



# **(PREPRINT) Jain Life Reimagined: An Examination of Jain Practice and Discourse during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

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**ABSTRACT** This article analyzes the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religious practices and the public discourse of Jains in the U.S.A. and India. On the institutional level, I show how Jain organizations made extensive efforts to connect digitally with their community members when collective, in-person celebrations and temple visits were either reduced in number, limited in capacity, or cancelled because of the pandemic. Given the new importance of Jain online platforms, I address their potential role in both blurring sectarian boundaries and creating authentic sacred spaces. On the individual level, I examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the everyday religious practices of Jains. I conducted eight semi-structured interviews over Zoom between November 2020 and January 2021. I argue that while there is a great diversity of individual Jain responses, a common feature appears to be a significant increase of Jains participating in scholarly religious activities. In terms of the ways in which Jains talk, write, and reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic, I theorize that the Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by environmental concerns and by the processes of scientization and universalization. Building on the work of Knut Aukland (2016) that examines the role of science in contemporary Jain discussions, I define scientization as the ongoing process where Jains underline the convergence of their religion with modern science. With the term universalization, I refer to the noticeable trend among Jains to argue for the need to teach Jainism beyond the Jain community by showing its contemporary relevance and applicability to overcome global problems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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**KEYWORDS** Jainism, scholarly religious activities, environmentalism, scientization, COVID-19 pandemic, universalization

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is in many respects the first global event in human history. Since January 2020, when the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern, the pandemic has in some way or other affected almost everybody. Branko Milanovic, an expert of socio-economic inequality, put it thus: “If, in a couple of years—when hopefully it is over and we are alive—we meet friends from any corner of the world, we shall all have the same stories to share: fear, tedium, isolation, lost jobs and wages, lockdowns, government restrictions and face masks. No other event [in human history] comes close.”<sup>1</sup> While the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on societies have yet to come into full focus, it is clearly a historic event. As such, it is an important moment to document. Till date, there are only a handful of studies that examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Jain religious tradition.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is to contribute to this emerging and important field of research by analyzing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religious practices and the public discourse of Jains in the U.S.A. and India. [2]

In part I, I focus on Jain practice. On the institutional level, I analyze the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Jain religious organizations in the U.S.A. I show how Jain temples and centers made extensive efforts to connect digitally with their community members when collective, in-person celebrations and temple visits were either reduced in number, limited in capacity, or cancelled because of the pandemic. I further argue that the Jain online religious platforms can blur sectarian boundaries and create authentic but temporary sacred spaces. On the individual level, I examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the everyday religious practices of Jains. To map out the personal experiences of Jains of the pandemic, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews over Zoom between November 2020 and January 2021. I argue that while there is a great diversity of individual Jain responses, a common feature appears to be a significant increase of Jains participating in scholarly religious activities. In part II, I conduct a discourse analysis to examine the ways in which Jains talk, write, and reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic. I theorize that the Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by environmental concerns and by the processes of scientization and universalization. Building on the work of Knut Aukland (2016) that examines the role of science in contemporary Jain discussions, I define scientization as the ongoing process where Jains underline the convergence of their religion with modern science. With the term universalization, I refer to the noticeable trend among Jains to argue for the need to teach Jainism beyond the Jain community by showing its contemporary relevance and applicability to overcome global problems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. [3]

1 I wish to thank Alexander Agadjanian and Konrad Siekierski for their invaluable editorial input and their constructive feedback and suggestions.

Cf. “The First Global Event in the History of Humankind” by Branko Milanovic for *Social Europe* on 7 December 2020. Last accessed July 31, 2021. <https://socialeurope.eu/the-first-global-event-in-the-history-of-humankind>.

2 See Bothra (2020); Maes (2020b); Vekemans (2021); and Prajñā (2021). The Jain religious tradition (Jainism) originated in North India about 2500 years ago. It has a distinctive community of both male and female ascetics and a supporting community of laypeople, also referred to as householders. While fully ordained Jain ascetics live only in India, Jain householders live in every part of the world.

## Part I: Jain Practice and the COVID-19 Pandemic

### Institutional Responses

In the U.S.A., the federal government, under both the presidency of Donald Trump (January 20, 2017 – January 20, 2021) and the current presidency of Joe Biden, never issued a nationwide stay-at-home order. While the Trump administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions (CDC) issued several coronavirus guidelines, these remained on the level of recommendations with no enforceable mandate. The implementation of the federal guidelines has been left to the discretion of state and local authorities. The result is a great diversity in policy responses among the various states. As one commentator put it: “50 different governors [have been] doing 50 different things.”<sup>3</sup> [4]

During the stricter lockdown period (19 March – mid-May 2020), some states explicitly banned religious gatherings and asked religious organizations to temporarily shut down physical facilities.<sup>4</sup> Others prohibited religious gatherings only implicitly through orders regulating the maximum size of in-person gatherings or by qualifying houses of worship as “nonessential businesses.” On the other hand, several states allowed religious services to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic. The State of New York, for instance, exempted religious organizations from its stay-at-home orders, fearing that a ban on religious gatherings would violate the constitutional rights of individuals to freely exercise religion, granted under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment (Brannon 2020, 3). [5]

Given these divergent regulations, it is not surprising that religious organizations in the U.S.A. responded in a variety of ways. A few houses of worship defied gathering bans, holding services despite state quarantine orders. Several religious organizations also filed lawsuits, arguing that their constitutional rights regarding the free exercise of religion and freedom of speech were violated, or contending that state and local governments were not neutral in their application of gathering bans, claiming that some gave more leeway to secular gatherings in comparison to religious ones (Brannon 2020, 3). Most religious organizations, however, complied with the coronavirus-related emergency orders. Many have been making extensive efforts to reach their faith members in alternative ways, from offering remote services through online streaming, radio broadcasting, and phone conferencing to drive-in services where congregants can drive to a common location and worship together from the safety of their cars. [6]

Amidst these various regulations and organizational responses to the public health crisis, this paper focusses on the response of the Jain community. How did Jains in the U.S.A. navigate the COVID-19 pandemic? Which measures did Jain organizations take? I address these questions by means of a case study of the Jain Center of Northern California (JCNC). I start with a description of the common temple activities held at the JCNC prior to the pandemic, before proceeding to analyze the changes brought about by the spread of COVID-19. After having been closed for nearly one year, the JCNC reopened its temple complex in March 2021 with modified services. I discuss this reopening by highlighting specific guidelines of the California Department of Public Health for the reopening of houses of worship that impact the religious practices of Jains. [7]

3 Andrew Noymer, associate professor of public health at UCI, quoted in The New York Times on 20 May 2020. Last accessed March 19, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/us/coronavirus-reopening-50-states.html>.

4 See e.g., the *Order of the Governor of the State of Maryland*. 30 March 2020. Last accessed March 17, 2021. <https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Gatherings-FOURTH-AMENDED-3.30.20.pdf#page=3>.

