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# **Lost and Found, Centre and Periphery**

## **Narratives of the Jain Diasporic Experience Online**

The article *Lost and Found, Centre and Periphery* will investigate the contemporary Jain diasporic experience through an analysis of online narratives on ‘diaspora Jains’ and ‘diaspora Jainism’. Over the past two decades, digital media have become an important new arena to imagine, construct, and share the diasporic experience, both for members of the diasporic community and for Jains living in India.

This paper will elaborate on and compare different narratives on the Jain diasporic experience found online, identify recurring themes, and question where and why specific discourses on diaspora are propagated. The juxtaposition of ‘Indian’ and ‘diasporic’ narratives illustrates how digital media have brought the diasporic periphery in closer contact with the religious centre, and how this renewed connection can spark subtle negotiations and heated debates about what it means to be ‘in diaspora’.

Keywords: Jainism, diaspora, digital media, online discourses, migration, religion.

### **1. Introduction**

#### ***1.1 Jains and the Jain diaspora***

##### *From trade migration to an established religious diaspora*

Together with other South Asian groups, adherents of the religious tradition of Jainism<sup>i</sup> have been involved in overland and maritime trade networks spanning the Western part of the Indian Ocean world for centuries (Oonk 2007, 2013, 2015; Alpers 2013).

However, their patterns of mobility and settlement changed significantly in the 20th century under the influence of British colonial rule and subsequent decolonization processes. In the first half of the 20th century, many Jain families – particularly from the province of Gujarat – acted upon the desire of the British administration to reform

the economy in their colonies in East-Africa. These families set up business and ultimately settled in East-Africa (mainly in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda). Their once large communities declined rapidly in the turbulent years after the independence of the new African nations, with many families making use of their British passports and moving to the UK. The easing of restrictions on migration to the US in the late 1960s<sup>ii</sup> also started a flow of migration of South Asians to North-America.

The historical link between the Jains and the diamond sector was another factor which shaped mobility patterns, accounting for the establishment of smaller Jain communities in places like Japan and Antwerp (Belgium) from the middle of the 20th century onward. Today, Jain communities are found in North-America (estimated at 150.000) , the UK (estimated at 30.000), Belgium (estimated at 2000), East-Africa, Japan, Dubai, ...<sup>iii</sup> Although these communities are interconnected by business and family connections as well as cultural and religious collaborations, such as fundraising for the establishment of Jain centres and temples and co-organizing large events, they differ from each other in public visibility, organizational style, and socio-religious practices due to specific demographic makeup, history, and political and societal context. Estimates made by researchers and data obtained from Jain organizations suggest that between 250.000 and 300.000 Jains live outside India, in the diaspora. This means that the diaspora represents less than 6% of Jains.

Notably, the Indian peninsula not only remains the home of the vast majority of Jains, but is also central to Jain cosmology, mythology, and history. It is the place where all major Jain places of pilgrimage and the historical temples are, and – perhaps most importantly – it is the home of Jain ascetics. As communities are established away from this traditional religious heartland, with a different demographic make-up, and uneven

access to religious resources, this is expected to have an impact on how Jainism is experienced and practiced.

Research into religious diasporas (e.g. Hinnels, 2005 (Zoroastrian diaspora); Vertovec, 1999, 2000, 2004; Baumann, 1995, 1998 (Hindu diaspora)) has mollified the long-held assumption that religion after migration would dilute to the point of disappearing or lose all capacity for dynamism and evolution and 'freeze' into its pre-migration form. Instead, a closer look at religion in migrant communities may reveal them to be frontier zones where, through intense and often creative processes of interaction and negotiation, change and transformation take place (e.g. Smart, 1987; Beyer, 2007). These processes and the vast range of subtly or even radically different outcomes results they produce are termed diasporic or diaspora religion. Such processes of negotiation and change have been going on in the Jain diaspora for decades. Although these processes are non-teleological and geographically uneven, a few aspects commonly attributed to diasporic Jainism today are the simplification of rituals, a focus on philosophical and ethical rather than ritual aspects, a blurring of sectarian boundaries (allowing individuals to pick and mix to a certain extent), and new types of spiritual teachers and leadership.

It is useful to consider how individuals can belong to different diasporas: most of the Jains I spoke to are also part of the Indian diaspora. Some of them may be part of the Gujarati diaspora. Different formations of diaspora may be relevant to people at specific times or in distinct areas of their lives. The choice to write about the Jain diaspora without reference to any specific region within India is informed by my own interest in religious development in the context of migration. However, as the material presented below will illustrate, it is not possible to speak of people's religious praxis or spiritual experiences without encountering larger themes surrounding migration, such as

the process and challenges of putting down roots in a new place, dealing with pre-migration memories and memory-loss, the costs and benefits of maintaining a transnational network, etc.

