

Interviewee: Riya Mehta

Interviewers: Taylor Ginter, Coleman Lambo

Date of Interview: March 1st, 2016

Transcribed by: Taylor Ginter, Coleman Lambo

Audio Track Time: 53:57

Edited By: Brianna Satow (6/11/18)

Background: Riya Mehta is a second generation Indian-American who was born and raised in Wisconsin. Her father emigrated from India for graduate school and her mother for medical residency. Riya is currently a freshman student at Rice University and is seeking to major in both cognitive science and kinesiology. Riya and her family identify as Jains and as such follow the Indian religion of Jainism; a religion notably centered on the core belief of non-violence. Riya was regularly involved in her local Jain temple in Wisconsin which also served as a focal point for the Jain community in her town. Jain Sunday School was held at the temple and also was the venue for religious festivals- such as Diwali. Outside of temple, Riya also engaged the Jain community by serving as the local representative for Wisconsin for the Young Jains of America organization. At Rice University, Riya continues to be involved in the Jain community by being a Young Jains of America representative for Houston and through the Rice Jain Students' Association.

Setting: The Interview took place on March 1st, 2018 in a study room in Fondren Library.

Key:

CL: Cole Lambo

RM: Riya Mehta

TG: Taylor Ginter

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate [Brackets]: actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

Interview transcript:

TG: Hi my name is Taylor Ginter, um we're here in a Fondren study room on the fourth floor on March 1st.

CL: I'm Cole Lambo.

TG: [overlapping and laughter] Could you please introduce yourself?

RM: I'm Riya Mehta.

TG: Um can you say a little bit about, like, your year at Rice, just basic introduction.

RM: Okay. I'm a freshman at Rice and I'm in Wiess college. I am studying cognitive science and kinesiology.

TG: Cool! Okay. So the focus of our interview today is um going to be Jainism, along with what it's like to be Indian American um in America. So can you start off by telling us a little bit about your family background, um like how many siblings you have, where your parents are from—that kind of stuff.

RM: Okay so I have one older brother who is 21. Um like me, he was also born in the US and brought up in the US, but my parents were both born in India and my dad moved here for graduate school and he went to graduate school in Ohio and my mom moved here for residency. She went to med school in India and then she came here after she married my dad. Um and my mom is a doctor and my dad is an engineer. And yeah.

TG: So your parents are both from India, correct?

RM: Yes. So, yeah. So originally they were both born in India and then my mom—so originally we're from a place called Gujarat and that's where like my ancestry would go to. But my mom grew up in south India in a place called Chennai and my dad grew up in like east India, kind of, and then he also grew up in Nepal. That's it. Yeah.

TG: Um when—about how old were they when they came over?

RM: In their 20's. I think my mom was like later 20's and my dad was probably earlier. I don't know exactly what like year or age, but yeah.

TG: Okay, so what have you heard from your parents—like obviously you know their basic background, um have you heard stories about them growing up in India?

RM: Um...like what type of stories? Just anything?

TG: Um maybe like...something very characteristic of your family that you feel like defined your family or described your family well.

RM: Um...I think, so both of my parents were pretty well off. My mom—so my grandfather on my mom's side owned a business so they were pretty um well off. So when my mom was growing up she said that she never like went to school, or she didn't intend on becoming a doctor to earn money, like she worked—when she worked in India she worked in like a free clinic, she didn't earn anything but it wasn't really a concern to her um because of her family status versus when she came here she had to like obviously work for money. But um...so her life was like pretty good compared to like a lot of other people in India. Um for my dad, his family was like really, really wealthy until he was like 6 years old and then—they used to own coal mines so when the government like took over all the mines they like lost everything. And then that was like a big struggle for him but their family was still well off and like growing up was still good for all of them. But, yeah.

TG: Have you visited where your parents are from?

RM: Yeah, I have. I basically—so I've gone to Chennai more because that's like—because my grandparents, that's where they used to live and my mom's brother lives there and everything. So when I used to go to India I used to go there a lot. Um...in terms of like going to where our—like going to Gujarat I've only gone once or twice I think, 'cause—just I have a lot of family there but it's more of distant family, that's not like where my close family lives. So...And then my dad's—my dad's mom passed away before I was born but my dad's dad was living in Nepal so we would always go to Nepal. So like going to um like the places where they were like born or whatever, not as much.

TG: So you do still have some family in Nepal and India?

RM: Yeah, yeah. A lot of—most of my family would be in India.

TG: Is—um...are your parents the only ones from their family who came to America? Or emigrated in general?

RM: My dad's sister lives in Atlanta and um her family is there. My mom has like a cousin's sister who is in Boston. My dad's aunt lives in Houston. So he has some of my cousins. So they're not like the only ones, but still, like there's not that many like close—super close family members that live in the states.

CL: Bringing it back to the topic of Jainism, what really is the role that Jainism plays in your entire family?

