

Article

# Roots, Routes, and Routers: Social and Digital Dynamics in the Jain Diaspora

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**Abstract:** In the past three decades, Jains living in diaspora have been instrumental in the digital boom of Jainism-related websites, social media accounts, and mobile applications. Arguably, the increased availability and pervasive use of different kinds of digital media impacts how individuals deal with their roots; for example, it allows for greater contact with family and friends, but also with religious figures, back in India. It also impacts upon routes—for example, it provides new ways for individual Jains to find each other, organize, coordinate, and put down roots in their current country of residence. Using extensive corpora of Jainism-related websites and mobile applications (2013–2018), as well as ethnographic data derived from participant observation, interviews, and focus groups conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, and Belgian Jain communities (2014–2017), this article examines patterns of use of digital media for social and religious purposes by Jain individuals and investigates media strategies adopted by Jain diasporic organizations. It attempts to explain commonalities and differences in digital engagement across different geographic locations by looking at differences in migration history and the layout of the local Jain communities.

**Keywords:** Jainism; digital media; diaspora; migrant religion; digital religion

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. *Connecting Roots, Routes, and Routers*

This article, which draws from a broader research project<sup>1</sup> incorporating the analysis of corpora of websites (2013 and 2017) and mobile applications (2018), as well as ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, and Belgium (2014–2018), seeks to address the impact the rise of digital media has had on the way Jains that have settled outside India experience and practice their religion. As the title *Roots, Routes, and Routers* implies, this research article takes James Clifford's (Clifford 1997) volume titled 'Routes' as its starting point. In this influential collection of essays, Clifford makes a case for changing the focus of cultural studies from origins and stable belongings to migration and movement, or from roots to routes. The addition of "routers" as a third dimension is meant to draw attention to the increased influence of digital media in cultural processes in general, and in the migrant and diaspora communities in particular.

The fields of migration studies and diaspora studies address the balance of origins and movement, and grapple with the temporal dimensions of migration—subsequent instances of travel and migration, the development of new communities, the maintenance of old roots, and the severing or withering roots through subsequent generations. In the past two decades, a growing number of scholars of media

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and migration have argued that the increased role digital media has in many people's lives today is especially relevant for individual migrants and migrant or diaspora communities (e.g., Appadurai 1996; Georgiou 2006; Tsagarousianou 2004; Nedelcu 2012; Scheifinger 2008, p. 242; Helland 2007; Balaji 2018, p. xix). Furthermore, some researchers have argued that the impact of digital media has been significant enough to irrevocably change the migration experience and what it means to be 'in diaspora' (Tsagarousianou 2004; Diminescu 2008; Nedelcu 2012).

A strict bifurcation of the online and the offline worlds (and thus also of online and offline methods) does not make sense as digital technologies and spaces have integrated themselves in the social, cultural, and religious lives of the vast majority of people, for whom online practices are important as a part of everyday life, embedded in and continuous with other social processes (Miller and Slater 2000, pp. 5–7; Scheifinger 2018, p. 6; Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour 2016, p. xx; Diminescu 2012, p. 452).

This article will look at some of the ways in which digital media has influenced the lives of Jains living in three different diaspora communities. It will focus on the impact of digital media on the way Jains living outside India maintain their social, cultural, and religious link to India (their roots), as well as on their experience of settling abroad and establishing new ways of religious practice and community organization (their routes).

### 1.2. Jainism and (Im)Mobility

Through their religious tradition, Jains seem to be inextricably linked to a South Asian homeland. This connection is exemplified by the centrality of India in Jain cosmology, and by the fact that India remains the dwelling place of Jain ascetics and the location of Jain *tirths* or centers of pilgrimage. However, these strongly rooted religious and cultural practices do not preclude movement, travel, and migration. The transnational trade networks that have been built up over centuries, as well as more modern forms of migration such as student mobility, have contributed to the development of a contemporary Jain diaspora consisting of 300,000 individuals, spread over five continents (Banks 1994; Jain 2011, 1998; Oonk 2007).<sup>2</sup> Although the Belgium-, U.K.-, and U.S.-based Jain communities that were visited as part of the ethnographic fieldwork can all be said to be part of the 'Western' Jain diaspora, they are subtly different when it comes to aspects like their developmental trajectory, the religious and socio-economic diversity within the community, their migration history, the size and density of the community, the intensity of contact with family members in India, and so on.

The Jain community in Antwerp (Belgium) has grown around the diamond trade.<sup>3</sup> This involvement in one very specific economic endeavor has led to the formation of a very tight-knit community, with a strong lingering link with India, and relatively little internal diversity. The Jain community in London (United Kingdom), on the other hand, is much more ethnically, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse.<sup>4</sup> It also has a strong link to the East African past, often more so than

<sup>2</sup> The number of Jains is under discussion. The last census of India, conducted in 2011, consultable on [censusindia.gov.in](http://censusindia.gov.in), reported Jainism to be the religion of 0.37% of the population (just under 4.5 million individuals). However, there are concerns that not all Jains report their religion unambiguously in the census, stating caste or clan instead of religion, or combining categories, e.g., Hindu-Jain. If these concerns are correct, the actual number could be significantly higher. Outside India, counting Jains is often even more difficult, as religious affiliation is considered a private affair that should not be included in any census or administrative data. On the basis of estimates made by researchers, and data obtained from Jain organizations, it is assumed that between 250,000 and 300,000 Jains live outside India, in the diaspora.

<sup>3</sup> An estimated 2000 Jains reside in Belgium, concentrated in and around the city of Antwerp. Within Antwerp, the focal point of community life is the suburb of Wilrijk. For more information on South Asian and Jain trade migration to Antwerp, see (Henn 2010, p. 134; Henn and Laureys 2010).

<sup>4</sup> As in other countries, the exact number of Jains in the United Kingdom is unknown. Paul Dundas estimates 25,000–30,000 (Dundas 2002, p. 271), whereas P.C. Jain speaks of 50,000 (Jain 2011, p. 96). As most of my UK respondents thought 30,000 was correct, I will assume P.C. Jain's figure to be unrealistically high. The first Jain temple was opened in Leicester, but today, most UK Jains live in the Greater London area.

to India, the country their family left perhaps a century ago.<sup>5</sup> Compared with the Jain communities in the United Kingdom, the communities in the United States are similarly socio-economically diverse, and even more regionally and linguistically diverse. Although, within the diaspora, the North American Jains are by far the most in numbers,<sup>6</sup> the population density in most diasporic communities in the United States is significantly lower than in North London or Antwerp. Different types of Jain organizations have been established at all three field sites. Whereas Jains in Antwerp and in most communities in the United States have only one or two organizations active in their area, Jains living in London have access to at least a dozen. North America is the only place where an umbrella organization has emerged that groups the vast majority of Jain organizations and sets out a course for Jainism (or at least encourages ‘good practices’). In the United Kingdom or Antwerp, such a central body has not emerged.

