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Double-clicking the Temple Bell

Devotional aspects of Jainism online

Tine Vekemans

Abstract

In its earliest scriptures, Jainism appears as a non-theist religious tradition with a heavy emphasis on individual ascetic practice on the path towards the ultimate goal of spiritual liberation, or *mokṣa*. However, there is also early evidence of more devotional elements that attained a prominent place in the religious life not only of the lay community, but also of Jain monks and nuns. Practices like *bhajan* and *stavan* (songs of devotion), *darśan* (worship through seeing a deity, a guru or a holy place), and elaborate *pūjā* ceremonies (offerings of different substances) have recently found their place in the wonderful world of the World Wide Web. In their computer mediated form, these practices are often doubly contested: the tension between scriptures emphasizing individual asceticism and practices based on devotional aspects is further enhanced by the tension between offline devotional practices, often performed in temples with other members of the community, and practices mediated by the Internet, where problems of ritual purity of the online place of worship and the right mind-set of the devotee come into play.

Introducing the little explored case of online Jainism, this article aims to add to discussions about computer mediated religious practices, their function, and the possible grounds for their contestation. After situating the different devotional practices in Jainism, I will look into their prevalence online, attempt to identify their target audience and look into their reception. The data used are drawn from a broader dataset of online resources on Jainism and from a series of exploratory interviews conducted between November 2013 and July 2014 on different locations, both in India and in the diaspora.

Keywords

1   Preliminary Note

The purpose of this article is to assess and address different sorts of mediated religious practice in Jainism, with an emphasis on online manifestations. The study of the processes of adaptation and change in religious practice in function of changes in context, in this case media context in particular, illustrates the dynamic flexibility of what used to be seen as static and unchangeable rituals (Langer et al. 2006, Miczek 2007). However, before entering into the assessment of mediated Jain religious practice that forms the main part of this article, it is necessary to address the often problematized and heavily debated role of rituals and devotion in Jainism in general, so as to put the mediated rituals discussed later in this article in their proper context.

2   Introduction: Devotion and Asceticism in Jainism

Jainism is a religious and philosophical tradition which originated on the Indian subcontinent. Academics usually put the beginnings of this tradition in the 6th century BCE and concede that the last of the 24 enlightened teachers or *tīrthaṅkaras*, Lord Mahavira, is a historical figure. Although Jainism has a rich heritage and long tradition, it does not now have a large number of adherents. Presently, there are around 4.5 to 5 million Jains in the world.[1] The community is divided into a lay-community and a community of monks and nuns.

For a long time, Jainism was associated in people's minds with ascetic practices (fasting, pulling out hairs, and naked holy men starving themselves), or alternatively, with the worldly business success of part of the Jain lay community. When it comes to religious practice, it is not all solemn asceticism that makes up Jainism today, as became apparent when I attended a ceremony in a *śvetāmbara* temple in New Delhi, earlier this year:

I was invited to participate in *aṣṭaprakārī* or *aṣṭa dravya pūjā*, together with a group of students studying Jainism. In this ritual, a statue of one of the *tīrthaṅkaras* (also called the *Jina*) is

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1   According to the 2011 census of India, around 4,225,053 Jains lived in India at that time. Many Jains I spoke with believe the real number to be a bit higher, as some do not like to identify themselves as a minority, and prefer to be counted as a minority sect of Hinduism. The Jains in diaspora are not as easy to count. Some may still have Indian or dual nationality and thus be counted in the census, others now hold other nationalities and will not appear in the Indian census. As most countries now no longer include religious affiliation in their census, it is hard to get clear data on the number of adherents to Jainism in any one place. To make an estimate of the numbers of Jains living in the diaspora, researchers have to rely on information of community organizations or educated guesswork (often based on typical Jain family-names). The results of such an exercise usually lie around 250.000 – 350.000. The largest communities are located in the USA, UK, Nepal and Kenya. Smaller communities of Jains are found in South-East Asia, Japan and Belgium. (Jain 2011)