## The Jain Center of Northern California (JCNC)

In the United States, a few Jains, mainly male students, settled in the 1940s. The first wave of migration, however, was only in the late 1960s, when the United States liberalized its immigration policies for Asian, African, and other countries. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 initiated the emigration of especially highly skilled and educated Jains from India and East Africa (Vekemans 2019a, 174–75; Valley 2002, 194–97). Since then, the Jain diaspora community in the United States has grown considerably. Today, the Jain population in the United States is estimated to be around 150,000 to 200,000. This is about 2.5% of the world Jain population.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, India holds 75% of the world Jain population, having nearly 4.5 million Jains (Census of India 2011). There are over 70 Jain centers in the United States. About fifty of these also have a temple. From the end of March 2020 onward, Jain centers and temples in the U.S.A. either closed entirely, suspending all in-person activities, or remained open but with imposed restrictions in accordance with the coronavirus guidelines of their specific state and county. For instance, both Jain temples in California, the Jain Center of Northern California (JCNC) and the Jain Center of Southern California (JCSC) closed their premises “for all visitations indefinitely until further notice.”<sup>6</sup> In Massachusetts, on the other hand, the Jain Sangh of New England remained open but it required members to reserve online to limit the numbers of attendees “as per the State of Massachusetts guidelines” and to social distance, wear masks, and use hand sanitizer.<sup>7</sup> Whether Jain places of worship were closed or open with restrictions, all tried hard to reach their members in different ways by offering alternatives to in-person temple visits.<sup>8</sup> [8]

## Daily Temple Worship at the JCNC Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Within its temple complex, the JCNC has *murtis* (consecrated images) belonging to various Jain sects: the Śvetāmbara, the Digambara, and the Śrīmad Rājacandra traditions.<sup>9</sup> Prior to the pandemic, Jains belonging to these three traditions could perform daily *darśan*, which is the auspicious and the reverential viewing of sacred images. For image-worshipping Jains, *darśan* is an essential practice (Babb 2015). Whether they visit the temple for a few minutes or a few hours, they, at the bare minimum, will perform *darśan*. “For many Jains,” as I explained elsewhere, “[*darśan*] is a reflexive act. It is a viewing that reminds one of the qualities of the Tirthāṅkara [or of other sacred figures] one ought to develop in one’s own life” (2020a, 11). [9]

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the JCNC used to host religious activities and celebrations of not only the Śvetāmbara, the Digambara, and the Śrīmad Rājacandra traditions, but also of the Sthānakavāsī and the Terāpanthī traditions.<sup>10</sup> For all Śvetāmbara Jains, the JCNC facilitated the worship of the principal Tirthāṅkara images, enabling every morning the rites of [10]

5 These numbers are based on popular estimates. As Vekemans (Vekemans 2019a, 176) observes, the exact number of Jains in the United States has “always been somewhat of a mystery.” This is because Public Law prohibits the U.S. Census from gathering data on religious affiliation in its demographic surveys.

6 Cf. *JCSC Website*. “COVID-19 updates.” Last accessed March 22, 2021. <https://jaincenter.org/>.

7 Cf. *Jain Sangh of New England Website*. “Important Guidelines for JSNE Derasar Visit during COVID-19 Pandemic.”

8 To consider how this is in line with the responses of Jain organizations in London, see Vekemans (2021).

9 Śvetāmbara (“white clad”) and Digambara (“sky clad”) are the two main sects in Jainism. The denominations refer to the facts that Śvetāmbara ascetics are clad in white robes, whereas the Digambara monks wander naked. Śrīmad Rājacandra (1867–1901) was a mystical poet, lay reformer, and friend of Mahatma Gandhi who propagated a non-sectarian form of Jainism.

10 Sthānakavāsī and Terāpanthī are both non-image worshipping Śvetāmbara sects.

*abhiṣeka*, *candana pūjā*, and *āṅgī*.<sup>11</sup> Every evening, the JCNC also organized *ārti*.<sup>12</sup> It further provided accommodations to those who wished to perform the ritual of *pratīkramaṇa*, which is a ritualized repentance for the harm committed to the realm of living beings. Monthly, it arranged several religious activities for the entire Śvetāmbara community, ranging from *bhāvanā* (contemplation on a particular theme) and *bhakti* (devotion) sessions, to the collective performance of worship rites (such as *snātra pūjā* and *ārti*) and the communal recitation of mantras (such as the *namokar mantra jap*). For Digambaras, the JCNC made similar provisions. The temple has images fit for Digambara worship. Daily, it used to provide the necessary materials for Digambara devotees to perform *abhiṣeka* and *aṣṭa dravya pūjā* (“worship with eight substances”). Monthly, it used to coordinate a communal worship for the entire Digambara community.

The JCNC also used to accommodate the celebration of important religious festivals. It thus organized, for instance, the yearly rainy season festival for both the Śvetāmbara and the Digambara community, called *paryuṣaṇ* and *daśa-lakṣana-parvan* respectively. Before the COVID-19 lockdowns, devotees, during these festivals, often spent parts of their days together in the temple performing the repentance ritual of *pratīkramaṇa* and listening to religious sermons and the recitation of sacred texts. Some fast for a certain length of the festival. Dedicated lay followers may even fast for the entire eight-to-ten-day long festival and drink only boiled water. The most sacred day of the year for Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras is the final day of this rainy season festival, called *Samvatsarī*. On this day, Śvetāmbara collectively perform the repentance ceremony, known as the *saṃvatsarī pratīkramaṇa*. Digambaras perform *kṣamāpanā*, a similar communal confession ceremony. Both these ceremonies used to be held at the JCNC temple complex. Other Jain festivals that used to take place yearly at the JCNC includes the celebration of the birth of Mahāvīra (Mahāvīra Jayantī) and his final liberation (Dīvalī).

For followers of the mystical poet and reformer Śrīmad Rājacandra, the JCNC used to organize twice monthly a recitation of his celebrated *Ātmasiddhi*. The JCNC further made provisions for two specific Śvetāmbara denominations, the Sthānakvāsī and the Terāpanthī, both non-image worshipping sects. Twice a month, it held meditation sessions (*prekṣā*) for Terāpanthīs and a *namokar mantra jap* for Sthānakvāsīs,<sup>13</sup> next to daily repentance rituals during the rainy season festival and the biannual nine-day Āyambil Oḷī festival.<sup>14</sup>

This leniency of the JCNC to accommodate various Jain sects within a single temple complex is not unusual in the Jain diaspora. Jain temples and centers in North America sometimes accommodate *murtis* of different sectarian traditions and organize events around religious festivals specific to various Jain sects. Among the diaspora community, sectarian affiliation is not as strong an identity marker as among Jains in India, even though this seems to be changing even for India.<sup>15</sup> When I asked my American respondents about their sectarian affiliation, I received answers ranging from “I used to know this” to “we are the ones that worship images”

11 *Abhiṣeka* is to ritually lustrate a Tirthaṅkara image. *Candana pūjā* is a Śvetāmbara practice where the devotee dabs sandalwood and saffron paste on key parts of the Tirthaṅkara image, symbolically seeking to cool her or his passions. *Āṅgī* is the Śvetāmbara rite of adorning a consecrated image.

12 *Ārti* is the rite of offering lamps to a Tirthaṅkara image.