### 1.3. Migration and Religion

Many classic studies on migrants and their integration processes noted, with some surprise, the continued salience of religion among migrant populations (as noted by [Baumann 1998](#), p. 95 and [Cohen 1992](#), p. 159). Comparative sociological and ethnographic case studies have since fine-tuned this finding, most of them arguing that while religion can remain important, or even regain importance, in the lives of migrants, both the social organization that lies at the base of the religious community and the forms of religious praxis are liable to change through the process of migration. Diaspora populations have thus often been identified as areas of religious change because the interaction with new geographical, social, cultural, and climatological environments spurs the need to rethink entrenched narratives, practices, and customs ([Scheifinger 2008](#), p. 241; [Vertovec 2009](#); [Smart 1987](#)).

Standard works on Jainism often only briefly address the specificities of the diaspora (e.g., [Dundas 2002](#), pp. 271–75; [Wiley 2006](#), pp. 19–20) or gloss it over entirely. The few works that deal with the Jain diaspora generally consist of case studies describing one particular community of Jains from a sociological or religious point of view (e.g., [Jain 1998](#); [Radford 2004](#); [Helmer 2009](#); [Banks 1992](#); [Vallely 2002, 2004](#); [Shah 2011, 2017](#); [Shah et al. 2012](#)). Although these and other studies offer interesting insights about the specificities of the Jain diaspora, none of them question the role of digital media within them. After providing a brief overview of Jainism’s and the Jain diaspora’s presence on the Internet, this article will investigate the different ways in which digital media have changed the diasporic experience.

## 2. Jainism on the Internet

### 2.1. An Introduction to Jainism Online

Over the past two decades, Jainism has found its way into the realm of digital media and explored its diverse functions. Initially, the encounters between Jainism and digital media produced rather text-heavy and often very descriptive websites, aimed at introducing the general public to Jainism and serving as a reference library for Jains. Other, older media were subsumed within the realm of the digital, with digitized versions of books, cassettes, radio, and television now available to be accessed through personal computers or mobile devices anytime, anywhere. In addition to these online versions

<sup>5</sup> Respondents in London estimated that as many as 80% of Jains living in the United Kingdom have an East African background, meaning that they or their parents were settled in East Africa (mainly Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda) before they came to the United Kingdom in the 1960s. For more about South Asian migration to Africa, see ([Oonk 2007, 2013, 2015](#); [Alpers 2013](#)). For more on Jain migration to Africa and onwards, see [Banks 1994](#).

<sup>6</sup> The exact number of Jains in North America is unknown. Estimates vary from 45,000+ ([Dundas 2002](#), p. 271), over 50,000 ([Jain 1998](#), p. 295) and 60,000 ([Kumar 1996](#), pp. 103–12), to 150,000 ([Jain 2011](#), p. 99). Some respondents estimated the numbers to be significantly higher still. Most large cities in the United States have an active Jain center. The largest Jain populations are found in New Jersey, California, and New York in the United States and Ontario (Toronto) in Canada ([Jain 2011](#), p. 99; [Kumar 1996](#), pp. 104–5).

of existing material, new approaches, texts, and possibilities for engagement with the Jain tradition were created. In 2018, a Google search using the search term ‘Jainism’ yielded almost 100 million hits, leading to a very diverse range of websites of and on Jainism.<sup>7</sup>

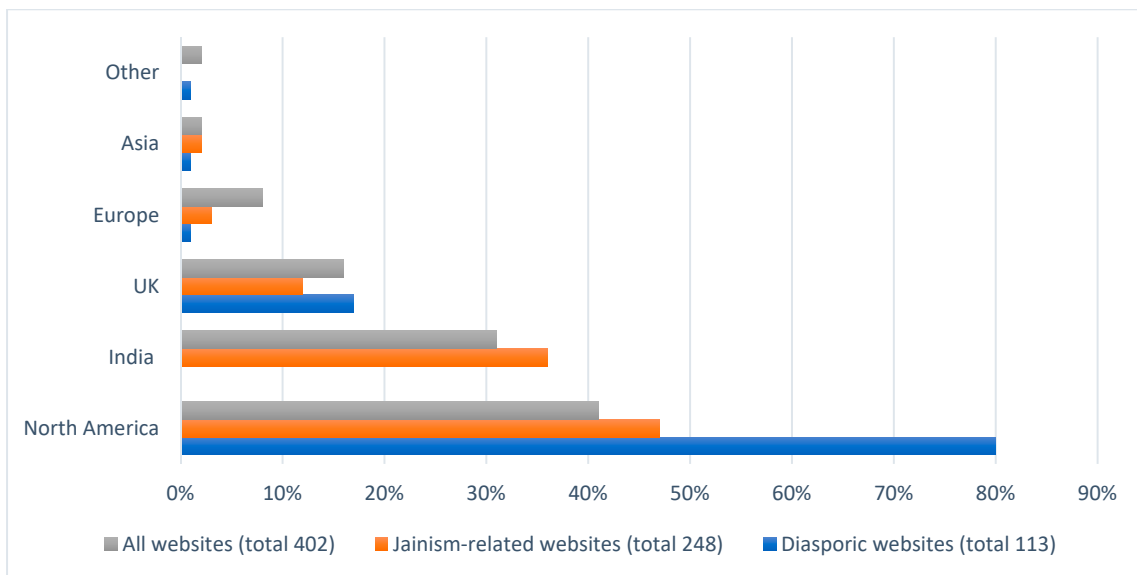
In 2017, I compiled a corpus of more than 400 websites, taking ‘findability’ as the main criterion.<sup>8</sup> The method used is based on the assumption that most popular websites and apps are findable using popular search engines (Scheifinger 2018, pp. 9–11). Whereas some of the websites in this corpus are dedicated entirely to Jainism, others include (elements of) Jainism as a part of a discussion on another topic, be it comparative religion, vegetarianism, or business ethics. Some of the sites in the search results are not focused on providing information on Jainism, but rather present an organization, provide a service, or seek to facilitate discussion or social connection. However, before looking into types of website available, the geographic and linguistic properties of the corpus merit a closer look.