anointed with eight (*aṣṭa*) types of substance (*dravya*). It is a common, but quite elaborate ritual. We all filed in, and sat ourselves down on the marble temple floor facing the icon of the *Jina*. As with most religious activities in Jainism, the ritual started with the reciting of the foundational mantra of Jain religious practice: the *Ṇavkār* (or *Ṇamokār*) mantra. The devotees who were on this occasion to perform the ritual, seemed very anxious to give the observing audience a clear picture of what Jain *pūjā* is about, and started performing the ritual with an air of deep contemplation and perhaps even exaggerated gravitas. When the icon was finally being anointed with the first substances, accompanied by the reciting of prayers and mantras, the room was quiet, full of eager students not wishing to disturb what seemed to us the solemn sanctity of the ritual. All of a sudden, three ladies came in. After a first, slightly awkward look around the room, they had a quick word with the *pūjārī* (temple-attendant), who went off, only to emerge a few minutes later with some musical instruments. The ladies, who obviously knew what they were doing, positioned themselves in front of the icon, and started chanting, singing, and drumming devotional hymns whilst finishing the *dravya pūjā*. Their music filled the entire temple, and the songs featured lyrics addressing the *Jina*, praising him, asking for guidance, and imploring him to take away the bad karma.

A puzzled audience left the temple two hours later, many doubting everything they thought they knew about Jainism: This was not what a student of Jain philosophy and doctrinal text would expect to see and hear. The emphasis on philosophy and asceticism that has long been the standard in Jain studies has given rise to expectations of silent ascetics, sunk deep into contemplation of the self, tranquil temples and adherents in profound meditation. The *Jinas* they contemplate are no longer in this world and so cannot intervene in worldly affairs. They serve only as exemplary human beings and role models and are respected as such. Although asceticism, with practices like fasting, renouncing, and physical expiation, is certainly an aspect, ascetic practice is by no means the full picture of Jainism. Devotional practice (sometimes denoted by the term *bhakti*) such as the *pūjā* and *bhakti*-songs (*bhajan*) described above are a lesser studied and often underrepresented part of Jainism.[2] The experience related above also illustrates that devotional religious practice comes in different brands. John Cort (2002a, p. 85) proposes to view devotional practice as a continuum from sober veneration to frenzied possession, in which case the Jain and Buddhist devotional practices are at one end and cults based on possession by deities at the other. Although one must agree that the Jains perform their rites closer to the pole of sober veneration than to the pole of divine possession, we must allow that there are different styles of veneration within Jainism too. The first part of the *pūjā* described above was done in a very sober way, the ladies that took over half-way through showed us a more exuberant and emotional kind of Jain devotion.

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2   Exceptions to this rule are several articles by John Cort and the work of Whitney Kelting: Cort (2002a, 2002b and 2012) and Kelting (2001 and 2007).

Early indologists and Western scholars of Jainism, on the rare occasions that they did pay attention to elements of practice and devotion, tended to regard any type of devotion in Jainism as a later addition to the original ascetic core of the tradition, heavily influenced by Hinduism and limited to the lay-community (e.g. Jacobi, cited in Cort 2002a, p. 63). The idea that devotional practice is a 'foreign element' in Jainism has recently been eloquently refuted by John Cort (2002a). Even so, understanding the relationship between asceticism and devotion in Jainism poses a challenge to scholars of Jainism and Jains alike. In his work on Jain devotion, Cort does away with the idea that these two forms of practice are opposites or mutually exclusive, stating that "asceticism is done in the spirit of devotion, and devotion is done in the spirit of asceticism", and additionally that "asceticism is also the object of devotional activity" (Cort 2002b, p. 728).

This interconnection instead of resolute bifurcation is also apparent in the relationship of Jain ascetics and devotional practice. The idea that devotional practices in Jainism are an affair of the lay-community only, and that monks and nuns are to be restricted to ascetic practice, is not viable when confronted with everyday reality.[3] Through their vows of non-possession (*aparigraha*), monks and nuns are indeed excluded from performing *pūjā*-ceremonies (Dundas 1992, p. 205). However, some *sādhūs* and *sādhvīs* are famous for writing and singing devotional hymns, and for being the driving force behind temple-building projects.[4] In this way, apart from being an object of devotion for the lay community, they are definitely involved in devotional practices as well, and have been throughout Jain history (Cort 2002a; Dundas1992, p. 205).