RM: So it's like actually—so I'm not—I wouldn't say that my family is like super religious and living in Wisconsin it's hard because there's really not that many Jain people there, but it does like dictate a lot of how we lead our lives, um especially in terms of diet. Like we're all vegetarian, um both me and my brother don't eat eggs. My parents do but so that's like a big part and that's like sometimes hard to follow. But then it just—we try to live by the principles of Jainism um with like non-violence and trying to just live like, I guess like how a “good Jain” would be.

TG: What is a [overlapping] “good Jain” mean to you?

RM: [overlapping] “good Jain” [laughter] Um...okay so definitely like non-violence, minimizing your harm to people and um other living beings, um...just not having too many like worldly possessions or attachment. Um like being a good person which sounds like—which is hard to specify what that entails but like just being nice, not mean, being—don't steal, tell the truth, kind of typical generalizations like that. Um I don't know like too much about too many like specifics about Jainism, but it's just like we try to learn more about the principles versus like history or things like that.

TG: So you mentioned that your diet is a little more stricter, you could say, than your parents [**RM:** Mhmm.] more generally, have you personally chosen Jainism, or do you feel it was passed down through your family?

RM: I feel like it was definitely passed down through my family, um and that's why I say that I don't think I'm that religious but I believe in like certain aspects of my religion, and then like certain aspects I don't as much. So I think that, like I definitely agree with vegetarianism, and all that, but I think that like culturally it was more passed down. Like if I hadn't been in this family would I have found Jainism? Maybe not. Yeah.

CL: Do you see a difference in your family practicing Jainism in India compared to your parents who immigrated to the United States?

RM: Yeah so definitely my grandmother, my aunt and all are like even more stricter. Like a traditional Jain diet you can't eat any onion, garlic, potatoes, carrots, like anything grown underground, and a lot of that. So my grandmother and my aunt and all would like follow that which is just impossible for us to do here. I mean—I guess people do it. Um and it depends on where you're located in the states. I think that Houston is a lot easier to follow that type of diet—versus you can't in Wisconsin. But um...yeah so they're a lot more stricter, but I feel like my family in India also has like all different levels of how much people follow Jainism. My dad's side is like definitely more religious than my mom's I guess. Um and they're a lot more invested in like going to temples and going to everything but then they're—yeah. So I guess, on my mom's side, although my mom's sister is like super super religious, she's taken like a vow of like how half the year she has to just like spend her time in a temple. Um but my mom's brother and his family don't really associate with Jainism, so.

TG: So you—you're born and raised in Wisconsin, correct?

RM: Yes. Yeah.

TG: Um can you speak a little bit more about what it was like growing up Jain in Wisconsin? Because you just mentioned [**RM:** Yeah!] that it was like a little bit tougher, maybe, to follow certain dietary [**RM:** Yeah]....

RM: So, it's just like, especially where I lived it was primarily—like everyone's Christian everyone was like white, basically. So explaining my religion to people—like people didn't understand. They've never heard of it. Everyone thinks, “oh if you're Indian you're Hindu.” And even if they even know about that much [**TG** laughs]. Um...I think as we grow up then we learn about more religions. But especially as I was younger people were like “what?” I don't know we didn't really talk about religion too much. Definitely diet-wise it was hard because everyone eats meat um and I think that now people are more understanding, but when I was younger people like if they gave me a pepperoni pizza they'd be like “just pick the pepperoni off” and I'd be like “it doesn't work like that!” so like people understanding that aspect. Um there was—like our community was— is pretty close, there's not that many people. But, growing up that was a nice like thing. We had Sunday school and we had a lot of cultural programs and we all had a really solid group. Which was nice that despite being in like a place like Wisconsin you can still have that community.

TG: Was there a Jain temple in your town or city?

RM: Yeah. So it was built in 2001, I think. It's still like a little farther away from my house, it's like 30 or 40 minutes. But it still exists I guess. Um and that—that's nice because a lot of places do not have the resources to build a Jain temple. And our temple is really nice. And yeah, so it serves as a nice place to like go to. Yeah.

CL: What does it really mean to go to temple? Like what are the activities that you do in Sunday school or with the community there?

RM: Yeah, so we pray I guess. Um...And there'll be—I guess it's not like a weekly service like there would be and a lot of my friends who go to like mass or something. Um Sunday school basically we had a teacher who just voluntarily like decided to teach us and she would try to teach us different principles, stories, history, and it would kind of just be every other Sunday for an hour um we would meet and it would be maybe ten kids. It got less and less as people like moved and became busier and older. Um and then basically we would just—there's like a prayer room with our like different gods and we would just go and pray. And then if there were like big cultural events then they'll have like songs and more comprehensive like whole group prayers.

TG: Did—Was you family—um or are they still close with other Jain families in the area?

