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Faith and flow

Navigating crowds in India's sacred spaces

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Foreword by PHDCCI

Anil Parashar
Chair – Tourism Committee

MESSAGE

India has always been the cradle of faith, a land where devotion seamlessly blends with culture, tradition and community. The search for divine solace represents one of the most vibrant and transformative dimensions of India's travel landscape, with millions of pilgrims and seekers traversing the length and breadth of the country each year to reconnect with their roots and enrich their inner experience.

The scale of these pilgrimages brings with it profound challenges. Effective management of thronging queues of devotees at temples, shrines and festivals is no longer a peripheral consideration, but a critical enabler of safety, accessibility and sustainability. Some tragic incidents of the recent past remind us that devotion must be safeguarded with planning, foresight and modern technology tools.

India is witnessing unprecedented growth in the number of people with disposable incomes and wanderlust. Undertaking pilgrimages is no longer seen as a sign of retirement or a move towards the vanprastha phase of life. The insights presented in this report span technology-enabled crowd forecasting, integrated command-and-control frameworks, global best practices and innovative financing models. They offer a roadmap for reimagining how India preserves the sanctity of its sacred spaces. If implemented thoughtfully, these recommendations will not only safeguard lives and cultural heritage, but also unlock opportunities for employment, community development and inclusive growth.

For PHDCCI, promoting sustainable and responsible tourism has always been a priority. Through initiatives such as **रूहmantic: Global Spiritual Tourism Conclave**, we aim to bring together policy makers, faith institutions, civil society, technology providers and industry to co-create solutions that preserve the purity of holy places while enhancing efficiency. A journey towards the abode of gods is not just about travel; it is about piety, collective well-being, building bridges between tradition and innovation and reaffirming India's role as the mystical destination of the world.

I am confident that this report will serve as both a thought-provoking analysis and a practical guide.

On behalf of PHDCCI, I extend my gratitude to all stakeholders who continue to make India's spiritual journey safer, smarter and soulful.

(Anil Parashar)

Foreword by KPMG in India

India's sacred spaces are more than sites of worship. They are vibrant hubs of faith, tradition, and community, welcoming millions of devotees every year. From legendary temple towns to sprawling festival grounds, these spiritual destinations capture the heart and soul of the nation, offering profound experiences that transcend generations.

As the scale and diversity of gatherings continue to grow, the challenge of managing crowd flows within these revered settings has become increasingly critical. Ensuring safety, comfort, and accessibility for all requires embracing innovative solutions, smart technologies, and coordinated stakeholder efforts. The consequences of inadequate crowd management reach far beyond operational concerns; they influence public safety, economic well-being, and the enduring reputation of India's most cherished spiritual centers.

This publication, "Faith and Flow: Navigating Crowds in India's Sacred Spaces," brings together insights, benchmarks, and actionable recommendations for reimagining crowd management in spiritual tourism. It draws upon examples from India and globally, addressing the impact of evolving visitor patterns, infrastructural capabilities, digital innovations, and collaborative governance. The integration of technology, policy, and human centered design can transform how we plan, monitor, and respond to pilgrim movements. From RFID-enabled systems in Tirupati to app-based planning in Varanasi, the innovations highlighted in this report demonstrate the potential of collaborative, forward thinking solutions.

We hope this thought leadership serves as a valuable guide for stakeholders navigating the complex interplay of faith and flow in India's sacred spaces, ensuring these remarkable destinations remain accessible, safe, and spiritually fulfilling for all.

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1. Introduction:

Crowd challenge in Indian spiritual tourism

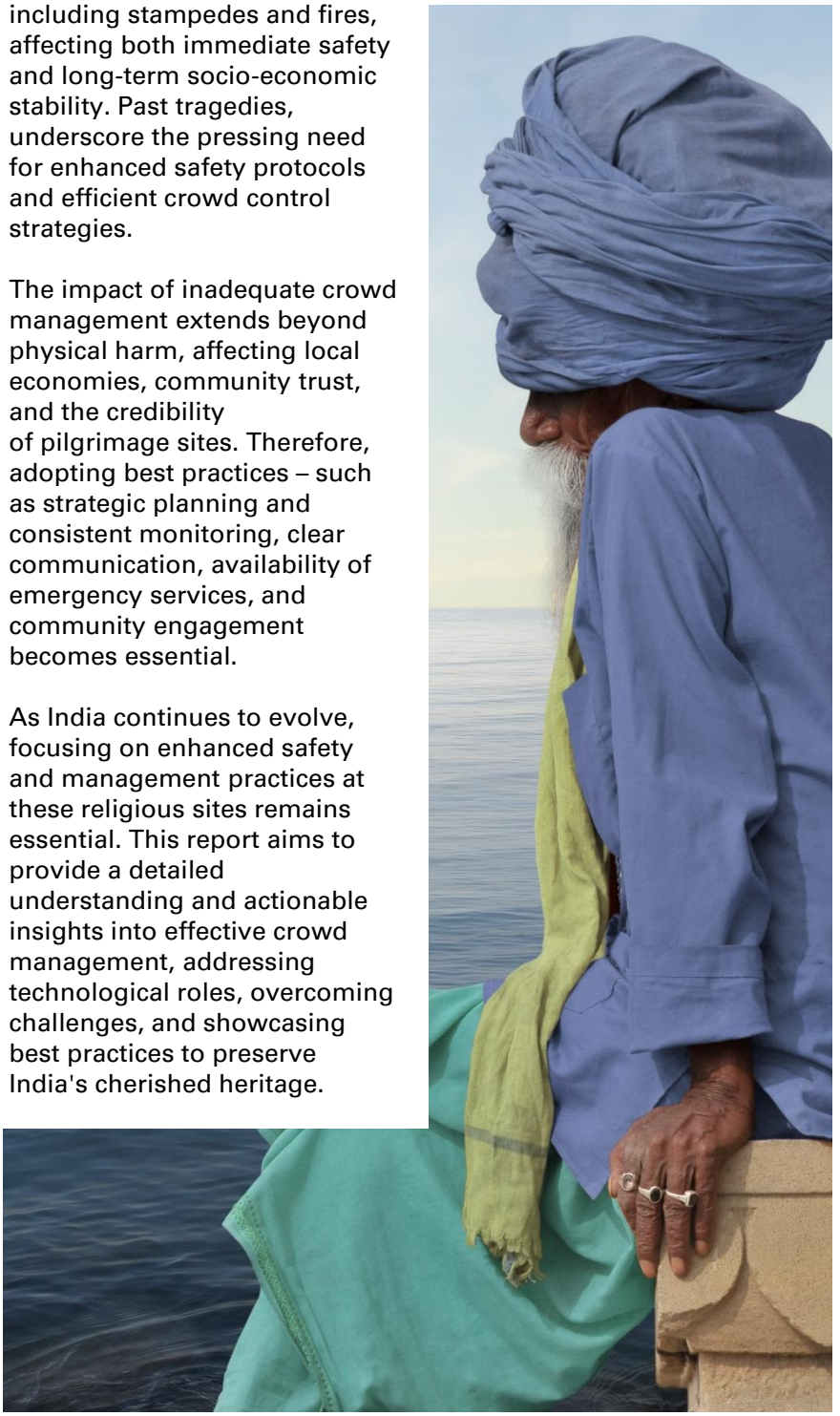
India's religious heritage features over 2 million temples,[1] as per the 2011 census, attracting millions of devotees, and tourists annually, especially during festivals and significant spiritual congregations, fostering cultural unity. Managing these large congregations involves complex strategies that are essential for ensuring visitor safety and smooth conduct of events. This thought leadership, titled "Faith and flow: Navigating crowds in India's sacred spaces," explores these intricacies.

In the context of India's religious spaces, effective crowd management requires risk assessment, capacity planning, behaviour analysis, emergency preparedness, and inter-department coordination during spiritual gatherings. Technology plays a vital role in this domain. Tools such as IoT sensors, AI-based footfall tracking, registration databases, and crowd simulation models help analyse and understand crowd movement patterns.

Despite technological advancements, challenges such as structural limitations, inadequate safety measures, infrastructure constraints, and coordination gaps persist. Inadequate crowd management can have severe consequences, including stampedes and fires, affecting both immediate safety and long-term socio-economic stability. Past tragedies, underscore the pressing need for enhanced safety protocols and efficient crowd control strategies.

The impact of inadequate crowd management extends beyond physical harm, affecting local economies, community trust, and the credibility of pilgrimage sites. Therefore, adopting best practices – such as strategic planning and consistent monitoring, clear communication, availability of emergency services, and community engagement becomes essential.

As India continues to evolve, focusing on enhanced safety and management practices at these religious sites remains essential. This report aims to provide a detailed understanding and actionable insights into effective crowd management, addressing technological roles, overcoming challenges, and showcasing best practices to preserve India's cherished heritage.