The figures below show the distribution by geographical location of the organizations or individuals producing the websites in the corpus (Figure 1), and the main languages used on these websites (Figure 2). It is immediately clear that most (69%) are maintained by individuals and organization outside India, and that English is by far the most used language, even though queries using Gujarati and Hindi language and fonts were used during the compilation of the corpus. The prevalence of North American and English language websites in the corpus is the result of two factors. First, the methods used for corpus compilation are affected by the biases inherent in the structure of indexing and ranking algorithms, and second, there are strong indications that both consumption and production of websites and other digital media are especially relevant to individuals and organizations in migrant communities.

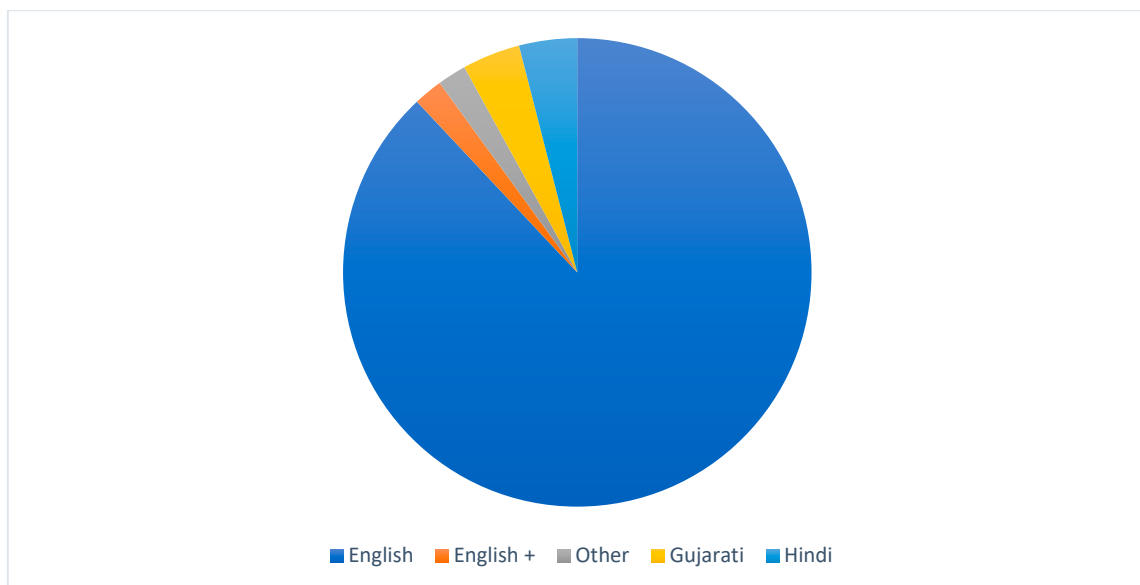
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<sup>7</sup> Of this large number of hits, the majority only mention Jainism in passing. The number of websites that devote a significant amount of attention to Jainism is much smaller.

<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this research, a website was deemed findable if it was included in Google search results to a simple query, or hyper-linked to by a website that was included in such search results. In the first phase of corpus compilation, I used Google.com as a search engine, within the Mozilla Firefox browser (the latest of which using version 52.5.2). I successively entered ‘Jain’, ‘Jainism’, ‘जैन धर्म’ (Hindi), and ‘જૈન ધર્મ’ (Gujarati) as search terms. Although I discounted websites that did not relate to Jainism in any meaningful way (for example, those that just had the word ‘Jainism’ in a list of South Asian religions), I did include both websites identifying as Jain, and websites containing information about Jainism. I did not limit my search to websites developed by Jain migrants, or indeed Jains. In a second phase of corpus compilation, I opened the first-tier websites and listed all hyperlinks and references. These were all, irrespective of their content, included in the corpus. This second tier functions as a double check for any important sites that may not have featured in the first tier of Google search results, and also allows me to identify important themes and (formal or informal) alliances with non-Jain organizations. For example, the large number of websites dealing with animal welfare or vegetarian and vegan lifestyles in this second tier of data gives some indication that these topics are important to the Jains. The findability of a website is not a fixed value. Rapid updates of Google’s search and ranking algorithms and the constant development of new websites result in a constant flux in ranking and findability, with some websites disappearing from the search results of a general query, even though they do still exist.



**Figure 1.** Geographic distribution of the 2017 website corpus.



**Figure 2.** Language distribution for the 2017 website corpus.

### 2.2. Bias in Search Engine Results

The prevalence of North American websites in the general corpus, as well as in the Jainism-related and diasporic subcorpora, is striking when viewed against the geographic distribution of Jains. However, these findings are in line with similar studies conducted on the digital presence of different groups (e.g., [Halavais 2009](#); [Vaughan and Thelwall 2004](#); [Vaughan and Zhang 2007](#)). The reasons for this overrepresentation are rooted in the way the internet has historically developed and the way search engines (in this case, Google) work, which sites they index, and how they rank their search results. Referring to Vaughan and Thelwall’s 2004 study on search engine coverage bias, Alexander Halavais aptly describes how U.S. sites have an advantage when it comes to Google ranking:

In the language of PageRank<sup>9</sup>, US sites simply have more authority: more links leading to them. They note that sites have existed longer in the US, where much of the early growth of the internet occurred, and that this may give US sites an advantage. Add to this that early winners have a continuing advantage in attracting new links and traffic, and US dominance of search seems a foregone conclusion. (Halavais 2009, p. 90)

Such a 'U.S. dominance of search' is linked to the prevalence of English in our corpus. Eighty-eight percent of all websites use English as their main language, with another 2% using English and another language (usually Hindi or Gujarati) in equal measure. When only taking into account websites containing Jainism-related content, the exclusive use of English is slightly less all-pervasive at 84%, with another 3% of websites combining English with Gujarati or Hindi. When looking exclusively at diasporic websites, the proportion of websites using English exclusively is as high as 98%.

The choice for a lingua franca such as English as the language for digital communication can be part of a conscious bid to be inclusive.<sup>10</sup> However, the prevalence of English in our corpus is also because of technological barriers related to historical technological developments in the way search engines such as Google deal with text in different languages and different scripts. A 2010 report estimates that more than 95% of Indian language content on the web is not searchable (Mon and Phatak 2010, p. 174). The reason for this lack of proper indexing is different from language to language, but in the case of Indic languages, it is mainly to be found in the use of multiple proprietary encodings and fonts (Mon and Phatak 2010, p. 174; Pingali et al. 2006, pp. 801–2). Not only do these technological barriers influence the amount of non-English material that can be found when searching online, they also motivate developers to choose English to increase the potential visibility of their website or app.