### *Jainism's digital diaspora*

Since the very beginnings of the Internet researchers and philosophers have speculated and analysed regarding the effect of the Internet on human life and society. Moving beyond extremes of either the global community or end of all community, more recent research looks at what different digital media are good for and what they allow users to do. A number of these functions of digital media seem to be especially impactful to migrants (Nedelcu, 2012; Scheifinger, 2008, 242; Brinkerhoff, 2009, 2012; Helland, 2007; Balaji, 2018, xix). First, access to information has become easier. Whereas two decades ago, those seeking to study aspects of Jain doctrine or philosophy had to import books from India, or travel there to seek out learned monks, today a lot of materials are freely available online. Websites like JAIN-eLibrary provide a wealth of materials to study of Jainism, Indian Jain media-outlets such as ParasTV are now available online or through a custom app, and an increasing number of ascetics have websites and/or apps through which their *pravacans* (sermons) can be watched globally and asynchronously. Second, digital media also help likeminded people find each other. For instance, a family new to an area can Google the details of the local Jain centre. In addition to this initial contact, the potential for intense communication (e.g. through WhatsApp) can help maintain and build relationships and even communities with a large offline component (such as local Jain centres (*saṅghs*)). In the same way, digital media allow people who have no offline contact to come together and participate in a shared project (chat groups, digitally mediated reading groups (*satsaṅgs*), Facebook groups like Jain Study group) (Vekemans 2019b). Lastly, some websites and apps

facilitate religious practice, allowing the user to perform rituals in front of a virtual shrine (Vekemans & Vandeveld, 2018). Together, these affordances seem to have given Jains more opportunities than ever before to engage with Jainism and interact with each other, regardless of their geographical location.

As a religious tradition whose members are relatively mobile, display high literacy and wealth, are successful in a number of transnational lines of business, Jainism unsurprisingly found its way onto the Internet relatively early. From the mid-1990s onwards, the number of websites devoted to Jainism grew exponentially. Interestingly this first stage seldom saw the ‘clergy’ (i.e. monks and nuns) or even the temple committees take to the online stage. It was very often individuals and newer organizations, especially in developing diasporic locations, that worked hard to be findable and provide Jainism-related content online. Later, established organizations in India – including those centred around ascetics - also started to become more visible online. Many non-affiliated websites followed. Interestingly, Indian websites often implicitly deem or explicitly cite Jains overseas as one of their main target audiences.

## ***1.2 Research setup and questions***

*In the beginning, I felt truly lost... However... It got better. I got better at being myself in a new place, I got better at finding what I needed. I found others, put down roots, and, over time, a lot of the things I missed became available to me here too.*

*(N. came to the US as a student in the 1970s, 2015)*

The social and religious implications of migration have been discussed within Jain families and Jain organisations for decades if not centuries. More recently, the increased use of digital media has had an important impact on such discussions: They not only allow for closer contact between Jains in different locations, but also enable more

information-sharing, and present overt or subtle opinions and interpretations of the diasporic condition.

“Lost and Found, Centre and Periphery” explores how the diasporic experience and its religious implications are constantly being contested and negotiated, both implicitly and explicitly, offline as well as online. For this, it draws on two sets of data. First, a set of narratives on the Jain diaspora found on a selection of digital media (websites and mobile applications), and second, opinions expressed on these same topics in interviews conducted with Jains in India, the US, the UK, and Belgium.

By thus juxtaposing online and offline, Indian and diasporic interpretations of Jains and Jainism in diaspora, this article wishes to engage with the following questions: (1) What interpretations of the diasporic experience are prevalent offline and online? (2) What differences can be perceived between online discourses on diaspora on websites hosted in India and on those hosted in the diaspora? (3) What impact can online narratives have on real live experience?

## **2. Materials: online and offline narratives**

The data upon which this article is based are drawn from a larger dataset gathered over the past six years (2013-2019) for the *Digital religion in a transnational context* project<sup>iv</sup>. This research project combined the structural and discourse analysis of a corpus of websites and apps<sup>v</sup> with ethnographic fieldwork – consisting of participant observation, focus groups, and individual interviews – with Jains living in the UK, the US, Belgium, and India. The aim was to discover what the impact of digital media has been on their socio-religious praxis and diasporic experience (Vekemans 2019c). In addition to the information I gathered about the use of digital media in the diaspora, the interviews I conducted revealed vastly different accounts of diaspora, and about the

impact of migration and diaspora on Jain religious practice and development. Some of these narratives were commonly reflected online, whilst others were not.

