Ahiṃsā in and within words

Conversations on Jain practices in Italy and southern Europe

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Based on ethnographic research titled 'Distinctive Values and Non-Violent Practices of Jainism and "Jainness" in Southern Europe,' the article analyses the discourses on ahiṃsā of people who born into the Jain tradition or who have converted to Jainism in Italy and Southern Europe. Although the ethnographic material and the collected stories are much richer than the line of interpretation I have given to their partial restitution in this context, I have analysed them through two lenses: Ahiṃsā *in words* and Ahiṃsā *within words*. The first kind of discursive non-violence, Ahiṃsā *in Words*, is generally shaped like a *narrative of non-violence* recounting specific episodes and concrete situations. It is a way of putting the practice of non-violence in dialogical form. The second kind of discursive non-violence, Ahiṃsā *within words*, concerns the various ethical, philosophical, and spiritual conceptions of non-violence and the need to aptly describe it and understand it verbally. It refers to an ongoing process of clarification, characterised by a continuous exercise of critical reflexivity on the part of the speaker, as manifested in proxemics and in the mannerisms of speech. Non-violent speech thus becomes an enacted reflection visible in different aspects of daily life, such as education, dietary practices, and daily choices.

Keywords: *Ahiṃsā* (Non-violence); Jainism; Religious minority; Conversion; Southern Europe.

1. Introduction

I began working on a research study titled 'Distinctive Values and Non-Violent Practices of Jainism and "Jainness" in southern Europe' in early 2024, aimed at exploring the distinctive values and practices of people who born into the Jain tradition or who have converted to Jainism in a specific area, that is Italy

and Southern Europe.[1] In the project Jain practices have been studied as an epistemological lens and a point of cultural intersection capable of integrating both the institutional and subjective orders of spirituality. From this perspective, the practice of Jainism has consisted of a constellation of material, bodily and discursive elements held together over time and recognised at an intersubjective level (Domaneschi 2025: 125). I have therefore observed a reciprocal influence between shared and subjective, tacit and public meanings, constituted as much by daily rituals as by collective ones punctuated over time. Jain practices were thus studied within a framework of rules capable of anchoring practitioners to certain procedural and normative aspects of the spiritual canon, whilst at the same time valuing the creative aspects of individual subjectivities (Domaneschi 2025: 170–171).

The project, which was promoted by the University of Turin in collaboration with the Jain Academic Foundation of North America (JAFNA), activated two two-year research grants, established the University of Turin Centre of Jain Studies, and set up two Jainism-related academic courses: 'Values and Practices of Jainism: An Introduction' and 'An Introduction to South Asian Anthropology, with a focus on Jainism.'[2] This research engaged a team of scholars with diverse and complementary skills, and with a varied disciplinary background comprising Anthropology, Indology, Cultural studies, Humanities, and the Exegesis of canonical texts. It thus gave the researchers the opportunity to combine their knowledge base, enriching their skill set and enhancing interdisciplinary scientific collaboration.[3]

[1] I would like to express my gratitude to the reviewers, both anonymous and named, and to my colleagues on the SEVA team for their willingness to engage in ongoing intellectual dialogue. My heartfelt thanks go to all the Jains who took part in the research and made it possible.

[2] These two academic courses, 'Values and Practices of Jainism: An Introduction' taught by Erika Caranti and 'Introduction to South Asian Anthropology, with a Focus on Jainism' (borrowed from 'Anthropology of India') taught by Sara Roncaglia, debuted at University of Torino during the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 academic years.

[3] The project was launched in 2024 under the scientific coordination of Professor Alessandra Consolaro and involved the participation of the SEVA research group. This is an acronym formed from the initials of the scholars who make up the group: **S**ara Roncaglia, **E**rika Caranti, **V**eronica Ghirardi and **A**lessandra Consolaro. Prof. Gianni Pellegrini joined the group in 2025. As part of the project, the Centre of Jain Studies was established to engage and collaborate with local communities, organisations and institutions to promote applied learning. Particular focus was placed on establishing a dialogue with other European universities and institutions specialising in Jain Studies, and Studies on Non-Violence with the aim of promoting intellectual exchange and identifying areas of common research interest. Further information can be found at https://jainitaly.eu/.

2. A religious minority

A preliminary exploration of Jains in Italy has shown that the presence of this particular cultural group is quite limited and is mainly characterised by single individuals and very few families. The relatively small number of Jains on Italian soil is also confirmed by the demographic data on the presence of immigrants from South Asia, based on data on foreign residents collected by the National Institute of Statistics on a yearly basis.

REGION	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	%MALE	% FEMALE	% ON TOTAL INDIANS
LOMBARDIA	27.953	23.922	51.875	53,9	46,1	26,7
LAZIO	20.275	12.960	33.235	61,0	39,0	17,1
ABRUZZO	12.687	7.045	19.732	64,3	35,7	10,1
EMILIA-ROMAGNA	10.087	8.496	18.583	54,3	45,7	9,6
VENETO	10.624	7.887	18.511	57,4	42,6	9,5
CAMPANIA	5.717	3.312	9.029	63,3	36,7	4,6
PIEMONTE	3.705	2.705	6.410	57,8	42,2	3,3
TOSCANA	3.091	3.105	6.196	49,9	50,1	3,2
UMBRIA	3.091	3.105	6.196	49,9	50,1	3,2
CALABRIA	2.802	1.425	4.227	66,3	33,7	2,2
PUGLIA	2.726	1.480	4.206	64,8	35,2	2,2
FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA	2.048	1.465	3.513	58,3	41,7	1,8
MARCHE	1.856	1.630	3.486	53,2	46,8	1,8
TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE	1.818	1.073	2.891	62,9	37,1	1,5
SICILIA	1.325	992	2.317	57,2	42,8	1,2
LIGURIA	1.064	1.091	2.155	49,4	50,6	1,1
BASILICATA	624	253	877	71,2	28,8	0,5
SARDEGNA	323	213	536	60,3	39,7	0,3
MOLISE	285	192	477	59,7	40,3	0,2
VALLE D'AOSTA	33	27	60	55,0	45,0	0,0
TOTAL	112.134	82.378	194.512	57,6	42,4	100,0

Table 1. The presence of migrants from India in the Regions of Italy in year 2024 (source: National Institute of Statistics, https://demo.istat.it/)

As the Italian national census does not collect information on religious affiliation, current statistical estimates make it impossible to quantify precisely how many Jains are living in Italy. However, ethnographic research has revealed that Jain migration to Italy is a fairly recent phenomenon. We are dealing with a complex social and cultural reality, which is difficult to define along the lines of the categories featured in extant databases (nationality, country of birth, etc.). Considering the ethnographic data collected during the research, I decided to adopt the category of religious minority as the most meaningful interpretative parameter. This concept can be viewed from multiple perspectives, mainly historical, philosophical and legal, but in this case, I propose to understand it according to its historical and anthropological characteristics. Religious plurality is a consistent dimension of human society which, although it has historically taken on different forms, generally presents itself in any social context as a cultural landscape in which many religious minorities exist along a dominant religious majority. These minorities are cultural constructs that are either accepted or rejected by the nation-state, thereby legitimising the boundaries of the majority and its identity in relation to them. Thus, the religious minority is defined dialectically in relation to the majority, through a process of negotiation that legitimises or negates its self-determination. In the case of the Jain minority in Italy, the following aspects were taken into account: the limited number of believers, their perception of themselves in relation to the Italian religious context, their relations with other faiths, the distinctive values and practices that preserve their subjectivity, and also their multiple places of origin (both in India and within the Indian diaspora), professional backgrounds, as well as the presence of Italian converts. Adopting the religious minority as a guiding concept has proven to be better suited than other useful euristic frameworks, such as the diaspora paradigm (Dufoix 2001) or mobility paradigm (Sheller, Urry 2006), to highlight individual paths, rather than collective ones, within a complex and loosely connected cultural and social entity, and to explore the variety of practices, devotional expressions, biographical choices and ethical issues I encountered during the field work.