13 The *namokar mantra* is the most sacred Jain mantra. It pays homage to the five worship-worthy beings: the *arihaṃtas* (omniscient ones), *siddhas* (liberated souls), *ācāryas* (mendicant leaders), *upādhyāyas* (preceptors), and the *sādhus* and *sādhvīs* (mendicants). *Jap* is the practice of meditatively repeating a mantra or sound for a set number of times.

14 Āyambil Oḷī is a Śvetāmbara festival, during which devotees fast by eating only one meal a day consisting of sour foods.

15 One respondent pointed out that the response to the pandemic by Jains in India was, in general, “non-sectarian.” This claim would need further investigation.

[11]

[12]

[13]

and “there are no sects in Jainism.” Such answers, typically from young Jains, show how sectarian affiliation is either unknown or downplayed as irrelevant. It is important to note that the pandemic might further deepen this blurring of sectarian identities. As I discuss below, the pandemic prompted a large-scale shift to online platforms for conducting religious services and hosting cultural-religious events. Unlike in-person activities where one is constrained by one’s physical location, online events can be attended by everyone, no matter where one lives and one’s sectarian denomination.

### The JCNC’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: From Temple Complex to Online Platforms

When the JCNC closed its temple premises because of the pandemic, it was quick in adopting Zoom to reach its community members online. Only a few days after the governor of California issued a stay-at-home order, the JCNC offered daily *bhakti*, *svādhyāya* (religious education) and *shibir* (workshops) over Zoom, with sessions especially for children and others aimed at the entire community for a period of two weeks.<sup>16</sup> [14]

Like many other Jain temples, the JCNC also started to offer virtual *darśan*. Five webcams livestream 24/7 footage of the temple’s main images. Similar to the in-person temple activities before COVID-19, the JCNC offers virtual *darśan* images for Jains of various denominations; it has three webcams livestreaming Śvetāmbara images, one webcam livestreaming Digambara images, and another livestreaming images of the Śrīmad Rājacandra tradition.<sup>17</sup> Given the limited numbers of recorded viewers, the popularity of virtual *darśan* is yet to be shown, at least among the diaspora community.<sup>18</sup> If, however, it endures beyond the pandemic and gains in acceptance, its effect on blurring sectarian boundaries in veneration practices is worthy of investigation. The JCNC broadcasts the five webcams on two separate channels.<sup>19</sup> One webcam alternates every six seconds of images, rotating not only between Śvetāmbara, Digambara, and Śrīmad Rājacandra images, but also bringing all the different images together on one screen at the end of a rotation round (see Fig. 1).<sup>20</sup> Inadvertently, Jain devotees using this digital resource for *darśan*, perform auspicious viewing for all sectarian images, regardless of their own sectarian affiliation. [15]

Every morning, the webcams also livestream *pūjā* and *ārti*. As community members were not allowed to worship inside the temple during the lockdown, the JCNC ensured that the *pūjārī* (ritual assistant) performed daily *pūjā* for the consecrated Śvetāmbara images as well as *ārti*. Traditionally, a *pūjārī* helps Śvetāmbara Jains performing their daily worship by cleaning and preparing the images and *pūjā* implements. However, with the temple closed to visitors, the *pūjārī* was now standing in for the absent devotees (cf. Fig. 2). Those wishing to participate in these rites from the safety of their homes and, in the words of the JCNC committee, accumulate “virtual *laabh*” or virtual merit, could do so by watching the livestreams. Similarly, for the Digambara images the JCNC appointed a Digambara volunteer to perform daily worship. [16]

For the yearly landmark celebrations, such as the rainy season festival (the Śvetāmbara *paryuṣan* and the Digambara *daśa-lakṣana-parvan*), the birth of Mahāvīra (Mahāvīra Jayantī) [17]

16 From 23 March 2020 to 5 April 2020. Cf. Last accessed April 1, 2021. <http://www.jcnc.org/home/covid19>.

17 In the U.S.A., just as in India, the majority of Jains are Śvetāmbara, which most likely accounts for the fact that the JCNC has more webcams livestreaming Śvetāmbara images than Digambara and Śrīmad Rājacandra images.

18 On online worship practices before COVID-19, see Vekemans (2014) and Vekemans & Vandeveld (2018).

19 Cf. <http://www.jcnc.org/livedarshan/gabharadarshan> (last accessed March 30, 2021).

20 This is a screenshot taken on 30 March 2021 at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boQeIdYg9hE>.



**Figure 1** “Garbhara Darśan,” showing simultaneously Śvetāmbara (top left and bottom right), Digambara (top right), and Śrīmad Rājacandra (bottom left) images. Livestreamed by the JCNC on 30 March 2021.



**Figure 2** “Pujāri performing Pūjā.” Livestreamed by the JCNC on 10 May 2021.



### JCNC TEMPLE ANNOUNCEMENT

"UNDER UPDATED COUNTY COVID GUIDELINES, JAIN BHAVAN IS NOW OPEN (Darshan ONLY)."

**Figure 3** "The JCNC Reopens." Worshippers are only allowed to perform darśan or auspicious viewing. As *darśan* does not involve the touching of material objects, one who performs darśan complies with the CDC and the CDPH guidelines. (screenshot taken on April 6, 2021)

and his final liberation (Dīvālī), the JCNC organized cultural-religious events over Zoom. For Dīvālī, for instance, the JCNC partnered with the JCSC to offer an online Dīvālī program, inviting Jains of both centers as well as from other places in California to participate. It further livestreamed various *bhāvanā* and *bhakti* performances.

#### Reopening of the JCNC: Limitations and Challenges

One year after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the previously closed Jain temples in the U.S.A. reopened with modified services and limited capacity. The JCNC reopened in March 2021, but it allowed devotees to only perform *darśan* (cf. Fig. 3). This, as we will see, is in line with the official guidelines issued by the State of California for places of worship. [18]

In July 2020, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) issued detailed guidelines for the reopening of places of worship.<sup>21</sup> Many of these are by now familiar prevention measures, such as ensuring that disposable gloves, facemasks, and hand sanitizer are available; the screening of visitors for symptoms; and the regular cleaning and disinfecting of high traffic areas. A few guidelines, however, are unique to places of worship and may, in the long term, effect significant changes in the worship practices of Jains. Given the fact that singing and chanting activities increase the chance "for transmission from contaminated exhaled droplets," the CDPH ordered "[p]laces of worship [...] [to] discontinue indoor singing and chanting activities" (CDCH, 8). Instead, it encouraged places of worship to continue such practices "through alternative methods (such as internet streaming)" (CDCH, 3). With respect to the use of material objects in rituals, the CDPH discourages both the sharing and the reuse of items in worship. For example, the CDCH guidelines advice places of worship to: [19]

Discourage sharing items used in worship and services (such as prayer books, cushions, prayer rugs, etc.) whenever possible and provide single use or digital copies or ask congregants/visitors to bring personal items instead. (CDCH, 8) [20]

21 Cf. *Covid-19 Industry Guidance: Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services and Cultural Ceremonies*. Last accessed July 29, 2020. <https://covid19.ca.gov>.

