

**DIGITAL SPACES, PANDEMIC RESPONSES: CASE STUDY OF THE JAIN COMMUNITY OF MUMBAI****Dr.Hemali Sanghavi***Head Department of History & Dean Academic Affairs,  
K.J.Somaiya College of Arts & Commerce Autonomous, Mumbai***Abstract**

*Covid 19 pandemic has generated unusual condition all over the world. Safety and survival have been the most important concerns. However, responses to the crises differ in degrees and ways. Again as a religious community the responses become unique. The paper explores the digital spaces carved by the Jain community in Mumbai in response to Covid 19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. It looks at the tensions of the external crises and the challenges of preservation of intrinsic principles of the religion. Revivalism and makeover are immediate trends. Globalisation and slobalisation seem to be fused in responses. These interactions definitely provide contemporary historiographical analysis of the Jain community of Bombay. The emergent picture is that of the community going through the phase of transition.*

**Keywords:** Jain community, pandemic, Mumbai, Digital Spaces



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**Introduction**

Epidemics and pandemics have tendencies to change lifestyles. The immediate response to pandemic is safety. While fighting for survival certain temporary responses are generated which history shows become habits over the passage of time. Covid 19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown can be looked from this perspective. Again local and specific cultural reactions are studied from the point of view of the Jains in Mumbai.

**Literature Review**

The present study is set in the context of the present ongoing Covid pandemic. It talks about the digital spaces. Hence most of the references are derived and dependant on the internet sites and posts. The paper also captures the debates related to globalisation and slobalisation. As the research is embedded in the context of the Jain community the works on the Jain studies have been referred and contextualised in the context of the contemporary studies. Sherry Fohr to illustrate in her publication *Jainism: a guide for the perplexed* worked on well-known narratives that have taught modern Jains their values. Lawrence Babb in his study *Understanding Jainism* shows how Jain mendicants and laypeople actually engage with their principles, mediate their religious practices and beliefs through other aspects of their identities, and live with apparent contradictions between doctrine and practice.

**Objective**

Covid 19 pandemic in India became widespread in March 2020. Indian government in view of the safety of the citizens and for curbing the spread of the disease as it spreads through social contact declared lockdown in the country. Under the lockdown guidelines all the religious places were closed to avoid large gatherings of the people. The crisis situation necessitated spiritual solace but which was not available due to the crisis itself. Different religious communities responded to this situation in different ways. An attempt to understand the creation of the digital spaces as the Jain



response is made in this paper. The discussion becomes important in the context that the twenty-first century has clearly seen religion resurgent on the world stage in all areas of life and in different global contexts.

### **Scope**

The diseases change the social interactions of the affected. The fear of the disease is equally influential factor which brings out change in the psychological and social interactions. As Covid 19 pandemic spreads through physical contact, the concept of social distancing began to be practised. This implied the loss of social spaces for the individuals. There was no option but to switch over to the online spaces or digital spaces.

### **Research Methodology**

The research paper follows the historical method. It traces the historical evolution of the Jain community of Mumbai. Ethnographical approach for the study of the living community brings greater insight into the particular community responses. Interestingly the pandemic and globalisation makes many of the responses uniform. Putting together globalisation and ethnographical perspectives, the study is helping to bring about interesting conclusion.

### **Digital spaces**

Digital spaces imply spaces which are accessed through internet. What sap, Face book, Instagram, YouTube, twitter, ticktock are some of the widely popular digital spaces in India. While these spaces already existed and widely used, Covid 19 pandemic made them the only available spaces for the communication and social interaction. It was in a way challenging condition for traditional religions. Traditionally religions are characterised by hierarchy. However, in case of the Jain community the ascetics and lay people are considered equally important components. Pandemic condition broke the connection between the ascetics and laypeople. This has created the laypeople dominant religious scenario.

### **Online talks**

It is not just the actors in the religious set up that has been changed over. The forms of expression, discussion and the spaces have also been replaced. Online talks, Face book live telecasts and YouTube live streaming is becoming common. One may think that this may be temporary scenario. The mankind history is full of incidents that the patterns emerging from disasters, whether natural or man made over the passage of time become part of lifestyle.

### **Online competitions**

Many of the Jain associations became active in digital spaces. Organisation of online competitions, games and quizzes on the religious themes have successfully involved the younger generation in the religious domain. Loneliness syndrome generated by lockdown created spaces for such activities and has resulted in explosion of online activities.. However, the senior citizens and elderly are not able to catch up with this upsurge. Now let's try to analyse the forces and counter forces working in these responses.

Covid 19 could become widespread due to the expanding Globalisation. The restrictions, practise of social distancing to prevent the spread of pandemic are partly holding back globalisation and facilitating slobalisation. But technology as a connector is promoting global connectivity. So the Jain response to Covid 19 turns out to be complex and multilayered. While like the larger Indian response there is physical disconnection from the outer world, the virtual connectivity to the world through technology has increased in greater proportions. The analysis of the Jain response in this context can bring interesting insights. Historically the Jains in Mumbai have been prompt to pick up the opportunity offered by the growing metropolis. Their well to do status has made it possible to have internet access.

The lockdown situation has led to questioning of the globalisation discourse. Globalisation is looked as the contributing



factor to the Covid 19 pandemic. The nationalistic response is emerging to counter the situation. These responses at the local and community level are showing variations. In case of the Jain community of Mumbai the trend of revivalism can be seen. The crisis situation suddenly resulted in the rejection of the global discourse and the traditionalistic approach emerged. The minority status of the community might have turned out to be contributing factor. The response of the Buddhist also runs on similar lines. There is revisiting of the ancient values. Covid 19 situation like most crises created push towards spirituality. The trend is characterised by revivalism. The tendency is towards the consideration of the basic principles of the Jain religion as solace for the mounting crisis.

However, the expressions and the symbols used are not of traditional nature. The ideas and the themes of the activities are from the tradition but the expression modes are contemporary. The modes are technology driven. There is acceptability of the medical prescriptions and precautions. One can also sense the disconnection of the ascetics from the larger community due to restrictions over physical and social communication. The voices of the common Jains and scholars are gaining space and popularity with the expanding digital spaces.

### **Conclusion**

This balance of tradition and modernity, fusion of religion and science, combination of the old and new has marked the Jain community response. The possible explanation as emerges from the phenomenon is that the pressures of globalisation might have been the background factor. The activities which are of demonstrative nature are gaining popularity in the community. The paper therapy explores pertinent questions and issues related to religious spaces particularly in the context of contemporary crisis. The digital spaces unfold multiple narratives of the Jain community.

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