



# The Temple Town Economy and Entrepreneurship Conclave

*Key Takeaways, Insights, and Call for Action*

23 February 2026

## About the Conclave

The Temple Town Economy and Entrepreneurship Conclave, organised by the deAsra Foundation through its research vertical, deAsra Insights, was held on 23 February 2026. The conclave was anchored in the thematic area of temple town entrepreneurship that the deAsra team has been exploring over the last few years.

Temple towns across India are far more than pilgrimage destinations. They are dense livelihood ecosystems, home to thousands of vendors, artisans, performers, transport providers, and small hospitality operators whose livelihoods depend entirely on the ebb and flow of pilgrim and tourist footfall. Despite the enormous scale of this economy – India has approximately 4,50,000 temple sites, and religious travel accounts for nearly 60% of all domestic tourism – these entrepreneurs remain largely informal, unrecognised, and absent from mainstream policy discourse.

The conclave focused on temple towns, their governance, and the key stakeholders in the temple town ecosystem – particularly the nano-entrepreneurs whose livelihoods temple towns sustain. It examined the constraints these entrepreneurs face, the opportunities they are missing, and the kinds of ecosystem-level interventions that can strengthen them.

4,50,000

Temple Sites

Approximately across India

60%

Domestic Tourism

Accounted by religious travel

21

Business Types

Directly dependent on pilgrim footfall in a typical temple town

# Format and Participants

The event was structured around two panel discussions and open dialogue among participants:

## Panel 1

Temple Towns as Living Economies: Understanding the Nano Enterprise Ecosystem

## Panel 2

From Insight to Intervention: Designing Ethical and Scalable Support Systems

The dialogue brought together a cross-section of stakeholders: temple trustees, emerging organisations working in temple town ecosystems, tourism sector professionals, academic researchers, representatives from government departments, practitioners working directly with nano-entrepreneurs, and individuals from organisations engaged in entrepreneurship and livelihoods. The table below lists the chief guest, panellists, and moderators.

Name	Designation and Affiliation	Role
Dr. Nitin Kareer	Former Chief Secretary, Government of Maharashtra	Chief Guest
Dr. Kiran Shinde	Adjunct Associate Professor, Planning, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University	Panellist
Mr. Abhay Tilak	Chair-Professor, Savitribai Phule Pune University; Honorary Director, Indian School of Heritage Studies	Panellist
Dr. Mallinath Kalshetti	Deputy Director General, YASHADA	Panellist
Mr. Dinanath Kholkar	Director, PIC (Pune International Centre)	Panellist
Mr. Gireesh Kulkarni	Founder, Temple Connect; International Temples Convention and Expo (ITCX)	Panellist
Ar. Jui Tawade	Co-Convener, INTACH Pune Chapter	Panellist
Dr. Kiran Limaye	Senior Research Fellow, deAsra Foundation	Moderator
Pradnya Godbole	CEO, deAsra Foundation	Moderator

## Highlights from the Discussion

### Dr. Nitin Kareer

In his address, Dr. Nitin Kareer highlighted the trade-off between policies focused on individual entrepreneurs and those aimed at the broader ecosystem. He observed that entrepreneurs are heterogeneous – varying in sector, scale of business, and aspiration – and that this diversity demands carefully targeted responses. He stressed that focused interventions are more likely to succeed than broad-brush schemes, and urged policymakers to move towards well-defined, evidence-based interventions that go beyond routine budgetary allocations.

### Panel 2 – Gireesh Kulkarni, Jui Tawade, Dinanath Kholkar

Gireesh Kulkarni spoke about the vast potential of religious tourism, reflected in the more than four lakh temple sites across India, and the skewed nature of the economics – where fewer than 10% of these sites currently have self-sustaining resource generation. He introduced participants to the work of Temple Connect and its biannual conclave with temple managements. Jui Tawade emphasised the need for dedicated entrepreneurs. Dinanath Kholkar discussed the various ways in which temple town entrepreneurs can access markets beyond the physical marketplace of their towns.

### Panel 1 – Dr. Shinde, Abhay Tilak, Dr. Kalshetti

Dr. Shinde anchored the first panel discussion by presenting the key findings from his study of Jejuri and Tuljapur. Abhay Tilak discussed the potential strengths and limitations of temple trusts as central stakeholders of temple town ecosystems, and made the case for redefining their role and governance structure. Dr. Kalshetti drew attention to the fact that temple towns are not uniform in how devotees perceive them, and argued that foregrounding the heritage dimensions of these sites will be key to improving livelihoods of local entrepreneurs.

### Q&A and Synthesis

Both panel discussions were followed by lively Q&A sessions that surfaced a range of issues, including the need for successful pilots, the challenge of stabilising the seasonal peaks and troughs of the temple town economy, governance constraints, and emerging digital solutions. Dr. Anand Deshpande, founder of deAsra Foundation, provided the overarching context – the imperative of harnessing the potential of growing religious tourism for the benefit of local entrepreneurs. He concluded by presenting a synthesis of the key points discussed during the conclave and underscoring the need for sustained engagement with this thematic area.