Discontinue passing offering plates and similar items that move between people. Use alternative giving options such as secure drop boxes that do not require opening/closing and can be cleaned and disinfected. Consider implementing digital systems that allow congregants/visitors to make touch-free offerings. (CDCH, 10) [21]

Consider limiting touching for religious and/or cultural purposes, such as holding hands, to members of the same household. (CDCH, 11) [22]

Consider modifying practices that are specific to particular faith traditions that might encourage the spread of COVID-19. Examples are discontinuing kissing of ritual objects, allowing rites to be performed by fewer people, avoiding the use of common [...] [items] in accordance with CDC guidelines. (CDCH, 13) [23]

It is not difficult to see how these CDCH guidelines directly impact the worshipping practices of Jains. Many of the rites I mentioned earlier, such as *ārtī* (the offering of lamps to a sacred image), are performed collectively. To share the merit of *ārtī*, several Jains, usually from multiple households, hold the tray with the candle together. Many rites that are performed individually, such as the worship of sacred images with material substances (the *aṣṭa dravya* and the *aṣṭaparakāri pūjā*), also go against the CDCH guidelines as others, performing the rite later, touch the same sacred image. On the other hand, *darśan* or auspicious viewing is in line with the CDCH guidelines. This is why the JCNC, when partially reopening its temple complex in March 2021, only allowed *darśan*. The question whether the CDCH guidelines will effect only temporary or also long term changes needs to be followed up with future research. [24]

## Individual Responses

How did Jains experience the lockdowns, the (partial) closure of their temples, and the large-scale introduction of new digital platforms for religious activities? To examine the way the COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting the everyday religious practice of individual Jains, I draw in this section from the eight semi-structured interviews I conducted over Zoom between November 2020 and January 2021. I interviewed four Jain householders from the U.S.A. and four from India. I knew four respondents beforehand (convenience sampling), while I selected the others on the basis of age (criterion-based sampling). Among the eight respondents, there are first-generation, second-generation, and third generation diaspora Jains, as well as Indian citizens in their early forties, mid-sixties, and late seventies. Before the pandemic, two respondents used to go to the temple daily, one used to regularly take *darśan* of ascetics, while the remaining respondents either went weekly or bimonthly and on special occasions (such as the rainy season festival *paryuṣaṇ*) to Jain centers like the JCNC I described above. All eight respondents possess a solid technology literacy, which in part explains, as I discuss below, their high level of participation in online scholarly religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. [25]

In my interviews, I observed differences not only between Jains living in the U.S.A. and India, but also within one region, sect, and even household. As one interviewee pointed out: “The way the pandemic has been affecting my religious practices is different from both my mother-in-law who lives with me and from my sister who lives in a different state [in India].” If some of my interviewees negatively experienced the closure of their local temple or suffered from not being able to take *darśan* of ascetics, still others felt their practice did [26]

not change much during the pandemic. One respondent, for instance, in an interview held in November 2021 insisted that despite the facts that the pandemic cancelled the collective in-person celebrations of *Samvatsari* (the final day of the rainy season festival *pariyusan*) and *Divali* in which he used to participate, and that he could not go to the temple, he did not feel that his personal practice was affected: “I am still participating in fasts and I [still] pray daily [...] for me, nothing has changed.”

For many Jains, fasting is a ubiquitous practice. There are many types of Jain fasts, depending on the duration of the fast and the specific food and water restrictions. While some respondents increased their fasting practices during the pandemic, others refrained from it altogether. Four interviewees thus noted how they experienced the lockdown restrictions (in terms of travel and social activities) as an opportunity to raise their fasting practices. One young Jain student living in Houston, for instance, completed for the first time in her life an *atthai* (an 8-day long fast during the rainy season festival *pariyusan*), drinking only boiled water from August 15, 2020 to August 22, 2020. My interviewees motivated their fasts with both theological arguments and health reasons, arguing that the soul, unlike the body, does not need any food and that fasts are good for health. One even likened the practice of fasting to getting a vaccine. But while some thus increased their fasting, others suspended their fasting practices counterarguing that it may negatively affect their immune system, something which should be avoided during pandemic times. [27]

### Scholarly Religious Activities

A common trend across the various interviewees pertains to an exponential increase in what I call “scholarly religious activities.” I asked all of them about their online religious practices (“Which religious activities have you been conducting over Zoom or other online platforms?”). One respondent informed me of the various online meetings he has been participating in and the classes on Jainism he has been attending since the beginning of the pandemic. At first, I thought there was a glitch. I thought he may only have heard the “online” part of the question and missed the fact that I was specifically asking about his online religious activities. But as I received similar answers from my other interviewees, I realized I had to adjust my understanding of what counts as Jain religious practices. For my interviewees, being a president, trustee, or board member of a Jain temple or society is expressive of their Jain religious identity. To be actively involved in these organizations through meetings is, for many, a direct extension of practicing their Jain dharma (religion). Similarly, the attending of lectures and workshops on Jainism is considered a religious practice by my interviewees. [28]

Since the start of the pandemic, there has been a significant growth of Jain lectures and workshops. One respondent, in January 2021, remarked that there are so many that each day she needs to make a selection. Not only were existing Jain organizations quick to start organizing lecture series online, but several Jains established new associations.<sup>22</sup> Ramesh Kumar Shah, founder of the RK Group trading conglomerate, created, for instance, the nonprofit organization The Jain Foundation on 6 April 2020. Since its inception, it offered over 130 talks on Jainism, given by a wide range of speakers, from scholars and corporate giants to economists [29]

22 To give an example of each: during the COVID-19 pandemic the Gyansagar Science Foundation launched in November 2020 a monthly Zoom lecture series. The Jaina India Foundation, a sister organization of the Federation of Jain Associations in North America, launched in August 2020 *Jain Avenue*, a web-based and multimedia magazine.

and Jain ascetics. According to The Jain Foundation's site, the lectures reached over 14,000 participants.<sup>23</sup> It explains the reason for creating a new online platform as follows:

Technology has been used as a platform to bring forth the values of Jainism via ... an App to appeal to the current generation. It has also been an endeavour to move away from preaching Jainism to highlighting the essence of what this religion stands for. A religion which today science is proving time and again to be accurate to the very last detail.<sup>24</sup> [30]

The claim that Jainism is in line with science is a prime example of the scientization of Jainism, which I discuss in part II. The point I wish to emphasize here, however, is that The Jain Foundation is illustrative of the fact that the pandemic has effected an exponential increase of online classes organized by and for Jains. The topics vary greatly, ranging from the history and the philosophy of Jainism to the religion's contemporary relevance and scientific nature.<sup>25</sup> [31]

This large-scale introduction of new online platforms raises questions about its long-term influence on traditional sources of authority within the Jain communities. As seen from the mission statement, The Jain Foundation adopted technology to "move away from preaching Jainism to highlighting the essence of what this religion stands for." If this persists beyond the pandemic, such online lecture platforms may, I suggest, give rise to new types of authority, and create new religious-leader figures within the Jain community.<sup>26</sup> In part II, I return to the ambivalent position of traditional sources of authority within the Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic. [32]

Finally, we need to consider how such online platforms create new avenues for Jains to be exposed to different sectarian interpretations of texts, *stotras* (devotional hymns), and practices. As I pointed out above, online platforms can be attended by all, regardless of one's location or sectarian affiliation. In addition, while some online platforms are strongly rooted in a specific Jain tradition or sect,<sup>27</sup> others, like The Jain Foundation, are not and offer lectures on Jainism that are either non-sectarian or sectarian but addressed to all. In this context, it is interesting to note how one respondent, based in Jaipur, India, attended four different lectures on the *Bhaktamar stotra* since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>28</sup> She found it fascinating to learn about the use and version of the *stotra* in different Jain sects since, as she remarked, being a Śvetāmbara she had previously not been exposed to the Digambara interpretation of the *stotra*. Her experience may be expressive of the fact that the response of Jains in India to the COVID-19 pandemic has been largely non-sectarian.<sup>29</sup> [33]

23 Cf. *Jain Foundation Talks*. Last accessed May 3, 2021. [https://www.jainfoundation.in/jain\\_talk\\_in.php](https://www.jainfoundation.in/jain_talk_in.php).