This criterion is also more attuned to the dual nature of the Jains' minority status: it is *a minority within a minority*, and this is true both in India and in the diaspora. According to Paul Dundas, at the beginning of the 21st century, approximately 100,000 Jains were living outside of India, of whom around 25,000–30,000 were living in Europe, 20,000 in Africa, over 45,000 in North America, and 5,000 in the rest of Asia (Dundas 2002: 271). Prakash C. Jain's study of the demographic profile of Jain communities estimated that the main places of residence were Great Britain, Belgium, East African countries, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, although the majority reside in the United States (P. C. Jain 2011: 99–100).

In the Italian case, this minority group can be broken down into subgroups according to three specific traits. The first of these traits is religious conversion, as among Jains in Italy there are also Italians who have converted to Jainism. People belonging to this subgroup often recount their discovery of Jainism as the outcome of complex spiritual journeys that have come to define their biographies. Most of them have in common a profound concern and compassion for all human and animal suffering, which has led them to search for a form of spirituality that could encompass a personal soteriology, a keen environmental awareness, and the moral imperative to protect all living beings. In their interviews, many of them tell of having felt a strong empathy for the suffering of others since early childhood, and of having always felt compelled to try to remedy it their own creative way. For example, one Italian lady attempted to build little wooden bridges to allow small insects living in the logs used as fuel for the home stove to help them escape the blast of the fire. Another interviewee, the daughter of a professional fisherman, was pained by the death of fish ever since she was a child. Growing up, these people's path to Jainism often intertwined with their resolve to join organised animal protection efforts, adhering to the Italian anti-vivisection movement, volunteering to rescue abused animals, or participating in organisations that monitor living conditions in slaughterhouses and intensive farms. Jainism's philosophy, which embraces a rigorous ethic of individual purification that emphasises non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) as the cornerstone of interrelationships between all living beings, thus provides a broader framework of meaning for their efforts. It translated their youthful drive into a generative spiritual creed that combined empathy with rigorous logic.

The second trait pertains to the experience of professional mobility and migration, and it mainly involves Indian migrants and expats who have chosen to settle in Italy, either permanently or temporarily. This category is particularly stratified because it includes professionals who often travel abroad for work and have left their families in India or elsewhere within the global Indian diaspora, as well as mixed heritage families, consisting of couples where one spouse is Italian and the other is Indian, with children born in both Italy and India. These children generally receive a form of dual spiritual education, which combines Jainism and Christian-Catholic values. As the people interviewed have been keen to point out, this educational effort is carried out without coercion: "The children learn every day, slowly and by example." The main Jain festivals are celebrated alongside Divālī, Holi and Christmas, reflecting a delicate balance within a diverse set of values and practices. Finally, this subgroup also includes Indian university students who have embarked on an academic career in Italy thanks to scholarships provided by the Italian Ministry of Education. They are typically students pursuing careers in STEM subjects, such as engineering, mathematics and economics, and they remain in Italy either for their entire higher education (bachelor's and master's degrees) or only for part of it

(master's degree), but some also apply for a PhD. During their academic careers, some have seized the opportunity to study abroad through the Erasmus programme, engaging with a variety of European universities, languages, cultural expressions and ways of life. Here, partly due to the lack of a strong Jain community in the places they reside, their perspective on Jainism veers towards the subjective, with an emphasis on the ethical dimensions of Jainism, such as leading a non-violent life, adopting an environmentally friendly lifestyle, showing kindness to all living beings and tolerance towards those with different beliefs. People in this subgroup tend to highlight the practical and scientific aspects of Jainism over the strictly devotional ones. This does not necessarily imply distancing oneself from daily devotional practices but rather entails being fully aware of one's intentions and mental state with regard to the repetitiveness of ritualistic sequences (Brett 2012; Iseli 2015; Pogačnik 2018; Vallely 2002).

The third specific trait is a certain degree of scholarly engagement, the peculiarity of a subgroup of Italian Jains that encompasses both Italian and Indian scholars who have devoted themselves to the study of Jainism, to the translation of Jain texts and to the furthering of interreligious dialogue, either as an academic pursuit or purely out of personal interest. There is a particular prevalence of Italian converts in this subgroup, who have combined their spiritual journey with their scientific pursuits to fruitful effect. Their aim is to deepen their understanding of the key principles, history and doctrine of Jainism, and to share their knowledge as an act of devotion. This can be a lifelong journey, one often carried out under the supervision of Indian Jain gurus, who, through online and face-to-face meetings, open up a dialogue on the scriptures and the contemporary practice of Jainism. Examples of this trend include texts such as *Il jainismo. La più antica dottrina della non violenza, della compassione e dell'ecologia* (*Jainism. The Oldest Doctrine of Non-Violence, Compassion, and Ecology*, Pastorino and Tettamanti 2002) by Claudia Pastorino and Massimo Tettamanti, and the translation from English into Italian of the *Saman Suttam* by Claudia Pastorino (Pastorino 2001). However, others are the result of academic reflection, such as Vanessa Danna's article on Indian jurisprudence regarding sallekhanā, "La questione dell'antigiuridicità del Santhārā jainista: digiuno rituale e diritto alla vita in India" (*The Question of the Illegality of Jain Santhārā: Ritual Fasting and the Right to Life in India*, Danna 2024), and Pietro Chierichetti's translation from Sanskrit into Italian of the *Tattvārthasūtra* (Chierichetti 2017). While different from the experiences of converts to Jainism, this academic path leaves transformative traces in the daily lives of scholars devoted to such studies.

3. Ethnography, biography, digital

Starting in the 1980s, Jain Studies underwent an anthropological shift, as evidenced by the research of Marcus Banks (Banks 1986), John Cort (Cort 1990, 2001) and Paul Dundas (Dundas 1992). The focus

shifted from the exegesis of canonical texts to the ethnography of the practices, values, and everyday cultural expressions of lay Jains. More recently, as this "disjunction between philological and anthropological studies" (Folkert and Cort 1997: 346) took hold, a growing interest developed in the field around the concept of Jainism as a 'lived religion', which was introduced in religious studies by Robert Orsi (Orsi 1997, 2002) as a means of interpreting actions, ideas and rituals that lack textual coherence, yet are adopted throughout childhood and adulthood drawing from an oral tradition and the example of kith and kin within a community of faith (see also McGuire 2008, Flügel 2005, Brivio, González Díez, Gusman 2025).[4] The ethnographic method I adopted for my own fieldwork has been purely qualitative, as I navigated personal networks within the loosely knit Italian Jain-related universe that I described earlier, in order to build relationships with viable respondents and especially to intercept persons willing to engage in longer in-depth conversations. Claudia Pastorino, an Italian Jain whom I contacted a few years ago while making a preliminary survey of people engaging with Jainism publicly, is worthy of particular recognition, as she has been very forthcoming from the beginning and has generously offered me invaluable support during the entire span of my research.

