Chapter 10
Attending Houses of Worship as Homes Out of the Home

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10.1 Introduction

> This gurdwara is one of the local tourist attractions. Italians who visit it ask about Sikhism and the history of our Gurus. Anyone can enter, regardless of religion or social origin. Everyone is offered a free ritual meal. We also welcome schools, but instead of spicy Punjabi food, children are given French fries with ketchup or pizza and soft drinks. By now the Italians know us, but there is always someone in the gurdwara who speaks Italian well and can explain who we are. (Informal conversation with Daljit Singh, September 2015)

This chapter revisits the development of fieldwork in settings that are not domestic *stricto sensu*, and yet bear significant resemblances with the domestic, such as Sikh and Hindu temples (gurdwaras and mandirs, respectively). These semi-public places are often perceived as home-like by the faithful (Bertolani et al., 2021) and, as in the case of homes, their access presupposes the overcoming of physical thresholds, but above all of symbolic and relational ones. Entering places of worship can be challenging for a white Western researcher, since beyond the formal rules valid for all, there may be informal ones based on gender or seniority. Moreover, internal spatial thresholds may entail differentiated access to certain spaces based on social stratifications, revealing tensions and conflicts within the religious community. Starting from the authors' experiences on the field, we analyse how the entry took place, through whom, with what difficulties or resistances, examining the role of gatekeepers which may be fundamental. Although not necessarily the hosts, they are the ones who may open the door for us and literally let us in, to observe and participate in the worship as far as possible. While it has been argued that ethnographic hospitality consists of social, ritual and cognitive elements (Selwyn, 2001), the host and guest

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relationship in a house of worship is laden with multiscale political negotiations. In particular, doing fieldwork in minority temples allows us to see not only how these are carved out as spaces of religious belonging for a given community, but also which roles and positionalities ethnographers may have upon their visits.

The chapter is divided into five sections. In the next one we discuss some theoretical concerns about entering the field and identify the main concepts underlying our empirical analysis. In the third one we present in a comparative perspective the main characteristics of the places of worship examined, methodologically explaining the reasons for our choice. Their internal complexity and social stratification are highlighted as well as the existence of inclusion/exclusion thresholds that may act towards the researcher and also the members of the same ethnic-religious community. We then reflect on the social spatiality that operates within places of worship, analysing how the aesthetics of a house of prayer, its architecture, planning and interior design produce significant boundaries between inside and outside spaces and groups. In the fourth section we reflect on the issue of positionality: of the researcher's as well as the gatekeepers' and informants'. Starting from some case studies, we discuss how thresholding processes affect the researcher's positionality and how this latter influences the analytical gaze in entering, but also remaining and leaving places of worship. In the conclusions we argue that entering houses of worship is fundamental to better understand social differentiations and tensions within the ethnic-religious community that might otherwise remain unexplored in migration and diaspora studies.

Our work draws on two analytical perspectives. The first is a socio-spatial analysis that leads to the investigation of the physical and social thresholds that regulate access to places of worship. The second deals with positionality and how the researcher can navigate identity politics in the field. These perspectives are conceptually interconnected: the activity of thresholding is a process of control of the social and geographical space, for example in relation to religious, ethnic and gender characteristics. This defines groups, spaces and access rules, as well as the power relations between members of the same group, or between them and the outside world. Above all, thresholding itself generates a distinction between insiders and outsiders, that is, it defines a mutual positioning among the social actors which feeds back on dynamics of spatial and social inclusion or exclusion (Miranda-Nieto et al., 2020). Researchers, gatekeepers and informants negotiate each other's position throughout the research process, shifting the threshold that defines their positionality (Herod, 1999). The latter is the result of social, dynamic and contextual relationships that must be studied, as they influence the researcher's analytical gaze, allowing access to certain data rather than others (Mullings, 1999). Before getting there, however, we situate our argument in the relevant theoretical background.