24 *The Jain Foundation*. Last accessed June 30, 2021. [https://www.jainfoundation.in/the\\_jain\\_foundation.php](https://www.jainfoundation.in/the_jain_foundation.php).

25 See, e.g., the following lectures hosted online during the COVID-19 pandemic by The Jain Foundation: "The Antiquity of Jain Culture in Sri Lanka and Buddhist Literature," "Tattvarth Sutra: The Bible or Gita of Jain Religion," "Jainism and Environmental Protection," and "The Spiritual Science of Shri Namaskar Mahamantra." Last accessed June 30, 2021. [https://www.jainfoundation.in/jain\\_talk.php](https://www.jainfoundation.in/jain_talk.php).

26 Compare Campbell and Evolvi (2020, 5).

27 See, e.g., the *Gyan Jagrati YouTube Channel*, which is solely focused on the Digambara tradition as initiated by Acharya Shri Shantisagar (1872–1955). Last accessed May 11, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKLlz-VacvnnHxIqR5GMKtw?app=desktop>.

28 The *Bhaktamar stotra* is a Sanskrit hymn dedicated to the first Tirthankara Ṛṣabhanātha and accepted, with some variations, by both Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras. On the central role of this *stotra* in Jain devotional practices, see Cort (2005).

29 Cf. footnote 16.



**Figure 4** “Jinvani Channel.” Livestreaming of *pūjā*. Photo taken by my respondent in his living room on January 4, 2021.

### Online *Pūjā*

One respondent specifically missed not being able to go to the temple during lockdown. Before COVID-19, his daily routine consisted of performing *samāyik* for 15 to 20 minutes in the early morning,<sup>30</sup> followed by a 45-minute morning walk, a bath, and a visit to his local temple to perform *pūjā*. On Sundays, he used to listen to the teachings of *sadhus* (*pravachans*) and teach young Jains about Jainism at the local school (*pāṭhśālā*). With his local temple closed, he started to livestream temple *pūjās* on his TV instead. Since then, he has been performing every morning his daily *pūjā* to the Tirthankara images that are livestreamed on Jinvani, an Indian television channel of the Digambara sect to which he belongs (cf. Fig. 4). To go through the various *pūjā* steps and *mantras*, he uses an app on his phone.<sup>31</sup> To stay focused he turns off the TV sound. For this respondent, the livestream is not so much about being a passive observer of the live *pūjā*; he considers the livestream valuable insofar it enables him to actively perform his own *pūjā*. The COVID-19 pandemic has thus exposed him to new digital modes of practicing his religion. Reflecting on his altered religious practices, he said with a sigh that “unfortunately, technology is very helpful” and while “it is not like [performing *pūjā*] in the temple, this is as close as you can get.”

Steven Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi (2014) introduced the concept of “third spaces” to

30 During *samāyik* a householder temporarily becomes an ascetic, chanting mantras, listening to sermons, engaging in meditation or other suchlike practices.

31 On the growing popularity of Jain religious apps, see Vekemans (2019b).

[34]

[35]

refer to “religious venues that exist between online and offline settings, venues that believers approach as if they are authentic spaces of religious practices” (Campbell and Evolvi 2020, 7). I think it is apt to conceptualize the religious space that the livestreaming effects each morning on my respondent’s TV screen as such a “third space.” He considers this space as an authentic religious venue. This is seen from the fact that he ritually approaches the livestreaming as if he were in the temple. To go to the temple, Jains traditionally take a bath and wear *pūjā* clothes. For men, traditional *pūjā* clothes can consist of unstitched orange or, if they are under the vow of continence (*brahmacarya*), white robes (*dhotī*), but any set of clothes set aside for *pūjā* can be worn. The main point is that the clothes one wears for *pūjā* are not worn for other activities. *Pūjā* clothes need to be “ritually pure.” To ensure this, a Jain traditionally takes a bath before putting the *pūjā* clothes on and, once in *pūjā* clothes, refrains from worldly, nonreligious activities, such as taking water and food, engaging in chitchat, or going to the bathroom. Observing these multiple restrictions surrounding *pūjā* clothes, Whitney Kelting (2001, 126) argues that the creation of sacred space starts with the donning of the *pūjā* clothes itself:

While the *pūjā* space can often be most clearly marked by the lack of idle conversation and the items left outside (and, of course, the *pūjā* rituals themselves), the demarcation of *pūjā* time is most clearly represented by the donning of *pūjā* clothes. [36]

She further notes how during her fieldwork she witnessed a mother scolding her daughter for hitting her sister who was in *pūjā* clothes and about to go to the temple, observing that “[h]itting her sister in *pūjā* clothes was like hitting her in the temple” (Kelting 2001: 127). This anecdote illustrates well the power of *pūjā* clothes in effecting a sacred, religious space. [37]

Given this ritual significance of *pūjā* clothes, it is important to observe that my respondent would take a bath and “change his clothes” before livestreaming the *pūjā*. In other words, in terms of ritual preparations, he makes no distinction between the livestreaming and the temple. The livestreaming thus seems to transform his living room in a temporary yet authentic sacred space. Despite this, my respondent negatively experienced not being able to go to his local temple during the lockdown, explaining that the aura of the temple is instrumental in supporting his best *pūjā* practices. He clarifies: “I may be the primary cause of my actions, but there is also the efficient cause. The aura of the temple helps you. At home, if I feel thirsty [while performing *pūjā*], I take a glass of water.” [38]

Everyday Jain religious practice ranges from *darśan* and temple worship (*pūjā*) to fasting (*tap*) and attending lectures on Jainism. Given the flexibility and fluidity of Jain practice, it is not surprising to see that the COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting the everyday religious activities of various Jains differently. In general, the way the COVID-19 has been impacting the religious activities of Jains depend on how their daily religious practice looked like before the pandemic, their technological literacy, amount of free time, social networks, and their level of engagement in local and (inter)national Jain communities. [39]

## Part II: Jain Discourse and the Pandemic

The Jain discourse on the current pandemic acknowledges the scientific narrative of the pandemic’s origin, which explains the COVID-19 as a novel type of coronavirus that initially [40]

jumped from an animal source to humans before starting to spread between people. Jain accounts, however, do not end there. They also discuss the deeper causes behind the pandemic and identify solutions to prevent future ones. It is in these discussions where a Jain lens on the pandemic becomes perceptible. In one way or another, Jains claim that the cause of the pandemic is a lack of adherence to Jain principles, such as non-violence (*ahimsā*) and non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*). Consequently, they suggest that the adherence to these principles can offer a solution. As one author writes: “The whole mankind would not have suffered by the COVID-19 pandemic if they would have followed the Jain teachings and moral values and virtues” (Garai 2020, 50).<sup>32</sup> Many Jains see the COVID-19 pandemic as a proof for the universal significance of Jainism. This section takes a closer look at this Jain discourse on the pandemic. I argue that it is characterized by environmentalism and the processes of scientization and universalization. I expound these three characteristics individually, before exemplifying my argument with a case study.