RM: Oh yeah! For sure. I would say that my—the majority of my parents' friends would be from the Jain community. Just because everyone is like really close and...it was basically like the only Indian people in the area back then um that were like, I guess that spoke the same language and that were like the same religion and they became like really close because that's what they knew and that's what they identified with so. For the most part they'd do like—everyone would have dinners like every week or like they'll go all watch football games together [**TG** laughs] or like random things like that and that's like, I would say the main like friend group my parents have.

TG: And then besides going to Sunday school, or like your weekly dinners or watching football, um what other activities—or I guess like, what holidays did you celebrate growing up or what other festivities did you partake in?

RM: Yeah, so we would celebrate Diwali, which was a big holiday, so in my house we would do like a prayer type thing. Um...And then there would be a function at our temple which would be a lot of often like singing, dancing, like all the kids we would all like put on a show like all the girls would do a dance and different people would do like different musical talents and it just kind of like gave everyone an opportunity to do whatever they wanted. And our Jain temple, like although it is separate from our Hindu temple, they're on the same grounds and our Jain temple is really small so all our events were held in the Hindu temple and a lot of like people—we would also like go to Hindu temple events too so the Hindu temple had a separate Diwali function with like fireworks and everything. Um...And then there was like functions for like major, I guess—we have like a Lent type thing so at that there would be like a function, um like an eight day time so there's like a lot of priests will come, there'll be like meditation and like speeches and things like that. Um and then if there's like a birth of one of our gods then we'll celebrate that. Or if it's like the anniversary of them like attaining liberation we would celebrate that. Yeah.

TG: So you just mentioned the Hindu temple too. Do you identify—you don't identify—do you identify as Hindu at all?

RM: No.

TG: Okay.

RM: No, no. It's just like, the grounds are basically like the Jain temple is here and the Hindu temple is like here [gesturing with hands] and it's like the same kind of area. Um...And we do have our own like separate board and it's still a separate temple but like, we just didn't have the resources—there's a lot more Hindu people so we didn't have the resources to build a temple big enough to accommodate everyone, so we're like partners with the Hindu temple for like all their stuff too(?).

CL: Now, could you talk a little bit more about like the relationship between the Hindu community and the Jain community? 'Cause it sounds very collaborative right now.

RM: Yeah, it is. So while we have our own like board for our Jain temple and president and everything and we work closely with the Hindu temple so I think that like all the security, all the like janitor service, cleaning, like all that is all um one like common thing for everybody. We share like parking spaces. Um...The Hindu temple houses the key to the Jain temple so if anyone goes to the Jain temple you have to check out the key from the Hindu temple and there'll usually be someone at the Hindu temple to check out the key within like the operating hours. Um...They also—we like rent out their space, kind of, but they like give it—like we book—they have a calendar and we like book it for certain nights and they like let us do that. And they make like a whole, I guess, like calendar of events. 'Cause like obviously our Diwali program can't like interfere with theirs. So we have like separate days and stuff like that. Yeah.

TG: Can you talk about your experience coming from Wisconsin to Houston? You mentioned already that Houston is a little bit easier to be Jain in. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

RM: Yeah, so in Wisconsin like the group was really small and the people like weren't really religious because of the community we were in. You wouldn't see like kids that are that invested in Jainism. And I was like a local representative for—so we have like a youth Jain—like Young Jains of America um like national organization and there's different regions and you can be like—and we have an executive board too for that but you can be a local representative for different areas. So I was a local representative for Wisconsin and basically you're supposed to like hold events that like allow all the Jain people to get together. Basically it's just kids from ages 14-29. But in Wisconsin like I couldn't get anyone to go to anything. Like we didn't have any events because—maybe if we had like one dinner a year that everyone came to that was like—we would all hang out but our parents would be there too or it wouldn't be an official Jain event I guess 'cause we were all friends and we would hang out but yeah, nobody would come to those. Versus here I'm a local representative now for Houston and we've had like events every month. Um and... we actually get people to show up [laughs] yeah. So like it's not that—it's still not like an obscene amount of people compared to how many Jains there are here that are like youth but it's still like we can have events every month so last Sunday we haduh like volunteering at Houston Pets Alive so that was like fun. We had a ultimate Frisbee like thing in January. Yeah, so things like that. Um...yeah so

there's just a lot more people here and—but the people are very serious about Jainism and I think that here like that's their friend group. And I've seen that in a lot of places like Houston, Chicago, or Atlanta or like places where there's a big community of Jain people. You see they all like live in similar areas so they all go to school together. They all like—That's their friend group, and that's who they hang out with all the time. And for me that was different because I had my school friends and then like Jain friends kind of on the side. That wasn't the only group of friends that I had. So um...so yeah, they were a lot more serious about it and there's like a lot more people. Yeah.

CL: Can you talk a little bit about maybe the Jain community on campus here at Rice? Or if there's a lot of celebrations that occur on campus?