### ***2.1 Ethnographic materials***

The fieldwork I performed in Belgium, the US, the UK, and India provides much of the material that informs this article. Excerpts from the 75+ interviews and focus groups I conducted between 2014 and 2019 are used throughout this piece to illustrate different interpretations and aspects of the diasporic experience. Respondents for these interviews were initially contacted through community organizations, online forums, and through snow-ball sampling. They were then selected to include a variety of profiles, ages, regional backgrounds, migration histories, levels of activity in diasporic organizations, etc. To protect privacy, respondents have all been anonymized by default.

### ***2.2 Websites and mobile applications***

#### *Corpus compilation*

The corpus of more than 400 websites used for the research presented here was compiled in 2017-2018 by listing the top results in a web browser after a query using the simple search term ‘Jain’ and ‘Jainism’ (in English, Hindi, and Gujarati), and subsequently crawling those sites for hyperlinks to other sites not yet listed. Mobile application collection followed a similar strategy to compile a corpus of 60 applications for iOS and Android operating systems. Although arguably rudimentary, by lack of a large-scale survey of digital media use in the Jain community this is the most straightforward method to acquire an understanding of the digital resources available. What further justifies this method is a majority of respondents confirming they had visited or at least knew of the key websites and apps in the corpus, and admitting to using browsers like Google to find information.



### *Search engine bias*

One immediately salient element in the website corpus is that many of the websites most findable through search engines and most linked to by other websites are being developed and maintained outside India, mainly in North America and Europe.

Websites from India only made up 37% of the corpus compiled in 2017-2018. The biggest portion of websites (42%) is hosted and maintained from North America.

Another 12% was hosted and maintained from the UK. 84% of websites were exclusively in English.

The geographical and linguistic distribution of websites discussed above is somewhat counter-intuitive. First, taking into account that around 95% of Jains live in India, Indian websites are relatively underrepresented. This apparent anomaly can be partly explained by digital media's greater relevance for individual migrants and migrant and diaspora communities: Jains living in diaspora have become keen developers of digital content, as they have found digital media offer ways to mitigate some of the challenges of practicing Jainism and (re)building Jain communities outside India. Another important factor accounting for the large proportion of non-Indian websites in the corpus is the general linguistic and geographical bias inherent in search engines (which tend to index English/North American material more accurately and rank it higher). This creates a situation in which any Google search on Jainism is more likely to include content developed in the diaspora in the top results (Halavais, 2009; Vaughan & Thelwall, 2004; Vekemans, 2019a). 71% of these diasporic websites are websites of Jain organizations (typically local Jain centres), while portal websites present the second largest category with 12%.

This does not necessarily mean fewer websites are developed in India. Instead, they are less likely to be found and linked to. Interestingly, the mobile applications developed to address different (perceived) needs among Jains (Vekemans 2019d), do

not seem subject to the same extent of search engine bias, possible because of lower language dependency (i.e. more visual and intuitive materials).

### **3. Method: Analysing Jain diasporic narratives**

#### ***3.1 Identifying themes in diasporic narratives***

##### *Nostalgia versus/and connection*

Especially in early definitions of diaspora, myths of homeland and a nostalgic yearning to return there were considered central to the diasporic experience (Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1991; Brah, 1996; Boym, 2001). Although memory remains important in how migration and diaspora are experienced (Stock, 2013; also evidenced by the growing field of Memory Studies, e.g. Creet & Kitzmann, 2011; Glynn & Kleist, 2012), a new wave of diaspora research focussing of processes of globalization, modernity, and their concomitant increased mobility has shifted the emphasis to (the potential of) transnational connectedness, rather than inevitable disconnection and loss, offering a new perspective on the figure of the migrant. The migrant can now be perceived not as disconnected from his or her homeland and an outsider in his or her new environment, but rather as a transnationally connected individual whose mobility translates into complex and highly individual networks of multiple belongings rather than exclusion and loneliness (Diminescu, 2008). Especially respondents whose families had migrated a long time ago, and those with complex migration histories (typically Jains in the UK with a family history in East-Africa) appeared less attached to or nostalgic towards India as their homeland.

*Going back to India? No. We've been on holiday once or twice, but it does not feel like my home. It's fine for a visit, but I couldn't live there now. We are British.*

*Jain, but British Jain. British East-African Jain I should say to be entirely correct.*

*[laughs] There is no real attachment to India. Jainism may originate in India, but it has now also rooted elsewhere. (D. moved to the UK from Kenya in the late 1960s. 2017)*

In practice, nostalgia and connection are not mutually exclusive. Intricate combinations of nostalgia and loss on the one hand, and a highly connected transnational social and family network on the other are part and parcel of the lived experiences of most diasporians. They can be both lost and found.

