

ORDER

No. POI 85/2020/Pt I 113

Dated: Shitong, the 17th August 2021

**SOP on Preventive Measures to Contain Spread of COVID-19
in Religious Places/Places of worship**

In supersession of the Order No. POI 85/2020/Pt I 112 dated 25th September, 2020, and after due consultative meetings with various stakeholders, the following SOP is hereby notified

I. Scope

Religious places / places of worship get frequented by large numbers of people for spiritual solace. To prevent spread of COVID-19 infection, it is important that all required health protocols and preventive measures are strictly followed in such premises.

The second wave of the pandemic has seen large numbers of Covid-19 infections particularly because of the highly transmissible Delta Variant. Hence it is imperative that adequate precautions are taken for gatherings in religious places of worship to safeguard against any spread

This document outlines various generic precautionary measures to be adopted in addition to specific measures to be taken at particular places to prevent spread of COVID-19

Religious places/ places of worship located in any area declared as a containment zone shall remain closed. Only those outside containment zones will be allowed to open.

II. Generic Preventive Measures

Persons below 18 years of age are advised to stay at home

Persons above 65 years of age, persons with co-morbidities and pregnant woman are advised to stay at home. However, such persons who are fully vaccinated, i.e., have received both doses of the vaccine may visit the place of worship. Organizations managing the religious institutions will advise accordingly.

Further, since vaccination is proven to protect against Covid-19 infection, severity of illness, hospitalization and death, adherents of all religious faiths are encouraged to get themselves vaccinated. In the interest of safety, it is desirable that persons visiting places of worship are vaccinated with at least one dose.

The generic preventive measures outlined below include simple public health measures that are to be followed to reduce the risk of COVID-19. These measures need to be observed by all (workers and visitors) in these places at all times.

These include:-

- 1) Social Distancing is compulsory and individuals must maintain a minimum distance of 5 feet in public places
- 2) Use of face covers/masks to be mandatory. Wearing of N-95 masks or double masking is encouraged for better protection

- 3) Practice frequent hand washing with soap for at least 40-60 seconds; even when hands are not visibly dirty. Use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers (for at least 20 seconds) can be made wherever feasible.
- 4) Respiratory etiquettes to be strictly followed. This involves strict practice of covering one's mouth and nose while coughing/sneezing with a tissue/handkerchief/flexed elbow and disposing off used tissues properly.
- 5) Self-monitoring of health by all and reporting any symptoms at the earliest to State Helpline 14410 or War Rooms of the respective zone/ block.
- 6) Spitting should be strictly prohibited.

III. Number of Attendees

1) Ordinary / regular services:

In Churches, maximum number of persons allowed during church service should not exceed one-third of the seating capacity of the church. Further, one row in between two pews should be left empty. Individuals should also maintain a minimum distance of 5 feet.

In Temples, Mosques, Gurudwaras and other religious places of worship, individuals must maintain a minimum distance of 5 feet. For prayers, the number of persons should not exceed one-third of the seating capacity of the place of worship.

Inside the place of worship, members of the same family are advised and encouraged to sit together.

Any official meetings required to be held for managing the religious institutions may be carried out subject to a limit of 20 participants.

2) Special Services:

- (a) Rites of initiation, which include prayers and ablutions relating to Births, Naming Ceremonies, Christening and Baptism, Bhogs, Installation and Ordination, other respective rites and customs etc. are permitted at places of worship. Rites of induction, which include ceremonies of acceptance of a person into a full membership of the respective faith community like confirmations, taking of the first communion, and others are permitted in places of worship. These are subject to:
 - i. The number of candidates, celebrants, and ceremonies would be determined by the space and size of the place of worship and limited to one-third the seating capacity of the place of worship or 50 persons **whichever is less.**
 - ii. Elements needed for these specific services are left to the discretion of each group as applicable and relevant to their practices.
 - iii. The communication and distribution of these elements should be done without any physical contact.

- (b) Marriage Rituals in places of worship is permitted, subject to
 - i. The total number of persons (bride and groom, family members, celebrants, etc including invitees) in the place of worship should be limited to one-third the seating capacity of the place of worship or 50 persons **whichever is less.**

- ii. Engagement or Marriage ceremonies outside religious places / places of worship like marriage hall, etc shall not exceed 20 attendees in total.
- iii. No wedding reception is permitted.
- iv. Intimation is to be given to the concerned Deputy Commissioner in advance regarding the date, time and venue of the marriage ceremony.

The names of the persons attending the place of worship should be maintained by the organization or faith group concerned and to be shared with the concerned Deputy Commissioner for contact tracing, if and when required.

IV. Specific Measures to be taken in religious places / places of worship:-

- 1) Entrance to have mandatory hand hygiene (sanitizer dispenser) or hand washing and thermal screening provisions.
- 2) Only asymptomatic persons to be allowed in the premises.
- 3) All persons to be allowed entry only if using face masks.
- 4) Posters/standees on preventive measures about COVID-19 and benefits of Vaccination are to be displayed prominently in both English and Local Language. The Health and Family Welfare Department, Government of Meghalaya will make available such IEC material. Audio and Video clips to spread awareness on preventive measures for COVID-19 and importance of vaccination should be regularly played.
- 5) Staggering of visitors to be done to the extent possible.