For the purpose of this article, I have somewhat artificially divided Jain devotional practice into the following categories: *darśan* or looking upon an icon or holy person, *pūjā* or worship that usually entails ritual offerings, and *bhajan* or devotional music and song. Although this is by no means a controversial subdivision, it is important to note that, online as well as offline, these forms of devotional practice often occur in combination with each other, one entailing the other (as *pūjā* entails *darśan*), or one being a part of another (as *bhajans* are often included in a *pūjā* ceremony). Part one of this article aims to give an impression of the most important mechanics of Jain devotional practice, and traces different developments of mediated practice. In part two, I will situate the three categories of Jain devotional practice further and trace their online presence and adaptations. Part three addresses the use and reception of online devotional websites. By way of

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3   This view was defended by earlier researchers of Jainism such as Johann Georg Buhler and Hermann Jacobi, and still appears in some reference works today (see Cort 2002a, p. 65). In one interview, the person I spoke to argued that the ascetic is indeed the original core of Jainism. He sees the devotional practices as a necessary aide to help the lay devotees focus their minds.

4   A spectacular example of Jain ascetics being the moving force behind temple building projects in modern times is *sādhvī* Shri Gyanmati Mataji, whose visions provided the blueprint for the building of a model of the Jain cosmos and several temples in Hastinapur from the 1970s onwards. Incidentally, the website that informs internet users about the important role of sādhvī Shri Gyanmati Mataji (<http://www.jambudweep.org/>) also holds the biographic information of another Jain *sādhvī*, Shri Chandnamati Mataji, who is famous for writing *bhajan* songs.

conclusion, I reiterate how Jainism on the Internet fits into the larger whole of research on religion online and what additional research might still be necessary.

3   Part I – Jain Devotional Practice

3.1   Introductory notes on Jain devotional practice

In the introduction above, I aimed to illustrate how Jain devotional practice is an integral part of Jainism, and comes in a wide range of shapes and sizes. Although some ceremonies are described in detail in *pūjā* manuals, there are many regional and sectarian variations. None of the Jains I spoke to see this variety and multiplicity as a problem. To paraphrase one of my Indian respondents: "It is not so much what you do as with what mindset you do it." Or as Paul Dundas wrote in the standard handbook on Jainism, "The Jains":

> What is really important in the ritual is to have an appropriate inner, spiritual disposition (*bhāva*) so that, to this extent, an act of worship can only be carried by an individual on his or her own behalf. (Dundas 1992, p. 205)

Just as the ritual actions can vary, the object of veneration in Jainism can be different things, some more abstract than others: souls that have attained liberation (*mokṣa*), scriptures, good conduct, the travelling ascetic, the mendicant leader, the mendicant hierarchy, *Jina*, liberation, spiritual peace, meditative absorption, the holy continent of Nandivara, and *Jina* image and temple (Cort, 2002b, p. 733). When discussing Jain devotional practice, and in particular online Jain devotional practice, the more tangible of these objects of veneration such as *Jina* images, temples and mendicants (meaning Jain monks and nuns) are the ones that will come back most often. The situation becomes more complicated, as not all Jain sects accept all the objects of veneration cited in the list. The most notable difference centers on the veneration of the *Jina* image in a temple. Not all Jain sects perform such worship. The majority of Jain sects are *mūrtipūjak*, meaning that they build temples to house statues of the *Jinas* which they venerate. For these sects, a temple can be a large village or communal temple, but many also have a small shrine or 'temple' at home, housing an icon of the *Jina*. However, other Jain sects do not adhere to this practice. Notably, the *śvetāmbara sthānakvāsī* sect and their offshoot the *śvetāmbara terapanth* reject representations of the *Jinas*, put more emphasis on silent prayer and meditation, and thus have no need of temples either. These sects do build prayer halls for communal ceremonies (Dundas 1992, pp. 200-201). Online forms of

devotional practice which entail visual material representing a *Jina* image are evidently not aimed at these groups.

3.2   Mediated devotional practice in Jainism

We now turn our attention towards mediated devotional practice and find ourselves on contested ground. While some scholars have argued that recent adaptations in ritual traditions as can be perceived online are symptoms of the commodification that will ultimately destroy religious and cultural traditions, others point out that this interpretation is based on an overly static and reified view of what constitutes a tradition (Brosius and Polit 2011, p. 271). Researchers that adhere to this second viewpoint emphasize the dynamic character of rituals and traditions, arguing that processes of transfer[5], adaptation and invention are always, and have always been, at work within them (Miczek 2007, p. 199). Seen in this light, new media technologies may be appreciated as they provide possibilities of diversification and connection to a wider audience (Brosius and Polit 2011, p. 271).