#### *Defining viable sources of religious knowledge*

As Jainism's traditional heartland, South Asia is the birthplace of all canonical Jain scriptures and religious figures, home to its historical temples (*derāsars*) and shrines, and dwelling place of its monastic community of monks and nuns. This religious centrality could arguably strengthen any attachment to or nostalgia for (a real or mythical) homeland. Most of my respondents in the diaspora agreed that a lack of access to scriptures and dedicated temple spaces had been a problem in the past.

However, most felt these problems had by now been at least partly alleviated as temples and centres had been built, local Jain libraries had been compiled, and many materials were now freely available online.

Although lack of contact with Jain ascetics was still keenly felt by many, respondents often indicated that the potential for contact with Jain ascetics without travelling to India had increased. Here again, digital media play a role. Speeches (*pravacans*) by monks and nuns are increasingly made available online (recorded or even live-streamed), and some monks and nuns can now be contacted through social media or contact forms on websites. Additionally, the increased presence in the diaspora of former monks and nuns, of those who choose to disregard the traditional ban on mechanized travel, and of intermediate ascetic ranks and gurus not bound by such a ban

has been instrumental in organizing Jain communities by setting up organizations like JAINA (North America) and SCVP school (UK). These various religious figures have contributed to the affirmation of the diaspora as a more integral part of the Jain world (Flügel, 2012, 978; Long, 2009, 79-80).<sup>vi</sup> As members of the local community undertake deeper study of (aspects of) the Jain tradition, they become a local source of information for diasporic communities (Vekemans 2019b).

*There is a lot of material online, and some people here in the community are knowledgeable. Still, I don't know. I feel that sources from India are somehow better? They are often produced by monks, or at least under their guidance. If you're going to follow a religion, you need to make sure you do so correctly, especially for the children. We also feel it is important that they go home [to India] frequently. It is there that they can learn the most.*

*(R., stay-at-home mother who moved to Belgium from Rajasthan in 2010. 2017)*

Even whilst acknowledging the increased availability of local and online sources, respondents like R. did have a keen sense of nostalgia towards India as their spiritual homeland, often phrased as 'missing something'. To counteract this, respondents fill bookshelves with books imported from India and/or travel to India regularly, specifically allocating time for spiritual pursuits, contact and learning (Vekemans 2019b).

Others display less attachment to India as Jainism's religious centre. In the excerpt above, D. seems convinced that being Jain in the UK does not require input or regular contact with India. Other respondents went one step further, explaining how the diasporic condition had prompted changes in local Jain practice. Especially in North-America and the UK, respondents tended to acknowledge India as an important religious centre of Jainism, but at the same time stressed that religious learning and innovative practice were available in their communities too. Initiatives have been

launched to develop a Jainism that is tailored to a non-Indian environment, often stressing applied ethics (in charity work, diet, and life-choices), and/or critical study, rather than ritual praxis. These innovations are deemed especially important to keep the coming generations on board.

*Things like this [a discussion group on Jain ethics and veganism] are only possible here. We have this [...] critical distance from the ritual habits built up in Jain communities in India, where everything has happened in a certain way for generations, and nobody questions it. That, and this intense contact with other ways of life and other modes of religion here in the US have prompted me – and others – to learn, think and do more with what [i.e. the religious tradition] we have, not less (A., university student who moved to the US from Gujarat when he was 14. 2015).*

As contact between Jains in India and Jains in the diaspora has increased through the growing availability of international travel and communication technologies, Jains in India also have some idea of how Jains elsewhere live. The interpretation of the diasporic experience held by my respondents in India tended to emphasize the centrality of India in Jainism, and therefore echoes the nostalgic rather than the transnational approach. Some respondents did recognize the potential for dynamic change in diaspora communities, but then disapproved of the changes made. Others just deplored the lack of information and knowledge these Jains must undoubtedly have (due to difficult access to scripture, ascetics, *derāsars*, etc.). P., who has worked in the pilgrimage-centre of Palitana for decades, phrased it as follows:

*Well, the Americans... What to say about the Americans? They live the ideal life. Many of them are so successful. However, spiritually, they fall behind. They lack knowledge, I mean access to the right teachings. So they end up focussing on mundane aspects of our [Jain] tradition. Without proper guidance, they feel they have to compromise, and in compromising, they lose.*

*(P., volunteer at a Jain dharamshala in India. 2017, translation from Hindi by the author)*

A more positive assessment was generally maintained regarding the potential political power to be harnessed by getting overseas Jains involved in political campaigning<sup>vii</sup> and local charities.