### Environmentalism

The Jain discourse on the current pandemic is marked by environmental concerns. Many Jains consider the COVID-19 pandemic as being symptomatic of a broken ecosystem. They view it as manmade, being the result of the world’s overexploitation of natural resources. As a theological explanation, several Jains writing and reflecting on the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic bring in the law of karma.<sup>33</sup> Connected to this, they imbue nature with a moral force and agency, suggesting that the pandemic is the revenge of an abused planet earth or that it is the outcome of nature trying to teach everyone a lesson. [41]

For example, in his video “Say No to More: A 3 Step Solution to Climate Change” posted in September 2020, the Bangalorean motivational speaker, Rahul Kapoor Jain sees the current crisis in the following terms: “[W]hat you give is what you get, and what you get is what you deserve. This is the law of karma. Anything said or done in this world, is echoed back with the same intensity. This ecological crisis that we are all facing, is an echoing back of our own thoughts, words, and actions.”<sup>34</sup> For many Jains, like for Rahul Kapoor Jain, the disturbed ecosystem springs forth from a disturbed human morality. In another video “Get Back into Your True Nature,” published online on 15 May 2021, he further suggests that the coronavirus was purposefully created by nature “with the intention that we will think about our mistakes and make amends.” He explains “our mistakes” as the misuse of nature’s resources and its pollution caused by “the viruses of anger, ego, greed, and deceit.”<sup>35</sup> [42]

Within this Jain environmental discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, the principle of *ahimsā* (non-violence) is presented as a means to not only prevent future pandemics but also to overcome climate change. In this discourse, the principle of non-violence is first and foremost equated with a vegetarian diet and an active care for and restoration of the environment. This pandemic-contextual interpretation of *ahimsā* reinforces the sociocentric and ecocentric [43]

32 See also Jain, Shugan (2020); Jain, Pragya and Sayyam Jain (2020); Sanchetee, Pratap and Prashant Sanchetee (2020).

33 Also, various Jain *ācāryas* such as the late *ācārya* Gyansagar ji Maharaj and *ācārya* Śivamuni explain the causes of the pandemic by reverting to the Jain theory of karma. See <https://www.speakingtree.in/article/corona-karma> (last accessed June 30, 2021) and Prajñā (2021, 7–8) respectively.

34 Rahul Kapoor Jain’s *Say No to More. A Three Step Solution to Climate Change*. Last accessed May 17, 2021. <https://jainavenue.org/videos/>.

35 Rahul Kapoor Jain’s *Get Back into Your True Nature*. Last accessed May 16, 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_zS\\_K02l75k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zS_K02l75k).

ethos in Jainism, which began to emerge as a prominent discourse among diaspora Jains about twenty years ago.

Traditionally, the central ethic of *ahimsā* mirrors the ascetic ideal of renunciation. Aiming to purify the soul, it is focused on self-realization. Anne Vallely dubbed this orthodox interpretation of *ahimsā* a “liberation-centric ethos” (2002, 193). By contrast, in recent years, a new interpretation of *ahimsā* emerged, involving a “discourse of environmentalism and animal rights” (Vallely 2002, 193). Nonviolence, from this perspective, is not so much about the purification of the soul as it is about “alleviating the suffering of other living beings” (Vallely 2002, 205). Vallely aptly terms this interpretation of *ahimsā* a “sociocentric and ecocentric ethos” (2002, 193, 203–13), observing the emergence of this new ethical orientation among some Jain communities already twenty years ago. At that time, this environmental interpretation of *ahimsā* marked a sharp difference between not only diaspora Jains and Jains in India, but also among the first- and second-generation diaspora Jains (Vallely 2002, 204–5). [44]

In comparison, the Jain discourse on the pandemic shows that environmentalism has become a pan-Jain theme. It is no longer uniquely characteristic of young western Jains. Contemporary Jains, whether living in India or elsewhere, whether first, second, or third generation diaspora Jains, frequently express Jain principles in a language that stresses the importance to both maintain a healthy ecosystem and protect animal rights, showing the interconnectedness between human, animal, and plant life. [45]

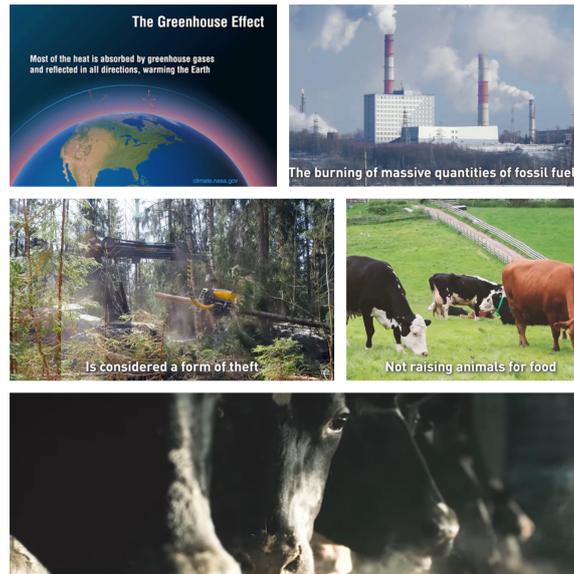
## Scientization

Knut Aukland coined the term “scientization” to refer to “processes by which adherents of religions align their religion with the natural sciences” (2016, 194). He argues that appeals to the authority of science can be both in *form* and *content*, explaining how “[a]ppeals in form are found in the deployment of scientific-looking diagrams and scientific-sounding terminology, while appeals in content consist of claims that one’s religion is ‘scientific’ or ‘a science’” (2016, 199). In the Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic both types of appeals occur frequently and in a variety of ways. [46]

Appeals *in form* can comprise accounts that show the benefit of traditional Jain tenets for today’s society by explaining these in a scientific, modern, rational, or health-oriented language. With respect to online talks and videos, typical examples of appeals in form are images of hi-tech or modern research centers. For example, in “Say No to More,” the video I mentioned earlier, Rahul Kapoor Jain uses a collation of scientific diagrams and animations, such as a NASA simulation to explain the greenhouse effect, next to pictures and short films of western industry, agriculture, livestock farming, and deforestation (cf. Fig. 5). [47]

Appeals *in content* include claims that Jain principles and practices are scientifically proven solutions to the pandemic (and other world problems). Auckland classifies such types of appeals as “unspecific” (2016, 203–4). While they state that Jainism is scientific,<sup>36</sup> there is no systematic attempt to show why Jainism and science are in apparent harmony or why its principles are scientifically proven means in overcoming the pandemic. On the other hand, in the Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, appeals in content can also involve arguments that show the global need and relevance of Jainism in an entirely scientific fashion, from formulating a hypothesis and collecting facts, to offering an analysis of these facts and making [48]

36 Think, for instance, of the above quoted statement of the online platform The Jain Foundation: “[Jainism is] a religion which today science is proving time and again to be accurate to the very last detail.” Cf. [https://www.jainfoundation.in/the\\_jain\\_foundation.php](https://www.jainfoundation.in/the_jain_foundation.php) (last accessed May 14, 2021).