1. Temples Of Khajuraho | Stories | indianculture.gov.in | (Accessed: June 2025)

2. Understanding pilgrim movements and behaviours

Pilgrim patterns and trends at notable religious sites in India have demonstrated a substantial increase in visitors, particularly during major festivals and events. Analysing these movements provides insights into managing peak demand and devising efficient crowd management strategies.

2.1 Analysing visitor footfall across sacred sites

India has witnessed an incredible surge in religious tourism and pilgrimage in recent years. According to the Ministry of Tourism, the number of religious tourists rose from 105 million in 2020 to 1,439 million in 2022.[2] Furthermore, around 6.64 million foreigners visited India for religious tourism in 2022 compared to 1.05 million in 2021.

In 2024, religious travel continued to expand steadily, growing by 30-40 per cent month-on-month.[3] With the market projected to grow at a CAGR of 18.2 per cent[4] and India expected to welcome 100 million foreign tourists in India,[5] managing large crowds has become increasingly complex. Implementing effective crowd management strategies is crucial to ensuring safety, minimising wait times, and enhancing the overall experience for devotees.

2.2 Understanding tourist flow in India's spiritual destinations

Event-specific surges: Festivals and religious events witness a significant increase in visitor numbers, often far exceeding regular attendance. For example, the 2024 Rath Yatra in Puri drew 1.5 million pilgrims,[6] surpassing the daily average of 20,000 to 30,000 people.[7] Similarly, the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj witnessed an impressive turnout of over 66 crore attendees,[8] underscoring the immense scale and spiritual significance of such gatherings.

High annual turnovers: Several temples maintain high year-round visitor frequencies but experience peak traffic during certain periods. The Ram Mandir in Ayodhya recorded 135.5 million visitors in 2024,[9] whereas the Kashi Vishwanath Temple and Sri Venkateswara Temple in Tirupati attracted 28.6 million[10] and 25.5 million visitors[11] respectively. Mumbai's Siddhivinayak Temple, with its daily visitors ranging between 75,000 to 90,000, totals 18 to 22 million annually,[12] reflecting a steady stream of pilgrims throughout the year with noticeable peaks during Ganesh Chaturthi.

Variations by age: Recent statistics show a growing interest among younger pilgrims aged 21 to 32 years,[13] exhibiting a keen enthusiasm for exploring temples, delving into spiritual experiences, and learning about historical and religious narratives. This shift points to an evolving trend where spirituality intersects with intellectual curiosity, potentially influencing crowd dynamics and management needs.

Peak demand during festivals: Vaishno Devi Temple, a prominent pilgrimage site, welcomed 9.48 million visitors.[14] While it experiences steady footfall throughout the year, pilgrim numbers rise notably from October to November, driven by favourable weather conditions,[15] and see a sharp surge during Navratri.[16] Analysing visitor trends at Vaishno Devi and similar sites highlights consistent daily attendance, with significant spikes during major festivals and religious events.

2. With 66 Crore Visitors At Maha Kumbh, Why Religious Tourism Will Be The Next Big Thing In India: Explained | News18 | Oliver Fredrick | Feb 2025
3. Religious Tourism: The Indian Travel Industry's Next Big Bet | Skift.com | Bulbul Dhawan | March 2025
4. India Religious Tourism Market Size & Outlook, 2024-2030 | Horizon: Grand View Research | (Accessed: June 2025)
5. As travel rebounds, India targeting 100 million foreign tourist arrivals: Tourism Ministry | CNBC TV18 | CNBCTV18 Travel Desk | Oct 2023
6. President Murmu joins around 1.5 million devotees in Puri Rath Yatra | Hindustan Times | Debabrata Mohanty | Jul 2024
7. Decoding the most popular temple towns of India and the accompanying tourist economy | CNBC TV18 | Mangalam Maloo | Jan 2024
8. Maha Kumbh: More than 66 crore visitors, Rs 3 lakh crore revenue and tons of garbage | Deccan Herald | Sanjay Pandey | March 2025
9. Ayodhya's Ram Mandir becomes UP's most visited attraction of 2024; outshines the Taj Mahal | The Times of India | Jan 2025
10. Kashi Vishwanath temple's pilgrim footfall up 48% in first 5 months | Lucknow News - Times of India | Jun 2024
11. Tirumala Daily Visitors 2025: Record-Breaking Pilgrim Numbers and Insights | tirumalatirupationline.com | (Accessed: Jun 2025)
12. Decoding the most popular temple towns of India and the accompanying tourist economy | CNBC TV18 | Mangalam Maloo | Jan 2024
13. Religious tourism: 7 tips for a tranquil temple visit during crowded times | Hindustan Times | Akanksha Agnihotri | Jan 2024
14. Yatra Statistics | Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board | maavaishnodevi.org | (Accessed: Jun 2025)
15. Best Time to Visit in Katra Vaishno Devi | Temperature, Weather & Seasons | MakeMyTrip.com | (Accessed: Jun 2025)
16. Over 1.27 lakh pilgrims visit Vaishno Devi shrine in first 3 days of Navratri | Deccan Herald | PTI | Oct 2023

2.3 Spatial patterns: Flow management and critical junctions

Indian temples and pilgrimage centers have traditionally relied on basic queue management systems. In many cases, especially near the inner sanctum, structured crowd control measures are either minimal or absent. This often leads to prolonged waiting times, sometimes stretching for several hours. For example, at the Tirupati temple, wait times are reportedly reaching 30-40 hours.[17] Such extended delays can cause significant physical strain and discomfort for devotees, ultimately detracting from the intended spiritual experience.

Key disruptions in pilgrim flow

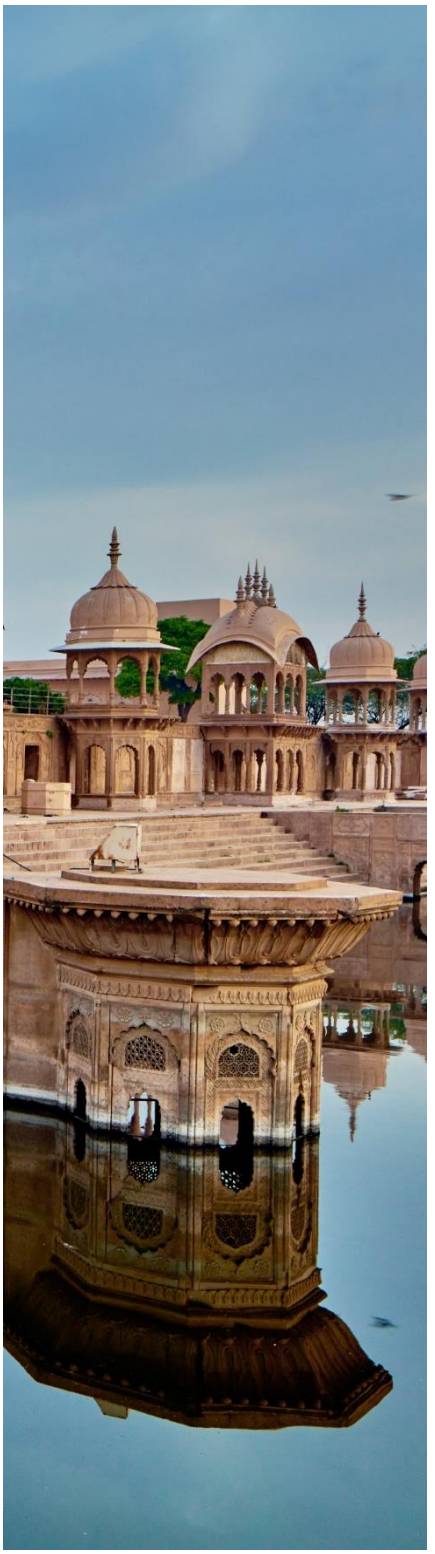
Capacity sensitive areas: Areas such as narrow walkways, staircases, and the pathways leading to inner sanctums often create natural bottlenecks, which can slow the movement of visitors and contribute to localised congestion.

Entry and exit flow issues: In several cases, the absence of clearly designated pathways for incoming and outgoing foot traffic results in two-way movement through narrow corridors, leading to congestion and occasional discomfort for devotees. Additionally, the lack of adequate signage and coordinated flow systems can further hinder smooth movement, increasing the potential for confusion and safety concerns.

Ritual- centric congregation challenges: Rituals and ceremonies present logistical challenges, particularly during designated times when large numbers of devotees gather simultaneously. These peak periods often lead to temporary surges in crowd density, requiring careful coordination to ensure smooth and safe movement.

Lack of zoned areas: Clearly defined zones are required to manage the diverse range of activities and varying crowd densities. Areas designated for queuing, rituals, rest, and movement often overlap, leading to overcrowding. This absence of structured zoning can hinder effective crowd dispersion and make it difficult for pilgrims to locate appropriate spaces for their devotional needs.