### ***3.2 Bi-axial model for analysing diasporic narratives***

[Figure 1 here]

[Table 1 here]

To help analyse the narratives derived from the selected websites, apps, and interviews, I set out these aspects on two axes (cf. figure 1): the first one visualizes where religious knowledge is located, and where potential religious innovation can occur. This is the centre-periphery vs. multi-centre axis. The second one visualizes the expected outcome for diasporic Jainism vis-à-vis Jainism in India. This axis has divergence as one pole, and convergence at the other. This creates four prototypical narratives: Interpretations of diaspora that place India at the centre of Jainism and Jain religious development can either propose that the diasporic periphery can (re)approximate the Indian centre, through increased contact and easy access to information and resources, or they can assume that the diasporic periphery will inevitably drift further and further away as time passes. Interpretations that take a multi-centre view and acknowledge that valid religious development is possible in diaspora can either propose that, through mutual exchange, a syncretic form of Jainism may be developed consisting of a combination of best practices developed in different places, or they can assume that different but essentially qualitatively equal versions of Jainism will exist separately.

#### **4. Results: Perspectives on Jainism and Jain diaspora online**

Because of the rapid development of digital media of and about Jainism, any online query – be it through Google search or an app store - today confronts the Internet user with a variety of discourses Jainism, and on the situation of the Jain diaspora and Jain migrants. Of course, the type of information one finds, and thus the narratives one encounters, are largely determined by which sites are most findable (which is subject to search engine bias, as discussed above). To assess the potential impact of these implicit and explicit narratives on diaspora and religious development disseminated online, a number of the most findable websites and mobile applications were selected for analysis, using the aforementioned axes. The subchapters below will provide an overview of the most prevalent discourses relating to diaspora on websites hosted by diasporic individuals or organizations, and on websites and in app-descriptions produced by individuals and organizations in India.

##### ***4.1 Diaspora discourse on diasporic websites***

Although elements of all four quadrants of the graph were present in the diasporic experience narratives drawn from my off-line interviews, references to diaspora on websites produced and maintained in diasporic communities themselves tend to inhabit mainly the multi-centred half of the plot, or, occasionally, the centre-periphery/convergence quadrant.

##### ***A multi-centre perspective for a positive and strong diaspora***

Unsurprisingly, the majority of individuals and organizations tend towards a multi-centre view of Jainism, in which religious learning and innovation can also occur in diasporic communities. Indeed, it is often stated, online as well as offline, that

innovation and adaptation are not only possible but necessary, and do not automatically equate to losing authenticity or compromising Jainism's core values.

One organization strongly profiling itself as an alternative religious 'centre' is the federation for Jain Associations In North America (JAINA). The reasons for this are that, unlike elsewhere, JAINA in the US has developed as an umbrella organization setting out policy guidelines and serving as spokesperson for the majority of Jain organizations in North America, and perhaps the fact that the North American Jain communities make up the largest part of the diaspora. On their elaborate website the following reference includes a strong claim to religious authenticity 'preserving core values', combined with the necessity of some adaptation. Just like on many other diasporic websites, the key message seems to be that it is possible to be simultaneously authentic and well-adapted.

By working closely together for the common good and staying connected with our Indian roots, and (more recently) leveraging state-of-the-art communication and social media tools, each diaspora Jain community has preserved the core Jain values quite well while prospering, but also simultaneously adapted to the socio-political constraints unique to the nations Jains are settled in.<sup>viii</sup>

Both online and offline, the development of new perspectives on Jainism and of modern ways of applying Jain ethics in day-to-day life are seen as ways to keep the diasporic community active and thriving for subsequent generations.

The outcomes of such processes of adaptation and innovations are new, local types of Jain practice that may in turn influence Jainism in other places. When it comes to expectations regarding the position of these new local Jain ideas versus traditional Indian Jainism, opinions are divided, and often both potential divergence and potential convergence are hinted at on the same website. For example, the use of the words unity



and cohesion in the Jain Diaspora committee mission statement read as a prospect of convergence, at least between different diasporic communities.