### 2.3. Internet as the Ultimate Diasporic Space?

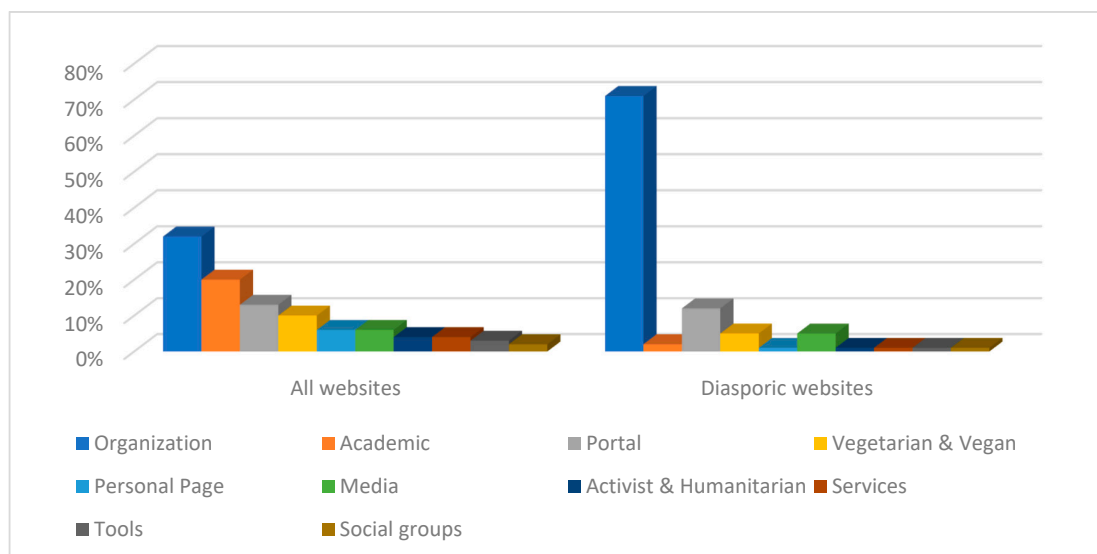
A second reason for the number of websites on Jainism developed outside India puts the diaspora center stage. The website corpus indicates that Jains living in diaspora have not only been subject to this digital boom of Jainism-related websites, social media accounts, and mobile applications, but have also been instrumental in shaping it. Twenty-eight percent of the total corpus (and 42% of websites providing Jainism related content) is produced in the Jain diaspora. Although estimates of the number of Jains both in India and the diaspora vary, only about 2.5–6% of all Jains are assumed to live outside India. This small group thus produces a disproportionately large amount of the findable online content on Jainism.

Figure 3 below compares the distribution by category of the entire corpus with the diasporic subcorpus. Although the broad categorization given above does not reveal the full nature of the content found online, it does give an indication of what kind of websites are accessible through a common Google search. Most websites are geared to provide some form of information, be it practical information on the activities of an organization, details on ongoing academic research on Jainism, or doctrinal information for Jains or a broader audience.

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<sup>9</sup> PageRank is the algorithm based on incoming hyperlinks that Google pioneered as a means of assessing the quality of a website.

<sup>10</sup> In the case of many European and North American communities, the use of English allows for equal access to the Gujarati speaking majority and Hindi, Bengali, or Kannada speaking individuals living in the area. In addition to this, being understandable to the broader community in the country of residence can be a legal (in the case of charity status) or social requirement. However, in many Jain organizations in the diaspora, the de facto working language at meetings, lectures, and events is most often Gujarati.



**Figure 3.** Categories of websites and their distribution for the 2017 website corpus (left) and for the diasporic subcorpus (right).

In the diasporic subcorpus, the percentage of organizational websites—usually belonging to a local Jain center or temple—is close to 70%. Most of these websites have similar functions and provide similar content. For example, on the website of the Jain Society of Greater Atlanta (JSGA 2019), we find a number of pages: Home, Event (includes RSVP), Membership (includes login to access more information), About, Donate, Directions, and Contact. It also features a button that allows the visitor to connect with them on Facebook. Although organizational websites mainly focus on making practical information about their activities available to members and potential members, many also contain a measure of doctrinal information and, sometimes, religious resources such as ritual texts, music, video-lectures, and so on (e.g., JCSF 2018).

The second most prevalent category in the diasporic subcorpus, portals, is entirely devoted to such doctrinal information or religious resources. The quantity of information on these portals varies, from lists of links (e.g., Jainism 2019) to elaborate curated content (e.g., Jainpedia 2018<sup>11</sup>; Jainworld 2018<sup>12</sup>). Some specialize in a particular format of content, such as books on Jain e-library (Jain e-library 2019<sup>13</sup>), or focus on one particular topic or group within Jainism, such as the International Digamber Jain organizations' portal (IDJO 2018).

### 3. The Impact of Digital JAINISM on Lived JAINISM

The past decade has seen a huge increase in Jainism-related websites, as well as the introduction of social media and mobile apps on Jainism. These developments have had a very broad and diverse range of influences on the social and religious lives of many Jains. Through interviews and focus groups with more than 80 Jains in three countries (USA, United Kingdom, and Belgium), data were gathered to unpack and assess these influences. Respondents related how they used their phone or computer to chat with friends, conduct a virtual ritual, verify fasting-days on a mobile app, study a sutra text,

<sup>11</sup> Jainpedia.org is an online encyclopaedia project by the London-based Institute of Jainology and Prof. Nalini Balbir (Sorbonne, Paris).

<sup>12</sup> Jainworld.com was started in 1996 by one individual who felt compelled to develop a website to make information on Jainism accessible online when he had moved to the Middle East with his family. The developer has since moved to the United States and the website is now maintained from Atlanta. It brings together vast amounts of information on most Jainism-related topics and, because of an elaborate translation project, is clearly trying to reach both Jain and non-Jain audiences.

<sup>13</sup> The Jain e-library website, jainlibrary.org, is designed and maintained in India, but the organization behind this project is Jain Education International of Pravin K. Shah, who is also the current chairperson of JAINA's Education Committee. It provides downloadable versions of a very broad range of Jainism-related books and publications.

ask religious advice from a monk, play an educational game, and so on. Although some respondents argued that the ease with which religious resources can now be accessed anytime anywhere is not conducive to spiritual growth, and that the information found on the internet is often incorrect or incomplete, very few of my respondents stated that they did not make use of any of the features of digital media now available.