My approach to the field has thus strived to explore the distinctive values and practices of the Jains in Italy and southern Europe primarily by listening to their life stories and personal experiences. By engaging in an open-ended reflection on Jainism as a 'lived religion,' I sought to stimulate a proactive effort on the part of the respondents to recount their experiences in their own words, as they understood and recounted their own perspectives, cognitive processes and personal agendas. Furthermore, this study marks a significant departure from my own previous research experience, as it is the first time that I had to carry out field research primarily through online meetings.[5] The decision to resort to digital ethnography was influenced by various factors, such as the preference of some respondents for online preliminary 'get to know you' meetings, the geographical distance between participants, and the enduring impact of the global pandemic on social interaction practices. All this has prompted some considerations on the digital medium and its impact on research practices, as well as on the interpretation of ethnographic data.

[4] The anthropological turn has involved several generations of scholars, who have focused their research on distinct topics. I would like to mention in particular a number of female scholars who have been prominent in this field, including Whitney Kelting, Anne Vallely, and Tine Vekemans, who have produced important ethnographic studies on ascetic communities, women in Jainism, dietary practices in the diaspora, and the significance of digital technology in Jain practice (Vallely 2002; Kelting 2001, 2009; Vekemans 2022).

[5] This topic has been extensively explored in contemporary literature. In the Jain studies, the pivotal study by Tine Vekemans is worth mentioning (Vekemans 2022).

In order to aptly describe these, it is best to first take a step back. The genesis of this research on Jains can be traced back to a theoretical premise proposed by John Cort in the 1990s, as he outlined it in his seminal article 'Models of and for the Study of the Jains,' in which he distinguishes the 'study of the Jains' from 'the study of Jainism:'

> The former involves the study of the religious practices and beliefs of the people who call themselves Jains, whereas the latter involves the study of that set of interrelated tenets, dogmas, and ideologies within Indian intellectual history which are known as Jainism (Cort 1990: 43).

Cort's theoretical framework underscores the necessity to refrain from interpreting the practices and beliefs of individuals identifying as Jains in accordance with a preconceived model derived from the analysis and study of the canonical texts of Jainism. Instead, it advocates for an emic approach, wherein the perspective of the participants is predominant (Cort 1990: 54-55). Christopher Jain Miller has recently expanded on Cort's seminal work, proposing three interpretative models for engaged Jain studies: the constructive-reproductive, the critical-analytical, and the critical-constructive models. As he himself writes:

> These three models are meant to be as accommodating and interdisciplinary as possible; they sometimes overlap and in many ways reflect the aspirations and methods of scholarly work already being undertaken in the academy (Miller 2026: 17).

Without going into details on the first two, I would like to focus on the third, which takes account of research performed both 'of' and 'for' the Jains, and "engages the etic *with* the emic, and in the process remains open to the transformation of both" (Miller 2026: 29). In the tradition of anthropology, I would like to emphasise, as the author does, that the preposition 'with' best identifies my research methodology. It is therefore not a study of the Jains or for the Jains but with the Jains, that is, collaboration—including critical collaboration—with the Jain community in its diverse and pluralistic composition. This emphasis on 'with' also characterised the work of our research group, which, owing to its multidisciplinary nature, sought to combine the meticulous exegesis of Jain scriptures undertaken by my colleague Erika Caranti with ethnographic exploration of the everyday practices of Jains—both converts and non-converts—which I investigated through fieldwork.

That's when the challenge posed by the digital medium first arose: how could I ensure that my work could be done effectively, if the interaction with the respondents was mainly carried out online? How to combine participant observation in the digital realm? There is a certain contradiction in wanting to study the daily practices of Jainism while not always being able to physically be present to

observe them. The medium has therefore foregrounded a relationship conveyed not so much by physical encounter but by the spoken word, which has become the real focus of interaction. From this perspective, the practice I was most able to observe and participate in was the discursive one, highlighting the way in which non-violence is conveyed through words.[6]

4. Discursive practice

This emphasis on discourse demands a high degree of reflexivity from the researcher, in that she must engage in a consistent effort to be aware of and to understand the many ways in which the anthropologist's own cognition becomes inextricably entwined with that of her research subject. In my own case, I could build on the premise that a persistent interest in orality has been a constant companion of my academic journey.[7] Joining an interdisciplinary academic research team and collaborating with scholars who have made language and translation a central focus of their own research endeavours, only further highlighted the importance of reflexivity.

The analysis of discursive practice as an interpretative framework has long been a staple of ethnography, but it has also entered the domain of philological research and is peculiarly relevant to the field of Jain hermeneutics (Caranti 2026). In a Foucaultian sense, discursive practice signifies a mechanism through which power relations are produced and perpetuated within a given societal context. Discourses are not merely a means of expressing ideas: rather, they become concrete acts and modes of action that shape subjectivity. However, they are not to be understood as reflecting reality, but rather offer a reworking of it, an interpretation on which adherence to a certain social order depends. Therefore, analysing discursive practices involves not only interpreting meaning, but also

[6] Most of the conversations took place via online meetings, which were followed, in many cases, by face-to-face encounters. In *Jains in the World*, John Cort writes, as a methodological guideline, that: "The Jains are a highly mobile people [...] to study the Jains, the researcher must travel, as well" (Cort 2001: 13). I have tried to follow his advice as closely as possible in studying the presence of the Jain minority in Italy, but in some cases this has not been possible. Many of the people I met lead lives spanning several continents—including Europe, Oceania, Africa and the United States—and our research funding would not have been sufficient to cover such expenses. However, I did not regard this impossibility as an obstacle to the research, because I believe that constraints and limitations are the initial conditions, the starting point for ethnographic practice. Without margins or limits, research would become a mere collection of data; conversely, the interpretative choice arises precisely from the awareness that one cannot show everything. We must therefore start from the conditions that the research imposes on us and value them as hermeneutic elements. In this case, the digital medium has stimulated a reflection on non-violent discursive practices.

[7] During university studies, I combined the study of anthropology with that of oral history. Over the years, I have put this dual training into practice through collaboration with institutions and scholars on historical-ethnographic research projects.

analysing the way power is projected and manifested discursively in specific socio-cultural interaction contexts — how a proactive (even coercive) form of adherence to, or transformation of, the established order is made possible and maintained over time. From this perspective, discourse thus becomes a practice of subjectivity: it creates and informs a space for the exchange of knowledge, it provides a normative matrix of existence, and designates the scope of potential practices of experimentation (Foucault 1966, 1969, 1970).

The ethnographical material, the stories I have collected during fieldwork, is a much richer corpus of ethnographic information than what I have been able to relate to and refer to here using this line of interpretation. But focusing on the aspects that best fit this analytical framework, I propose to interpret them through two different ways of understanding non-violence in Jain discursive practice: *Ahiṃsā in words* and *Ahiṃsā within words*. These two dimensions are actually profoundly interconnected because the 'non-violence of the word' for my respondents is never taken for granted, it is rather a conscious *process*, nourished by reflection as much as by action, and it takes on different meanings within each person's biography, as it is shaped by the specific situations he or she experiences, the passing of time, and the relationships within the interconnected personal worlds of family, work and leisure.

The first kind of discursive non-violence, *Ahiṃsā in Words*, is generally shaped like a *narrative of non-violence* recounting specific episodes, concrete situations. It is a way of putting the practice of non-violence in a dialogical form. The research literature on orality[8] has taught us that in spoken narrative the experiential and situational element is privileged, leaving abstraction in the background; in this way, knowledge, in the form of narration, becomes an integral part of concrete experience. By telling stories of lived non-violence, respondents become aware of the way that non-violence can be discursively articulated and made alive, translated from the merely notional to the existential plane.