# Key Takeaways

1

## The Temple Economy Is a Significant but Underrecognised Sector

Temples that have been pilgrimage centres of national or international repute have demonstrated remarkable economic transformation – both in visitor numbers and revenues. Yet for most of India's vast temple geography, this potential remains entirely untapped. Research shows that 21 distinct types of businesses are directly dependent on visitor and pilgrim footfall in a typical temple town. The profile of devotees has changed significantly in recent years, but the products, services, and experiences on offer have not evolved to meet them.

2

## The Ecosystem Is Fragmented – Coordination Is the Core Problem

Perhaps the most critical structural finding of the conclave was that the temple town economy suffers not from a lack of activity, but from a lack of coordination. Four key stakeholder groups – temple trusts, institutions of local government, local businesses and residents, and devotees – currently operate without an overarching framework. Temple trusts have limited authority that typically does not extend beyond the temple's physical premises. Infrastructure development, vendor management, street-level experience, and tourism promotion all fall outside this mandate – and land in the realm of local governing bodies, which are often ill-equipped to address them.

An overarching framework that brings all stakeholders into synergy – aimed at elevating the temple town experience through entrepreneurial value creation – is the need of the hour. Such a framework should assign clear responsibilities, enable shared investment in infrastructure, and create a governance architecture capable of managing a growing visitor economy.

3

## Mapping Opportunities in the Temple Economy

The most generative part of the conclave was an honest mapping of the gap between what the temple town economy currently delivers and what it could offer. The following clusters of opportunity emerged from the discussion and provide the foundation for any future intervention strategy.

# Clusters of Opportunity

## Extending and Deepening the Visitor Experience

The current visitor experience in most temple towns begins and ends at the temple gate. Extending the experience – physically, temporally, and emotionally – is the single most powerful lever available. Half-day, overnight, and multi-day circuits can increase visitor stay, while smaller temples can be connected to anchor sites to create richer journeys. Curated experiences such as storytelling walks, photography tours, and local food trails were discussed as promising directions. Temple guidebooks and short courses on art and architecture can deepen engagement. Evening programming, including light-and-sound shows, can extend footfall beyond daytime hours. School and college partnerships were identified as ways to build early cultural connections with younger audiences.

## Prasad, Products, and Supply Chains

The supply chain is where the temple economy's disconnect from the local town becomes most visible. Many religious products are sourced from outside the temple town, limiting local value retention. Participants emphasised the need to promote locally branded and distinctive products. Prasad delivery services can connect temples to devotees who cannot visit in person. Temple flowers can be repurposed for fragrance products. Cold storage facilities can address the perishability of flowers and food, enabling more stable markets. Aggregator platforms can connect artisans to wider markets. Strengthening and marketing local production will help retain economic value within the town.

## Tourism Circuits and Destination Branding

Localised or minor temple sites do not attract large numbers of devotees on their own. Tourism circuits can connect multiple temples into structured routes, including half-day, full-day, and multi-day plans. These circuits should have a clear identity and experience focus, allowing smaller temples to gain visibility through linkages with better-known sites. Digital storytelling and influencers can support destination branding. Large events such as Kumbh, Waari, Ganesh Utsav, and jatras, along with events rooted in local site identity, can be leveraged to strengthen the broader local economy around core temple sites.

## Infrastructure and Basic Amenities

Foundational infrastructure gaps undermine every other intervention. Good infrastructure is often the best enterprise policy. Basic amenities such as clean toilets and hygiene facilities are critical. Special attention must be given to women, the elderly, and differently-abled visitors. Roads, signage, and last-mile connectivity need improvement. Waste and plastic management systems must be strengthened. Temple towns must be inclusive and accessible. Disaster management plans are necessary for towns that host large gatherings.

## Skilling, Data, and Governance

Building the temple town economy requires investing in people and systems, not just infrastructure. Poojaris and local entrepreneurs need support for cross-skilling. Local residents should be enabled to participate in the accommodation market through homestays, and reliable quality signals for homestays must be developed. Guides with structured training in storytelling and customer service can create a market of their own. Internship pipelines from ITIs and colleges can support peak-season operations. Design thinking workshops for leadership across stakeholder groups can improve experience quality. Clean, stratified data on devotee profiles and enterprise performance will help research provide timely inputs for policy.

# Call for Action

The conclave identified the following priority actions across key stakeholder groups:



## Establish coordinated governance mechanisms.

Temple trusts, local bodies, and tourism departments must create shared frameworks to improve infrastructure, hygiene, vendor systems, skilling, and year-round experience design.



## Strengthen local supply chains.

Promote locally branded products, improve cold storage for flowers and food, support fragrance production from temple waste, and create aggregator linkages for artisans.



## Develop and document pilot interventions.

Select temple towns should serve as sites for structured pilot projects that can be documented as replicable models for wider implementation.



## Encourage corporate and CSR participation.

Corporates can contribute to upgrading facilities, supporting local product development, building artisan capacity, and funding long-term temple town initiatives.



## Invest in actionable research.

Research must move beyond headline estimates to develop nuanced understanding of changing visitor profiles, spending patterns, and successful pilot models that policymakers can act on.

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## For more information

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