The increased availability and pervasive use of digital media affects how individuals deal with their roots, as well as with their chosen routes. Both the corpus of websites described above and the input from interview respondents in different countries illustrate how digital media have provided opportunities for increased contact with friends and family members in South Asia and elsewhere (Section 3.1), and have facilitated access to information and resources that was previously difficult to come by outside India (Section 3.2). Additionally, digital media have enabled Jains in the diaspora to access *pravacans* of religious figures such as gurus, pundits, monks, and nuns, and—in some cases—to establish regular digitally mediated communications with ascetics (Section 3.3). Lastly, they have been instrumental in the development of new Jain communities, and have the potential to increase communication and enhance community cohesion (Section 3.4).

### 3.1. Interpersonal Connections

I studied in the United Kingdom for four years and I have family in India and Dubai. Today, I live here [in Belgium], so I do not see my family or college-friends that often . . . But we stay connected. We chat and call each other whenever there is some occasion, like a birthday or something. When these relationships started, we were in the same place. I mean, I have met them and spent time with them. I am glad I do not have to lose that now. (K., Antwerp)

For many migrants, keeping their connections to their place of origin is crucial to their well-being. This need is especially dire for new migrants, who have not yet developed a network of connections in their new place of residence with the people (Jain and non-Jain) living there, but remains important for many migrants throughout their lives. The possibilities offered by computer-mediated communication (CMC) in this respect have already been noted in early studies on migration (e.g., [Hiller and Franz 2004](#)). In fact, this is where various scholars have seen the most important impact of digital media in the lives of migrants. The corpus of websites discussed above merely hints at the importance of this feature. Whereas forums and discussion boards tend to be in disuse, applications like WhatsApp and software such as Skype have greatly facilitated regular contact, and through adding video, enabled face-to-face conversation between migrants and family members and friends elsewhere. Respondents overwhelmingly named WhatsApp and Skype as digital features that impacted their communication with and connection to coreligionists in India.

These new channels of communication are used for socializing and discussing family affairs, but also for sharing religious information and even mediated participation in religious events.

And when my family members in India call via Skype—we don't speak so very often—but they will definitely get messages through such as "don't cook with green veg today".

My family set up the laptop in the [home] temple, so I could join them in doing *ārti* on special occasions. Using Skype, I can hear the music, they can hear me reciting, and we can talk afterwards.

The above statements, taken from the transcript of a focus group conducted with students of the Jain Student Association at the University of Michigan, illustrate how CMC can be used for religious purposes. Interviews indicate that such religious uses of CMC, as well as the availability of new digitally mediated ways of engaging with the Jain tradition such as watching videos, studying texts, performing a ritual, or even playing a game can foster an increased feeling of belonging to the Jain community, even in those who do not actively engage in a local Jain organization. Respondents reported feeling a strong connection to the global Jain community while watching a livestream of an initiation ceremony in India:



R: There was a live feed this summer of a big dīkṣā ceremony, I think in Ahmedabad

A: Yeah, I watched that too.

R: It was this huge event and I had never seen a dīkṣā, I don't know what goes on. I think it was . . .

A: On ParasTV<sup>14</sup>.

R: Yes, so my mom and me were kind of watching that livestream. To feel like . . . like being a part of it.

This feeling of 'being a part of it' can best be explained when we consider these online activities as a form of shared practice. Activities may not always be performed together, at the same place, or at the same time, but even without face-to-face contact or direct interaction, users are conscious of the fact that they share their experience with others, and common narratives, places, and practices are reinforced in the process. This can suffice to trigger feelings of belonging and connection to Jainism and the Jain community.

### 3.2. Doctrinal Connections: Digital Media and the Diasporic Knowledge Economy

We encourage the kids and also the adults in the pāṭhśālā to ask questions. When no answer can be found here, we ask a scholar or call a sādhu in India. Although we prefer to contact a pandit. They are more exposed. For basic things, we ask the kids to Google it. (S. Atlanta)

Whereas the importance of digital media in maintaining interpersonal connections between Jains in different places was not very apparent in the website and mobile application corpora, their role as sources of information was. In addition to the practical information the bulk of organizational websites provide, many websites in the corpus described above also offer a wide range of doctrinal information and religious resources. This can consist of primary materials, such as pdf versions of sutra texts (e.g., the website Jain eLibrary (Jain e-library 2019) and the mobile application *Jain Pathshala* (Arihant Solutions 2015; Vishal Shah 2015)) or video clips of sermons (e.g., *Jain Muni Pravachans* (Vishapp 2015), see Section 3.3 below), as well as secondary materials, such as summaries of Jain doctrine and practice (e.g., Jainworld 2018).

The ethnographic part of this research has shown that over 70% of respondents had used the internet to look for doctrinal information. This does not mean it is their only strategy for obtaining information. These digital sources are not the only sources of information and learning available. The relative absence of regular interaction with ascetics has been a key factor in transforming the transfer of religious knowledge in the Jain diaspora. Other factors include a limited access to Jain texts and the absence of elderly members of the family, who are often cited as a main source of religious learning in India. As the quotation at the start of this subchapter illustrates, this problem of access to traditional sources of information is negotiated in different ways.

Many activities in Jain temples and centers in the diaspora have to do with collective knowledge transfer and learning, with lectures, pāṭhśālā classes, and svādhyāys being organized on a regular basis. Such activities are conducted by a range of individuals. In some communities, samaṇīs<sup>15</sup> belonging to the Śvetāmbar Terāpanth sect run regular classes and give lectures for adults and children. They tend to be involved in activities of local Jain organizations too, and often have academic qualifications in addition to their monastic training. A few communities have their own recognized Jain scholars.

<sup>14</sup> Paras TV is an Indian television channel dedicated to Jainism and related topics. It can be watched online via a live stream (Paras TV 2019), or using the Paras TV App (Tanuj 2014).

<sup>15</sup> A Samaṇī is a female intermediate level novice ascetic in the Śvetāmbar Terāpanth sect of Jainism. These 'half-initiated ascetics' take most of the vows full ascetics take, but do not have to lead a peripatetic life, and are allowed to travel, handle money, and provide their own food if necessary. This enables them to study at universities, visit Jain communities in the diaspora, and so on. They have centers in London (United Kingdom), Houston (TX, United States), Iselin (NJ, United States), and Orlando (FL, United States), where they give classes and lectures regularly. When invited, they also visit other Jain communities.