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.<sup>ix</sup>

However, this expectation of convergence is subverted to some extent in other sections of the website. A strong assertion of difference and self-assertion is found in the by-laws and constitution of JAINA, which warns Jains new to North America that their ‘non-sectarian’ approach may not be what they are used to:

Caution: Jains in North America strive for unity among the various sects (Shvetambar, Digambar, Sthanakvasi, etc.). Please bring your best practices from India and do not create sectarianism. Know that Jain traditions are rich and varied, and conducted in different languages with different idol images. Only by embracing these will you be practicing true Non-Absolutism (Anekantvad – multifacetedness). We want North American Jains now and in the future to practice and maintain their respective traditions and live as unified Jains practicing JWOL [Jain Way of Life].<sup>x</sup>

This claim clearly goes against centre-periphery notions of diaspora, and presupposes a multi-centre Jain community, in which innovation and rejuvenation may well come from outside India. However, it is difficult to gauge whether JAINA assumes future convergence. A majority of interview respondents held that North America, or indeed ‘the Western world’ might just need a different style of Jainism and predicted a further divergence. Others saw possibilities for convergence, if best practices from the diaspora would, in turn, influence Jain praxis in India.

### *Convergence through access: Diaspora perspective*

There are many diasporic websites that make no overt claims about the development of local Jain ideas and perspectives, but instead focus on making materials from India available to the diasporic public. India is recognized as the main (or only) centre from which Jain religious learning emanates, but more authentic religious practice for diasporic Jains can be facilitated by providing access to information and materials. An example of such a difficult to place website is one of the oldest websites dedicated to Jainism: Jainworld.com. The website itself only gives a very brief mission statement ‘Since 1996, Jainworld has been the most comprehensive and popular website on Jainism.<sup>xi</sup>’ In an interview conducted in Atlanta in 2015 the founder of the website elaborated upon the intended audience and use of the materials on the website.

Because there are many Jains that move around, they have no access to Jain literature. So we have to make everything available to them, so that they can at least teach their children. They can show this is what... and they themselves can use it. So it is for all levels. (Vinodbhai, Founder of Jainworld.org, Atlanta)

On the UK-based website Jainpedia.org , we find a similar aim.

In an increasingly secular Western society, many younger Jains in the UK know little about their ancestors’ backgrounds and beliefs. Presenting striking elements of the Jain heritage in a digital resource along with rich contextual material will encourage them to find out more about this ancient religion and the civilisation in which it arose.<sup>xii</sup>

These aims are closer to the pervasive discourse on Indian websites and apps that the growth and practice of Jainism in the diaspora is hindered by a lack of access to resources, but that this can be rectified to some extent by making resources more widely available.

#### ***4.2 Reference to diaspora on websites and apps produced in India***

In interviews, community leaders in India tended to depict India as the authentic centre for religious learning and innovation in Jainism. Most sympathized with the difficulties Jains outside India must face in practicing their religion. Some thought their plight could be alleviated by reaching out and providing guidance and materials, thus leading to (some degree of) convergence. Others did not think true Jain practice would ever be possible overseas and expected a scenario of divergence in which, over multiple generations, Jainism in the diaspora would gradually disappear. Although some respondents did acknowledge the existence of independently developed ideas and practices in the diaspora, they strongly doubted that this would lead to a convergence, with those innovations being taken over in India.

#### *Convergence through access: Indian perspective*

Whereas a centre-periphery model with the expectation of eventual convergence was not very common and seldom very explicitly stated on diasporic websites, such a model is the norm for websites and mobile applications managed from India that refer to the diaspora. Using a global medium prompts developers to think globally and include Jains outside India in their target audience. For example, the short description of the Jainism Simplified application reads: ‘Jainism Simplified is a one stop spiritual and general content source for Jains across the Globe.’<sup>xiii</sup>

Moreover, the assumption that they need these tools more than most Jains in India leads developers’ mission statements to explicitly include the provision of the resources, information, guidance, or tools to Jains overseas, as is illustrated by the excerpt from the website Jainsite below.

Jainsite was started in 2006 by the inspiration of Muni Shree Bhagyachandra Vijayji Maharaj Saheb. Jainsite was first started as a monthly magazine called

“Jainism for Jivan Vikaas” where the articles were published every month in Hindi and English. These magazines were then sold to readers across India. Since couriering these magazines to readers in the US was not feasible, in 2008 Jainsite started a website so that Jains all over the world can access the information published here daily by which people are made aware of the happenings within the community.<sup>xiv</sup>

As these websites and apps tend to see Jains living outside India as a potential target audience and market, they logically present at least some degree of convergence as an option. However, to achieve this, access to correct, reliable information is key, and this is exactly what many of the sites and apps in this category claim to offer, as is hinted at in the excerpt from JainTeerth.com below.

JainTeerth.com is a unique portal to highlight and popularize Jain Teerth Kshetras worldwide. It not only gives the right information to Jain community spread all over the world about Jain Teerth kshetras, but also helps them to improve their knowledge about Jain Teerth kshetras and great historical persons.<sup>xv</sup>

## **5. Discussion: why online discourses on diaspora matter**

### ***5.1 Exposure***

Excerpts of interviews about the Jain diasporic experience throughout this article have illustrated how this experience varies from person to person. Not only did respondents display different levels of nostalgia towards India as an actual homeland, they also held different opinions about India’s status as spiritual heartland and religious epicentre.