Of course, mediated religious practice was not invented simultaneously with the World Wide Web. Long before the world took its first hesitant steps in cyber space, print media and photography facilitated the first mediated forms of Jain devotional practice. Arguably, these contextual changes had their impact on ritual practice. Indeed, the availability and popularity of different media influence and alter the terms of cultural articulation and practice of which rituals make up an important part (Brosius and Polit 2011, p. 268). In the case of Jainism, photography and printing made it easier for devotees to have pictures of an icon or a guru in their home. This opened up the possibility of indirect *darśan*. In many Jain homes and offices one can still find large framed pictures of the family guru or a respected ascetic, and sometimes also of one of the major holy places of Jainism. Print media made doctrinal texts, but also devotional poetry, hymns, and sermons of ascetics more readily available. The next technologies that enabled new forms of mediated religion, were radio and television. Several Jain radio and television channels and programs have been established in the last decades. While some of the broadcasted content on Jain radio and television wishes to inform or entertain the audience (talk shows, documentary type programs, news, et al.), we also find devotional aspects in the programming: live *bhajan* music, monks and nuns giving sermons, ceremonies (*ārtī* and *pūjā*), and "back to back devotional music from midnight 'till morning".

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5   For an elaboration on ritual transfer, see: Langer, R, Lüddeckens, D, Radde, K, Snoek J 2006, 'Transfer of Ritual', *Journal of Ritual Studies,* vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 1–10.

These different types of media each broadened the scope of mediated devotional practice, deepening the visual and adding an auditory dimension. Today, we see that the Internet has in many ways encompassed these earlier forms of mediated religious practice: a lot of Jain photographic material and printed media are now also accessible online.[6] Radio and television have by now all found their way to online platforms as well. The two most well-known Jain television channels are Paras TV and Mahavira TV Channel. Both broadcast in India, but are available for online viewing elsewhere.[7] Television programs such as US-based Mangalam, are made especially for the Jains living in the diaspora. Mangalam is broadcast in North America and Europe, but all episodes have been uploaded to YouTube, and are offered embedded on the show's website for online viewing.[8] Most Jain radio channels are local stations based in India. However, others aim for a larger, global audience by broadcasting online. Radio Jinvaani[9], advertising itself as the World's first Jain devotional radio broadcasting from Pune is one such radio station, and the astonishingly similar sounding Radio Jinvani[10], self-proclaimed World's first and only Jain radio channel, is another that seems to be quite popular.

The Internet is not just a repository containing the online versions of offline media. The computer has added new possibilities of participation and interaction to mediated ritual practice, as we will see in part two of this article. All of these forms and incarnations of Jainism form part of the interconnected corpus of Jainism-related websites that has been the object of my research in the previous years. When we regard the whole of this corpus, the larger part of websites clearly has a prime informational or organizational objective.

However, in addition to the functions traditionally attributed to the Internet, namely communication and information, the Internet has also clearly become a resource and a space for devotional practice (Hackett 2006, p. 68). An analysis of the "virtual manifestations" of religions through modern media, including their purpose, use, and reception has now become an essential aspect of any attempt to come to grips with the ritual dynamics of different religions.

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6   For example <http://www.jainjagruti.in>.
7   Paras TV has a live-stream and programs on demand service and a large selection of programs on their YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6E1pvhGa55AaZ-svF70ViA>. Mahavira TV channel has some videos embedded in their website and have several you-tube channels (the main one seems to be <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvx4BldWdFkB6qvNEqHCIYA>).
8   <http://mangalamshow.com>.
9   Accessible through <http://www.radiojinvaani.com>.
10   Accessible through <http://www.jainmedialive.com/index.php>.