RM: Yeah so...so we have like a Rice Jain Students' Association. There's not—there's more people than I guess than I would have expected in it but—that are Jain on campus. So last semester the president of that organization she graduated that semester so now me and this other guy are kind of leading it. Um...but—so there's, I don't know how many exactly but there's probably eight or nine Jain people on campus and we try to hold like meetings or at least where everyone gets to know each other. We don't really do much. I would say that most of the people on campus aren't that involved. A lot of people are like Jain by—just by family and they don't really—that's not like an integral part of their identity. So me and the other guy are like involved, and the girl who graduated obviously was. But there's not that many other people who—like me and him will post in the group like “oh we should have a meeting” or like if we had a meeting we would be like the only ones that show up, so. Which I guess it's like everyone's busy so if it's not something that people want to come to it's understandable. But, yeah so we just try to— if things are going on or if like someone's going to the temple we just try to make everybody on campus aware of that, so. Yeah.

TG: So why have you chosen to be involved—like you mentioned um being Young Jain Association?

[**RM:** Yeah] representative and then now the Rice group too.

RM: Yeah so despite the fact that I would say that I'm not super religious, I do think that it's a big like part of my cultural identity. So, and I think that it's a great way to like get to know people who are similar. Um...And like people that I can relate to. And I think that it's cool how we can have a community of people, like and we can have conventions and we can do things like that because there's not like that many of us because you can't have like a Young Catholics of America 'cause you'd have so many like [laughter] you can't have a convention that big. But like for us we have a like convention every other year for just kids and the year that's not there it's for all Jain people of all ages and that like varies in location every year. It's like in the summer and it's cool because you get to like meet people and even like in each region you get to meet people in each like city and we have like regional retreats too so I think that it's a good way to like be involved and like yeah.

CL: Could you talk a little bit about maybe people's preconceptions about Jainism? Or how aware people are in general are of Jainism?

RM: Um I would say like, at least from my experience in Wisconsin, people aren't really aware. Um...In my like world history class in 8th grade we like talked about it but my teacher didn't even know what he

was talking about so I was like okay...And people just—maybe they've heard of it but they don't understand what it is. So I don't think that— like I haven't come across too many preconceptions because people just don't understand. Or I think that they would be like—a lot of the preconceptions would be like people's ideas about Hinduism. So they'd be like, “oh like, isn't a cow sacred” or whatever and I'm like “No!” like “Wrong religion!” So like, they just equate that to Hinduism, as being the same. And like most Jain people live in India so like it hasn't spread, it's not really like a religion that spreads that much so people just aren't aware.

TG: So what do you say to people like in that situation? How do you present what Jainism means to you, or like what you think the integral part of Jainism is?

RM: I basically tell them our main principle is non-violence so...that's like why we're vegetarians and how we try to like lead our lives. I just—it's kind of—I tell them like it's like kind of a sub-sect of Hinduism um...and I don't know—I guess I don't go too much into detail 'cause there's a lot to say but, yeah. That's like something we try to work on in our conventions. They're like “come up with a thirty second elevator pitch [laughter] to explain to someone what it is.” Um, yeah.

TG: Have you ever faced any hostility towards—about being Jain?

RM: I don't think necessarily hostility, I think it's just the lack of understanding. Like people don't understand, or people argue, or they think it's like dumb or they just—I mean, I guess, yeah so like people will think “why are you vegetarian?” or like it doesn't make sense or they don't understand or um...a lot of people if they're super Christian they believe that anybody who's not Christian is going to hell so like people will say that. But not in like a—I guess I've never really had someone be like yelling at me like “you're going to hell!” but like implied like religiously like you're going to hell because you're not Christian, and things like that. Yeah.

TG: Has there been one situation that's stuck out to you?

RM: I don't think so...I'm trying to think like—I guess...I don't bring up like religion too much in school or like other settings. Because like I've been exposed to a lot of like Catholicism in my entire life um...I do have like a lot of—like I do know a lot about their principles too so I can like—like I talk about that too and I try to, like I don't know. I just like if they are talking about Catholicism then I'll have a good conversation about that and I don't necessarily like bring up Jainism.

CL: You talked a lot about how the majority of people don't really know what Jainism is. Is it any better within the Indian community like here on Rice or in Houston if the familiarity with Jainism is any better or if they just focus on Hinduism?

RM: I think that the like Indian community, a lot of people would know what Jainism is. I mean there's definitely people that don't but you definitely have more like recognition among Indian people and they understand like what it is and they understand the principles. I think it's hard 'cause you do fall into generalizations like people will be like, “oh you're the people who don't eat onions and potatoes!” and you're like “well, I mean there's more to it than that but, yeah.” I don't know.

TG: Is there any kind of stigma about Jainism within the Indian or Indian American community? That you're aware of or that you have perceived.