Insufficient waiting and resting areas: The waiting areas at many temples and pilgrimage sites are inadequately designed to handle the large influx of devotees. Furthermore, during festivals and religious events, temporary structures often fail to provide necessary amenities and sufficient space during peak times. Without adequate seating and shelter, pilgrims are left uncomfortable and distressed, leading to increased dissatisfaction and potential safety risks.



17. Tirupati Balaji temple announces new rules as waiting time for Darshan touches 40 hours | The Economic Times | ET Online | May 2023

3. Challenges faced in crowd management at religious sites

With religious sites in India, witnessing massive footfalls during festivals, pilgrimages, and daily rituals, often far exceeding their designed capacity. Managing such dense gatherings presents multifaceted challenges spanning safety, infrastructure, and human behaviour. Despite spiritual significance, these locations can become high-risk zones without systematic crowd management. Effective crowd management, therefore, goes beyond a logistical need but a critical public safety imperative.

3.1. Safety, security, and health concerns

Religious mass gatherings pose public health and security challenges, intensified by inadequate sanitation infrastructure. Ensuring proper hygiene, drinking water stations, and efficient waste management is essential for maintaining well-being of pilgrims. The large gathering of devotees at Kumbh Mela 2025 has presented increased public health challenges, including concerns related to overcrowding and water quality.[18] Reports indicate that the Ganga in Prayagraj contains elevated levels of fecal coliform bacteria, contributing to a rise in gastrointestinal infections, skin conditions, and respiratory concerns.[19] Insufficient hygiene management and untreated sewage further exacerbate public health concerns.

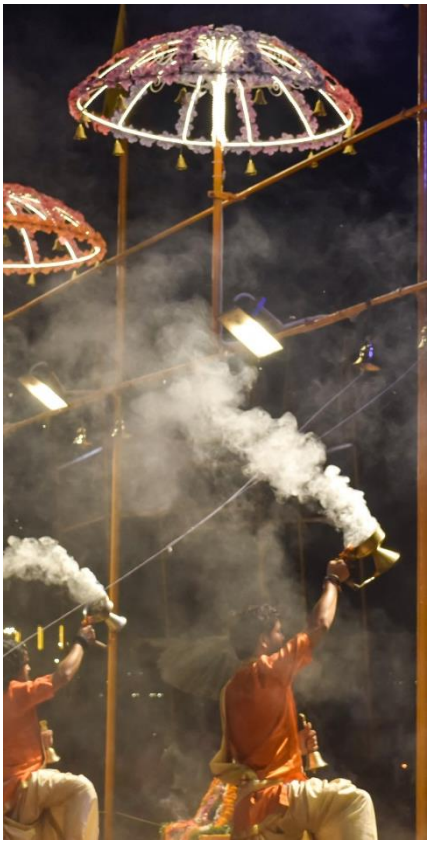
Large-scale events pose security challenges due to crowd density and emotional intensity, leading to theft, surges, and missing persons. Limited surveillance, poor CCTV coverage, and undertrained personnel weaken preparedness. Strengthening monitoring and crowd control is essential to ensure safety and effective security deployment. For instance, a 2020 report from Andhra Pradesh Police found that less than 9 per cent of temples in the state had CCTV systems, exposing glaring gaps in basic security readiness.[20]

Combining health systems, sanitation planning, surveillance, and trained personnel is vital. Safety and health are essential not just for emergency preparedness but for ensuring a secure pilgrimage experience.

3.2. Legacy infrastructure

Many religious sites lack the fundamental essential infrastructure needed to support large gatherings. This includes defined pathways, signage, and evacuation routes. The 2013 Kumbh Mela incident, in which 36 individuals tragically lost their lives due to a crowd surge at the Allahabad railway station ,[21] highlighted the challenges of managing large-scale events and ensuring adequate infrastructure under high pressure. Despite being one of the world's largest religious gatherings, the site faced constraints in pedestrian access, crowd regulation, designated holding areas, and emergency evacuation routes.

Most temple towns and pilgrimage circuits in India were designed in earlier centuries and have not been retrofitted to accommodate present-day crowd volumes.[22] Narrow lanes, congested entry points, lack of queue segregation, and absence of real-time signage create severe movement bottlenecks. Additionally, limited integration with public transport nodes and the absence of multi-modal access facilities (such as shuttle services or emergency vehicle corridors) further restricts safe access and evacuation.



18. Maha Kumbh: What Is faecal bacteria, found in alarming levels in Prayagraj waters? | Hindustan Times | HT News Desk | Feb 2025
19. Maha Kumbh Skin Allergy: Kumbh pilgrims returning with skin ailments | Ranchi News - The Times of India | Kritika Tiwary | Feb 2025
20. Less than 9% of temples in Andhra Pradesh have CCTV surveillance | Deccan Herald | Prasad Nichenametla | Oct 2020
21. Many feared dead as stampede breaks out at Allahabad railway station | The Economic Times | Feb 2013
22. Working Group Report on Improving Heritage Management in India | NITI Ayog: Govt. of India | 2023 | (Accessed: Jun 2025)

3.3. Cultural and behavioural challenges

Beyond physical movement, crowd management understanding people's emotions, beliefs, and traditions. Pilgrims often follow strict rituals like walking around the temple (circumambulation), taking holy dips, or offering prayers at specific times. These practices organically lead to increased foot traffic in certain areas, especially during key moments like aarti or darshan. Devotees engage in spiritual practices in varied ways, including pausing for blessings, chanting in groups, or following personally meaningful routes, which can make crowd movement less predictable. Traditional queue systems may not always be effective in such environments, as movement is guided by faith and devotion rather than structured order.

Variations in language proficiency, limited familiarity with digital systems, and differing approaches to structured plans, particularly among older or rural pilgrims – can present unique challenges. Effective crowd management requires culturally sensitive communication, especially when staff or volunteers may not be trained in multilingual interaction. Respecting traditional practices is essential in a meaningful spiritual experience. Utilising visual aids, local languages, well-trained volunteers, and scheduling plans aligned with ritual calendars can help create a harmonious and well-organised environment.

3.4. Lack of predictive tools and real-time coordination

Many religious sites face challenges in systematic crowd forecasting, often relying on rough estimates that may be insufficient during sudden surges. Modern tools such as online bookings, transport data, and social media analytics, have the potential to improve crowd management but remain underutilised. Additionally, limited coordination between temple staff, law enforcement, and healthcare teams can slow response efforts. Implementing a unified system that provides real-time data to all stakeholders could strengthen collaboration, enhance crowd control, and improve overall safety.

Simple tools like live heatmaps, shared alerts, and mobile communication platforms could make a big difference. But for that, standard operating procedures (SOPs) and coordinated digital systems need to be in place. Predictive and real-time tools are no longer optional – they're essential.

3.5. Absence of integrated command and control systems

Many temples and religious events lack a dedicated control room for real-time monitoring. When such a center is available, it is often temporary or restricted to a single department, such as law enforcement or the temple administration. Establishing integrated, multi-departmental coordination systems could enhance overall management and responsiveness.

Without a centralised system, integrating live feeds from CCTV cameras, crowd sensors, RFID gates, and mobile applications can be challenging. As a result, no single team has a comprehensive view of real-time developments, potentially leading to slower and less coordinated responses to emergencies or crowd surges. Additionally, staff in these control rooms may require enhanced training in managing large-scale gatherings, interpreting digital dashboards, and handling crisis situations. Strengthening preparedness measures could help ensure smoother operations for major events.

3.6. Examples of past incidents

India has faced multiple incidents at religious sites where challenges in crowd management, infrastructure limitations, and emergency preparedness have led to safety risks. These events emphasise the urgent need for structured crowd forecasting, digital tracking, and real-time crowd control mechanisms to enhance safety and ensure smoother gatherings.

Naina Devi Temple, Himachal Pradesh (2008)

A tragic crowd surge occurred on a mountain path following the collapse of a rain shelter, resulting in the loss of 140 devotees, including many women and children.[23]

Mandhar Devi Temple, Maharashtra (2005)

A high-density crowd incident and subsequent fire at the hilltop temple during a local festival resulted in casualties of ~300 pilgrims.[24]

Sabarimala Ayyappa Temple, Kerala (14 February 2011)

A tragic crowd surge occurred on narrow forest roads as pilgrims returned from a festival on Makara Jyothi Day, resulting in the loss of 109 lives and 50 injured.[25]

Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine, Jammu (2022)

A crowd congestion incident on New Year's Day, exacerbated by panic and overcrowding, tragically resulted in the loss of 12 pilgrims, despite the presence of digital pass systems.[26]

Haridwar, Uttarakhand (8 November 2011)

A crowd surge at the railway station during a religious gathering resulted in the tragic loss of lives and injuries for 16 individuals.[27]

23. India temple stampede 'kills 140' | South Asia: BBC News | Aug 2008
24. Crushed by the crowd | Frontline | Feb 2005
25. Sabarimala stampede: 109 pilgrims killed, 50 injured | India Today | Jan 2011
26. New Year tragedy at Vaishno Devi shrine: 12 killed in rush, stampede in early hours | Jammu News - The Indian Express | Arun Sharma | Jan 2022
27. Haridwar stampede | The Hindu | Nov 2011

4. National and global benchmarks

Analysing successful case studies from India and around the world to gain insights into innovative and effective crowd management strategies, supporting the development of a comprehensive national framework for spiritual infrastructure planning.