**Figure 5** Scientific and Modern Imagery in “Say No to More.”

scientific generalizations. In contrast to unspecific appeals, I call these types of arguments ‘specific’ as their authority rests on a scientific argumentation.

Within this Jain scientific discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional sources of authority have, I argue, an ambivalent position. Jains who wish to substantiate their claims by means of a traditional source of authority have a wide range of options available, from quoting the so-called words of Tirthaṅkaras and sacred texts, to referring to well-respected historical figures, ascetics, and leaders (*ācāryas*) of their community. Some Jains who write on the COVID-19 pandemic and draw upon the prestige of science leave out these traditional sources of authority. To return to our earlier example “Say No to More”: Rahul Kapoor Jain does not refer to any traditional Jain source of authority, be it the Tirthaṅkara Mahāvīra, a particular Jain scripture or ascetic. Also in his video’s imagery, there is no characteristic Jain image in sight. The result is a Jain discourse on climate change and COVID-19 presented in a scientific and universal language. Others, however, unlike Rahul Kapoor Jain, can rest their claim that Jainism is scientific on the authority of a traditional source itself. One respondent, for example, told me how his *ācārya* says that the practice of Jainism is scientifically based and helps one from contracting disease. That Jainism is scientific and good for health rests, in this example, on the *ācārya*’s authority. In the scientific discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional sources of authority are thus either ignored or drawn upon to rest one’s claim that Jainism is scientific and pertinent for today’s world.

### Universalization

With the term “universalization” I refer to the ongoing trend where Jains actively seek to promote the Jain way of life to non-Jains. While proselyting is not a part of the contemporary Jain agenda, there is this common idea that if more people would know about Jainism, the world would be less violent, greener, healthier, and more peaceful (see e.g. Jain, Rahul, 15 May 2021 and 28 September 2021; R. Jain 2020; Jainuine YouTube Channel, November 4, 2019; @kumar\_jain\_2018; Prajñā and Kachhara, 2020; @prajna\_jainism\_2019). As one respondent, living in New Delhi, said: “The basic tenets of Jainism should be widely publicized.

They are useful, scientific, ecofriendly and they promote harmonious co-existence of human beings and animals.” Similarly, Dipak Doshi, former Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Jain Society of Metropolitan Chicago (JSMC), in an interview with *Young Minds* for a special issue on Jainism and the pandemic stated: “In the past 40+ years here in Chicago, I have witnessed Jainism evolve and mature, however, we have kept it predominantly confined to our temples and communities. It is time to take Jainism on a roadshow, educating the mainstream by showcasing Jainism and its values and principles” (Young Minds 2020, 7).

With respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, examples of universalization include claims that Jainism offers universal solutions and tools to both endure and overcome the pandemic. Many Jains thus feel that Jain principles, especially the principle of non-violence (*ahimsā*), should be spread beyond the Jain community (see e.g. S. Jain et al. 2020; S. Jain 2020; Kumar 2018; Sanchetee and Sanchetee 2020). Underlying the process of universalization seems to be the assumption that non-Jains do not practice *ahimsā* simply because they do not know about it or because they have a misinformed dietary view about the need of meat consumption. It is interesting to note that in the past, Jains who were actively proclaiming the need of promoting Jainism were mainly lecturing for Jain audiences and writing in journals, magazines, and websites published by and for Jains. In recent years, however, this audience has become diverse and international, consisting of both Jains and non-Jains alike. This, I argue, is due to the academization of Jainism. [51]

Aukland (2016, 209) defines “academization” as the “processes by which proponents of a religion establish institutions and practices modeled on mainstream academia, actively use markers of such institutions and their scholars, and invite academic appraisals of their religion.” He further notes how some of these institutions can work together with recognized universities in India and abroad (Aukland 2016). The example of the Bhagawan Mahavira International Research Centre shows how the universalization of Jainism can go hand in hand with the process of academization. The center was established in 2014 at the Jain Vishva Bharati Institute in Ladnun (Rajasthan, India) with the vision to “integrate science and Jain philosophy and to evolve a scientific approach to [the] understanding of Jain traditions” (IC-SJP *Event Brochure* 2016, 2). In March 2021, the center organized in partnership with Florida International University (FIU) the Second International Conference on Science and Jain Philosophy (ICSJP). As mentioned on the conference site, the purpose of this conference was “to connect scientists working on the interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies to scholars of the Jain religious tradition [...] [in] the hope to better understand the human mind and explore new pathways towards a more peaceful, just, and verdant world.”<sup>37</sup> Participating in the conference were Jains, many of whom have a background in the natural science or the humanities, but also western scholars of Jainism and scientists. This collaboration of Jains with western scholars and scientists is a typical aspect of the academization of Jainism (cf. Aukland 2016, 211). [52]

### Case Study: “Corona Pandemic in the Perspective of Non-Violence”

In this section, I analyze the article “Corona Pandemic in the Perspective of Non-Violence,” published in the summer of 2020 and written by Rajmal Jain, a practicing Jain, emeritus professor of Gujarat University and scholar of the Physical Research Laboratory (which is the Indian National Research Institute for space and allied sciences). In his article, Rajmal [53]

37 *FIU Conference Website*. Last accessed March 4, 2021. <https://icsjp.fiu.edu/>.

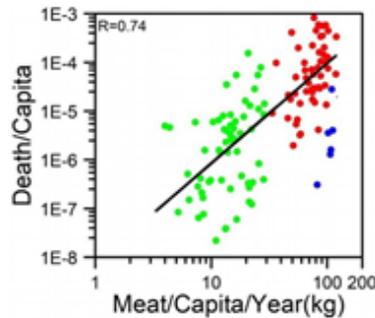


Figure 3: Spectrum of mortality rate due to COVID-2019 as a function of meat consumption in 120 countries of the world.

The equation obtained by linear fit is:

$$\text{Log}_{10}Y = 2.05\text{Log}_{10}X + \text{Log}_{10}(-8.29) \quad (1)$$

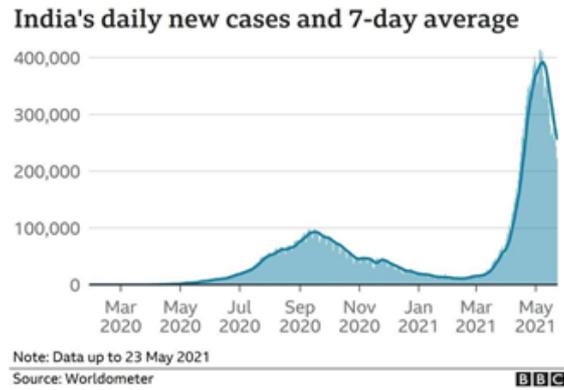
**Figure 6** Rajmal Jain’s graph depicting the correlation of meat consumption and the COVID-19 death rate and his logarithmic equation.