10.2 On Considering Houses of Worship as Semi-public Home Spaces

This chapter engages with the multi-scalarity of homemaking in migration contexts, arguing that minority places of worship may function at once as community hubs and as "claims" for domestication over the public space (Gale & Naylor, 2002; Singh, 2006). As an increasing number of studies across social sciences have effectively shown, people attach a sense of home to places other than their private dwellings, and this can be evermore the case of migrants (Peterson, 2017). Not only individuals and households may face challenges in terms of finding adequate housing, but ethnic groups often negotiate their social accommodation depending on how far they can legitimately appropriate public spaces (Knott, 2010). For religious minorities, the establishment of a worship house thus serves, quite literally, as a landmark for advancing their right to the city and claiming participation in public life at large (Baumann, 2009). At the same time, this spatial appropriation on the ground of religious freedom grants group members a separate place to freely express, perform and reaffirm one's collective identity against processes of marginalisation (Meer et al., 2012). It is in the interplay between community and public spaces that our chapter addresses the peculiarity of Hindu and Sikh houses of worship in Italy.

As migration researchers who have explored the Indian diaspora experience in Italy for almost twenty years, we recognized local mandirs and gurdwaras as strategic places for in-depth study of the social life of these minorities (also taking advantage of the welcoming attitude of Punjabis which exceeded the formal accessibility of their temples, Gallo & Sai, 2013). On one hand, Indian migrants in Italy have exhibited a large degree of self-encapsulation. Put it differently, without entering into private homes, schools or job places it would not be possible to observe their patterns of socialisation, which instead are continuously at work within the temple (Kumar, 2015). On the other hand, entering minority religious spaces meant approaching ideas and practices of home in a multidimensional manner; that is, paying attention to ritual as well as mundane relations as they simultaneously unfold, questioning the migration process itself as a never-ending process of homemaking that strongly builds on religious belonging (Saunders et al., 2016). Although there is nothing like a "threshold theory" across disciplines, by using the concept of threshold we point to the symbolic meaning beyond the materiality of a doorway or any other architectural element that divides an outside from an inside (Buchli, 2013). In particular, we highlight the process of marking spatial forms of social inclusion or exclusion, and consider these boundaries as zones of passage, where social actors can be admitted or barred at different times (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017). Drawing on our research visits to gurdwaras and mandirs in northern Italy, this piece explores the predicaments of demarcating a safe haven for its faithful in a diaspora setting, by considering a plurality of thresholds that have to do with stakeholder relations, intra-ethnic boundaries and ethnographic accessibilities.

This leads us to consider the researcher's positionality and the circumscription of the field as a result of political negotiations which blur the boundaries between what is "inside" and "outside" and redefine who is admitted and under what conditions (Hirvi & Snellman, 2012; Salemink, 2015). Not only the unequal power relationships between researcher, informants and gatekeepers affect the process of knowledge production (McDowell, 1992; Mullings, 1999), the ethnographers can also be "escorted to the door" of the place of worship at any time, as a result of intersectional logics and power relations enacted in the field that may result in open or latent confrontations (Chacko, 2004; Herod, 1999). Since positionality and social roles influence what is seen and what kind of data can be collected (Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008), they cannot be taken for granted but must be analysed as part of the research itself, along with the researcher's subjectivity, biography and preferences (Magolda, 2000) which can steer the interpretation process in unforeseen directions.

Methodologically speaking, this chapter emerges from the ERC HOMInG project in which both authors have collaborated since 2019. In fact, while the analytical framework here suggested takes after this cooperation, Bertolani had started to conduct her research with Sikhs in Emilia Romagna since the early 2000s, while Bonfanti had carried out her fieldwork with Punjabis in Lombardy since 2012. As a result, the argument discussed in this chapter benefits from a long-term, multi-sited and comparative perspective (Vari-Lavoisier et al., 2019). The themes of thresholding and positionality run across both ethnographic experiences. The authors have made an effort to put their accumulated findings into dialogue in order to provide a more nuanced reflection on the value and pitfalls of visiting houses of worship as public homes for the Punjabi diaspora. The starting point of our joint quest was the urge to give a complex and ethnographically grounded answer to a simple question: what does it mean to consider minority prayer houses as community homes? What remains untold under such a plain metaphor? In the next two sections we advance two parallel perspectives that may be conducive to a coherent answer. The first is a socio-spatial analysis of places of worship like mandirs and gurdwaras, while the second deals with the researcher's positionality. In the end, it will become apparent that attending houses of worship "as homes out of the home" means to navigate overlapping politics of identity in the field, possibly learning how religious diasporas relocate despite uncertainties, amidst old and new forms of stratification (Waghmore, 2020; Jacobsen & Myrvold, 2012).

