the Committee stating <i>inter-alia</i> that prior to promulgation of the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980, the Devaswom Board could provide adequate facilities to the lakhs of pilgrims visiting the Shrine. But thereafter, the situation had changed as the State Forest Department did not even consider the legitimate rights and privileges of the Devaswom Board with regard to utilisation of even the area under their little (13.35 acres), not to mention the area under lease and possession (168.35 acres) and the area under permission (60.00 acres). The Board submitted that since the temple was situated in the southernmost fringe of the Periyar Tiger Reserve, it is easy and practicable to delink 500 hectares of forest land from the Tiger Reserve. The representatives of the Government of Kerala, took the position that what was needed at Sabarimala was a sensible and humanitarian approach, which could solve the problems of both humans and nature. They informed that the Supreme Court in WPC No. 212/2001 had directed the Central and State Governments and the Devaswom Board not to carry out any non-forest activity at Sabarimala. Which were not permitted by the Central Government under the Forest (Conservation) Act. Taking into account both the submissions and the ground realities noticed by the Committee during their on-the-spot visit, a Preliminary Report on the subject was thus finalized and presented to Parliament.</p>
6.	70	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>The Committee in their Preliminary Report had suggested certain measures which <i>inter-alia</i> included de-linking the Sabarimala temple area from the Preiyar Wildlife Sanctuary and the subsequent long-term development of the area on the basis of a Master Plan in Consonance with the Broader considerations of the ecology of the region. The Committee had opined that Sabarimala could be developed like Vaishno</p>

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			Devi Temple or other major pilgrim centres in the country. As the long-term development was bound to take some time, it was emphasized that certain short-term measures should be expeditiously taken to alleviate the sufferings of the pilgrims.
7.	71	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	Responding to the suggestions of the Committee in their Preliminary Report, the Ministry of Environment and Forests in their Action Take Notes stated that the problems faced by the pilgrims can be addressed by evolving a holistic Master Plan for facilitating Sabarimala pilgrims visitation including institutional mechanisms for day-to-day management and crowd regulation as-well-as by creating a high level coordination mechanism under the control of the State Government of Kerala for implementing the Master Plan. The Ministry also asked the State Government to take a view <i>vis-a-vis</i> the environmental clearance required under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 for transferring forest land to the Travancore Devaswom Board, the statutory body for managing the affairs of the Sabarimala Shrine. The Travancore Devaswom Board, while explaining their position in this matter, indicated that Sabarimala area, situated in the southern most part of the Periyar Tiger Reserve, was actually in the buffer zone and therefore it would be very much possible to de-link the required area for development works from the Sanctuary and transfer the same to the Devaswom Board, while adding sufficient substitute area from the nearby forest. The Devaswom Board assured that they would undertake to protect the entire area that would be allotted to them in an eco-friendly manner with the least disturbance to the flora and fauna existing there.
8.	72	Ministry of Environment and Forests, and Government of Kerala	The Committee were surprised that the Ministry of Environment and Forests in their Action Taken Replies conveniently avoided the main issue of de-linking the requisite area from the Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary to facilitate development

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			<p>works in the area. Neither was there any mention about the short-term measures to be initiated to alleviate the suffering of the pilgrims on account of lack of toilet facilities clean water, food, medical facilities etc. as had been desired by the Committee. Instead the Ministry merely asked the State Government to examine the issues and take a view <i>vis-a-vis</i> the clearance under Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. There was also no response from the State Government in this regard. The committee was thus inclined to conclude that the response of the Ministry of Environment and Forests was unsatisfactory and rather vague and it failed to address the core concerns expressed by the Committee in their Preliminary Report. This strengthened the Committee's resolve to have the matter examined further with a view to making the concerned authorities realize the urgency and importance of the concrete steps to be taken in the matter. Accordingly the Committee decided to discuss the issues in detail with the representatives of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, State Government of Kerala and the Travancore Devaswom Board.</p>
9.	73	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>During the first oral evidence held in December 2004 the Ministry of Environment and Forests submitted that the situation at Sabarimala warranted regulation of flow of pilgrims through a holistic " Master Plan" drawn by professionals, which should also include institutional mechanism for day-to-day management. The Committee were given to understand that the "outline of the Master Plan for Sabarimala", to take care of the next 50 years, was prepared by a professional agency, namely. M/s Ecosmart of India Ltd., Mumbai at the instance of the State Government of Kerala. It was explained that the Master Plan outline mainly with the twin issues of pilgrim-management and crowd-regulation. As the entire pressure of the pilgrimage is being felt on two spots only, namely</p>