4.1. Indian case studies

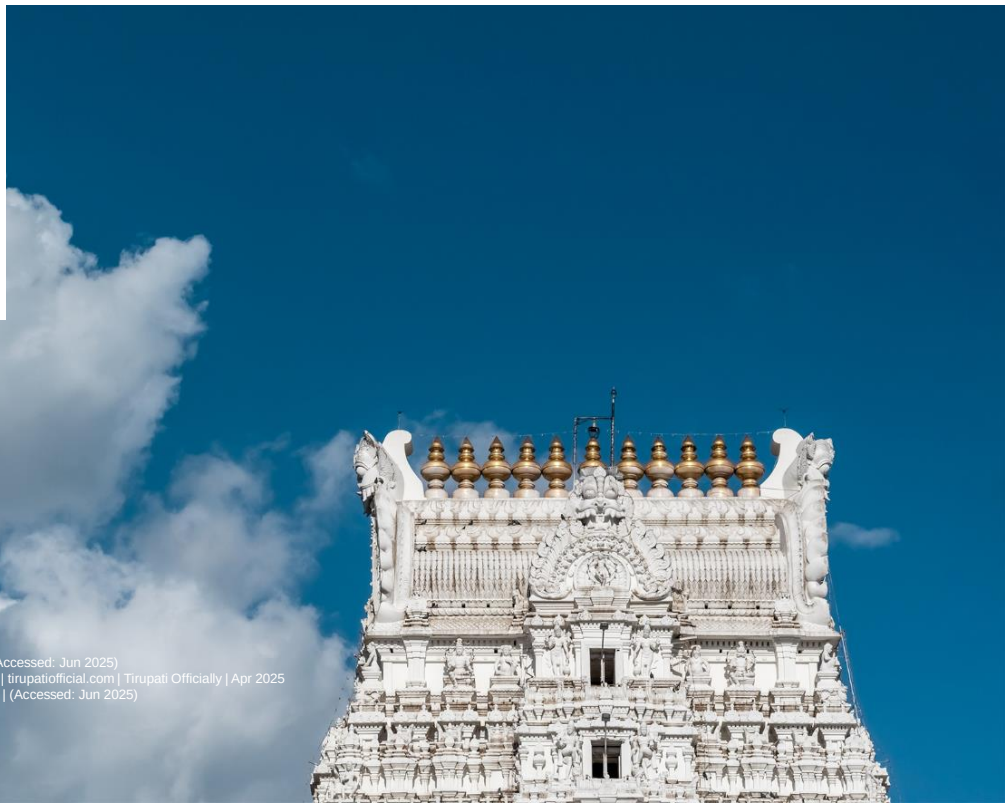
Indian temples attract thousands of pilgrims every day, especially during festivals, auspicious days, and religious events. This high volume of footfall often leads to significant crowding, which can pose challenges in terms of safety, comfort, and overall visitor experience. To address these issues and ensure a smooth and orderly flow of devotees, several temples have implemented crowd management strategies. These include timeslot based darshan systems, digital queue management, designated entry and exit routes, use of surveillance and public announcement systems, and deployment of trained volunteers or staff to guide pilgrims. Such measures help in reducing congestion, enhancing safety, and improving the overall spiritual experience for visitors.

4.1.1. Tirumala Tirupati (RFID + virtual queue)

The Sri Venkateswara Temple in Tirumala Tirupati welcomes an estimated 60,000 to 80,000 pilgrims daily,[28] making it one of the most visited religious sites in the world. The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) has implemented RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) and virtual queue systems to enhance crowd management and improve the temple experience.

RFID based footwear management: The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) has implemented an RFID-based footwear management system to streamline the handling of devotees' footwear at the Tirumala temple. By assigning unique RFID tags and corresponding tokens, the system ensures quick retrieval, reduces misplacement, and minimises waste from unclaimed items. This innovation enhances operational efficiency, making the footwear deposit process more organised and convenient for both visitors and temple staff.[29]

Virtual queue: TTD has also introduced a virtual queue system for booking Special Entry Darshan tickets online. By requiring mobile number verification and OTP authentication, it prevents bulk bookings by agents and ensures fair access for individual devotees. The system manages high web traffic, enhances transparency, and streamlines ticket distribution, allowing pilgrims to select their preferred darshan slot and complete the booking process efficiently.[30]



28. Sarvadarshanam | Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (Official Website) | (Accessed: Jun 2025)
29. TTD Introduces RFID-Based Footwear Management System in Tirumala | tirupatiofficial.com | Tirupati Officially | Apr 2025
30. Tirumala - How to Book Special Entry Darshan Tickets | KshetraDarshan | (Accessed: Jun 2025)

4.1.2. Sabarimala Sree Ayyappa Swamy Temple

The Sabarimala Sree Ayyappa Swamy Temple, nestled in the Western Ghats of Kerala, is a revered pilgrimage site dedicated to Lord Ayyappa. During the Mandala-Makaravilakku season, it attracts nearly 30 million devotees.[31] Given its location in dense forests, Sabarimala presents distinct crowd management challenges due to ecological sensitivity, narrow access routes, and limited infrastructure. To address these concerns, the Kerala Police and the Travancore Devaswom Board have implemented a comprehensive Virtual-Q system.

Virtual-Q system

The Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) has implemented a Virtual Queue system at Sabarimala Temple to streamline crowd management and enhance safety during peak seasons.[32] Pilgrims can book darshan slots online, with a daily cap of 70,000 to regulate footfall and prevent congestion.[33] Registration requires mobile number verification and government-issued ID. The system offers benefits such as free tickets, nominal internet fees for Prasadam, and accident insurance, ensuring an efficient, organised, and spiritually enriching pilgrimage experience.

31. Kerala Tourism to Sabarimala pilgrims: Stay back & visit other places of worship | Kochi News - Times of India | Preetu Nair | Nov 2023
32. Sabarimala Virtual Queue and Accommodation Bookings Open for May 2025 | Sabarimala Uptodate | May 2025
33. Virtual queue limits leave Sabarimala devotees unhappy, raising concerns for Devaswom | Mathrubhumi.com | Ratheesh Ravi | Nov 2024

4.1.3. Kashi Vishwanath Corridor (app-based movement planning)

The Kashi Vishwanath Temple, one of the most revered temples in India, is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is located in the spiritual city of Varanasi. Often referred to as the "Golden Temple" due to its magnificent gold-plated spire. In recent years, pilgrim footfall has significantly increased, with over 2.86 crore devotees visiting the temple in 2024,[34] marking a 48 per cent rise from the previous year. This surge in visitors has also led to a 33 per cent increase in temple revenue, attributed to enhanced facilities and a more seamless darshan experience.

Sugam Darshan: Sugam Darshan[35] is a special, ticket-based darshan facility at the Kashi Vishwanath Temple designed to offer a quick, queue-less, and hassle-free experience for devotees.

This service is particularly beneficial for individuals with time constraints, persons with disabilities (divyangs), or those who are unable to wait in long queues. By streamlining the darshan process, Sugam Darshan ensures that all devotees, regardless of physical limitations or time availability, can have a smooth and spiritually enriching visit to the temple.

New mobile app for crowd management: To further enhance crowd management, especially during high-footfall events like Mahashivratri, the temple authorities, along with the district administration and police, have developed a mobile app that allows pilgrims to pre-register for darshan.[36] This app is expected to enable devotees to choose their preferred time slots and routes to the temple, helping officials estimate crowd sizes and manage traffic flow more effectively. Entry is planned to be facilitated through multiple gates, including Ganga Dwar (via boat), Dashaswamedh Ghat, Scindia Ghat, Chhattadwar, and Dhundhiraj Lane. Additionally, LED screens are to be installed to display live rituals from the sanctum sanctorum, and public address systems and drinking water facilities are planned near these screens. This initiative, inspired by past crowd surges, represents a significant step forward in using technology to ensure a safe and organised pilgrimage experience.[37]

Live Darshan for devotees: In addition to physical darshan options, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple offers a Live Darshan facility, broadcasting real-time visuals from the sanctum sanctorum to devotees around the world. This free online service ensures that spiritual connection is accessible to all, regardless of physical location or mobility. It allows devotees who are unable to visit in person due to health, distance, or other constraints to still participate in the divine experience from the comfort of their homes.[38]

34. 4-time rise in donations to Kashi Vishwanath Dham in Varanas | Times of India | Jun 2024
35. Shri Kashi Vishwanath Official Web Portal (Home Page) | (Accessed: Jun 2025)
36. New app for Kashi Vishwanath Dham in Varanasi | The Statesman | February 2022
37. KV Dham designs app for pilgrim registration to check crowd | Times of India | Rajeev Dikshit | Feb 2022
38. Live Darshan - Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust | (Accessed: Jun 2025)

4.2. Global case studies

4.2.1. Vatican City

The Vatican City, known as Vatican City State, the smallest independent state in the world, serving as the spiritual epicenter of global Catholicism. It receives millions of visitors annually, particularly during events such as Easter Mass. Despite spatial constraints, it has developed a well-functioning, layered crowd dispersal model that offers valuable lessons for high-density religious destinations.