These are Jain lay people that have studied Jainism in detail, often combining spiritual learning and academic study.<sup>16</sup> Whereas these ‘scholars’ are local to their respective diaspora community, the professional lecturers referred to by most respondents as ‘pandits’ tour the world visiting different communities to give talks on diverse Jain related topics. Many Jain organizations try to arrange a visit by such speakers (e.g., Dhirubhai Mehta<sup>17</sup>, Tarlaben Doshi<sup>18</sup>) around the festival of *paryūṣaṇ*. Last in this list of categories of people involved in teaching and giving lectures in the Jain diaspora is the large group of local volunteer teachers and speakers that has made the growing number of *svādhyāys* and *pāṭhśālās* for adults and children possible. Although arguably differently qualified than the *samaṇīs*, pandits, and scholars described above, they are often the most accessible source of information and learning for the community at large. In addition to this expanding group of teachers, the growing Jain diaspora has also seen the prolific production of handbooks about Jainism for both children and adults. This ranges from the *pāṭhśālā* curriculum developed by the Federation of Jain Associations in North America (JAINA), over manuals for ethical living based upon Jain teachings such as the widely spread ‘The Jain Way of Life’, by Yogendra Jain (Jain 2007), to different books on Jainism in Gujarati and English by Vinod Kapashi (Kapashi 1988, 1998). Textbooks and curricula developed in India are also widely used in the diaspora.

However, what role do websites and digital media in general play as a means of accessing doctrinal information for Jains in the diaspora today and how do digital media integrate with the other forms of diasporic knowledge transfer described above? In a bid to situate the role of digital media in the way Jains in the diaspora connect to and learn about Jain religion and doctrine, respondents were asked how they would go about finding answers to doctrinal questions. Table 1 below lists all the sources of information consulted by different categories of respondents. All sources mentioned are marked with ‘x’. Sources that were clearly preferential for a particular category are marked ‘xx’.

**Table 1.** Strategies for obtaining doctrinal information used by different actors in the Jain diaspora.

		Local		Pandits	
	Internet <sup>19</sup>	Books	Teachers	& Local Scholars	Ascetics
<i>Specialist teachers</i>					
<i>Samaṇīs</i>		x			xx
Pandit		xx			x
Scholar		xx			x
<i>Volunteer teachers</i>					
Teacher US	x	x		xx	x
Teacher UK	x	x		xx	
Teacher BE		x		xx	x
<i>Regular Jains (Non-teachers)</i>					
Jain US	xx	x	x	xx	x
Jain UK	x	x	x	xx	x
Jain BE	x	x	x	xx	xx

<sup>16</sup> In the United Kingdom, people like Vinod Kapashi, Natubhai Shah, and Harshad Sanghrajka all hold PhDs in Jainism and are widely considered to be specialists. In Belgium, Amit Bhansali, who holds a PhD on Jainism from the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands, regularly leads *svādhyāys*.

<sup>17</sup> Dhirubhai Mehta is based in Surat. He visited the Jain Center of Northern California in 2015, and the JCCA in Antwerp in 2018. See also (Dhirajlal 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Tarlaben Doshi is based in Mumbai, but has visited Jain centers in all three of our field sites over the past years to give lecture on Jainism. She visited the Jain Society of Metropolitan Washington for Paryūṣaṇ in 2018.

<sup>19</sup> It deserves mention that ‘Internet’ here refers exclusively to the practice of looking for doctrinal information presented on websites like Wikipedia, Jainpedia, Jainworld, and so on. As every respondent involved in teaching (*samaṇīs*, pandits, scholars, and volunteer teachers) said they used the internet to find illustrative materials for their classes and most also

The interviews indicate a difference between specialist teachers including pandits, scholars, and *samañīs* on one hand, and volunteer *pāṭhśālā*, *svādhyāy*, or *satsaṅg* teachers/leaders, who have often had little or no formal training in Jain doctrine, on the other. If scholars, pandits, and *samañīs* are confronted with a question they do not know the answer to, they would first consult books and then, if necessary, contact an authority (monk, ascetic, or (another) pandit) in India. The *samañīs* tended to turn to the head of their order or the *Terāpanth Ācārya* whenever there was any doubt regarding doctrinal matters. None of the scholars, pandits, and *samañīs* I talked to would use the internet, unless it was to gain easy access to *sūtras* and other texts through websites such as Jain e-library. Volunteer teachers who are confronted with a question regarding Jain doctrine, on the other hand, tend to make more use of the internet and handbooks as a first source of information. If this does not yield the required information or if the question at hand is of a more complex or philosophical nature, they turn to local scholars or visiting pandits, from whom they expect to get a final satisfying answer. The practicality of this strategy is of course dependent on the availability of such scholars or pandits, which, in turn, is again proportional to population density. In London, the presence of a relatively large number of home-grown Jain scholars, *samañīs*, and teachers within the local Jain community has influenced the degree to which Jains in the United Kingdom turn to other sources as a means of finding information on Jainism.

When *pāṭhśālā* teachers in the United States and the United Kingdom indicated that they used the internet in the preparation of their classes, they said they looked for audiovisual materials to illustrate their lessons with, but also to find or verify doctrinal information. *Pāṭhśālā* teachers in Belgium were less inclined to use the internet to find information and tended to immediately consult a local scholar or an authority in India on any doctrinal matters.

For regular Jains (i.e., lay Jains who are not involved in teaching or advanced study of Jainism) looking for information on Jain doctrine, the volunteers leading *satsaṅgs*, *svādhyāys*, and teaching *pāṭhśālā* classes for children and adults are a convenient and accessible source of information. However, this category also most prevalently makes use of the internet as a source. They do so either as a first step in the information gathering process, before turning to a local teacher, or because contacting a local teacher is not a feasible option (for example, for those who live in an area without Jain organization and/or who are not involved in any collective Jain activities), or even to verify an answer obtained elsewhere. Looking for information online exposes them to the myriad of competing narratives on Jainism found online.<sup>20</sup> Some respondents, like R. in London, perceive this multiplicity of narratives as an asset.

You have to do your own critical reading. It is interesting because only the Internet allows you to do that. You can look at different suggestions and compare and build, until you will get an explanation that you trust. This is not possible when you are going to one guru or even read in the regular library. (R., London)

Not all respondents were this pragmatic regarding different, potentially contradictory, narratives online. In Antwerp, D. related how he does not trust online doctrinal information.

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conceded they used the internet to access materials, for example, by downloading books from Jainlibrary.org, these practices are not included in this analysis.

