

Sabarimala temple to go 'green', pilgrims asked to cooperate

SABARIMALA: With the Kerala high court seeking that the famed Sabarimala temple in the state's Pathanamthitta district and its premises are kept clean and turn "green", local authorities have launched an awareness drive and asked pilgrims to ensure that they adhere to the rules.



The local administration led by Pathanamthitta district collector S Harikishore has launched the Mission Green Sabarimala project to carry out focused awareness drives and plastic collection exercises, before tougher controls including a complete ban on bringing plastics, possible stop-and-search activities and fines are put in place over the next two years.

"We are requesting Sabarimala devotees to not bring plastic bags, packets, bottles and containers with them or discard waste indiscriminately around the holy site and the river," said Harikishore, who added that the pilgrims use bags made of cloth or other biodegradable materials.

Situated on the mountain ranges of the Western Ghats at an altitude of 914 metres above sea-level, Sabarimala temple is four kilometres uphill from Pamba in Pathanamthitta district, which is around 100km from Thiruvananthapuram.

The temple, which bars the entry of women who have attained puberty, is accessible only on foot from Pamba and over the years, has become a must visit place for Hindu devotees, especially from the southern states.

Till a few years back, it was open only for two months — from mid-November to mid-January — but now is kept open for five days every month and as a result, the number of pilgrims has risen dramatically, leading to huge damage done to the environment, especially because parts of the temple premises are located in the forest area.

Harikishore added that through this awareness campaign, they aim is to reduce the use of plastics and the campaign is using volunteers drawn from various state government agencies.

Under the Mission Green Sabarimala project, the district administration has installed an additional 250 bins along the trekking route to collect garbage.

Around 30 'eco-guards' have been posted along the river Pampa and in resting areas for clean-up operations and to remind pilgrims that dumping clothes and waste in the river is a punishable offence.

The campaign has set up plastic exchange counters where pilgrims can deposit their plastic waste in exchange for cloth bags.

The Kerala Water Authority is assisting in the installation of a reverse osmosis plant at the base of the trekking route to provide safe and clean drinking water.

The Travancore Devaswom Board has also undertaken a project to install around 50 kiosks providing drinking water along the route. An estimated two million PET bottles are sold along the trekking path every year.

This project has largely focused on awareness building this year, but once the alternative infrastructure is in fully in place, tighter regulations will be imposed to keep the shrine and its surrounding regions clean.

Our larger aim is to make Sabarimala completely plastic free. We are hoping to have an effective alternative system in place before we impose a total ban so the visitors are not inconvenienced," added Harikishore.