RM: I think that some people think that Jains can be a little like a little too specific or annoying about their like religious practices. I just think that there's a spectrum of what people follow like to the extent of Jainism they follow. Um...I know people who like they eat before sunset because that's technically what you're supposed to do too and then they'll like...they follow the diet really strictly so then if they go somewhere they're like mad if you didn't cook something that they can eat and they'll like make a big fuss about it. So sometimes people get annoyed about that. Um...Yeah. Or sometimes people are like more intolerant than they should be considering the principles of our religion.

TG: Um...How have you decided what aspects of Jainism you want to incorporate into your life?

RM: I think it just has come from what I personally believe. I don't exactly know what like caused me to believe in those things. Um...But yeah. So it's just basically like what aspects do I believe and what aspects do I not believe. Um...And that's like an interesting thing because I was having a debate with someone and I was like what do you have to follow to call yourself a Jain? You know like what set of characteristics makes someone Jain. Like if they don't believe in something can they still be Jain? So, like the person I was arguing with said that if you are pro-choice then that's like you can't be Jain. You can't like believe in abortion because that's so against Jainism so like if someone believes in that you can't be like "you're not Jain anymore" but then I don't know like, I don't think there's an official set of like categories.

TG: So how do you see Jainism fitting into today's day and age? Like in terms of abortion or not eating after sundown.

RM: I think that it depends on what environment you're in. In India, I think that you can be more strict and it's okay. But I just think that here it's such a strict religion to follow like in actuality that I just don't think that you can follow like everything if you want to survive. Like my dad travels so much that if he like gave up eating eggs he wouldn't be able to eat like anything, if he was that particular. He has to go abroad, he has to go everywhere like he just feasibly can't do it and I don't think that makes him a bad person or a bad Jain, necessarily. Um...And I think that a lot of social issues like Jainism is on the more conservative side and—but you're seeing like a generation of people like our age who are more liberal and they're still like identifying with Jainism so I think that as—like at least in America as the generation of Jain people changes you'll see a lot of different like ideals that might not necessarily correlate with Jainism.

TG: Yeah I was gonna ask actually about the differences between like our generation and maybe your parents or your grandparent's generation [**RM:** Yeah] of Jains.

RM: So I mean my parents and just like their generation are definitely like I said more on the conservative side with all social issues. And I don't know if that's necessarily a cultural thing. Like I would say Indian people in general in that generation would all fall like on the more conservative

spectrum um as like a generalization, obviously not everybody. But um so I'm not sure if that necessarily stems from Jainism or our culture in like general. Um So I definitely think we'll see a transition of people who are like a lot more liberal.

CL: Have you noticed any specific tenants or pieces of Jainism that's been modified by younger generations? You mentioned a little bit about how diets need to change to accommodate life. Is there anything else you noticed that really needs to be modified in order to accommodate everyday life?

RM: I just think as a whole it's like a religion of modification 'cause like you can't—I mean like everything—I just feel like everything deviates from the principles of it in some extent like you're not supposed to like buy a lot of things but obviously we all like buy lots of things and you're not—you're supposed to be like a minimalist but like people still like have the desire for like material things so that has changed. Diet adjusts I think that like...I don't know. It's just like—there's such a spectrum of how people follow it.

TG: Um have you learned about Jainism in an academic setting? Besides I know you already mentioned like Sunday school and then like your brief stint in 8th grade with your teacher. Um like specifically at Rice have you taken any Jain classes?

RM: I have not. I was talking to Dr. Donaldson so I was like okay...she said she's only here for one more year so I was like I hope I can take a class. But thus far I haven't taken anything at Rice or—yeah I haven't—even in Sunday school we didn't learn like the history and I think our Sunday school was not structured it was just a mom who was like okay I'm gonna do Sunday school. But now you're seeing like—now in Wisconsin my dad's a teacher and they have like a curriculum and they learn like a set like curriculum of stuff. We were just like okay whatever she feels like talking about let's talk about. And if you go to bigger places like Houston or Boston they have like different levels, different curriculum for each level you have like tests, you have like all these different things and the amount of knowledge that people have here is a lot more than like what I just am educated about.

TG: Um do you plan on passing along Jainism throughout future generations? Like if you have kids would you raise them as Jain?

RM: I am not sure as of yet. I think that it's been such a big part of my life and I would want that community but because I'm not super religious I just don't know like if I would change my mind or like—I think that I would carry principles with me but I don't know about the whole religion as a whole. Um I think that I would definitely—I'm definitely gonna be vegetarian for the rest of my life. Um and just like the principles of non-violence and being truthful and not stealing and like all that. Definitely passing it on. Yeah.

TG: How does non-violence present itself in your life? Like obviously not eating animals—what other ways do you practice non-violence?