<sup>20</sup> This includes narratives emphasizing applied ethics, devotional practices, philosophy, and different sectarian narratives. The discourse on many of the diasporic organizational websites seems to emphasize unity across the main Jain groups, often by prioritizing shared customs over differences in historical and doctrinal understandings. However, as the vast majority of Jains in the diaspora belong to the *Śvetāmbar Mūrtipūjak* group, preliminary analysis indicates that even in discourses that, on the face of it, promote a unified Jainism, *Śvetāmbar Mūrtipūjak* interpretations are more common. Some websites in the diaspora, and a large number of the websites hosted in India, are more vocal about their sectarian allegiance. Whereas this article does not delve into the narratives present on diasporic and other websites, this will be the subject of future research.

I rarely use websites to get any information. I don't rely on those things. I find them full of errors. I rather turn to books or some knowledgeable person in India. I'm being very hard about these websites but it is not for me. (D., Antwerp)

A few respondents would also contact authority figures in India, if a satisfying answer could not be obtained in another way. This seems to be much more prevalent in Antwerp than in the United Kingdom or the United States, perhaps because of the Antwerp community's more frequent trips to India.

### 3.3. Devotional Connections?

These days, a lot of people [ ... ] will tape things: lectures, speeches by sādhus and pandits and share it via WhatsApp and such. The main thing we miss here in the US is the teachings of the sādhus and sādhvīs. And its only through recent technologies that we can access these more easily here. (A., Detroit)

In India, Jain ascetics have a multifaceted function within the Jain community. They are venerated by the lay community as examples of renunciation and the path to liberation. However, in addition to this, they are often very learned, considered a valuable source of information on all aspects of Jain doctrine, and turned to for advice in personal matters too.

Quite a few respondents that had lived in the United Kingdom or the United States since the early eighties or even longer stated that they had long felt cut off from the ascetic community and that it was only in the last twenty years that this feeling had been remedied to some extent, both by the rise in numbers of travelling ascetics and gurus and by the increased digital presence of ascetics in India. Traditionally, Jain ascetics did not adopt technology because of injunctions against personal possessions and the use of electricity (Cort 2001, p. 55). Because of this, digitally mediated communication with them and even the sharing of their teachings in video or audio format was impossible until a number of subgroups negotiated creative ways to make (limited) use of mobile devices, laptops, and film equipment acceptable. For many Jains, especially those living in the diaspora, this has been a key step in making them feel less cut off, as S. describes below.

Because we go to India for a short time, so you don't have that much interaction, you don't get to go to a lot of discourses. So I think those monks and nuns that are using electronic media ... you know, traditionally they might be against it but obviously they've adopted it. [ ... ] For us from our perspective, in the West. It is a really good thing. (S. London)

Although not all Jain ascetics are open to having their *pravacans* recorded, many apps (e.g., Vishapp 2015) and websites (e.g., Pragyasagar 2019) provide access to Jain ascetics' preachings, usually in the form of embedded YouTube videos. Such materials are rather popular—the majority of my respondents in all three field sites at least occasionally watched such videos. They provide the viewer with doctrinal information, but, as interaction with the monastic community is seen by many Jains as a central element of Jain religious practice, they also provoke feelings of devotion. Naturally, the ways individual Jains use these materials differ. Whereas some integrated viewing *pravacans* into their regular spiritual practice, others said they would play *pravacans* in the background while cooking dinner or studying. However, such worldly uses of the materials were invariably (partly) motivated by emotions, with respondents stating it “calmed their nerves”, had “a comforting effect”, or made them “feel less alone”.

if I need a bit of motivation, I do go online and put on any random video of the Acharya and just listen. (A., New York)

The degree to which ascetics avoid any electrical appliances (microphones, lights, and fans) and digital devices (computers, smartphones) now varies from ascetic order to ascetic order. Those orders that do make use of digital devices and have developed a digital presence usually circumvent the injunction

against personal property by having a lay follower be the official owner of the device or putting such a lay follower in charge of making, updating, and running websites and social media accounts. As Jain ascetics, with few exceptions, do not travel by mechanical means, Jains living outside India tend to have limited access to the ascetic community. For them, this negotiated digital presence can be especially impactful.

### 3.4. Building and Maintaining a Community

When I came here as a student in the 80s, there was no central point for Jains to find each other and get together. Now, you can Google to find each other and arrange meetings and activities online. (D., Atlanta)

Digital media do not just affect how and to what degree Jains living in the diaspora can (re)connect with their South Asian roots or find information. They also impact the routes individual Jain migrants take, providing new ways for individual Jains to find each other, and organize and build communities in new countries of residence. Wherever more than one family of Jains settles, chances are that they will try to find each other, get together, and at least share their experience of migration, if not organize some form of collective religious gatherings or events. The process of building new communities based on a current place of residence usually follows the same trajectory. The first contacts and get-togethers tend to be very informal. Often, when the number of Jains is large enough, these get-togethers move to the level of a formal organization. This tends to be followed by the procuring of land for the building of a Jain center and/or temple. In North America, we even see the development of an umbrella organization, JAINA. Digital media have different social functions in the different stages of such organizational development. First, they provide a billboard and a platform to find each other. Once the core network is established, they become a very important tool for organization and discussion.

#### 3.4.1. A Website as a Business Card

In the first phases of the development of a new Jain community, a website can be of prime importance. A findable website functions as a business card; a way new or previously unconnected Jains in the area can learn about activities and connect with others. The large proportion of organizational websites in the diasporic sub-corpus is a clear indication of this. Sixty-one out of the 80 diasporic organizational sites in the corpus are tied to a specific local community, center, or temple. Forty-eight of these only include Jains and 14 bring together both Hindus and Jains. Fifty-four of these are located in North America, 6 in the United Kingdom, and 1 in Singapore. What is interesting to note is that some—admittedly smaller—Jain communities in other parts of the world are not represented in the corpus at all. This can mean their websites are not findable using the search methods used for corpus compilation (as is the case for the Jain communities in Kenya and New Zealand), or that they have not developed websites (as seems to be the case in Belgium and Dubai).

Discussing the digital presence of Jain organizations in the different field sites, it became clear that while organizations in the United States and the United Kingdom tend to have a website, often supplemented by a Facebook page or group, the Jain Cultural Centre Antwerp (JCCA) in Antwerp does not have a website and has only a rather limited Facebook page<sup>21</sup> by way of digital presence (JCCA 2019). The reasons for having a website that were often mentioned by board members of Jain organizations I interviewed were to attract new members, and to make sure the community knows what is going on when. The first motivation is especially relevant in areas with lower population density, where new migrants would not necessarily find it easy to obtain information on coreligionists in the area. This reason seems to have been especially strong in the United States. Conversely, for organizations in the United Kingdom, the second reason seems to be the main driving force.

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<sup>21</sup> The public Facebook page of the Jain Cultural Centre Antwerp is maintained by one of the committee members and provides pictures and reports on past activities. Only rarely is it used to announce activities.