Multi-stage pilgrim dispersal models

- The Vatican uses a tiered approach to control crowd buildup. Visitor access to St. Peter's Basilica and St. Peter's Square is managed through a combination of advance bookings, controlled group entries, and physically demarcated viewing zones. For major events, pilgrims are allotted pre-assigned sectors, with access passes distributed in advance through parishes and tour operators

- This model ensures that large numbers of attendees can participate without overwhelming any single area, balancing spiritual accessibility with logistical control. Importantly, Vatican City's coordination with the city of Rome plays a critical role in external crowd regulation. Holding zones, traffic redirection, and public transport coordination are handled well in advance, ensuring smooth dispersal after large ceremonies.

3.1.1. Senso Ji Temple, Japan

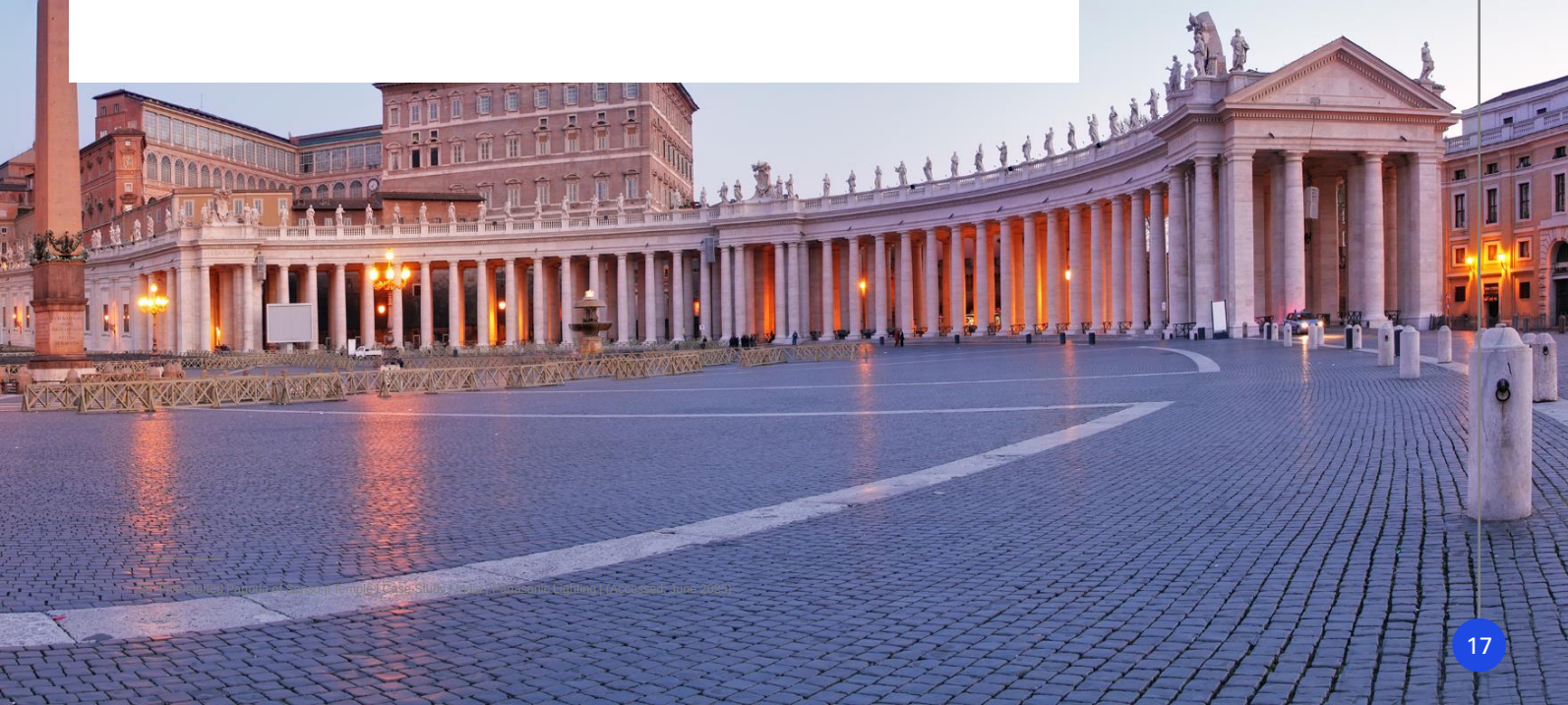
Senso Ji Temple, located in Asakusa, Tokyo, one of the oldest and most famous Buddhist temple, attracts over 30 million visitors annually, with significant spikes during New Year's celebrations (Hatsumōde) and festivals such as Sanja Matsuri.[39] Despite its location in a densely packed urban setting, Sensō-ji has developed a low-tech but highly effective crowd management system rooted in infrastructure design, community participation, and behavioural guidance.

Zoning and spatial flow controls:

During peak periods, the temple precincts are transformed into one-way pedestrian corridors, using temporary barricades and rope lines to guide visitors smoothly from the Kaminarimon gate to the main hall. Entry and exit routes are separated to reduce opposing flows. Staircases leading to the honden (main hall) are segmented to allow up and down movement from different sides, minimising congestion at choke points.

Volunteer stewardship and signage:

Local volunteers, staff, and Tokyo's civic personnel assist in on-ground regulation, helping pilgrims navigate the site and dispersing groups at potential build-up points. Signage is multilingual (Japanese, English, Chinese, Korean) and uses clear pictograms, accommodating Tokyo's diverse tourist base. This community-led guidance model reduces dependence on enforcement and fosters a sense of shared responsibility.



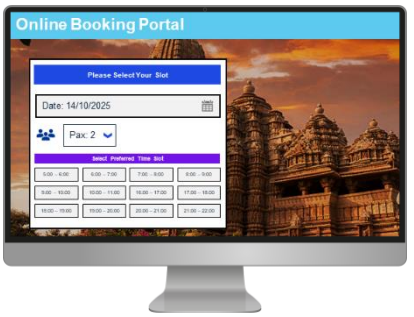
5. Integrated crowd management framework

Managing crowds effectively at temples and religious sites requires an integrated approach that brings together technology, infrastructure, and collaboration among stakeholders. This includes temple management, local authorities, law enforcement, and emergency services, each playing a significant role. Technological platforms, such as real-time monitoring, digital queue systems, and mobile apps, can help improve awareness and guide visitor flow more efficiently. Simultaneously, well-planned infrastructure, including clear signage, designated zones, and waiting areas, supports a smoother and safer experience for devotees. The crowd management framework should be designed with to have flexibility and responsiveness to effectively accommodate variations in visitor inflow during both peak and off-peak hours.

Structured framework for efficient crowd management.

5.1 Pre – arrival management

Pre-arrival management is a critical component of effective crowd control at temples and religious sites. By proactively managing visitor flow before arrival, this approach utilises technology to facilitate advance scheduling, optimise entry patterns, and minimise congestion. Such measures contribute to a more organised, efficient, and comfortable experience for pilgrims.



Advance reservation system for visitors

Scheduled time slot selection

Predictive visitor flow analysis for temples

Proactive preparations for managed crowds

Digital reservation system for pilgrims and devotees

Online registrations: Implementing online registration systems for managing large crowds. Pilgrims can register for their visits in advance, providing essential details and selecting preferred times. This helps distribute the flow of visitors more evenly across different time slots.

Time-slotting: By segmenting visit times into specific slots, time-slotting ensures a controlled entry of devotees throughout the day. This reduces peak congestion, allows better resource planning, and minimises waiting times, optimising the pilgrims' experience especially during festivals and peak hours.

Dynamic ticketing: Dynamic ticketing systems adjust the availability of entry slots in real-time based on visitor demand and predicted flow. High-demand periods can be balanced by limiting ticket issuance or offering incentives such as discounts for less crowded times. This dynamic approach ensures that the temple can handle visitor volumes effectively without overwhelming the infrastructure.