The second kind of discursive non-violence, *Ahiṃsā within words*, concerns the various ethical, philosophical, spiritual conceptions of non-violence and the need to aptly describe it and understand it verbally. It refers to an ongoing process of clarification, characterised by a continuous exercise of critical reflexivity on the part of the speaker, as manifested in proxemics and in the mannerisms of speech, which may include the tone and pitch of the voice, the use of pauses, the refraining from speaking over others, and the policing of the agonistic, emphatic element in the representation of events, experiences and personal philosophies. As well as striving to contain conflict and to refrain from engaging in verbal battle, the exercise of critical reflexivity also helps the speaker in maintaining

[8] See AISO https://www.aisoitalia.org/

a certain personal distance. This is a form of surveilled discursive practice that is generally more current in written expression, but more rarely found in verbal discourse. That is why I consider non-violent proxemics as a kind of *humble epistemology* (Stoller 1989), a dimension that meeting on video actually emphasised, something I did not expect. Watching oneself on video while talking to the respondents also induces a greater awareness about how we place ourselves in the gaze of the Other, which further increases the scope of this kind of surveilled communication.

In the following paragraphs, I will focus on specific areas of application of these forms of discursive non-violence, as each person encountered during the research process demonstrated one or more aspects of it. A conscious decision has been taken *not* to seek a unifying model of doctrinal reference for these non-violent practices, but rather to acknowledge and value the plurality of expressions, including contradictions, disjunctions and diverse perspectives that contribute to the hermeneutic process.

5. *Ahiṃsā* in and within words

A recurrent theme that emerged during the conversations was the pivotal role of education in imparting non-violent values during childhood. Within the Indian Jain families settled in India and in the diaspora, there generally is no imposition of adherence to Jainism; rather, the pedagogical approach is founded on dialogue, confrontation, reflection and individual choice. The discourse of a Jain woman who has experienced several generations of living in diaspora focuses on the aspect of reflexivity as an educational element repeated over time:

> It was much more practical on a day-to-day basis. And that's how we grew up. And we were guided, for example, to stop and think about everybody else's feelings that we were all equal, the notion of don't harm people even with your words. Don't harm people with your actions. Stop and think. [...] I actually think it may well have been a family attitude. And the reason I say this is because it's in what we were taught about Jainism, it wasn't blatantly obvious that our words and our actions can harm someone. But I believe that the guidance that we had from our family, my parents and my grandmother, and the way that they also behaved or dealt with everybody, we were very much encouraged to stop and think about the other person and how to manage or to handle that so that we don't hurt people. And I can also openly say that I don't think that our generation was very good at that until we have, in a way, had a moment to accept this and then stop and think. Actually, that's part of Jain philosophy as well. Do I want to personally adopt this? But I think as we were growing up, we were often told, "stop and think," especially at the time when we were forgiving each other for Michchhāmi Dukkaḍaṃ, at the end of the fasting. Again, we were told to think, that means to

> think how to minimise harm to others. And how do you want to feel at the end of the day, at the end of the week? It's your choice.[9]

This element of the dialogue highlighted that the acquisition of non-violent language and behaviour is a protracted process, constantly put to the test by different circumstances of life but always founded in individual choice. One respondent, who was raised in India and subsequently moved to Europe, provided a detailed account of this process:

> So, look, I grew up quite following the rules, our conservative tradition, religious upbringing. I didn't question much why this. I was like, yeah, I believe in all this, but then, you know... so I'll give you an example, when I was 14 years old, I was in school and my friend was eating a chicken burger. I didn't know because in the school they sold that and the vegetarian burger. And, you know, in India, like in Italy, you are just like into each other's lunch boxes. So I just took it from him and I took a bite. And I was like, "oh, this is so delicious." And this friend was, "oh, sorry, but it is not vegetarian. It's chicken." Anyway, I was only 14 and I was really tempted. I was like, oh, "I like it." It's so delicious. So, I said "I'm going to..., I don't care, I'm just going to go and buy that for myself." So, I went to the canteen and I said, "one chicken burger, please." And they started preparing. And something was going on inside me. And I was like, "what am I doing?" So, at that point, I became conscious of the fact that I, myself, wanted to be vegetarian. And this same thing happened again when I was at university. [...] And then, of course, I started understanding *ahiṃsā*. In my family, we used to have a lot of discussions about all this. But then when we go abroad... we started living abroad when I was 20. And I mean, it was very difficult to find vegetarian food in Europe in those days. And so, you know, you are challenged. [...] But I'm choosing to be vegetarian in a Western

[9] The research, which began in 2024, lasted approximately two years, but benefited from contacts established in previous years through my acquaintance with Jains in Italy, some of whom have become close friends. I met with around twenty respondents with whom I had a series of conversations in English and Italian over time, which allowed me to explore the many facets of their perspectives in greater depth at different points. Returning to certain issues repeatedly brought to light aspects of the practice of Jainism in southern Europe, whilst casting others into the shadows. It also allowed me to observe, within the various aspects of daily life, the reflexivity that the subjects exercise with regard to the choices that modify or guide their actions. Reflexivity is a concept difficult to translate unambiguously; I have therefore used it operationally as a process of understanding an individual's actions and relationships with others, and at the same time as a distancing from the actions themselves through the ability to observe and evaluate them. During the research, Erika Caranti was also present on occasion and made valuable contributions to the discussions. To make the oral conversations more comprehensible, the respondents and I revised the style of the spoken language, taking care not to compromise the freshness of the orality. When reworking Fabio Dei's words, I did not consider it useful to "restrict the narrator to what they actually said at that specific moment, rather than allowing them, as the author does when writing, to rethink, return to the text, correct it and make changes, etc. [?]" (Dei 2022: 143). The transformation of his question into an affirmative research practice led me to engage in constant dialogue with the subjects, turning the revisions of the text into an intimate and controlled epistemology of self-representations. Removing a sentence, highlighting another, or limiting or emphasising one's own role are all part of the interpretative process.

> world. And these are my boundaries. And this is where Anekāntavāda comes in. So Anekāntavāda is looking at the same thing with different eyes. Yes, in someone's eyes, I can be a bad Jain, but at the end of the day, ahiṃsā is not just about being nonviolent towards the other. It's about nonviolent towards myself. And I'm not here to become a monk or a nun. I am a householder. I want to live in this materialistic world. So, I need to define my boundaries. My children are vegetarian, [but I told them] "Till you were 18, you were in our home and you had to follow all our rules." I gave them my example, but we all have the right to choose. So, you know, like my parents wouldn't kill the animals and creatures in the house. But how did we learn about the thoughts? I think, one, by observing, but I won't say like, people would not fight in our house. It's not like they were not raising their voices. But I think people who are curious, who then understand, okay, what does a ahiṃsā really mean? And then we listen to it, we understand it. But it's quite a journey. You know, like learning anything is quite a journey, repetition, really understanding. We have to put in effort. And even neuroscience is saying that your beliefs, your thoughts, become your words, becomes your actions. And that becomes your behavior, right?