RM: So I think just like anyone here I'm obviously not gonna go like beat up someone on the street but like...um...just like advocating for non-violent things. I wouldn't see—you don't see like Jain people, for

the most part, like joining the military or anything like that that advocates like non-violence. Um... Yeah. Like you don't—I don't know. Just living minimizing violence.

TG: What did you say your major was again?

RM: Cognitive science and kinesiology.

TG: Okay. I ask because I interviewed Dr. Sulekh Jain before and he was mentioning in his like career path he was purposefully avoiding—he had to purposefully avoid a couple situations where he didn't want to [**RM:** Yeah] for example create a machine that would be used violently.

RM: Yeah. Yeah I think especially for a lot of like healthcare related fields um like I don't want to do any dissections and um that's like a big thing. So even in high school I was like trying to get out of those. Um...unless—like obviously I know my mom had to do dissections in med school and stuff and at some point it's necessary but just in like biology classes trying to avoid that. Definitely not like going into industries that, you know like, encourage violence. With my majors at least, I don't—I haven't done too much with them yet so I don't know like how much they would be involved in like non-violence but like yeah.

TG: Are you premed?

RM: No.

TG: Oh okay.

RM: Yeah. I'm not. But even still, like still health related.

TG: Mmhmm. Yeah. Still relevant.

RM: Yeah. Still. And like in biology classes—I guess here there's not too many, I mean in labs sometimes, but there's not too many classes that like do too much dissection. But I know at one of my friend's universities she was like the first day of her anatomy class they just dissected a cat and I was like, "oh, okay...I wouldn't like to do that." So.

TG: Yeah. Alright well we don't wanna take up too much more of your time. Um...do you have anything else that we haven't touched upon yet that you wanna bring up?

RM: I'm trying to think. I feel like I wasn't very thorough with anything. Um... Yeah that's what—even when we were—when you emailed us about who was gonna do the interview um the one girl had graduated so it was like between me and the other guy and he said he like adopted Jainism only when he came into high school so he didn't think he was that knowledgeable about it but I was like I don't know how much more I know...um I just think it's very different depending on where you were brought up—people's perspectives on Jainism. Like whether it—that's like your main identity or not. Um. For me like there was just so much like conflict between like other religions because like everything I did was like- all

my friends like went to like Catholic private schools or they were all Catholic and everything was, you know they would do Lent and my entire school would be off for Easter and like all our holidays were—um I was in choir and every choir we would sing in was at a church and all we would sing is like super Christian songs. Um Like there were some—and we'd sing like Bible verses or whatever and at some point I like know more—I knew more about like Catholicism than I did Jainism and I knew more than some of my Catholic friends and they were like how do you know all this and it's just like just by living that life where that's like all everyone talks about. So it's just like different.

TG: How else do you identify? That's a pretty big question but...because you mentioned that you do identify as Jain and it is to some degree a part of your identity um so what else do you identify as?

RM: I think more so than Jainism, like the whole Indian culture has been a big part of my life. Um like I said, I don't know how much of like the culture that my parents were raised in is necessarily reflecting how they were raised in India or like necessarily Jain principles. Um...Just like living a life—'cause I don't think—there's a lot of things that I don't think Jainism necessarily says but um—that my parents would still like—okay I wasn't allowed to like date or I wasn't allowed to—um my parents have a very negative view about like partying or drinking or drugs. Um which I guess is, I guess, stated in Jainism, they do frown upon all of that but like it's just so much of the Indian culture too. Yeah so like, yeah identifying as Indian and a student? I guess? And like whatever else. Yeah.

TG: When you say—like I mean you said like “they” frown upon it. Who do you mean by “they”? Like do you follow a certain set of writings or how does the Jain ideology get passed down?

RM: Yeah so for the most part I guess there are a set of writings, and scriptures, and it's just like—there are monks and gurus and stuff who advocate all these different things. Um I personally haven't like read any of the scriptures or anything. A lot of it isn't in English so I can't read it um so I guess it just gets passed down by a lot of word-of-mouth and I think that can change the interpretation a lot too but just like I guess there's a general understanding of like what “they” being like the original gods and stuff wanted.

TG: Do you speak any other languages?

RM: Yeah so I speak Gujarati and then like kinda Spanish.

TG: What language do you speak at home with your parents?

RM: Both English and Gujarati. Yeah. So they mostly like—they definitely mostly speak in Gujarati and I'll like do both. Yeah.

TG: Do you plan on going back to India any time soon—or Nepal?