AI/ML for demand prediction and scheduling

Demand prediction: Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) tools analyse historical data, transactional patterns, and social media trends to predict pilgrim influx accurately. These predictive models anticipate peak periods and help temple management prepare for surges, ensuring that required resources and staff are in place.

Scheduling: Using AI and ML for scheduling optimises resource allocation by forecasting demand patterns. Proactive scheduling of staff, security, and medical personnel based on predicted visitor numbers ensures that the temple is equipped to handle crowd variations efficiently.

5.2 On-ground infrastructure and flow design

Effective on-ground infrastructure and flow design to manage large crowds at religious sites. This approach involves structured pathways, barriers, signage, and gender-sensitive design, complemented by advanced technology such as digital twins and crowd simulations. These elements together ensure a seamless movement of devotees, enhancing the overall experience.

Clearly marked smart pathways: Well-designed pathways that ensure smooth movement for devotees. Clearly marked routes help prevent constraints by providing wide, organised passageways, while IoT sensors enabled smart pathways leverage real-time monitoring to manage crowd flow. Combining the approaches create a safe, seamless, and structured crowd flow for devotees and pilgrims.

Queue managers: Strategically positioned physical queue managers help in guiding crowd movement and maintaining secure access by preventing entry into restricted areas. These systems can be dynamically adjusted – opening or closing sections based on real-time visitor flow.

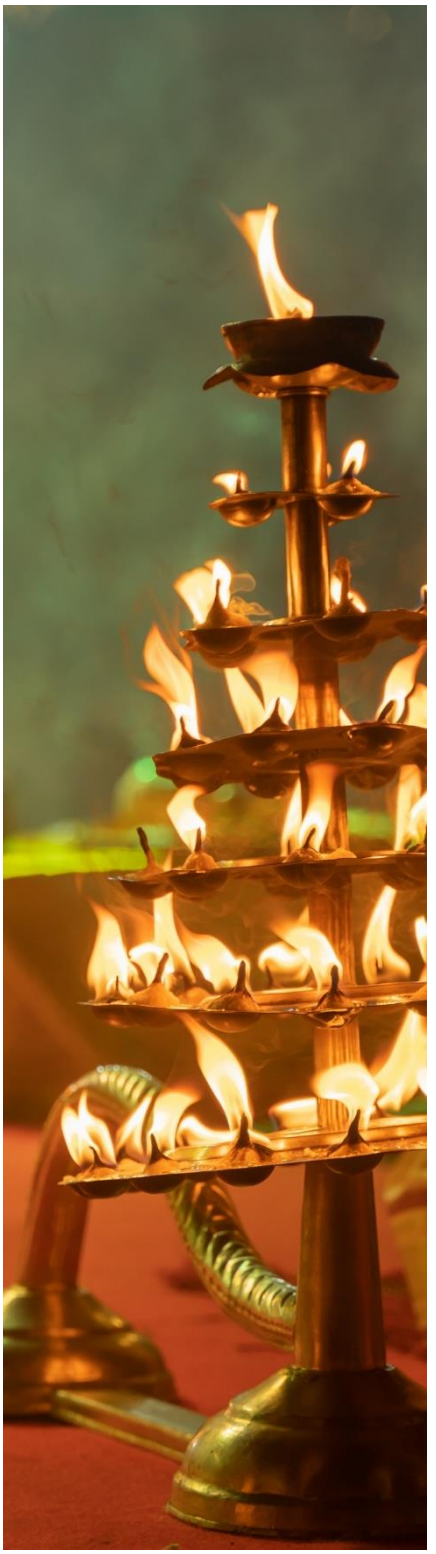
Digital signage: Digital signage ensures smooth temple navigation for pilgrims. Informational signs provide multilingual directions and highlight essential locations, reducing confusion. Furthermore, adapts to real-time crowd conditions, displaying wait times and alternative routes.

Inclusive space design: Dedicated spaces for women, children, and the elderly help minimise stress and improve convenience. Additionally, inclusive layouts accommodate differently abled individuals, fostering a barrier-free environment for meaningful participation in religious activities.

Understanding the role of digital twins and crowd simulations

Digital Twins: Digital twins create virtual replicas of the temple premises, enabling management to visualise and analyses crowd flow in real-time. These models help in planning and implementing better infrastructure by forecasting problem areas and optimising space usage.

Crowd Simulations: Crowd simulations use ML algorithms to model the movement of large groups. Prior to major religious events, running simulations can predict potential congestion points, informing decisions on infrastructure layout and deployment of resources. These simulations provide insights for adjusting pathways, barriers, and entry/exit points to improve crowd management.



5.3 Technology enabled surveillance

The integration of technological tools and digital platforms can effectively monitor crowd movements and minimise potential disruptions at temples and religious sites. With real-time data and insights authorities, can anticipate crowd surges, manage flow patterns, and respond promptly to emerging situations.

AI-powered CCTV cameras: Real-time monitoring and predictive analytics using AI Powered CCTV cameras. These cameras detect unusual patterns, identify hazards, and alert security teams promptly. By analysing the current movement trends for both devotees and vehicles near the pilgrimage site, they can forecast congestion points, allowing proactive measures to prevent bottlenecks and ensure a smooth flow of visitors

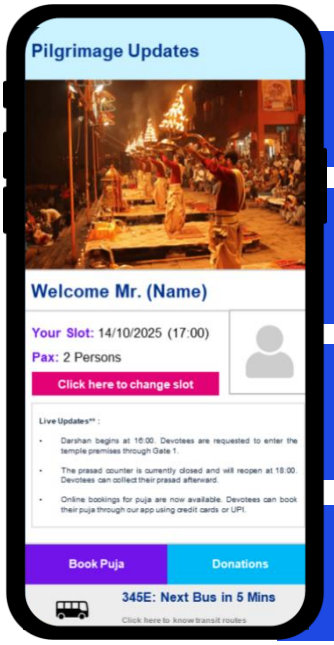
Data visualization and heat maps: They provide insights into crowd density, allowing temple authorities to identify congested areas instantly. By visualising high-traffic zones, they enable swift adjustments, such as opening additional pathways or redirecting pilgrims to ensure a smoother flow. Additionally, it can help in optimise resource allocation by pinpointing areas needing extra security, medical assistance, or sanitation services, enhancing overall safety and visitor comfort

RFID technology: Facilitates visitor tracking and movement management using tagged cards or wristbands, ensuring continuous monitoring of pilgrim flow. It also optimises entry and exit processes by enabling faster identification and reducing wait times, thereby ensuring smooth transitions between temple sections and enhancing overall crowd management efficiency.

Mobile apps: Real-time information and communication for devotees and pilgrims. They can access schedules, queue updates, and emergency alerts to plan their journey effectively and enhance on premise experience. Additionally, these apps enable instant notifications about crowd conditions, directions, and safety measures, ensuring a well-organised and secure experience

Facial recognition (with privacy safeguards): Facial recognition technology strengthens security by identifying individuals, monitoring movements, and detecting suspicious behaviour to prevent unauthorised access. However, its implementation must prioritise privacy, ensuring encrypted, anonymised data and transparent usage to maintain visitor trust and compliance with regulations

Data analytics: Understanding visitor behaviour, helping optimise crowd management. By analysing behavioural patterns and preferences, these tools enable informed decision-making, allowing managers to anticipate visitor numbers, allocate resources efficiently, and implement proactive strategies for seamless operations



Seamless booking and scheduling: Enable devotees to book, modify time slots, and reserve pooja or temple services in advance.

Live updates and notifications: Provide real time updates on bookings, pooja services, temple schedules and announcements.

Crowd management and information: Offer live updates on crowd movements, congestion levels and safety protocols.

Transport and accessibility insights: Display real time public transport availability, navigation assistance and parking details.

5.4 Establishing centralised command and control centers

Centralised command centers streamline coordination between civic agencies, police, and temple authorities, ensuring efficient decision-making through real-time monitoring and information sharing. They manage crowd density, security alerts, and resource allocation, enabling smooth operations and rapid responses during peak events. Advanced communication networks enhance coordination, while predictive analytics help anticipate crowd movements and implement proactive safety measures. Additionally, disaster response systems develop contingency plans for emergencies like stampedes or fires, coordinating with hospitals and emergency services. Regular training drills ensure personnel are well-prepared to handle crises effectively, maintaining visitor safety and operational efficiency.