A young woman, born in India and then moved to Italy to pursue her studies, describes her children's education:

> In my family, my dad is Jain by birth, and my mom is Hindu by birth. When they got married, my mom adapted to Jainism. Growing up I was taught the values of both Hinduism and Jainism. I grew up with them, like I am a vegetarian. I have those values in me that I don't want to exploit any other person or any other animal or anything for that matter. But I also follow Hinduism a lot. [...] So, for me, the thing was always that I wanted to know the reason behind the things that we do. And my mom, as much as religious she is, she was not really keen on knowing the reasons behind things. Like she would say that this is what we do in Hinduism or this is what we do in Jainism. But I would say, but "why exactly do we do that?" So, I was a very rebellious person growing up in that sense. But then growing up, I tried to understand the logic behind things. For example, as simple as why do Jainism want you to not eat after sunset? Because there is a growth of microorganisms in the environment. So, it all started to make sense and then I started to accept. But when I was a child, I was very rebellious in that sense. [...] I understand that rituals have their roots in the philosophy of the religion. But I do not like to be imposed upon the rituals without the reasons behind them, without the philosophy behind them. So, the thing is that I have tried a little bit to find answers. And mostly I fail and then I just talk to my mom about everything. I think that is what it is because also, by profession, I am a scholar. So, maybe that has always been inside me. To actually find out the concepts, the philosophies. And then understand things.

The childhood experiences of Italian converts to Jainism were somewhat different because, in most cases, their religious and value-based education conflicted with their sensitivity. The transition to a different set of principles has, however, for many individuals, entailed a period of personal and spiritual disorientation, as they have found themselves unable to align their ethical principles with the prevailing societal values in their daily life. This predicament often leads to a process of introspection and a search for a form of spirituality that can fully embrace the interconnectedness of all living beings, unbound by the conventional hierarchies that divide human and non-human entities. The

reproduction of some excerpts from conversations of Italian converts makes this plural dimension of childhood search explicit:

> Jainism is what is closest to my spiritual language. I found the name for what I was, it was inside me, because I had been searching for it since I was a little girl, because I didn't have a happy childhood. I already had a strong sense of compassion... From an early age, I helped those who were suffering and I internalised their pain. I assisted sick people in hospitals and elderly people (when I was in secondary school). As a volunteer, I wanted to make up for the lack of love... and I said, "This is my life, I want to help others." As a child, I sensed that there was a soul in every living being. I bought books about karma and had compassion for every living being. Why take the life of every living being? I suffered because of this and wondered why I was suffering, but as a child you don't understand that there is a logic behind this pain.

An Italian witness reflects on her journey to Jainism:

> Even as a child I felt this dissonance within me [...] there was a feeling that somehow guided the search at a time when I did not even imagine that there could be something as interesting as what I later found where I landed. [...] As I went on I was more and more amazed, as if I had really found the treasure of treasures, whole communities practising exactly what I felt was right, what I felt was true, in spite of what the society around me told me, so it was really like finding the treasure of treasures, especially certain chapters of the book I translated into Italian, Saman Suttan, like the chapters dedicated to non-violence, to Ahiṃsā, where it was always remembered in contrast to the Christian, evangelical, biblical texts, which I knew by heart because I had been with the nuns for 15, 16 years, where creation was completely cut off from theology, here creation was theology, creation was the very core of theology, and so yes, it was a miracle, it was really a finding of oneself, a recognition of oneself in something great, and also certainly not feeling so alone, so isolated, so marginalised, so different, so cut off, but a great recognition, there was this enormous recognition.

An Italian activist, involved in animal protection, tells:

> I have always been involved with animals and the environment. I started when I was 13 years old and have never stopped. I chose my university based on what would be most useful for a path, a cause, a mission for animals, call it what you will, so I have been doing this my whole life. The concept of dedication was fundamental to me even before I learned about Jainism. When I approached different religious forms, I found nothing that could inspire me because I could not identify with monotheistic doctrines where man is at the centre and animals are at his disposal.

During the research, another element that emerged from the childhood experiences of Jain families was the importance of example in transmitting the value of non-violence. A young Indian father who has lived in Italy for a long time and is married to an Italian woman explains his parenting methodologies as follows:

> I have always tried not to argue with people, even with my voice, I use kindness, I speak politely, that is, I try to do the best I can. I can't remember ever having an argument in my life, so almost never. [...] I also teach this to my children, although they are still small, but yes, I tell them not to fight, to speak calmly. If they listen, they'll remember, even when they grow up and do what they want, but... [...] They are baptised, so when they grow up they can choose what they want to follow.

Another Indian father, who lived in Italy from 1996 to 2017, gave an example from his daily family life of how he taught his young daughter non-violence:

> There is compassion. Every living being has compassion. So if we start our lives, our children's lives, by just teaching them even a small insect, like when I was in my house, once, I just used to teach, if I see a cockroach in my house, I'm not going to kill it. I will take it on the paper and throw it out of my house. So, these things, when children see them, they ask. My wife is from the Kshatriya community, she is not from the Jain community. She used to kill the cockroach. So, once, I was sitting with my daughter when she was about four or five years old. A cockroach in my house, it was just going, so I asked her, just to teach her, "should I kill it or should I just put it on the paper and throw it outside." I said, according to you, "which is better?" She said, "oh yes, we should not kill him. If we have the option, we should leave it outside." So this kind of little, little thing, if we kill even a little insect, this could be a great opportunity to teach our children.

A respondent, who has experienced several generations of living in diaspora, reiterated this aspect of ongoing family and individual reflexivity, without concealing the fact that, especially in the 80s, certain choices, like vegetarianism and nonviolence, were not easily understood or accepted by Western society:

> The one thing that was really critically important was the vegetarian diet. The notion of non-violence and the notion of thinking about where our food comes from. And the notion of how we conduct ourselves with others. It was done in a very non-ritualistic form [in my family], I would say. And it was a kind of guidance that came from a religious viewpoint, but it was the best way that they could teach us how to put it into practice on a daily basis. And of course, there were times when we were quite rebellious where we would say, "this doesn't work, this is not fair." And we would question it, especially when you get the Western educational experience, you learn to question much more. [But in Western societies in the 80s] there was the lack of understanding of us and how we operated. But I would like to say that there definitely was some resistance to our way of being. [...] We were ridiculed for speaking our own language. We were ridiculed for having a different religion. We were ridiculed for thinking differently. We were ridiculed for eating differently. So, the experience of growing up like this and living in two different cultures, growing up not given too much information, but enough, not being forced, but heavily guided, I would say, or it was pointed out to just stop and think about this for yourself. I think that's kind of, personally for me, it's given me the time to think about it and accept it for whatever my mind can assimilate of Jainism and the principles and what makes sense to me that I feel I can put into practice every day.

Although a shift has been observed in recent years, due to increased global awareness of animal welfare and environmental protection, until the late 1990s and early 2000s, the enduring rejection of vegetarianism and non-violent practices by Western society, particularly with regard to the treatment of animals, was a unifying factor for Jain Indians and Italian converts to Jainism. One of them elucidates these aspects as follows:

> So, I didn't think I had a spiritual life within me, I thought maybe I was just in an almost dramatic performance, saving animals. [...] Jainism for me was fundamental, [...] actually I found an affinity with something that goes back to even the monastic life at the bottom of everything and I saw that in my projects, I saw that in my volunteering and so on, I saw it in constant practice, I was living that compassion, I was living that empathy, I was living the importance of all life, not only animal life but also plant life. [...] So this whole discourse, I found myself realising that I was doing a spiritual discourse of someone who had started it thousands of years before me and had found, I think, a coherence in giving values and living them and conditioning one's life according to those values.