10.3   Hidden in Plain Sight? Social Relations Within Sacred Spaces

In this section we discuss the specificity of mandirs and gurdwaras as minority places of worship and the possibility for the researchers to debate the access and characteristics of such premises. Under which conditions were the authors able to enter these houses of prayer? Furthermore, what could they observe by visiting,

staying and partaking in the everyday community worship of the groups studied? If home visits in private spaces impinge on the relations between hosts and guests and allow for a close look at domestic spaces and routines for the household considered (Lenhard & Samanani, 2020, cf. Bertolani, Chap. 12), visiting houses of worship adds an extra layer of complexity insofar as these can be considered as 'semi-public' homes: i.e. community hubs for an ethno-religious minority but also visible landmarks in the public space (Dwyer, 2016; Bertolani et al., 2021). Tackling these emergent questions, two paragraphs will follow. The first situates the places of worship that we consider with respect to the localities where they are established. The second analyzes how space is socially organised within such temples, focusing on internal thresholds.

10.3.1 The Emplacement of Indian Religious Minorities in Italy: An Overview

Indian migration to Italy, mostly from Punjab, dates back after the 1984 Sikh pogroms occurred in the homeland, peaking in the last decade, with recent figures topping over 150,000 admissions into the country (CARITAS and MIGRANTES, 2019). Initially clustered in rural areas in North-central Italy, most first-time Indian immigrants were young males often employed as *bergamini*, temporary agricultural labourers, at once sheltered and excluded in a condition of relative invisibility. Employment diversification, longer settlements, family reunifications, generational changeover and recent naturalizations have reshaped the landscape of these migration flows and of Sikh minorities in Italy. Punjabi Diasporas include a Hindu as well as a Sikh component which is majoritarian, although both are inherently plural, being made up of different social groups, based on their *jati* (caste-lineage, in spite of Sikhism ideally backing egalitarianism), or their affiliations to intra-religious orders. In addition, regional and idiom commonalities bind together Hindu and Sikh Punjabis in immigration settings, beyond their diverse spiritual or political associations. For both authors, who have long been engaged in fieldwork with Indian Punjabi migrants in northern Italy (Bertolani et al., 2011; Bonfanti, 2016), focusing on gurdwaras and mandirs was instrumental to find key interlocutors first, and then to reason on the importance of such places for their respective communities.

The role of houses of worship for the *emplacement* of the Punjabi community in Italy is well established in the literature. With that term, we refer to the progressive appropriation of place where a migrant community has relocated, "their efforts to settle and build networks of connection within the constraints and opportunities of a specific locality at a particular time" (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016: 961). The concept of emplacement enables us to capture the instantiation of a set of dynamics in space and time. As Gallo (2012: 2) wrote, "current literature significantly highlights the role of religious places in connecting members of ethnic minorities across generations, in promoting continuity with different diasporic locations and in

allowing migrants to enter the public sphere in receiving contexts". Besides, the establishment of different *gurdwaras* in Italy is made differently meaningful in generational migration histories. The mandirs and gurdwaras that Bertolani and Bonfanti have visited reflect collective histories of status transformation among Indian migrants: from irregularity to long-term stay, from individual movements to family reunifications, up to naturalisation and the coming of age of second-generations. Moreover, the spatial distribution of mandirs and gurdwaras reveals a topographical story of emplacement. From makeshift prayer rooms in private houses, the establishment of formal places of worship in the urban outskirts or more often in the countryside took off thanks to the alms-funding developed by the Sikh and Hindu communities, alongside the process of reciprocal recognition with local authorities. Building on Baumann's (2009) concept of 'templeisation', we consider that a shift of religious observance and ritual practice from private homes to established temples (which also determined the rise of new authorities) has taken place among the Indian diaspora in Italy over the past twenty years. In the case of the Sikhs this occurred through a direct dialogue with local city councils and the Catholic church, as the extreme internal fragmentation of the community has so far prevented the formal recognition of Sikhism as a distinct faith (gurdwaras are still regulated as cultural associations). In the case of the Hindus, the process of accommodation benefited from the affiliation to national associations also sponsored by Italian devotees (namely Hare Krishna groups). This led to the official recognition of Hinduism, notwithstanding its various currents, by the Italian State (thus mandirs are regulated as religious places, including tax benefits). Hindu and Sikh minorities in Italy then represent an interesting case for comparison between two groups that, while sharing the same Punjabi ethnicity and immigration history, come to terms with different shades of emplacement according to their religious affiliation.