With such a wide variety of Jain organizations active and organizing events in a relatively small area in North London, there is (friendly) competition for participants.<sup>22</sup> In Antwerp, the high population density, together with a penchant for privacy derived from the diamond sector, and the limited number of Jain organizations<sup>23</sup>, has resulted in a very limited public digital presence. Several respondents indicated that a website would, in their eyes, only serve to attract people who were new to the area or to inform the local non-Jain community on their activities. However, as most new Jain arrivals in Belgium already have family or trade contacts there, they would be informed anyway.

### 3.4.2. Organizing and Affirming Diasporic Communities

Once a community organization has been established, WhatsApp groups (and, increasingly, custom-designed apps) become vitally important. Many Jain centers now conduct a large part of their daily management through different WhatsApp groups—a *pāṭhśālā* teachers' group, a parents' group, a steering committee group, a *bhajan* group, a *svādhyāy* group, a group for kitchen volunteers, and so on. The heightened degree of interactive communication this mode of organization facilitates not only enables the sharing of religious knowledge and practical information, but also emphasizes the existent ties between members of the group. S., a young woman involved in the *pāṭhśālā* classes at the Jain center of Atlanta, discusses the merits of the parents' WhatsApp group:

Parents feel involved more, they know what goes on, what their children do here. [ . . . ] That is what it is about: feeling you are a part of what goes on at the Jain center, even when you cannot be physically present. (S., Atlanta)

Diasporic organizations often seek to instill such a feeling of 'being a part' of a larger Jain community in their members and those visiting their websites. Different discourses of belonging and community are disseminated online.

Jain Diaspora is the JAINA initiative to connect all the Jain communities living in 36 countries outside of India and thereby drive greater unity and cohesiveness in the global Jain community. (JAINA 2018)

Dear JSOC Family, I hope you all have recovered from our Mahavir Jayanti celebrations! Let us carry forward this momentum with us and bring it to our regular bhavanas as well. (Newsletter of the Jain Samaj of Colorado (JSOC 2019)

Our mission is to create and bring together the community of Digamber Jains in USA and ultimately from the whole world. (IDJO 2018)

The excerpts above illustrate how three U.S.-based Jain organizations emphasize different levels of Jain community in their online communication. Again, the internet user is exposed to different competing narratives on Jainism—while the JAINA website tends to refer to the global Jain community, IDJO (International Digamber Jain Organization) seeks to fortify the *digambar* community, and the Jain Samaj of Colorado chooses a discourse indicating local unity and cohesion.

## 4. Conclusions

Different researchers have postulated the special relevance of digital media—and the affordances they provide—in the lives of migrants, and more specifically in the religious lives of migrants (Helland

<sup>22</sup> Whereas the population density around Harrow and Kingsbury is such that new arrivals will find it much easier to find out about the existence of the local Jain organizations by word of mouth, the right communication strategy will impact their choice from the cornucopia of organizations and activities.

<sup>23</sup> Apart from the Jain Cultural Centre Antwerp (JCCA), only one Jain organization is active in Antwerp—the Srimad Rajchandra Mission Centre Antwerp. This is a branch of the guru-led Srimad Rajchandra Mission Dharampur.

2007; Kumar 2012; Balaji 2018). Others have emphasized how digital media can be a place where diasporic interpretations of a specific religion may find a forum and gain in influence (Beyer 2007; Portes 2001). Both these claims were shown to be valid for the Jain diaspora. When investigating sources on Jainism on the Internet, it became clear that a disproportionate amount of the most easily findable websites is hosted outside India. These are not just websites like Wikipedia or academic institutions. A significant proportion of them is made by Jains in the diaspora. The 2.5%–6% of Jains that live outside India are directly responsible for a significant amount of the content that someone looking for general information on Jainism on the Internet, be they students or scholars, diasporic Jains, or Jains in India, is likely to find.

There are two reasons for this state of affairs. First, the Jains living in diaspora have become keen developers of digital content, as they have found that digital media offer ways to mitigate some of the challenges of practicing Jainism and (re)building Jain communities outside India. Second, the general linguistic and geographical bias inherent in search engines (which tend to index and rank English/North American material better) creates a situation in which any Google search on Jainism is likely to include content developed in the diaspora. This does not necessarily mean that less websites are developed in India, only that they are less likely to be found.

The analysis of the ethnographic data gathered over a period of four years confirms what the website and app corpora suggest—over the past two decades, digital media have gradually changed what it means to live ‘in diaspora’. It has become easier to maintain regular contact and share experiences with family members and friends in India and elsewhere. Different types of information have become more accessible, and new ways of finding information and learning are being developed. Even monks and nuns—or at least their teachings—are now no longer out of reach to Jains that have settled abroad. This does not mean all aspects of the migrant experience are traditionally seen as negative, such as loss of social networks and difficult access to information, which have now been mitigated. Many respondents indicated that they still missed the experience of religious actions—watching a monk give a *pravacan* online is not the same as attending such a *pravacan* at an *upāśray*, video-chatting with a sibling is a poor replacement for actually sitting down to have dinner with that sibling, using an app to read a *sutra* text does not quite have the same effect as spending time in a *bhandar* studying the same text. However, if the ideal scenario is not practically possible, because of geographical distance and/or a busy lifestyle, these digitally mediated opportunities can and do make a difference in the lives of many (in India as well as in the diaspora).

Although there are a lot of common threads, there are also differences in the way individuals make use of digital media in their socio-religious lives, and in the ways Jain diasporic organizations have appropriated digital media in their activities. Although personal preference and digital literacy play an important role, certain patterns of digital engagement seem to be linked to certain diaspora communities and can be attributed to differences in history and composition (including the internal diversity and population density).

This article presented a few of the areas in which digital media have been most instrumental in changing the Jain diasporic experience. It is by no means exhaustive. The effects of digital media on Jainism and Jains in the diaspora are uneven and multiple, meshed together with other dynamics of change at work in migrant communities or indeed part of a broader societal dynamic called (late) modernism. Some of these effects may also be felt in Jain communities in India. As new digital features and functionalities are developed, the impact of digital media on Jainism in the diaspora might well change accordingly. For now, we can conclude that, in addition to roots and routes, routers matter. Digital media have partly bridged the gap between India as the religious center of Jainism, and those Jains living elsewhere. By facilitating regular contact and access to information and resources, as well as by providing a forum for Jains to find each other and organize, they have been instrumental in transforming the Jain diaspora from a peripheral appendix to a more central active part of Jainism.

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