It is also at this point that the concept of Jainness[10], the process of approaching the values of Jainism, was outlined, as one Italian witness stated:

> So it's funny how I was already doing certain things before I knew that they were Jain practices, for example eating very early before sunset, never walking on the grass or even on the pavement when it's dark, all the things that you study in Jain practice and you say "ah but I was already doing that without knowing anything," it's a bit of that instinct that tells you to be careful not to hurt small creatures, so I wouldn't dream of walking in the dark on a meadow because at least you would kill a snail. So some teachings I even laughed at because I said I was already doing it, some others, well, let's be clear, the theoretical part, certain facets of the theoretical part I have not been able to absorb, certain things I don't feel resonate in me, I'm not mature enough to feel that this theory is in line with my feelings, many things I struggle with.

It is highlighted that adherence to the values of Jainism is not a linear, obstacle-free path, and that critical reflexivity, which is exercised by people on themselves through discursive practices, is an ongoing process.

> For example, look, I even got sick, I lost my health, because I cannot practise detachment. They teach detachment, the multiplicity of viewpoints, they are wonderful rules, very high rules. I cannot detach from the pain, the despair I feel when I come into contact with the suffering of animals. But it is not something I can deal with, it is not something to do with reason, with the mind, it is something inherent. [...]I am really far behind and, in fact, I cannot even call myself a

[10] See the Jainpedia's glossary https://jainpedia.org/glossary/jainness/

> Jain. The Jains overestimate me, they think I am a Jain, but I do not think I am a Jain at all. I think I am someone who is in love with Jainism, who studies Jainism, who tries to practise Jainism, but I am not capable of detachment and I fear that I will never learn it at this point.

And continues:

> For example, when they talk about reincarnation, life after life, and describe, the life of Mahāvīra and tell you about all his 20 previous lives, I can't internalise it. I want to read it more as a symbol, as a symbol that should drive you towards improvement. I am firmly convinced of this, trying to push myself towards improvement every day. Then maybe I won't succeed, but the direction is towards evolution, improvement, that's for sure...

Although this is another point of disagreement with the Jain canon, an Italian witness explains a different use of language in a supervised manner. This therefore constitutes a conscious/deliberate effort to elevate the counterpart, even in cases where the latter is perceived as representing 'violence.' The use of such deliberate acts of falsehood requires deep reflection on language, since the deviation from the truth is here substantiated and, to a certain extent, justified by the pursuit of a higher purpose, thus highlighting a discerning dialectic.

> [...] I could present myself that way, it would be very easy because objectively I am doing these things, last week there was a conference on alternative methods where I convinced at least three research centres in two days to stop using animals. If I present myself that way it works fine, the problem is that in order to do all these things [like saving animals from laboratories] I exploit the weaknesses of different people to get my results and so from that point of view I am the anti-Jain.

6. Jain practices in Italy

Analysis of ethnographic material reveals the variety of aspects that characterise Jain practices in Italy. As previously mentioned, it is not possible to speak of a community, but rather a constellation of individuals who identify themselves within a spiritual and religious tradition of shared values but engage in diverse practices. Important factors of this diversity include the individuals' contexts of origin, age, gender, length of residence in Italy, and the presence or absence of a family context. Some of these factors influence the way Jain devotion is practised on a daily basis or during ritual occasions such as festivals.

> Things are not that easy, because I'm coming from a small town in India where a lot of Jain people live. So, usually, I woke up and immediately rushed to the temple. And then I did abhishek, bhaktī. In the morning, in my town, everybody is rushing to temple. Not to office. The life starts after the temple. My mom was going to temple. My father went to temple. My grandmother was already at

> the temple. Here in Italy practising is not possible like in India, like in a physical form. So, the spirituality is like more in a mindful way. I wake up, sit in the morning in silence, I do a little bit of yoga, 10 to 15 minutes of silence, do prāṇāyāma. I sit on the mat, just in āsana and just pray. I have nothing in front of me to look at, but just I am looking from my mind. So I am portraying the image of the Gods Ādinātha, Abhinandananātha and just portraying that image in my mind and like thinking that I am touching the tīrthankara's feet. And because I am born and brought up there, so of course I know some mantra the most basic one is Namokār mantra. [...] But I don't have a little temple at home in Italy and the reason is that I don't think so that I will be always in my purest form. Also, I never thought of having the temple because practically it's a very big thing as I have seen from my childhood. it's not like I can make temple just on my own.

A young Indian woman who studies at the University tells:

> So usually, I don't practice very much like in terms of scripture-based Jainism. I do look towards it in terms of whenever I feel lost, you know, there are tough days when you're having exams and you feel like you're exhausted. And through that, I do feel like Jainism is that stem, that backbone that I go forward to. But I'm more into the beliefs of how Jainism is more a way to live life than to be just a religion. I don't practice all aspects of Jainism, but I do practice what I believe is very important, especially since I live here. It's kind of still tough to be able to have everything happening like I used to have in India. So, I try to eat before the sunset. So, during winter, since the sun sets up pretty early here, around 5\ 5.30 to have my dinner and that comes from more when I was raised in India, but there was no rule strict. My mom and my grandmother preferred to eat before the sunset, especially my grandmother. But my dad used to eat after the sunset. [...] I keep going back to Namokār Mantra, is my go-to. I remember by heart. So that's something I go back to in terms of my life. I think it gives me like some kind of strength, like if I'm like scared, that's the one thing I go to. I don't know a lot of religious scriptures, but there's Bhaktāmara path. Sometimes when I'm like really lost, I'm struggling with life, I play it on YouTube. So, before my exams, like while I get up, the first thing I put is Namokār Mantra and I get, it's not like I'm just like sitting and meditating. it's become a ritual that I have to play it. So, I feel good.

She adds:

> It's more like spiritual. I don't believe like I have to see God to be able to pray to him and to communicate. So, no, I don't have a temple. It would be nice if I get to go to a place, but and that, you know, it's like something I heard from a religious leader, "God is everywhere in everyone," right? That's something very Indian. But then, why do we need to go to a temple then if God's everywhere? So, this is what the leader said, that air is everywhere, but you need to go to a air pump to pump air in your tire, right? Even though it's everywhere, the right correct pressure, the right atmosphere for you to pump the gas in the tire is only at the gas station. That's the same way. He said that to be able to channel yourself and to be in that right spiritual set, it's the vibes, it's important to be at a temple. But since I don't have an access to it here in Italy, I feel completely fine without it as well. I've not been to any religious temple here except for churches in Italy. And sometimes, if I'm like at a church, I really pray just like I would pray in a temple. So I would, of course, I would sit, kneel down at a church and like hold my hands the same way. I would also write what my wishes are and put it on the paper and I light a candle. But I feel like, for me, it's God. At

> the end of the day, it's universe, it's God. And if it's not in the shape of Mahāvīra, it does not make it less. I feel like all gods are the same at the end of the day.

Another young Indian woman who studied in Italy for her Ph.D narrates:

> I did pray. I do pray on a regular basis. In my home, wherever I was living, I tried to establish a little temple for myself. And I would not have a lot of things, obviously. And I did not even want to collect a lot of things because it is difficult to move around with them. And I tried to celebrate. For example, if it was a festival like Diwali, I would lit lamps in my home everywhere. I would go to Indian stores. In Rome, there is an Indian store that I would go to and bring things. And cook something like a kheer, some sweet or something which is typical for these things. There was a Hindu temple in Rome where they would celebrate Holi. So, I would tell all my Italian friends and bring them with me. I sing Namokār Mantra when I pray. There is Mahāvīra ārti. I don't remember all of it. But I can read it. Yeah, I would say those are the two things.