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			<p>Pampa (the foothill) and the Sannidhanam (sanctum sanctorum), it was proposed to de-congest this area under the Master Plan outline and develop peripheral areas such as Erimeli, Vandiperiyar and Nilackal as base camps to accommodate the rush of pilgrims and regulate their movement towards Pampa and the Sannidhanam. For this purpose, a rapid shuttle service was being proposed to transport pilgrims from the primary base camp at Nilackal to Pampa and back with the provision for a token system for 'darshan'.</p>
10.	74	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>Following this oral evidence, the Committee did not hear anything on the subject from the Ministry of Environment & Forests or the Government of Kerala for about six months. They then decided to call them again to apprise themselves of progress, if any, made by them in the matter. On receipt of a communication from the Committee in this regard, the Ministry of Environment & Forests furnished a written note dated 20.06.2005 stating that they have given in principle approval for 110.524 hectares of forest land at Nilackal for the base camp and the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife had given their consent for using 12.675 hectares of Periyar Tiger Reserve land in the Pampa - Sannidhanam area. The Committee were also informed by the Ministry that parallel processing of the case (12.675 hectares) under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 shall be taken up after receipt of proposal from the State Government. In this connection, it was informed that as the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India has imposed a ban on diversion of forest land in National Parks and Sanctuaries, the user agency, namely Travancore Devaswom Board was required to obtain case-specific permission from the Apex Court for this purpose. Obviously, the Ministry of Environment & Forests woke up only after the Committee pursued the matter further and decided to take stock of the progress made by them in this regard. Subsequently</p>

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			during the evidence held in June-July, 2005, the Committee were given to understand that the 'Outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan' has since been accorded approval by all concerned authorities, which in fact implied that the Outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan had acquired the necessary status to set the stage for the holistic development of the Sabarimala region.
11.	75	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	The Committee note that broadly there are two stages proposed in the outline of the Master Plan and its eventual development into a full fledged Master Plan, namely, (i) Immediate interventions by January, 2006 to upgrade the present level of services <i>i.e.</i> pilgrim management, parking facilities, solid waste management, water and sanitation facilities, health care etc. to improve the current situation and the setting up of a base camp at Nilackal (ii) Medium and long term interventions upto the year 2015 & 2050 respectively to implement infrastructural proposals including select Pampa River Action Plan proposals with required technical inputs. This includes further development of main base camp at Nilackal establishing transit camps along the pilgrimage route in Uppupara, Erimeli and Vandiperiyar, improvement in trek routes, Shuttle services, Queue Complex, Jyothi viewing points, emergency & disaster management and rope way for transportation of goods.
12.	76	-do-	With regard to the provision of funds to undertake construction and other works as proposed in the outline of the Master Plan, the Committee note that the Devaswom Board have stated that they are capable of bearing the expenditure for short and medium term interventions. In this connection, the Committee feel that the cost for short term schemes/projects, which are required before the pilgrims season begins in November, may not be much. However, the Committee believe that the medium and long term interventions, for which detailing