RM: So I went this past summer to India and that was like I hadn't been in a while just because of high school and like everything, summer gets really busy and if we go we wanna go for an extended period of time. Um when I was younger I used to go every summer and that was—and mostly I would go to my mom's side of the family and then Nepal sometimes. Um there's like a lot of political problems in Nepal

so it was like sometimes hard to go but. It was more important when I was like younger when my grandparents were alive 'cause that was the only chance I got to see them the entire year 'cause they didn't come here at all. Um I think my grandfather on my dad's side like came once but basically that was my only opportunity to see them. So then after they all passed away it was like less important to go um so yeah. So I went this summer only to India. Unfortunately I couldn't go to Nepal. But, I like going, yeah it's cool to like see everything and like see family. I don't know when I'll go next just 'cause I went recently [TG: Mmhmm] but yeah.

TG: How was it different when you went back this time? 'Cause you said it was like a while.

RM: Yeah I think it was like a lot more modernized. Especially—I didn't go to like the place I usually go, though. Um but it was definitely like a lot more—you can like feel the money, a lot more people, like we went to a really crowded—like we went to Bombay so it's like really crowded and just looks like more or less it looks like it could be a city in America. Except it's a little more rundown but like just a lot more industrialized and modern and I would say like the rich there have—are really rich and the money that they put into building things is different than here. So like their malls and everything are so much better than here it's just surprising to see. Yeah.

TG: What do you do when you're back in India? Besides hanging out with family.

RM: Yeah so this time we went on a vacation I guess with like all my mom's family um for about a week and a half to like really northern India and we toured that. So usually we try to tour different parts of India. Um everybody like lives in different cities so it's hard to go everywhere. We only went for three weeks which still seems like a long time but it's not to go everywhere. Um when I was younger we used to go—me and my brother used to go for two months. Um and we would just go by ourselves and spend the time with my grandparents so in that we did like a lot of stuff. We would—We had like drawing classes, they would put us through like piano classes and we would go to the beach every day and like just doing things like that. Yeah it was a little less like structured this time it was just meeting people. My cousin got like married a couple years back and I hadn't been so I like met his wife I guess [laughter]. Um yeah so like that's sometimes hard. Like I missed both of my cousins' weddings um and things like that, so. But my mom goes more often. Yeah.

CL: You mentioned a little bit about how Jainism is changing in the United States. With India modernizing like you saw, do you see any changes in Jainism over there or is it remaining relatively constant?

RM: I wouldn't know too much about my generation of like Jain people in India because I just don't know anyone. Um my family's all like older so I see like that their generation is the same I definitely don't think that it's gonna be as modern as it is here. Um... You like—like I said, like increasingly you're seeing Jain people fall on the liberal side and I just don't see India like—I don't see Jain people in India like advocating abortion, I don't see them advocating like gay marriage or anything like that as much as you would here just because of the environment we're in. Um but even here it's a spectrum because you'll get people who are really really against all of those things, they're really against—and they won't

like, they won't drink or they won't do anything but then there obviously are people that do as well so I guess it depends on the environment you were raised in.

TG: Um how do you perceive Rice's Indian American community?

RM: Um...I think that it is definitely really modern. Um...I think that...there's like once again, I know a lot of Indian people who are on like both sides, um but I definitely do think that it's more modern and more liberal than maybe what you would find in some other places.

TG: Are you involved with any Indian American clubs on campus? Not specifically Jain.

RM: Yeah so I'm in like the SAS [South Asian Society] and then I'm in my a cappella group is like—I mean it's not only for South Asian people but it is—like Basmati Beats is a—we sing like South Asian music so most of the people are Indian so it's cool to get to like know different types of people. Um...What I've noticed is that, for the most part, there's a lot more South Indian population here at Rice than North Indian which is like interesting that there's such like a discrepancy between like where people are from and what language people speak. Yeah.

TG: Can you talk a little bit more about the clubs you're involved in? Like what you guys do?

RM: Yeah so the SAS tries to hold different cultural events. Um we have—so we have our big cultural showcase in the fall every year with each different group performing like there's the three dance groups and the a cappella group and they just try to get everyone together. Um if there's a holiday for Diwali there was like a function—we have like a dance type thingy in the fall every year too during the time that leads up to Diwali so we all went to that and that was a lot of fun where it was like cool that you could get like eighty people to go to this thing off campus. And dress up and like do that. And then in terms of Basmati Beats we just like sing, we try to incorporate Indian music from like a lot of different languages and cultures with American songs. Yeah.

TG: What does SAS stand for?

RM: The South Asian Society.

TG: Okay. Just wanted to make sure.

RM: Yeah. Yeah.

TG: Why do you think it's important—or maybe you don't think it's important—for people on a college campus to be involved with these types of groups and to participate in these activities?

RM: I think that at least for me like it's been such a big part of my culture that coming here and not being involved in it would seem—like I just don't see myself not being involved. And I think it's cool 'cause it has a community of people who have been raised kinda similar to you who have similar cultural um ideas.

Their parents are probably like in the same generation, same type of like environment. So I think it's cool to have a community of all of us where we're all kinda really similar.

TG: Would you say your main friend group is mainly Indian American or different—more diverse.