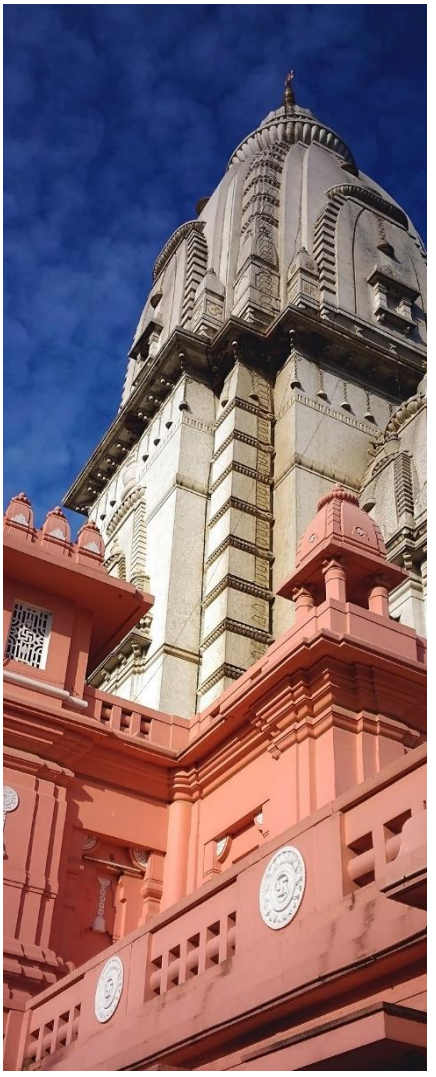
5.5 Post-visit management

Post-visit management is an essential aspect of crowd management at temples and religious sites, designed to ensure continuous improvements in visitor services and implement effective measures to enhance service quality.

Feedback systems: Feedback collection methods, including online surveys, mobile app prompts, physical forms, and interactive kiosks, to gather pilgrims' perspectives. This data can be systematically analysed to identify key concerns such as current wait times, cleanliness, and safety measures. Temple authorities and government bodies can utilise insights from responses to identify gaps in existing services and implement targeted improvements.

Sentiment analysis: Sentiment analysis tools, enabled by Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Machine Learning (ML), evaluate the tone and emotional content of feedback to determine whether experiences are positive, negative, or neutral. This analysis helps identify patterns in visitor satisfaction – for instance, recurring negative sentiments about long wait times can signal the need for immediate intervention. Additionally, analysing historical sentiment data offers predictive insights, enabling management to anticipate potential issues and implement preventive measures ahead of peak events.

Sanitation measures: Dedicated teams conduct regular sanitation routines, focusing on high-traffic areas like restrooms and pathways. During major events, waste management becomes essential, with strategic placement of bins and recycling stations ensuring efficient disposal. Robust hygiene measures, including frequent surface sanitisation, hand sanitizers, and clean drinking water, help uphold health standards. Regular inspections and compliance checks further strengthen cleanliness efforts, contributing to a hygienic and positive experience for all visitors.



6. Policy and institutional enablers

Beyond technological advancements, religious sites require strong policy frameworks and institutional support from state tourism boards, Hindu Religious & Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) departments, and urban local bodies to ensure effective resource deployment and emergency preparedness. Additionally, adequate funding for infrastructure and technology is essential for maintaining operational efficiency. To enhance safety and visitor experience, the establishment of data-sharing frameworks and standardised crowd management protocols is crucial for seamless coordination among stakeholders.

6.1 Role of state tourism boards, HR&CE Departments, urban local bodies

State tourism boards:

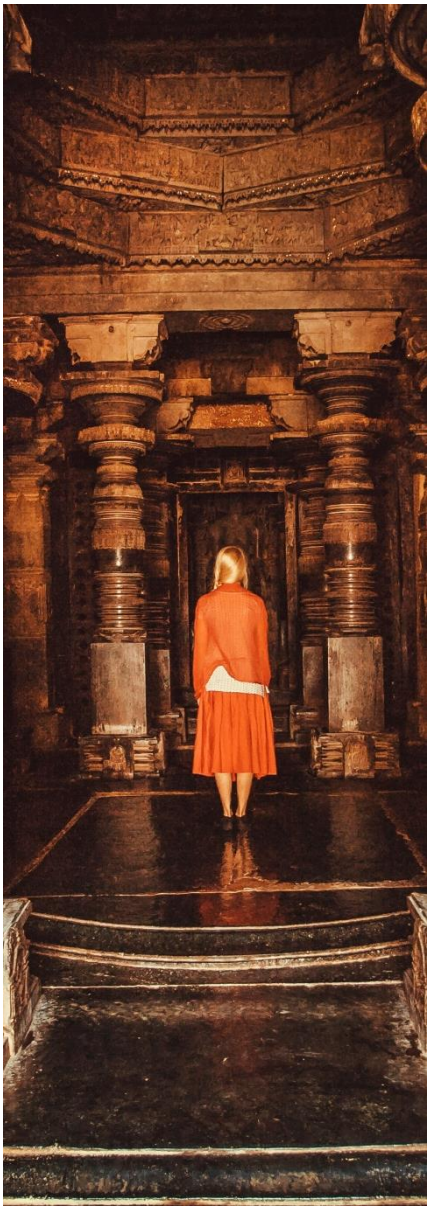
- State tourism boards play a crucial role in promoting religious sites, attracting visitors, and ensuring their safety and comfort
- They are responsible for developing tourism policy and plans, allocating resources for infrastructure development, and coordinating with local authorities to implement crowd management strategies
- By leveraging state tourism boards' expertise, temples can enhance visitor services and boost local economies through well-managed religious tourism.

HR&CE Department:

- The Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HRCE) departments manage and regulate temple activities, ensuring their smooth operation
- They oversee temple assets and finances, infrastructure maintenance, and the implementation of safety protocols
- HR&CE departments collaborate with temple trusts to develop crowd management plans, address visitor concerns, and ensure compliance with regulations while maintaining sanctity of religious places.

Urban local bodies

- Urban local bodies are responsible for providing essential services such as transportation, sanitation, and emergency response within city limits
- They play a key role in managing the influx of pilgrims during major events, coordinating traffic control, waste management, and public safety measures
- By integrating urban local bodies into crowd management plans, temples can ensure seamless coordination in the deployment of resources, including volunteers and facilities management.



6.2 Understanding investment/financing approaches

Temple board surpluses: Temple boards often generate significant surpluses from donations and offerings, which can be reinvested in crowd management initiatives. For example, The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) has received a total of INR1,365 crore in hundi offerings in 2024.[40] These funds can be utilised for upgrading facilities, employing modern technology, and training staff to handle large congregations. Effective management of temple board surpluses ensures that resources are allocated strategically to improve visitor services and maintain high safety standards.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): Companies can invest in infrastructure development, security systems, sanitation facilities, and emergency services as part of their CSR obligations. Collaboration between temples and corporates through CSR fosters sustainable development and ensures that essential resources are available to handle large crowds effectively. For example, Adani Group has provided a grant of INR50 lakh for the renovation of Uchila Sri Mahalakshmi Temple and INR10 lakh for the restoration of Anekere Chaturmukha Kerebasadi in Karkala Taluk.[41]

Public-Private Partnerships (PPP): PPP partnerships allow private entities to invest in infrastructure projects, technology implementation, and service improvements in collaboration with public authorities. PPPs facilitate sharing of expertise, resources, and risks, ensuring efficient and cost-effective solutions for managing pilgrim crowds. For example, to enhance the pilgrimage experience at the Vaishno Devi shrine, a ropeway is being constructed between Katra town and Sanjichhat under a PPP model, with an estimated investment of INR300 crore.[42]

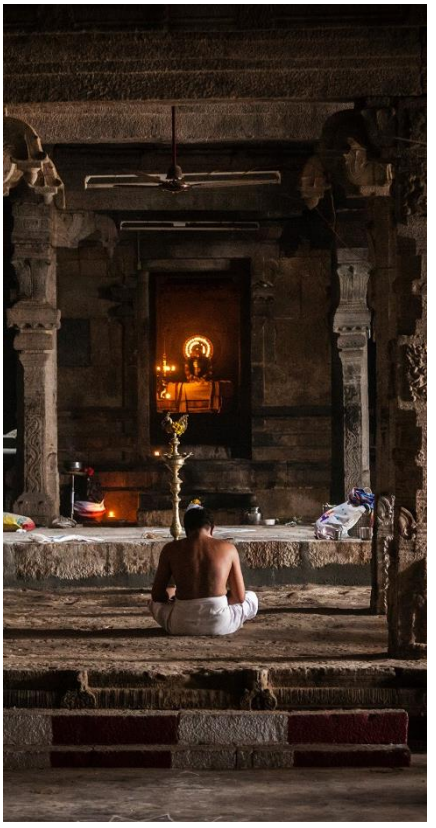
6.3 Need for data-sharing frameworks and crowd science SOPs

Data sharing frameworks:

- These frameworks enable the seamless exchange of information between stakeholders, including state tourism boards, HR&CE departments, urban local bodies, and private partners
- Shared data on visitor patterns, demographics, and congestion points help informed decision-making and proactive planning
- Establishing centralised databases and real-time data-sharing platforms ensures that all parties have access to critical information, enhancing coordination and response.