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			<p>is yet to be done, may require substantial funds. The Committee therefore, expect that the Ministry of Environment and Forests and Government of Kerala may extend all possible financial assistance and the cooperation to the Devaswom Board to mobilize the requisite funds. Efforts may also be made to examine the feasibility of building a corpus out of sponsorships, donations from pilgrims etc. in order to ensure that the implementation of the proposed Sabarimala Master Plan does not suffer on account of paucity of funds.</p>
13.	77	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>The Committee have been informed that the implementation of the outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan during the short-term has commenced under the aegis of the Travancore Devaswom Board, which is the designated nodal agency for this purpose. The Travancore Devaswom Board have contended that they have the wherewithal to implement the Sabarimala Master Plan. The Committee, however, feel that since the Master Plan is a gigantic project involving several works and schemes, both over the medium-term (upto 2015) and the long-term (upto 2050), clarity of purpose coupled with very sound and efficient organizational capabilities are necessary for its smooth implementation. Even though the Travancore Devaswom Board have assured the Committee that they are capable of implementing the proposed Sabarimala Master Plan, the Committee feel that considering this ambitious project, it would be better if the Devaswom Board involves professional and competent agencies for the implementation of the Master Plan so that the project is completed timely and successfully. As the implementation of the Master Plan may involve different Departments/Agencies of the State Government as well as outside agencies, the Committee apprehend that coordination among them may pose a problem. They would, therefore, urge the Government of Kerala to extend all possible</p>

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			<p>technical and material help required by the Travancore Devaswom Board to meet the onerous responsibility undertaken by them. The Committee also desire that the Government should consider conferring statutory status to the proposed Sabarimala Master Plan by enacting a State Act for this purpose with a view to providing the necessary legal sanction for its smooth and expeditious implementation, particularly since the Master Plan covers a wide time-span of 50 years involving steady financing and effective inter-departmental coordination.</p>
14.	78	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>In their Preliminary Report, the Committee had recommended that a Committee consisting of the Minister of Environment and Forests, Government of India, the Minister of Forests and the Minister of Devaswom, Government of Kerala should be constituted at the apex level to give necessary impetus to the process of development of Sabarimala. The Committee, however, note that instead of constituting a high level political body suggested by them, only a coordination Committee comprising of officials at the state level has been constituted by the Government of Kerala under the Chairmanship of the Chief Secretary, with the President, Travancore Devaswom Board and representatives from different Departments as Members. Further they note that at the working level, another Committee comprising of various officials under the Chairmanship of the Principal Secretary, Devaswom Department has been constituted to monitor the implementation of the projects/schemes envisaged in the Master Plan outline. The Committee feel that the two-tier arrangement presently made at the State level for monitoring the implementation of the proposed Master Plan is rather inadequate and thus, needs to be suitably upgraded. They desire that at the first level, a Committee under the Chairmanship of the Minister, Devaswom to facilitate decision-making may be constituted</p>

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			and another Committee may be formed at the working level with the Chief Secretary as the Chairman and the Principal Secretaries of all concerned Departments as Members for regular monitoring and control of the implementation. The Committee believe that such an arrangement will facilitate necessary political as well as administrative impetus to the implementation of the Sabarimala Master Plan. The Travancore Devaswom Board, the statutory body responsible for the affairs of Sabarimala and the implementation of the Master Plan should work under the guidance of the two-tier Committees proposed above.
15.	79	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	The Committee note that the Master Plan outline envisages development of a base camp at Nilackal, which is about 17 kms from Pampa, the foothill. The requisite land for this purpose (110.524 hectares) was allotted to the Travancore Devaswom Board by the State Government. The Committee are given to understand that the Government of Kerala have charged a price as Net Present Value for the land transferred to the Devaswom Board at Nilackal for the base camp, as according to them the nature of land transferred to them at Nilackal was forest land and that it was done in accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry of Environment and Forests. Keeping in view the larger public interest the Committee would like the Ministry of Environment & Forests and the State Government of Kerala to examine the feasibility of treating the transferred land at Nilackal as "Revenue land" instead of "Forest land" and consider waiver of the price charged as "Net Present Value".
16.	80	-do-	At the instance of the Committee, the Travancore Devaswom Board had given an assurance during the oral evidence that they would be in a position to complete the immediate interventions envisaged in the Master Plan outline before the ensuing pilgrim season. As