4   Part II – Types of Jain devotional practice, online and offline

4.1   Darśan

Darśan or "looking" is perhaps the simplest form of worship. Typically, it denotes the devotee who comes to the temple to look upon the icon. Scholars are still debating the ritual mechanisms of *darśan*, mostly in the context of Hinduism (e.g. Gonda 1969, Eck 1981, Babb 1981). Often, it is said to have a transactional, bilateral function: The devotee sees the icon, the icon sees the devotee, and a bond is established between the two. The tradition in *śvetāmbara* temples to adorn the icons and fit them with exuberantly large glass eyes seems to confirm this idea. Yet in hymns and manuals there is no indication of *darśan* being interpreted as a two-way phenomenon (Cort 2012, p. 30). The icon is supposed to be a focal point for the devotees inner contemplations. As the *Jinas* are liberated souls that are no longer present in this world, they cannot simultaneously inhabit the icon to look back at the devotee. *Darśan* is not limited to icons. A devotee can also take *darśan* of a holy place or *tīrth*, or of a guru, monk or nun. When taking *darśan* of a monk or nun, devotees bow very low (*vandana*) and if they are of the same sex, it is customary that they touch the feet of the ascetic. This is often mirrored in temples, with people touching the feet of the icon (where permitted) or the pedestal upon which it stands.

The visual aspect of *darśan* makes it well-suited for use in visual media. On the Internet, *darśan* takes many forms. Online television and YouTube channels provide footage of the holy places like Girnar or the temples of Palitana for mediated *tīrth darśan*, or pilgrimage. Many websites include photo and video galleries full of pictures of *sādhūs*, *sādhvīs*, icons and holy places. In some cases, this kind of album is explicitly titled *sant darśan*, or *e-darśan*. Even when they are denoted simply as 'picture gallery', the typical style of the pictures, especially in the case of pictures of monks and nuns, reveals that they are unmistakably geared towards the devotional. Some of these images have been turned into desktop wallpapers and screensavers available for download as well.

4.2   Pūjā

Pūjā in Sanskrit and Hindi means 'offering, adoration'. The two main categories of *pūjā* in Jainism are *dravya pūjā*, being the offering of substances, and *bhāva pūjā*, which denotes psychic worship. *Dravya pūjā*, like the *aṣṭa dravya pūjā* described at the outset of this article is one of the more elaborate forms of *pūjā* regularly performed by (or in the presence of) the lay community. It consists of the anointing or presenting of the *Jina* with auspicious substances. There are also shorter

and more simple forms, in which a smaller number of substances are offered. *Ārtī* is often taken to be the simplest form of *pūjā*, and consists only of the waving of a lamp in circles in front of the icon. *Pūjā* is not limited to a sequence of actions. *Pūjā* manuals prescribe hymns and incantations which form part of the ritual. Other, often very elaborate, rituals which are tied up with specific holy days or the installing of a new icon are beyond the scope of this article, as they have no online variant.

Dravya pūjā has found its way to the Internet as well. YouTube and online television channels enable computer users to watch *pūjā* on their computer screens. Some websites take it one step further and include software that lets the user perform the rites on the statue him or herself. In this case, an icon, often a depiction of an existing icon rather than a computer generated image, appears on the screen. The user can dip the cursor in a bowl of saffron paste depicted next to or under the icon, and apply this to the icon by clicking. Similarly he can drag the cursor to deposit flowers in front of the statue, sway a burning oil lamp or candle in front of the icon and so on. More often than not, this is accompanied by devotional music and song. Some websites take extra care to replicate the temple experience, asking users to ring the electronic temple bell trice and recite or listen to the *ṇamokār* mantra sound file before starting the ritual.

On the website of a Jain temple in Rajasthan,[11] the Internet user is invited to perform *ārtī*. Once the visitor clicks on the button 'online *ārtī*' in the menu, *bhajan* music starts playing, and the image of Lord Nakodajī appears on the screen. Next to the idol, different buttons depict the temple bell, flowers, sandal or saffron paste, incense, an oil lamp and a coconut. The user is now free to perform *ārtī* at his or her own discretion. Other e-temples offer a more simple *pūjā*, with less agency for the user. One website[12] only allows the user to click, drag and offer some flowers to an icon of the *Jina*. Then, after clicking the 'do pooja' button, the icon is automatically anointed with saffron (or sandalwood) paste. The full *aṣṭa dravya pūjā,* like the one I observed in Delhi, can be performed online on <http://www.jainuniversity.org/>. Each of the substances, when clicked, starts a new hymn.