With very little exception, the Jains I talked to – both in India and in various places in the diaspora – at least occasionally used digital media to find information on or engage with Jainism. The preceding sections demonstrated that digital media not only offer resources or facilitate contact, but also put forward implicit and explicit interpretations of the diasporic experience, the diasporic community and their social, cultural, and

religious needs, in addition to Jain religious development in general. In this way, digital media potentially influence the experience and opinions of the increasing number of Jains in diaspora and in India. As the vast majority of respondents confirmed that their first strategy when looking for information online is using a general search engine, the discourses on diaspora and religious development that are most findable through these search engines arguably have the most impact.

The assertive multi-centre perspective as illustrated above by excerpts from the JAINA website is very visible in the category diasporic websites (which, as we saw, are generally listed highly in search results). For apps, which tend to focus less on community building and representation, and more on addressing single practical needs, and on websites hosted in India, we find that the access for convergence perspective is most prominent. This leads to the question whose voices are (over)represented here, and why.

### ***5.2 Loud voices and quiet whispers***

The narratives online are almost invariably positive accounts of Jainism and its future in the diaspora. Whereas respondents felt they could share doubts and more negative prospects and experiences in interviews, these narratives seldom appear online. This makes sense when we look at the type of websites in the corpus.

Organizations in the diaspora have very little reason to exist if they expect to become defunct within a generation because of an envisioned inevitable decline of Jainism in communities outside India. Even when there is a fear that this might be a plausible scenario, good PR teaches that a positive, empowering story which allows room for innovation and experiment is more likely to attract people than a negative tale of decline and religious dilution. JAINA-affiliated North-American websites (and their other media-channels) offer the most assertive of these narratives, but different

organizations in the UK have been attempting to build a shared narrative on Jainism in Great Britain too.<sup>xvi</sup>

For Indian websites and mobile applications that want to emphasise their global appeal, good PR points in a similar direction. It would be illogical to put forth narratives wherein the diaspora – often an important target audience - is completely lost beyond chance of convergence. However, for sites and apps that produce their content in India, it seems logical to assert India as the source of reliable religious resources and information.

### ***5.3 Conclusion: The stakes of digital diaspora***

This article has shown how opinions and experiences of diaspora differ and can be contentious. The place and potential of the diaspora vis-à-vis the main Jain community in India is subject to negotiation and discussion. For an increasing number of Jains, especially the younger, Internet-savvy generations, digital media is both a source of information and inspiration, and the theatre in which such creative negotiations take place (Brinkerhoff 2012). However, due to the active engagement of diaspora organizations and individuals with web development, as well as search engine bias, different voices resound at different volumes. A disproportionate number of easily findable websites are developed and maintained by individuals and organizations in the diaspora. These tend to propagate a specific positive, multi-centrist view of diaspora emphasizing vigour, connectivity, and the potential for religious innovation. The prevalence of such interpretations online may alter digital media users' (future) diasporic experiences and opinions on diaspora. On a collective level, this may give further impetus to a strong project of global Jainism, in which diaspora communities can play a role as alternative centre for Jain philosophy and innovation. Reflecting upon the interviews I conducted with young people actively involved with Jain organizations

in the US, I found that the assertive stance taken by JAINA has been assimilated by many. Through the Internet these new interpretations of Jainism developed in North-America can then, theoretically, be imported to India. However, this exchange is not a given. Indeed, some researchers have concluded that diasporic religious developments are unlikely to have a direct influence on the religious heartlands (Beyer 2007).

Naturally, this digital findability and visibility of diasporic interpretations of Jainism do not necessarily imply societal influence and religious authority in India. However, they do indicate that the potential for such influence has grown because of digital media.

This potential impact of diasporic interpretations of Jainism in India requires more elaborate research in India and deserves to be looked at in more detail, especially as the political power of the diaspora has been confirmed by their active engagement – using digital media – in advocacy for a number of high-profile political/legal campaigns in India.

All of these facets make it abundantly clear that narratives found on digital media are growing increasingly important to how media users within and outside of India conceptualise diaspora. This process may in time alter the balance between Jainism's traditional religious heartland and its diasporic periphery.