Crowd science Standard Operating Procedures

- Crowd science SOPs provide guidelines for predicting visitor behaviour, managing flows, and addressing emergencies
- These procedures ensure consistency in actions taken by different stakeholders, reducing confusion and enhancing safety
- Training staff and volunteers on these SOPs ensures that they can respond effectively to dynamic crowd situations and maintain order during peak times.



40. 2.55 crore devotees visit Tirumala in 2024, temple gets Rs 1,365 crore offerings | The New Indian Express.com | Jan 2025
41. Adani group gives CSR grants to Basadi, Uchila temple | Times of India | Stanley Pinto | Feb 2024
42. To make Vaishno Devi pilgrimage faster, easier, a Rs 300 crore ropeway from Katra | India News - The Indian Express | Arun Sharma | Nov 2024

7. Economic and social impact of better crowd management

Insufficient crowd management at temples and religious sites can lead to significant delays in the movement of pilgrims and devotees, which in turn results in measurable financial losses. These delays can disrupt scheduled rituals, reduce visitor turnover, and strain available resources. For temple authorities and event organizers, this often translates into increased operational costs, including overtime for staff, emergency response measures, and infrastructure wear and tear. Additionally, local businesses and vendors that rely on steady footfall may experience reduced revenue. On a broader scale, governments may incur higher public safety and administrative expenses, while also facing reputational risks that could impact tourism and future event planning.

7.1 Pilgrim safety and satisfaction metrics

Safety metrics: Metrics to assess pilgrim safety include the frequency of incidents (stampedes, health emergencies), response times in emergencies, and the availability of medical facilities in proximity. Regular audits and real-time monitoring via surveillance systems are required ensure that safety standards are upheld, reducing risks and fostering a secure environment.

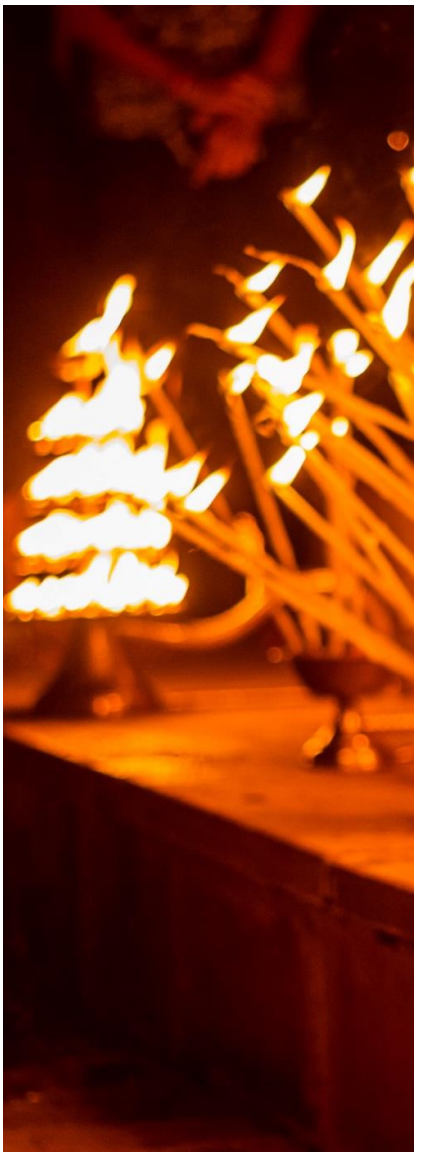
Satisfaction metrics: Capturing visitor experiences related to wait times, accessibility, facility cleanliness, and ease of navigation. High satisfaction scores indicate successful crowd management practices, leading to repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations, further boosting the site's reputation.

7.2 Optimised capacity planning for increased engagement and revenue

Enhanced capacity: Structured pathways, dynamic ticketing, and efficient flow designs enable the accommodation of higher numbers of pilgrims without compromising safety or comfort. For example, an online booking facility can help predict the expected footfall in advance, allowing authorities to make necessary arrangements and ensure smooth visitor movement without interruptions.

Higher footfall: With increased carrying capacity, temples can attract more visitors during peak times and festivals. This translates to higher footfall, leading to greater revenue from donations, offerings, and entry fees. For example, people may hesitate to visit crowded religious places and may have concerns about on-premises facilities. The availability of such facilities ensures peace of mind, thereby attracting more devotees.

Economic boost: Increased revenue from higher footfall, which can be reinvested into further improving temple infrastructure, services, and security. For example, temples like Tirumala Tirupati and Sri Siddhivinayak Temple in Mumbai experience some of the highest visitor footfalls in the country. Additional funds can also support community development projects, boosting local economies and fostering sustainable growth.



7.3 Employment opportunities of smart crowd management

India's religious tourism sector provides direct and indirect employment to a significant number of people. With the spiritual tourism industry projected to reach a valuation of approximately USD59 billion by 2028, it is expected to support around 100 million jobs.[43] Additionally, the implementation of effective crowd management techniques can further enhance employment opportunities across various segments of the sector.

Smart mobility: Implementation of smart mobility solutions necessitates skilled professionals to manage transportation logistics, traffic control, and pedestrian flow. Employment opportunities arise for engineers, data analysts, and on-ground coordinators who can strategise and execute smart mobility plans

Surveillance: Surveillance systems, including AI-enabled CCTV cameras and facial recognition technology, require a workforce for installation, monitoring, and maintenance. Employment roles include surveillance operators, security analysts, and IT specialists who ensure the effective functioning of these systems

Digital helpdesks: Creating digital helpdesks enhances visitor support, necessitating roles for tech support staff, app developers, and customer service representatives. These individuals assist pilgrims with real-time information, registrations, and problem-solving, improving the overall experience.

43. India Is Gripped by a Spiritual Tourism Boom as Faith Becomes Fashionable | Bloomberg | Satviki Sanjay | May 2025

8. Recommendations and roadmap

A well-structured roadmap is essential for implementing effective crowd management practices at temples and religious sites. This approach should incorporate short-term, medium-term, and long-term initiatives designed to enhance pilgrim safety, improve the visitor experience, and strengthen overall infrastructure.

8.1 Short term – technology deployment (0 – 1 years)

Digital ticketing: Implementation digital ticketing systems at the top shrines based on highest visitor flow to facilitate smooth and organized entry. Pilgrims can book time slots online/or using mobile apps, reducing physical queues and streamlining crowd flow. This immediate measure enhances visitor convenience and minimizes congestion

CCTV surveillance: Deploying AI enabled CCTV cameras at key points within the top high-density shrines and religious places/festivals to monitor crowd movements and ensure security. AI-enabled cameras provide real-time analytics, detecting potential hazards and allowing prompt action. Enhanced surveillance safeguards visitors and maintains order

IoT based crowd sensors: Installation of IoT based crowd sensors to monitor density and flow at critical zones within these shrines. Sensors help in identifying overcrowded areas and directing visitors accordingly. By providing real-time data, sensors can inform dynamic adjustments and improve overall crowd management.

8.2 Medium term – technology deployment (1 – 3 years)

Integrated pilgrim management platforms: Development of integrated pilgrim management platforms that encompass registration, scheduling, communication, and feedback systems. These platforms provide a unified interface for managing pilgrim interactions and enhance coordination among different stakeholders

GIS Mapping + command centers: Implementation GIS mapping for detailed spatial analysis and planning across top pilgrimage circuits. Establish command centers equipped with GIS data and real-time monitoring tools to ensure effective coordination and decision-making during peak events.

8.3 Long term – technology deployment (3 – 5 years)

Digital twins: Creation digital twins – virtual replicas of major pilgrim sites to model crowd behavior and infrastructure usage. Digital twins enable predictive simulations and analyses, allowing proactive planning and continuous optimization of visitor experiences

AI crowd models and simulations: Developing AI-based crowd models and simulations to predict and manage visitor flow dynamically. These models analyse historical and real-time data to forecast crowd patterns and suggest interventions, ensuring efficient and responsive crowd management

Universal pilgrim ID integration: Integrate a universal pilgrim ID system that allows seamless access to services across multiple sites. This unique ID enhances the visitor experience by providing personalised information, tracking pilgrim movements, and simplifying logistics

National framework for spiritual infrastructure planning: Establishing a national framework for spiritual infrastructure planning that standardises best practices, policies, and guidelines for crowd management. This framework ensures consistency, quality, and sustainability across various pilgrimage sites, fostering a holistic approach to spiritual tourism.

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The Committee's focus spans across various key segments of tourism, including:

- Heritage Tourism
- Spiritual Tourism
- Medical & Wellness Tourism
- Golf Tourism
- Wedding Tourism
- Film Tourism
- Border Tourism
- Sustainable Tourism

Our mission is to create a collaborative platform that brings together all stakeholders to develop an integrated and innovative approach to promote the tourism industry as a key driver of economic growth.

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