4.3   Bhajan

Devotional songs and poetry are an important part of Jain devotional practice. Typically considered the domain of women rather than men, *bhajan* music is very popular, and a number of the ladies I spoke to in India and Europe regularly take part in some sort of formal or informal *bhajan* group. These devotional songs are sometimes sung and/or played at home, but originally most are meant to

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11   <www.shreenakoda.com>.
12   <www.jain.8m.com>.

be part of a ritual in the temple or prayer hall.[13] The topic of the songs varies, but often the lyrics contain pleas to a *tīrthāṅkara* for help and guidance:

> Inner Lord, hear my song, the glory of the Three Worlds is yours. Hearing you, I came to your door, you carry me across the sorrow of birth and death. Do this for your servant, O King, give us the joy of liberation. O Lord! O Gem of Shankheshvar, Sahib, pay attention to this request Says Jinaharsa, rescue me, your servant, from the sea of emotions, Do this for your servant, O King, give us the joy of liberation. O Lord! (Shankheshvar Parshvanath Stavan, cited in Kelting 2001, p.133-34)

Online *bhajan* and *bhajan* downloads are probably the most widespread devotional resources online. Online radio stations broadcast devotional songs whenever they have no other programs running (typically through the night). Other websites offer a large array of audio files that can be listened to online. Lastly, some websites offer downloadable audio-files of *bhajans* (and also sermons). Some of these websites try to create a serious environment and seem to offer these downloads by way of aide of worship at home or religious teaching, others offer the more popular hymns as ringtones or background music.

5   Part III – Reception and Perception of Online Jainism

In what preceded, I have presented an overview of what kinds of Jain devotional practices there are, and how they translate into an online environment. But what is the purpose of online religion? And, relatedly, who do websites offering the opportunities for online devotional practice aim to reach, and how are they received and used by the people who they are meant for? Whereas information on purpose and target audience can be found readily available on most websites, their use and reception are more difficult to deduce. In a series of some 25 exploratory interviews at different locations, I have asked the opinions of practicing Jains from different sects and backgrounds on online rituals and resources. This information, supplemented with existing research on online religious practice in other (South-Asian) traditions, gives us some idea of the role and use of the websites described above.

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13   For a more elaborate reading of the role of women in Jain devotional practice, and the role of devotional music in Jainism in general, see Kelting 2001.

5.1   Purpose and Target Audience

To learn more about the purpose and target-audience of websites offering Jain devotional resources, it pays to start with a look in the websites' 'about us' section. One of the *pūjā* websites has the following statement of purpose:

> The purpose of creating Pooja Software was to avail the opportunity to do pooja in many tirths[14] at any time, any place, and for everyone. Our main purpose behind this Pooja is that there are many people who are not financially sound and old people who can't travel long distance can also do pooja. (<www.jain.8m.com>)

Another website offering Jain screensavers in exchange for a donation to charity claims Jain Desktop wallpapers and screensavers have…

> … also proved as an excellent source for the aged and elderly people to gain darshan (worship) right at their place; and for those who find it difficult to undertake yatra (religious tour) and visit Jain temples due to age factor. (<http://www.nirmaldosti.com/screensaver/index1.html>)

The two statements of purpose above give the impression that the online rituals are mostly a convenient plan B for people who are otherwise unable to go to a temple, guru or holy place, such as the elderly or the poor. Other websites put more emphasis on novel ways of incorporating the religious into the devotees daily routine at work and at home, perhaps complementary to worship in a temple. Or as Radio Jinvani's YouTube channel claims*:* "Experience elevation through Jain stavans and profound recitations"[15]. On downloadable picture material and wallpapers, one website claims:

> Desktop Wallpaper of Gods, Gurus and Holy Places on our working desktops are a way to reassert their subtle presence in our day to day life. The belief that the power of the God or the Guru above will keep us safe and at peace instigates us to keep there (sic) presence always in our life. To effuse your working atmosphere with a divine presence grace your desktop with the Desktop Wallpaper of Shree   Dharmachakra   Prabhav   Tirth.   (<http://dharmachakra.in/Downloads/Jain-Desktop-Wallpapers.aspx>)

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14 A tīrth is a place that is considered holy, often because one of the 24 teachers of Jainism was born, died or attained liberation there. It is considered auspicious to go on pilgrimages to visit these places. Such pilgrimages are called tīrth-yātrā.