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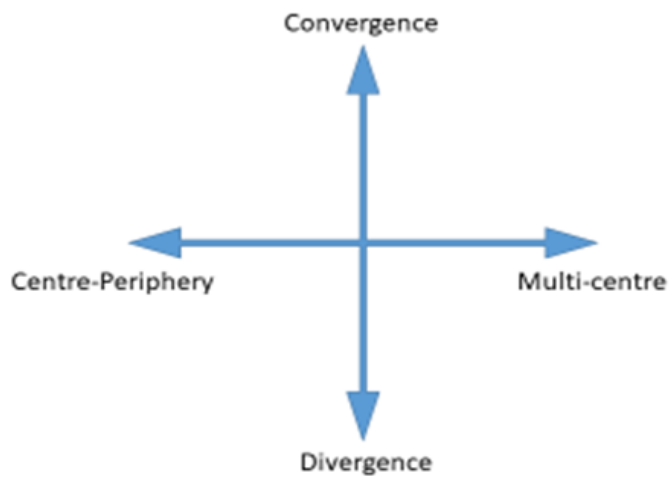
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Table 2. Prototypical narratives at the four corners of the graph

<b>Position of the diaspora</b>	<b>Future expectations</b>	<b>Prototypical stance</b>
Centre-Periphery	Divergence	The diaspora as lost or frozen. In a few generations, total assimilation with non-Jain majority culture is inevitable, no valid new interpretations of Jainism and Jain values will surface.
Multi-centre	Divergence	The diaspora as a dynamic and innovative space where a fundamentally different form of Jainism is being developed, that will gradually move it further and further from Jainism as practiced in India.
Centre-Periphery	Convergence	The diaspora can be brought closer to the centre, if they are provided with the right tools, information, and guidance from the centre.
Multi-centre	Convergence	The diaspora as a dynamic and innovative space, where new ideas and perspectives on Jainism are being developed that can in turn be adopted in India.

Figure 1: bi-axial model for analysis of diasporic narratives



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<sup>i</sup> For an thorough introduction to Jainism, see Dundas 2002 or Long 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> More specifically, it was the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, enacted June 30, 1968 that made it easier for South Asians to come to the US.

<sup>iii</sup> Estimates of the number of Jains in North America vary from 45.000+ (Dundas 2002, 271), over 50.000 (Jain 1998, 295) and 60.000 (Kumar 1996, 103-112), to 150.000 (Jain 2011, 99). Some respondents estimated the numbers to be significantly higher still. Estimates of the number of Jains in the UK range from 25-30.000 (Dundas 2002, 271) to 50.000 (Jain 2011, 96). As most of my UK respondents thought 30.000 was correct, I will assume P.C. Jain's figure to be unrealistically high.

<sup>iv</sup> The research-project 'Digital religion in a transnational context: Representing and practicing Jainism in diasporic communities' was made possible by a grant from the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). It was coordinated and supervised by Prof. Dr. Eva De Clercq at University of Ghent, Belgium.

<sup>v</sup> It analyses excerpts of the website-corpus as it was gathered in 2017/2018, and app-descriptions of the mobile application corpus as gathered in 2018/2019<sup>v</sup>

<sup>vi</sup> However, the ascetic presence in the Jain diaspora is still limited and exceptional in nature. The proposal to create a more embedded, local, ascetic order, which – although keeping to the rules that govern Jain ascetic life as much as possible – adapts to Western customs and situations has been launched by London-based Natubhai Shah under the working title Western order of Jainism (1996, 23-33).

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- <sup>vii</sup> Examples of issues around which such campaigns were launched are Jain minority status, the legalization of ritual fasting unto death (*sallekhanā*), and most recently the protection of the pilgrimage centre at *Śikharjī*.
- <sup>viii</sup> JAINA (N.N.). ‘Diaspora Committee Mission Statement.’  
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- <sup>xi</sup> Jainworld (N.N.) ‘Home.’ <https://jainworld.com/> (accessed October 15<sup>th</sup> 2019)
- <sup>xii</sup> JAINpedia is a project launched by the Institute of Jainology (IoJ). The Institute of Jainology was registered as a charitable trust in the UK in 1986, informed by a growing need to represent the Jain community in international, national, and local politics and society. Since its inception, it has been active in interfaith and political lobbying, as well as attempting to make Jainism more known and visible within the larger community. Although IoJ maintains an office in India, where it has, for example, supported the efforts to obtain minority status for Jains, most of their work is international or UK-based.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Rishabh & Jalpa Parekh. 2013. Jainism Simplified. Google Play, vers. 1.0.0.  
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.rishabh.jainism> (accessed September 10<sup>th</sup> 2019).
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- <sup>xv</sup> Jainteerth (N.N.) ‘About us.’ <http://jainteerth.com/about-jainteerth/> (accessed October 15<sup>th</sup> 2019)
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