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			<p>the Sabarimala long-term Master Plan was to be ready only by July 2006, the Committee were anxious that atleast the immediate interventions proposed in the Master Plan outline should be completed in time before the ensuing pilgrim season. Consequently the Committee undertook a study visit to Kochi/Sabarimala from 18-20 October 2005 for an on-the-spot appraisal of the progress made in the creation of the proposed facilities by way of immediate interventions for the pilgrims. The Committee noticed that the construction of basic facilities like toilets, drinking water pipelines, parking space for vehicles, shelters, sanitation has been initiated by the Travancore Devaswom Board at Nilackal, where a base camp is being developed for the pilgrims. According to the Travancore Devaswom Board the land at Nilackal was transferred to them only in September and they are trying their best to complete these works before the beginning of the pilgrim season. The Committee would expect the Travancore Devaswom Board to fulfill the commitment made by them with regard to the immediate interventions at the base camp. Furthermore the Committee would like to emphasize that no untoward incident should happen due to the presence of staggering number of pilgrims expected to congregate in the shrine this season. They therefore desire that the Travancore Devaswom Board should also take immediate disaster-prevention measures for the ensuing pilgrim season pending the commencement of projects over the medium/long-term.</p>
17.	81	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>Apart from the base camp, the outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan also envisages development of certain facilities on the way from Pampa (the foothill) enroute the Sannidhanam (the temple complex) like the Queue Complex, Cardiology Units, drinking water facilities, widening of trekking paths, sewage treatment</p>

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			<p>plants etc. In this connection, the Committee note that the Supreme Court vide their order dated 26th August 2005, in response to the Special Leave Petition filed by the Devaswom Board has directed the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests to grant permission to the Board to divert 12.675 hectares of land in the Periyar Tiger Reserve for the development of road and for providing infrastructure facilities for pilgrim visiting the Sabarimala Shrine. However during their recent visit to Sabarimala on 18th October, 2005, the representative of the Devaswom Board informed that the final clearance for the transfer of the aforesaid land had not been given till then by the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Government of Kerala. While taking a serious view of the delay in effecting the transfer of the requisites land and the lack of proper coordination between the Union Ministry and the State Government the Committee directed the representatives of both the Union Ministry and the Forest Department, Government of Kerala to take immediate action in the matter so that the proposed works to develop basic facilities in the Pampa Sannidhanam area can be executed without further delay. The Committee understand that on 18th October 2005, the State Government sent the proposal which was eventually cleared by the Ministry of Environment and Forests on 24th October 2005. The Committee deprecate the delay on the part of the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Government of Kerala to give the final clearance in the matter due to which it would not be possible to alleviate the problems faced by the pilgrims in the Pampa-Sannidhanam area for the ensuing season. As the clearance has finally been given, the Committee would now expect the Travancore Devaswom Board to take up the immediate interventions proposed in the Master Plan outline at the temple area (Pampa-Sannidhanam) in right earnest and execute the</p>

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			<p>works on a war footing so that a perceptible change is visible in the temple area very soon. The requisite facilities may include widening the trekking tracks leading to the shrine, broadening the "darshan" space available for pilgrims and provision of alternate points for viewing the auspicious "jyothi" in the distant horizon on Makara Sankranthi day. As considerable concern has been expressed by the environmentalists, the Committee desire that the Travancore Devaswom Board, in accordance with the Supreme Court directive, should take utmost care to protect the fragile ecosystem of the area while carrying out development works in the allotted land. All the works to be executed in the allotted area should be of essential nature only and strictly done in accordance with the outline of the Master Plan and the detailed long-term Master Plan to be formulated in due course, while keeping the flora and fauna of the area intact. The Committee would also expect the Travancore Devaswom Board authorities to ensure that any commercial exploitation of the allotted land does not take place in the area at any cost.</p>
18.	82	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>The Committee note that the Outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan envisages several projects and schemes in the Sabarimala region which <i>inter-alia</i> include schemes for sewage, sanitation and drinking water. These projects are proposed to be taken up on both the short-term and medium-term basis and these are linked to the Pampa River Action Plan, which is separate centrally sponsored scheme under the National River Control Directorate of the Ministry of Environment and Forests entailing reduction of pollution in the holy river Pampa, where pilgrims take their ritualistic holy dip before visiting the shrine. It is also the only source of drinking water for the pilgrims. It has been informed that the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests is mainly responsible for funding those elements of the Pampa Action</p>