A man from India who has lived in Italy for many years describes how he found comfort in visiting places of worship such as Catholic churches and the ISKCON temple in Florence, since there are no nearby Jain temples. Rather than seeing these other spiritual practices as a lesser alternative to Jainism, he views them as a way to enrich his own spirituality:

> I am very curious to learn about other religions too. Since I don't have my own religion here. Near Florence there is a Krishna temple called ISKCON, which is the Italian congregation of Krishna consciousness. And I turned to them, because at first, I remember that I also went to mass in church, even though I wasn't Christian. Because these are sacred places where you can tell the deity all your problems, you can share, because I was alone and there was no one else, I was very sad, so the first thing I found was a church, then I discovered that 11 kilometres away from Florence there is this temple, and I went there every Sunday. Because for me, that statue, whether it is Kṛṣṇa or Jesus, it doesn't matter, it is a place where I can talk, it is a statue I can talk to, discuss things with, say my things to, so it was also an outlet for talking about my problems. And so, I have continued to move forward, I also learned about Japanese Buddhism and Nichiren Daishonin, who was a Japanese monk, and so on and so forth, I tried to learn about other religions.

An Italian lady who converted to Jainism depicts how the rituals have been adapted to the Italian context:

> In the morning, I recite the Namokār Mantra, with some exceptions that I have allowed myself, which are not really part of the usual practice, because I recite it in Italian. So, I recite it in Italian, as it is written in the Italian translation of Saman Suttam, and when I say it, I have several friends on the internet, who are in India, Jain Indians, we write to each other more or less every day, and they tell me, "You have to recite it in the original language." Instead, I have three statues, two of Pārśvanātha and one of Mahāvīra, and in front of them I recite the Namokār Mantra in Italian. I feel more comfortable this way, but I am certainly wrong, because they say the original vibration is that

> of the Indian word. It is true, I have a practice that is a bit questionable, because I have transposed it a little to my own time, my own schedule, my own language.

The answer that a young Indian man studying in Italy gave to a question I asked him about a possible Italian path to Jainism is significant:

> I'm thinking. I am no one to twist Jainism in my way. It doesn't matter where you are. I didn't modify according to my situations. I follow as it is I have learned from my birth. Here the physical things I cannot do, but my mind, my activities, my deeds are the same. Example: If I see a small insect, I don't step on it. It doesn't change. So, it doesn't depend on the geographical location. It depends always on your consciousness.

7. Is this non-violent discourse an 'ephemeral practice'?

The practice of non-violent speech may seem 'ephemeral'—fleeting and short-lived—due to the in-the-moment nature of oral expression itself and the perpetual process of decay of the spoken word as it manifests itself in verbal communication, but field research has revealed a persistent interconnectedness between the Italian and Indian expressive contexts through the discursive practices relating to non-violence carried out by both converted Jains and people who born into the Jain tradition. Although these practices are in and of themselves perishable, fragile and fleeting, they have triggered an awareness-building process within relationships, creating unexpected resonances in the way people with different backgrounds perceive and process their world. Since the act of speaking in Jainism is guarded, in that there is a constant tension towards limiting violence in the pragmatics of interaction, non-violence organises the way one thinks and speaks, and the presentation of a non-violent perspective in discourse shapes the social fabric, understood as a continuous communicative exchange between members of society. By shaping meanings, non-violent speech engenders a mutual transformation of the self and the other. The emphasis on the spoken word indicates the importance given in Jainism to the way the dialectical skills of verbal non-violence can build bridges that take us out of the confines of the self and into less violence-prone relationships with others.

One witness explains this expansion of the self as follows:

> To achieve the ideals of Jina, I also question my thoughts, because even with words you can hurt so much if you don't listen with empathy; a path of humility must be followed; there is no knowledge without humility. [...] If you do not use the word with attention, with empathy, the person feels hurt. There must always be a thought, a question, in Jainism there is no ego.

Another adds:

> My parents have always been very focused on, do not hurt people physically or through words. Do not say anything if you don't have anything good to say, then don't say anything that will hurt someone, even if it's the truth. You should know not to hurt someone because if you're hurting someone emotionally by your words, it's as equal to you're hurting them physically. Hurt is the same, it does not matter if it's physically or emotionally or verbally. So do not, and it's something that we believe in a lot. That's something to always remember you're talking to someone, so I think these are some of the things that are like pillars of my life that I try to put my life on.

The dialectics of non-violence are not without their own difficulties and implicit compromises because, as we have previously seen in the everyday practice of Jainism, in the Italian context, there is not a community to nurture and supervise these practices. However, this linguistic social fabric can be overserved in action within different social contexts, as in Jain efforts to promote interreligious dialogue, or in the way Jains attempt to act on their social environment, and above all in their own process of self-actualisation and spiritual metamorphosis as they adapt to a new cultural reality in Italy. Regarding the first instance, an Indian Jain gentleman who arrived in Italy in the 1990s explains the need for a community that transcends the boundaries of Jainism and engages in dialogue with other spiritual traditions.

> Once a week we hold a satsaṅg at my house, where we sing sacred songs together. I need to have the community with me, so they come and we read the Bhagavadgītā, which is a sacred book. [...] In fact, we need to share with others and especially with the religion we follow, we become like companions in faith, at that moment there is a brotherhood, so at that moment if you have some physical problem or something else, maybe you talk about it, you already feel lighter, because you have said it, you don't keep it inside you, because if you keep it inside you, you suffer. Talking about it is medicine. Satsaṅg is singing together. Not having a Jain community, we sing Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, the Mahā Mantra, with others, and then we sing something else and read the holy book. Afterwards, there is prasāda: we distribute the food we have cooked, everyone brings something, and we eat together. This is really beautiful, and then we talk and discuss things while we eat. So, it's a way of life.

An example of the influence of Jainism in Italy can be seen in the story of a young Jain man who came to study at an Italian university. During an internship at a large, international organisation dedicated to food security, he discussed Jainism and its values of non-violence with his boss, presenting them as a concrete and practical solution to global sustainability challenges. In another instance, during a conversation with a colleague who explained the ways she was particularly careful not to destroy any form of life, even unintentionally, the same young man pointed out that her ideas, values and sensitivity 'sounded like Jainism'. In these interactions, we see examples of this expansion of the discourse on non-violence in everyday life, even in the working environment of another Indian man who came to Italy to work for a large Italian energy company, as he himself recounts:

> I say that the Italian people and European people, they are always curious to know what it is Jainism. And they never judge you. Like my office colleagues, when we eat together and we split the bill, I don't pay for alcohol, I don't pay for meat. So, they respect that. So, they also respect my religion.

This influence is also evident in couples where one partner is Jain and the other is atheist, as a young woman explains:

> Towards God, I think I'm more religious than my Italian boyfriend is because I end up praying even for him. I think the first time he ever prayed was for me. Because I told him, I have this exam and I really need to pass this to get my scholarship and stay in Italy. "So can you please pray?" And he asked "how did you pray?" I just said, "God please." So somehow we interchanged a lot in terms of values. He's making me understand what's more realistic, how things are supposed to be. He sometimes says I'm too influenced by Jainism, which I do not believe because I've seen people who are way more devoted and towards it. But I think the reason why he confuses it is because he believes that Jainism only stands for not eating meat. And for that, he believes that, you know, I would want my children to be Jain. That means not eating meat. I'm like, I think my children have to learn both ways. I would love my children to have a baptizing ceremony and have a Christian name. But I would also want them to, you know, see how Jainism is and how we do Abhishek of God, all of that. I want them to have both the cultures. And I do not want to give up and he does not want to give up. So, it took a while for him to understand that the children will be grown up in both cultures.