Jain examines the correlation between meat consumption and the COVID-19 death rate in a scientific fashion. He argues that “low meat eater [sic] countries have about 4 times less mortality relative to high meat eater [sic] countries” (2020, 8). Rajmal Jain frames the COVID-19 in ways I described before as typical for the Jain discourse.

Rajmal Jain views the COVID-19 pandemic as the result of a broken ecology, which, in turn, is the outcome, he writes, of a wrecked morality. He considers the human tendencies for greed and violence as the main culprits. “Greed,” he writes, “not only destroyed trees, plants and large forests but also killed small (one sense) to big (2-5 sense) animals that are surviving on the earth, flying in the air and living inside the oceans” (2020, 2). With respects to violence, he stresses the non-vegetarian diet. Like Rahul Kapoor Jain, Rajmal Jain sees the COVID-19 pandemic as manmade and frames it within the Jain theory of karma. He further puts forward the hypotheses that the current pandemic is the “revenge by [the] geosphere or [the] biosphere” and that it is a lesson of Mother Nature teaching us to curb the destruction, pollution, and abuse of the planet’s life and resources (2020, 3, 12). [54]

To prove the positive correlation between meat consumption and the COVID-19 death rate, Rajmal Jain appeals to the authority of science. This is, both in form and content, his article is a scholarly paper; from formulating hypotheses to offering a scientific analysis of the meat consumption per capita of 120 countries and coronavirus statistics (cf. Fig. 6). He bases his analysis on datasets provided by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization (R. Jain 2020, 3). Further, seeking to prove his hypothesis that the pandemic may be the karmic retribution for the killing of animals, Rajmal Jain investigates the theory that animals, when slaughtered, disperse infrasonic waves which, in due time, “take revenge.” Regarding this point, he concludes: [55]

We interpret our spectrum results ... in the perspective of infrasonic wave energy deposited in the ecosphere as a consequence of [the] killing of a large number of animals by man every day. Obviously, high-power deposition from emotional tension infrasonic waves took place in high meat-eating countries and thereby according to *karmavāda*, the high mortality rate [due to COVID-19] has also been observed in these countries. So we may interpret that the current corona pandemic is the revenge by animals and all other species killed by humans. (2020, 13) [56]



**Figure 7** Graph illustrating the severity of the pandemic’s second wave (beginning in March 2021) in contrast to the first wave (beginning in March 2020) in India. BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-57225922> (last accessed June 14, 2021).

To be clear, I am not seeking to examine whether Rajmal Jain’s methodology and conclusions are scientifically valid. It is important to keep in mind that he conducted the research for his article in the summer of 2020. At that time, after a 10-week long nationwide lockdown, the government of India was implementing its second and third phased reopening plan (Unlock 2.0 and Unlock 3.0). During the pandemic’s first wave, India was not affected as severely as during the second wave, which began in March 2021 (cf. Fig. 7). If Rajmal Jain would have written his article when India became the new epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2021), his hypotheses, analysis, and results would likely have been different. The degree to which the Jain discourse on the pandemic’s second wave in India differs or agrees with the Jain discourse that emerged during the early stages of the pandemic is yet to be analyzed. The main point I wish to emphasize here is how Rajmal Jain’s article fits within the ongoing process of the scientization of Jainism. Further, as I discussed above, traditional sources of authority have an ambivalent position within this discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, being either disregarded or, conversely, acknowledged. Rajmal Jain’s article is an example of the latter. While his article is, in essence, a scientific paper, on several occasions, he also explicitly states that Jainism is scientific and rests these claims on the authority of traditional sources, such as the first Tirthaṅkara Ṛṣabhanātha (2020, 11).<sup>38</sup>

[57]

In line with the process of universalization, Rajmal Jain feels that Jainism should be taught to non-Jains. To overcome the current COVID-19 pandemic and prevent future ones, we all need to focus, according to Rajmal Jain, on changing our lifestyle by practicing “*ahimsā* (non-violence) as well as *aparigraha* (non-possession) whole heartedly” (2020, 13, see also 9, 11, 14). He explains the core Jain concept of non-violence by drawing both on the traditional, liberation centric and the socio-and ecocentric (or environmental) interpretation of *ahimsā*. Thus, he writes: “non-violence or universal love to all living beings is the foundation of the Jain’s sacred life leading to the goal of liberation and self-realization called *mokṣa*” (2020, 3). Earlier in the article, we can read how applying non-violence means “stopping non-veg foods” as this “will protect our bio-sphere cycle and hence [...] nature” (2020, 2). He further concludes that: “There is no need to teach non-violence to [the] Jain community. [R]ather

[58]

38 Rajmal Jain’s article contains thus both specific and unspecific appeals to the authority of science. Specific, because his article is a scientific paper that seeks to show the relevance of applying Jain principles. Unspecific, because Rajmal Jain equally makes several claims that Jainism is scientific, without explaining why this is the case.

it is [...] necessary to motivate non-Jains to consider and practice non-violence in [their] daily life to save the biosphere and humanity” (2020, 11). For Rajmal Jain, there is a sense of urgency that Jainism should be spread and taught beyond the Jain community.

## Conclusion

In this article, I sought to analyze the ways the COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting the Jain religious organizations in the U.S.A., as well as the everyday religious practices and public discourse of Jains in the U.S.A. and India. In terms of Jain practice, we have seen how Jain organizations in the U.S.A. made considerable efforts to reach their members in new and alternative ways, from offering daily *bhakti*, *svādhyāya*, and *shibir* over Zoom, to digital *darśan*. While examining in detail the Jain Center of Northern California, we have seen how the changes and accommodations in its religious services were in line with the CDC and Californian state coronavirus guidelines. Further, the 24/7 livestreaming of its temple images raised interesting issues regarding its possible long-term effects in blurring sectarian boundaries. I also discussed how Jain digital platforms can create authentic but temporary sacred spaces. With regards to the manner how the COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting the everyday religious practice of Jains, I showed that there is a great variation among Jains. A common feature, however, is the exponential increase of Jains participating in scholarly religious activities. [59]

In the second part of this article, I argued that the Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by an environmental agenda and by the processes of scientization and universalization. These two processes involve, as I have demonstrated, appeals to the authority of science to show the contemporary relevance of Jain principles and pleas to spread the Jain way of life to non-Jains in a collective effort to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. I further contended that traditional sources of authority have an ambiguous role within the scientization process. Several scholars have argued to consider appeals to the authority of science as a “legitimation strategy.” While this is correct it is also more than that. The process of scientization offers, as Aukland contends, “a variety of resources with which people reformulate and re-represent, explore, and reinterpret and at times re-imagine their religion” (2016, 194). When appealing to the authority of science, Jains may do so to either “defend and preserve traditional beliefs and practices,” or, conversely, “to argue against traditional beliefs and practices” (2016, 194). As I hope to have demonstrated, in the Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, Jains appeal to authority of science to argue for the contemporary relevance and need of Jainism to both cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and to prevent other such global disasters in the future. [60]

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