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			<p>Plan which relate to the Sabarimala Master Plan and that sanctions have been issued by the Ministry for funding those components which are to be taken up immediately. The Committee desire that the Pampa Action Plan, which has significant schematic linkages with the Sabarimala Master Plan, should be properly dovetailed with the related components of the Master Plan so that the development of the region takes place in an integrated and holistic manner. Steps should also be taken to promote and ensure moisture-retention and raising of water-table in the region so that ground-water can be developed and utilized as a source for the use of pilgrims. For this purpose, the Committee would like representatives from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (National River Conservation Directorate) as well as the Ministry of Water Resources (Central Ground Water Board) to be included in the empowered Committees constituted at the State level to ensure proper coordination with regard to the schemes under the Pampa Action Plan.</p>
19.	83	Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>With the staggering number of pilgrims visiting the Sabarimala shrine every day during the pilgrims season from November to January, crowd management and regulation assumes top priority for the local Administration. In this connection, the Committee recall the stampede in the year 2000 in which 52 lives were lost. Strangely enough, the authorities did not bother to take requisite steps to improve the situation, leave alone the measures for disaster prevention, until the matter came up before this Committee. According to the Travancore Devaswom Board, a crisis management team exists with District Collectors of the concerned areas as its Members. It has also been informed now that the outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan provides for queue complexes as a medium/long-term intervention for crowd management. While underlining the seriousness of this issue</p>

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			as well as the fact that the steps taken hitherto in this regard were grossly insufficient, the Committee would strongly recommend enforcement measures including adoption of modern disaster management techniques in order to ensure a smooth and incident-free pilgrimage. They further recommend that a well-equipped disaster management cell should be set up in the Travancore Devaswom Board to oversee the proper implementation of all disaster-prevention measures.
20.	84	Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and Travancore Devaswom Board	<p>The Committee have been seized of this matter for almost two years and have been concerned about the problems faced by the pilgrims due to lack of basic amenities in the area. They have been urging the concerned agencies, namely the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, the State Government of Kerala and the Travancore Devaswom Board to work together and coordinate among themselves with a view to making Sabarimala pilgrim-friendly. To begin with, the Committee presented a Preliminary Report on the subject so as to bring to the notice of the Parliament the problems faced by the Sabarimala Pilgrims and the immediate steps required to alleviate the same. After this Preliminary Report and subsequent examination by the Committee of the various issues involved, the concerned authorities sprung into action and the requisite land for the base camp at Nilackal and the Pampa-Sannidhanan area has been cleared and handed over to the Travancore Devaswom Board. In the meantime, the Outline of the Sabarimala Master Plan has been prepared and approved by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Kerala and The Travancore Devaswom Board. The Travancore Devaswom Board is now in a position to implement the short-term measures by way of immediate interventions specified in the Outline to the Master Plan. Further, a detailed Master Plan for medium as well as long</p>

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			<p>term measures is being prepared and would be ready only by July, 2006. The Committee desire that they should be apprised about the details of the Master Plan and the specific steps taken to operationalise the Plan. The Committee now <i>vide</i> this Report have stressed the need for timely completion of immediate interventions as outlined in the Master Plan. The Committee will continue to closely watch the execution of these immediate interventions and the progress made thereon. The preparation, approval and commencement of the implementation of the full-fledged Master Plan will also continue to be monitored by the Committee until the issues taken up by them are resolved and taken to their logical conclusion. The Committee may like to give a final Report on the subject in due course after making an on-the-spot appraisal, if necessary.</p>