For staggering to be effective, churches can have multiple services on any day. The duration of the service should be restricted to the minimum but should not normally exceed one hour. Similarly, staggering may be done for other places of religious worship.

At the completion of the services or worship, any form of socializing and meeting in groups in common areas within the premises of the place of worship/organization is prohibited.

- 6) (a) In places where shoes / footwear are not permitted:
Shoes / footwear to be preferably taken off inside own vehicle. If needed they should be kept in separate slots for each individual / family by the persons themselves. People should wash their hands and feet with soap and water or use hand sanitizers before entering the premises.
- (b) In case of churches, etc where shoes are permitted:
Provision should be made for placing a disinfectant tray at the entrance to sanitize the shoes.
- 7) Proper crowd management in the parking lots and outside the premises duly following social distancing norms both before and after the religious service shall be organized.
- 8) Any shops, stalls, cafeteria etc., outside and within the premises shall follow social distancing norms at all times.
- 9) Specific markings may be made with sufficient distance to manage the queue and ensure social distancing in the premises.
- 10) Preferably separate entry and exits shall be organized.

- 11) Maintain physical distancing of a minimum of 5 feet at all times when queuing up for entry.
- 12) Seating arrangement to be made in such a way that adequate social distancing is maintained.
- 13) For air-conditioning/ventilation, the guidelines of CPWD shall be followed which inter alia emphasizes that the temperature setting of all air conditioning devices should be in the range of 24-30°C, relative humidity should be in the range of 40-70%, intake of fresh air should be as much as possible and cross ventilation should be adequate.
- 14) Touching of statues/idols / holy books etc. is not to be allowed.

For Churches, persons may bring their own hymn books and Bibles and sharing should be avoided.

Where the use of a common item in the worship hall is unavoidable, the item should be used with sanitized and gloved hands, and be kept away from extensive use by many.

- 15) In view of potential threat of spread of infection, as far as feasible recorded devotional music songs may be played and choir or singing groups should not be allowed.

In churches, masks should be worn at all times, including by the congregation while singing hymns and by the speakers to prevent risk of infection.

- 16) Avoid physical contact while greeting each other and maintain a minimum distance of 5 feet.

- 17) Common prayer mats should be avoided and devotees should bring their own prayer mat or piece of cloth which they may take back with them.

- 18) No physical collection of offerings like Prasad/distribution or sprinkling of holy water, etc. to be allowed inside the religious place. Collections, if required, may be dropped at designated collection jars during entry or exit.

During Holy Communion in Churches, Priest/Pastor/Person who administers the Holy Communion should wash and sanitize their hands often, and wear gloves if feasible, before administering the Holy Communion and to further ensure that there is no physical contact with the communicants.

Offerings and collections in places of worship should be made without physical contact.

- 19) Community kitchens/langars / "Ann-daan", etc. at religious places should follow physical distancing norms while preparing and distributing food.
- 20) Sanitization of the place of worship should be done regularly, which shall be the responsibility of the organization or faith group. Effective sanitation within the premises shall be maintained with particular focus on lavatories, hand and foot-washing stations/areas.
- 21) Frequent cleaning and disinfection to be maintained by the management of the religious place.
- 22) As far as feasible, the floors should particularly be cleaned multiple times in the premises.
- 23) Proper disposal of face covers / masks / gloves left over by visitors and/or employees should be ensured.

- 24) As far as practicable, live streaming of services, prayers and other rituals can be adopted by all religious organisations to cater to elderly people, children and persons with co-morbidities.
- 25) As far as practicable, persons should attend the place of worship that is nearest to their place of residence. This is to avoid unnecessary movement of persons.
- 26) In case of a suspect or confirmed case in the premises:
 - (a) Place the ill person in a room or area where they are isolated from others.
 - (b) Provide a mask/face cover till such time he/she is examined by a doctor.
 - (c) Immediately inform the nearest medical facility (hospital/clinic) or call the state or district helpline.
 - (d) A risk assessment will be undertaken by the designated public health authority (district RRT/treating physician) and accordingly further action will be initiated regarding management of the case and his/her contacts.
 - (e) Disinfection of the premises to be taken up if the person is found positive.

V. Events/Practices/Rituals/Celebrations that are Periodic, Seasonal and Annual

There are other practices in the calendar of each faith group which are periodic, seasonal and annual in nature. Most of these relate to activities which concern large crowds in assemblage and participation, as well as in community feasts and community activities. Some of these are also observed as Public Holidays.

For these activities, as large gatherings/congregation continue to remain prohibited, the concerned faith group should get the permission from the Government through the Deputy Commissioner concerned on a case-by-case basis.

These should not be clubbed with the regular daily or weekly practices and ceremonies in the places of worship.

VI. Violations

In the event, there is any violation of the above protocols or there is any attempt made by any person/organisation to spread misinformation regarding vaccination, the Deputy Commissioner / SDO (Civil) and / or their officers shall take immediate steps and proceed against such person/organisation in accordance with law.



(M.S. Rao)

Chief Secretary

Government of Meghalaya

Memo No. POL.75/2020/P11/108

Dated: Shillong the 13th August, 2021

Copy to: -

- 1 The Secretary to the Governor of Meghalaya for kind information of the Hon'ble Governor
- 2 The Private Secretary to the Chief Minister, Meghalaya for kind information of the Chief Minister