RM: I think it's more diverse, I think especially at Rice um because of our residential colleges like I have a lot of friends in my residential college that aren't also like Asian American, we're all kinda like friends so yeah so I don't think—I know that the Rice SAS it becomes dependent on the groups. I know like with the dance groups a lot of them that's like their main friend group so I think it depends on if you're in the dance group or not and I think that at least at Rice like a lot of people identify as members of the SAS if they're in one of the four—like either three dance groups or the a cappella group and then a lot of the other people that might be Indian might be in the organization but aren't that involved.

CL: So you've been talking about all the activities that you do on campus that allow you to stay involved with kinda the community and culture that you're used to, what about after college? Do you see yourself continuing to engage with the Indian community and the Jain community? Or how would you go about doing that?

RM: Yeah, so I think that it depends on where I am and I would try to find the Jain community there. Um it's really nice that we have like YJA which is Young Jains of America, we have like YJP, Young Jain Professionals, and then Jaina which is just all like Jains of America. And there's so many like organizations that you can—because of these organizations you can stay involved. They connect you to like Jain people in your community. Um If you find like the Jain temple it's really easy to like go to the temple and meet people and like get involved. I do think that it's harder when you're older to go like establish yourself in a new Jain community because everyone already knows each other. And I definitely felt that when I came to Houston too where like people are friendly but I went there and I like don't know anyone and it's nice because I had some friends and um relatives here so they could introduce me to people and take me like to the temple and like meet all their friends but it's still like, like when I went to the ultimate Frisbee it kinda felt like I was intruding on like all these people's friendships 'cause it—I was just like—they were nice, but I was just there and these people have been friends for years and years and years and that's the community that they know so they're like not as willing to like include someone so I mean it takes effort but it's possible to like find the community. Yeah.

TG: So why do you think there's a lot of young Jain groups specifically?

RM: What do you mean? Like...

TG: Like why is there special effort to get young people involved, or teach young people the tenants of Jainism?

RM: Yeah so I think with a religion like this the main way it spreads is based on family like passing it down. You don't see too many people just adopting the religion on their own. So I think that like YJA puts such an emphasis on including everybody and like connecting them to Jain people so that we don't lose that part of our identity because it's just so hard in this country to like otherwise pass on Jainism and

get people aware. So I think they're trying to like really teach people about it, make that a central part of their identity so that they carry that on throughout their lives.

TG: Do you see—this is totally just a conjecture—but do you see Jainism growing stronger as years go by in America, or losing strength?

RM: I think that it has since like, when my parents first moved here, it has grown in strength and numbers and more and more Jain people so I do think that it'll continue. I don't know how much it'll necessarily like—I don't know how much the Jain population will necessarily increase but I don't think it'll like die out anytime soon. I think that the organizations that we have keep a—like do a really good job of keeping like Jainism alive in America and keeping everybody involved in various ways so, yeah. Hopefully it doesn't go away.

TG: Yeah [laughs]. [To **CL**] Do you have any other questions?

CL: I don't, do you?

TG: No. [To **RM**] Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

RM: Um...I don't know. I'm tryna think what else—how else has Jainism affected my life. I think it's hard if you disagree with your parents on like—or even just like the Jain priests or the generation if you disagree with anything it's hard to like argue it and for them to see your perspective. And there's some like principles that are so...like people believe so strongly in um that it's hard to like change that. And I don't know, it's like hard to know if it needs to be like modified.

TG: Did you have any um arguments with your parents while you were growing up? I mean you're still growing up [laughs] but like [overlapping] while you were in the house.

RM: I mean definitely, um like I personally am pro-choice so my parents like cannot comprehend that 'cause they think that if you're a Jain that the fundamental belief is that you cannot kill any life so they just think that it's so against Jainism but like—and while I can see that, I think that like having the freedom to choose trumps that. Or even just like miniscule things like, in a lot of Indian religions, in um especially like Jainism I guess, a lot of temples will not allow females to enter the temple if they're on their period and I just don't understand that? So my parents will always be like oh you can't go, you can't go and I just will be like I don't care, which I don't—some things I just can't understand like why they—and maybe it's because I haven't read the scriptures or understood them but it's interesting to like disagree. Yeah.

TG: So do you and your parents discuss Jainism? And like why you disagree—do you have those kind of discussions?

RM: Yeah, yeah. For sure. Definitely. Um...They're like—while they're not necessarily open to like changing their opinion about a lot of things and the culture they were raised on, um we still do discuss and things like that.

TG: Alright, great. Well thank you so much for your time.

RM: Thank you!

TG: And sharing your life with us.

RM: No problem.

TG: We really appreciate it.

RM: I hope it was helpful.

CL: [overlapping] Yeah!

TG: Yeah! Of course, it was great to hear a young Jain's perspective is what we were looking for so, thank you!

RM: Cool, yeah no problem.

[recorder shuts off]