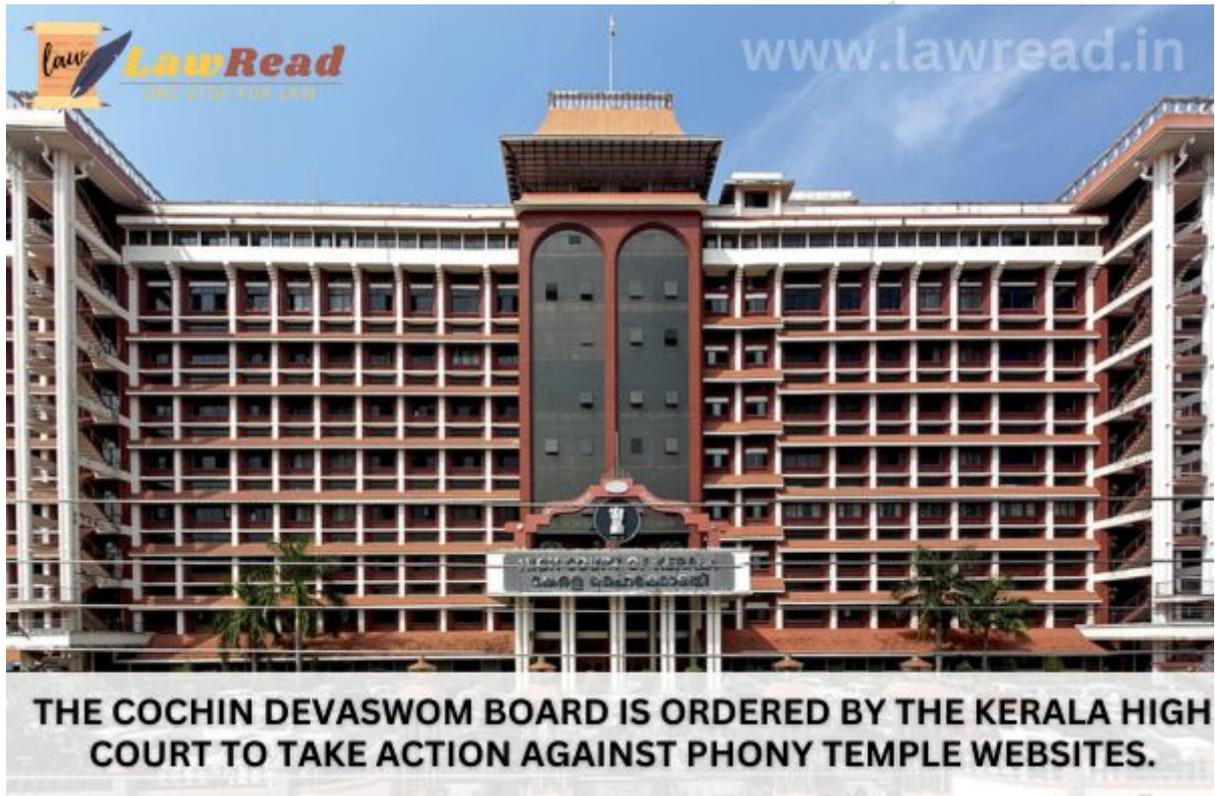


News

The Cochin Devaswom Board is ordered by the Kerala High Court to take action against phony temple websites.



The Cochin Devaswom Board's Vigilance Wing was directed to take action against phony Instagram profiles, websites, and other accounts that were defrauding temple devotees of their money.

[Devidas & ors v Cochin Devaswom Board & ors] The Kerala High Court has ordered the Chief Vigilance Officer of the Cochin Devaswom Board to actively monitor and take action against phony websites and social media profiles that illegally collect online donations and pooja bookings in the name of temples.

Following a plea from devotees who emphasized the danger posed by phony Instagram profiles and other online platforms that falsely purported to represent a temple, a Division Bench consisting of Justices **Anil K. Narendran** and **PV Balakrishnan** issued the directive.

The Court noted that safeguarding believers against online scams that exploit religion for selfish ends was crucial.

The Cochin Devaswom Board was then instructed to implement an authorized online pooja booking and contribution system for all of the major temples that fall within its purview.

Additionally, the Board was directed to take swift action against any internet platform that deceitfully pretended to be temples in order to take advantage of worshippers.

"Under the direction of the additional 14th respondent Chief Vigilance Officer, the Vigilance Wing of the Cochin Devaswom Board will maintain a constant watch against the exploitation of devotees in relation to online pooja booking, online donations, etc., through phony websites, Instagram accounts, etc., in the name of the respective temples." According to the Court's order, anyone responsible for creating such phony websites, Instagram profiles, etc., will be dealt with legally by filing appropriate complaints with the Station House Officer of the relevant Police Station.

A number of followers of the Sree Poornathrayeesa Temple in Thripunithura petitioned the court for a number of remedies, such as stricter financial audits of the temple's finances, improved oversight of volunteers, and increased openness in transactions pertaining to the temple.

The petitioners had also brought attention to the problem of platforms and phony internet personas abusing the temple's name.

In response to the accusations, the Cochin Devaswom Board stated that the 'Sree Poornathrayeesa Kshethram' Instagram account was a fake and that the appropriate actions were being taken.

The Board added that important temples such as Ernakulam Siva Temple, Chottanikkara Bhagavathy Temple, Sree Vadakkunnathan Temple, and Sree Poornathrayeesa Temple offered authentic online booking and contribution alternatives via their official websites.

Nevertheless, the petitioners noted that fraudulent internet platforms persisted in misleading gullible devotees in spite of such legitimate capabilities.

In order to assist devotees in identifying reliable sources, the Court ordered the Board to post

information about official temple websites and social media accounts on the temple grounds.

"It is also ordered that the details regarding the official website and official Instagram account of the temples under the management of Cochin Devaswom Board shall be exhibited at prominent places in the respective temples, for the information of the devotees, so as to enable them to avail online facility," it read.

The Court further stated that Temple Advisory Committees and their members are prohibited from using social media or unapproved websites to solicit donations. It emphasized that the deity, who is regarded by law as a permanent minor, is the rightful owner of offerings made in the temple's name.

According to the Court, money received from temple devotees should always be formally managed by the Devaswom Board and temporarily credited to the Devaswom fund, particularly when it is received for building, repairs, or festivals.

After hearing from the petitioners, other respondents, and members of the former Temple Advisory Committee who were the targets of certain accusations, the Court has directed that the Cochin Devaswom Board's ongoing investigation into the phony temple account be finished within three months.

"We deem it appropriate to dispose of this writ petition by directing the 1st respondent Cochin Devaswom Board to take necessary steps to ensure that there is no exploitation of the devotees of the temples under its management with regard to online pooja booking, online donations, etc., through fake websites, Instagram accounts, etc.," the court stated.

The attorneys T Sanjay, Sanil Kumar G, Ardhra Krishna, and Sreekanth G Menon represented the petitioners, who were temple followers.

Advocates Joy Thattil Ittoop, Suvin R. Menon, Dinesh R. Shenoy, and KP Sudheer. Many responders were represented by Bijish B. Tom, Jacob Tomlin Varghese, Baby Sonia, Uthara AS, Nevis Cassandra L. Caxton Loretta, Krishna Kumar TK, Karun Mahesh, and KS Arun Kumar.