15 <https://www.youtube.com/user/JAINRADIO24x7/about>.

5.2   Reception and Use

Although the Internet features an increasing number of websites offering devotional practices and resources, the existence of these is hardly evidence of their popularity, reception, and use. The number of hits on a particular website is often traceable, but this does not necessarily inform us on the intent of the users behind these hits. For example, one particular website hosting online *pūjā* boasts over 650 hits since 2010.[16] Apart from that being a relatively low number, one can wonder how many of these hits were people who actually performed the *pūjā* with a Jain devotional mindset. The statistics of this website reveal five hits from Belgium in the previous year. I am pretty sure my own research accounts for all of these.

> This raises a key issue and concern when studying religion on the Internet: What action or online activity can be considered a genuine religious action? How is it possible to determine if the people practicing forms of online religion are in fact conducting actual religious activities and having genuine religious experiences? As ritual studies recognize, it is not merely the action that makes an activity religious, rather it is the intent behind the action that gives it its religious significance. (Helland 2005, p. 6)

Indeed, the statements of purpose do not simply translate into patterns of reception and use. Although, to my knowledge, none of the existing research has specifically addressed the case of Jainism, research on online devotional practice in other South Asian religions has brought to light some of the common limitations of, and possible objections to, computer mediated religion. In her research on Sai Baba devotion on the Internet, Sophie Hawkins (1999) notes that the absence of the tactile and social aspects of ritual through online platforms can be grounds for objection. Discussing Vaishnava online *pūjā* in the USA, Nicole Karapanagiotis (2010) recorded problems of ritual purity of the online content, the users' computer and the user him or herself. Both these objections resonate in the discussions I had with Jains from different backgrounds, and essentially center on the dichotomies of sacred/profane and real/virtual that have become severely challenged in the contemporary context (Jacobs 2007, pp. 1103-1106).

   With one or two exceptions, all my respondents were aware of the existence of the possibilities of online *pūjā*, *darśan* and *bhajan*, but none of the people I spoke to so far have admitted to making use of online *pūjā* as part of their regular ritual practice. From the discussions I have had with Jains in different places and from different sectarian backgrounds, I learned that these online practices are not denounced, but neither are they generally accepted as an equal alternative for offline devotional practice. For many, there was a general feeling of things being out of context.

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16   <www.jain.8m.com>.

The smells of incense and flowers, the ringing of the temple bell, the sound of the voices of other devotees singing different *bhajans*, the view of the temple as the devotee approaches for morning worship, the touching of the icon or a guru's feet,… These and other such impressions lack in (computer) mediated *darśan* and *pūjā*. A number of my respondents in India indicated that they saw online *darśan* and *pūjā* mostly as for Jains living abroad, meaning far removed from (or too busy to go to) actual temples and gurus.

Some also expressed doubt about the possibility of being in the right mindset for worship when surfing the Internet. The environment in which devotional practice takes place has its impact on the inner, spiritual disposition (*bhāva*) of the devotee, which is the most important parameter in devotional practice. Inappropriate elements might be invasive commercial adds on the website or work stored on the computer that might grab the devotees attention or compel him or her to rush through rituals. This doubt echoes the ritual purity argument that became apparent in Nicole Karapanagiotis's (2010) analyses, and also relates to the commodification of religion and religious practice.

So, although online *bhajans, darśan* and *pūjā* are not denounced, there are a number of possible grounds for the contestation of these practices in online environments. At least in the eyes of most of my respondents, in the case of Jainism, online religious practice is not (yet) an organic extension of the offline religious experience. One of my respondents in Delhi illustrated this dual attitude very well. This man had a devotional hymn as a ringtone on his mobile phone, but, when asked about this, he indicated that "our hymns really shouldn't be used as such".