Yet the most delicate transformation I have been a witness to has taken place within the people I met. It generally takes the form of an intimate, personal dialogue between us, prompted by the conversations carried out during my research. In some cases, my questions were met with a moment of silence before the answers, as if the respondents were considering for the first time the possibility of "pressure-testing" the beliefs and values they acquired during childhood by comparing their current environment with the one they left behind. Here, the conversation enters a liminal zone, an expansion of the self that values both what has been temporarily left behind and current relationships and living conditions. The story of a young Indian woman is illustrative of this transition:

> I would say that living in Italy, I have obviously grown a lot as a person. Firstly, because I never lived away from my family before moving to Italy. So, it was the first time that I was living completely independently. And I learnt a lot about just being a person. Just about life. But also meeting with people. Like I have these wonderful friends in Rome. Who are amazing people. And I learnt a lot of things. Not being judgmental about a lot of things. For example, I have a friend back in Rome, who was dating this guy and who was not really the best partner. There was a lot of turbulence in that relationship. And at the end, she has a child now. In India, it is a taboo still to have a child out of wedlock. It would be not easily acceptable for me as well. But when I moved to Rome, I saw the dynamics. And I thought, it isn't really bad. And I also in fact, talked to my mom about it. And she said "This is not good. Maybe you should ask your friend to get married." And I was like, "no." And I tried to explain to her that there isn't any problem in this. And she also

> understood. So I thought I really developed my mindset in a lot of things. This was just a little example. But I started to become much more accepting than you were when you come from a narrower mindset. And that was really very enlightening for me. If I look at my spiritual or religious beliefs, also in my mind, in my spirituality, things became much more clearer to me than they were before. And I respect my mom a lot more now than I used to back then. Not that I had a bad relationship with her. I used to love her a lot. But now I respect her much more than I used to do before. And then when I see in my distant relatives that they are treating their girls differently from their boys, I talk to them that this is not fair and what you are doing is not right. [...] I do not surprise my family with an entire new package of thoughts. Whenever I learn something, because I talk to my family every single day, I talk to them about it. Like whatever, I feel like this is something new that I am trying to find out and this is something new which is affecting my way of thinking. I talk to my family and I try to influence them into it as well. Maybe they do not accept all of it altogether, but they understand that what I am saying is not anything vague. It has its reasons behind it and they respect that. I feel like I have a responsibility to not leave my family behind when I am growing up as a person. I talk to them because I feel like I have this responsibility to make them grow up with me as well.

This is a reflection by a young Indian woman on the relationship between Jainism and gender, with explicit reference to issues such as the body, motherhood and salvation.

> I personally don't agree with everything Jainism says, I don't know if it's like through the years of being practised and then misinterpreted. But I feel like sometimes Jainism can be misogynistic, especially in terms of periods. I feel like if I am given the right to give birth, it must be something sacred. And for you to not go to a temple, be more to go to rest, because you're impure. I do not believe and I do not stand for it. I think in India, periods are not talked enough in religious settings, which I do not believe is right. Because I feel like, if you're talking about everything else from consuming food to meditating and everything, why are we not talking about periods? Also, saying stuff like "You cannot get a Mokṣa if you're a woman," when I first heard about it after growing up, I was like, "what are you guys saying?" If God's mother did not have a period, you think God would have come into existence? And I think that our body is not impure. Our body is pure. Is our blood in our uterus any more different than the blood that's going in our veins? How? It does not make sense. Anything in our body is impure. I mean, if there is it, it's because we need it. Anyone is superior to another. Men are not superior. Women are not superior. At the end of the day, we're just different souls in different bodies.

An Indian student living in Italy reflects on the exploration of concepts that were initially uncritically internalised, but which were then examined in greater depth thanks to the encouragement of colleagues unfamiliar with Jainism.

> Like, when you grow up in a Jainism family, I didn't question. Now I moved to Italy and here, I'm studying with international students, doing various exchange programmes, working in an international office with high intellect of people, several philosophy students. I have friends in various streams. So, when the discussions started, then "they started questioning. It gives me one more insight to learn more about me and this philosophy. Example: Questions like, "how many are

> your gods? 24. But why 24 Tīrthaṅkara?" I know 24 because it has been taught from my birth. But now the questions which has been asked by others is giving me insight to learn more and more about my philosophy. So even I have also a lot of questions which I try to find out.

This process of constant revision and deeper understanding of what was previously accepted as 'generally known,' as well as the reappraisal of one's own approach to these truths, does not only occur by engaging with the spoken word within conversations or in the context of social relationships, but through the act of painstakingly translating the written word, which many of the scholars I interviewed habitually practice. An extract from the conversation with Pietro Chierichetti, the Italian translator of the *Tattvārthasūtra* (Chierichetti, 2017), illustrates this assertion. In the dialogue, Chierichetti explains how he puts non-violence into practice in his role as a school principal after translating the text:

> This role counts a lot, from this role I see that I could have the power to make people feel very bad, because even if I call a teacher, write him/her an e-mail and say "come here," even if he/she sits there and frets because he/she says "why is he calling me" or a student "why is he calling me" etc., so this kind of tension, if you can block it... then it's a very long chain, that is, in the sense that you have the power to condition many things. So, when I have to make choices, I can make one kind of choice or another; so, I can accumulate meritorious or not meritorious karman [...] but this, I repeat, does not only concern the school, but the school is a small world. [...] In any case, the tensions that we accumulate during the day, during our life, in the end we either suffocate them inside or we pass them on to others, and so when the tension comes here you can accumulate it, give it back multiplied infinitely. [...] In the pandemic period there were decisions, in short, that could affect or not affect, and so I tried to use some reflections from the Jain world, I'm trying to do, it's not that I'm always successful.

Since language can be imbued with violence, the choices we make in speech are never unconsequential, nor are they genuinely impartial. In order to rein in this violence, it is necessary to develop a certain sensitivity and awareness in the choice of terms, in the manner of speaking, in the meanings one refers to words and actions. It is a process which requires a sophisticated understanding of linguistic nuances, and hones a discerning capacity for critical analysis, an ongoing training of the self in non-violent communication that reveals the invisible categories which shape the ways in which people incorporate Jainism in their everyday life. Regarding the specific Italian context, the practice of non-violent speech used by the persons I met during my research, can also be viewed as a form of pragmatic and communicative regeneration and an adaptive response to the challenges of living abroad, coming to

terms with a different culture and a different social context[11]. Thus, the practice of non-violence in and within words can become a form of everyday introspection and enacted reflection, and witnessing this complex, interactive communication sphere in action can truly bring about the "enlargement of the universe of human discourse," the stated purpose of anthropology according to Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973: 14), as it acts on both of the researcher's and the respondents' ways of thinking.

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[11] I owe this reflection to Yifan Zhang, who mentioned it in his talk *Jain Perspectives on Non-Violence in their Southeast Asian Diasporas (Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore)* at the 'Symposium on Jain Studies: Research Dialogues across Disciplines "In Thought, Word, and Action:" Jain Practices and Epistemologies of Non-Violence in India and across the Indian Diaspora' held at the University of Turin on March 27, 2025.

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