6   Conclusion and Discussion: Online Jainism and Jainism Online

In recent years there has been some excellent scholarship on Christianity and Islam online, and research focusing on Hinduism's online enunciations is catching up. Because of the vast difference in size of the respective communities, in religious organization and in ritual mechanisms, it is difficult to compare the online presence of Jainism with that of other religious traditions. However, it is necessary to situate Jainism in the broader context of the study of religion on the Internet. One of the most used theoretical frameworks for analyzing religion on the Internet is Christopher Helland's online religion/religion online continuum.

> The term 'online religion' refers to the actual participation in religion on the Internet. This can include activities ranging from the spinning of Buddhist cyber-prayer wheels and the attending of webcast Catholic masses, to the offering of virtual flowers to gurus and spiritual masters, or e-mailing one's

prayers to God. In contrast, the term 'religion online' refers to the information about various religious traditions and groups that is present on the Internet (Karapanagiotis, 2010, p. 179).

In a reprise of his original article prompted by the critical remarks of Glen Young (2004), Christopher Helland further elaborated on the online religion/religion online continuum, placing more emphasis on participation and interactivity as prerequisites for true online religion (Helland 2005). This new emphasis complicates matters when we want to place Jainism in the online religion/religion online framework.

When researching Jainism's online presence there are a few things that immediately become apparent. First, although only about 5% of Jains live outside India, more than half of the findable websites concerning Jainism are hosted outside India. Most of these are hosted by Jain individuals or organizations in the diaspora. The Jain diaspora, and especially the Jains living in the USA, play a major role in the representation of Jainism online. The language used on most of these websites is English. Only very few websites make exclusive use of Hindi or Gujarati. Second, the vast majority of websites have the prime objective to inform Jains and non-Jains on Jainism and its ethical system or 'the Jain way of life' and so fall into the category of religion online, rather than online religion. Third, although most websites nowadays have some form of interactive system (ranging from a newsletter one can subscribe to, via presence on Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, to message boards and forums), the level of interaction and discussion on most of these is rather low.

When we look specifically at websites containing elements that may be used for religious devotional practice, we find that these constitute only a relatively small part of the corpus. The most prevalent in this category are websites exclusively devoted to, or including a section on, devotional music or *bhajans*. The second most prevalent category is websites including picture galleries containing snapshots, posters and video footage of monks, nuns, icons and places of pilgrimage (such as Girnar, Palitana (Satrunjaya), and Hastinapur). Although footage and radio broadcasts of *pūjā*-ceremonies are part of the programming of Jain radio and television channels online and offline, websites enabling the individual PC user to perform *pūjā* on the Internet are more rare.

Although online *darśan* and *pūjā* are certainly online ritual activities - and I would argue are closer to online religion than to religion online – they are asynchronous[17], and the level of interactivity and participation involved is rather low. The user may in some cases be the one performing ritual actions by clicking on icons, but he or she does not decide what the icons are. None of the websites I found gave the devotee the possibility to communicate or share their experience. Although most websites in the corpus have some interactive features, these are almost exclusively informational and do not include elements of devotional practice. Collective,

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17 For more on the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous ritual interaction, see: Jacobs, S 2007, p. 1111.

synchronous, online devotional practices like the prayer meetings described by scholars researching online Christianity such as Campbell (2005) and Young (2004) do not occur in the case of Jainism.

When it comes to Jainism's devotional aspects and Jainism's online presence, there is still more work to be done. Although most of my respondents knew of the existence of websites offering devotional music, picture materials and software, none of them had ever performed online *pūjā*. To fully come to terms with the reception and use of the websites discussed above, a broader survey is necessary, supplemented by interviews with users as well as content providers, before we can attempt a complete interpretation and conclusion on the different aspects of the computer mediated practice of Jainism.

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Biographical Note

TINE VEKEMANS works as a doctoral researcher at the Department for Languages and Cultures at the University of Ghent, Belgium. She holds a master's degree in Indian languages and Cultures. After spending five years working as an interpreter and social assistant for South Asian migrants in Belgium, she returned to Ghent University to pursue a PhD. Her research focuses on the intersections of migration, religion and media. The case she analyses is that of Jainism. Her other interests include contemporary South-Asian politics, migration law, and political philosophy.

Dra. Tine Vekemans
Faculty of Arts and Philosophy
Department of Languages and Cultures – Indian Languages and Cultures
Ghent University
Blandijnberg 2
9000 Ghent
Belgium
Tine.Vekemans@ugent.be