Following Michell (1988), *Mandir* is a Sanskrit word for where the mind becomes still and the soul floats freely to seek the source of life, peace and comfort. A mandir is not primarily considered a place for communal worship but the home of God, or of the particular deity. Temple activities revolve around the sacred image(s), the *murti*, installed upon the altar. An appointed priest, or team of priests, normally perform the *puja*, i.e. the ritual offering to the deities. As Hinduism has many sects, and each of them has slightly different beliefs in religion, it becomes difficult to gather the entire community under the same dome to one dedicated deity, especially in a foreign country. A temple becomes the centre and grounding point of the Hindu community. Mandirs in the diaspora often double up as community centres where Hindus can meet and organise social, cultural, and charitable events. As one of Bonfanti's informants explained:

> It is the mandir that fuels our faith in God, strengthens our society and teaches us to trust one another. Schools will educate the mind, but who will educate the soul? Especially for us who have come far away from home and our new generations are growing up here. In the mandir we care for our youth to learn the traditions they come from.

If a mandir in an immigration context functions as a focal point where Hindu devotees can reproduce their cultural identity and transmit it to their youth, the same

applies to gurdwaras in the Sikh diaspora. Among our research participants, the young Italian Sikhs who attended their local gurdwara actively, oftentimes performing *seva* i.e. free social service for the community, were highly conscious of their apprenticeship within 'the house of the Guru'. Following Nesbitt (2005), the literal meaning of *gurdwara* is 'the residence of the Guru', or 'the door that leads to the Guru'. Since the succession of living Gurus ended three centuries ago, the living Guru who finds abode in any gurdwara today is not a person but the book of Sikh scriptures called the Guru Granth Sahib. Like a mandir, a gurdwara fulfils essential social purposes. It is a place to learn spiritual wisdom, for religious ceremonies, where children learn the Sikh faith and customs, and a community centre which offers food, shelter, and support to those who need it. Unlike a mandir, there are no idols in a gurdwara. The only object of reverence is the Guru Granth Sahib, which is treated with the respect that would be given to a human Guru. The Guru Granth Sahib is kept in a room of its own during the night and carried in procession to the main hall at the start of the day's worship. There, the book is placed on a raised platform (*takht*, meaning 'throne') under a canopy and covered with a fine cloth when not being read (see Fig. 10.2). Although Sikhs show reverence to the Guru Granth Sahib, they do so to its spiritual content (*shabad*), not to the book itself. Within a gurdwara reading of *Gurbani*, hymns taken from the Guru Granth and possibly accompanied with music (*kirtan*), is at the core of Sikh worshipping. Worshipping within a mandir is instead performed mainly through the act of *darshan*, lit. the adoration of *murti*, statues of gods and goddesses which are considered divine themselves once they have been consecrated. Likewise, the role of music in Hindu *pujas* is not to be underestimated, as Beck (2012) reminded us revealing a template of interwoven ritual and music in Hindu tradition that he terms 'sonic liturgy'.

10.3.2 Making Sense of Thresholds within Hindu and Sikh Houses of Worship

While they house two different faiths that both originated in India (e.g. polytheistic vs. monotheistic, visual vs. aural devotion), Mandirs and Gurdwaras share some similar features in relation to the ways to access them and the occupation of their internal spaces. In both temples, entry requirements concerning bodily practices are maintained. Shoe-racks and lavatories before the entrance demand all visitors to purify their bodies in order to respect the holiness of the place and attune one's mind to it (see Fig. 10.1). Going barefoot and sitting on the floor (as well as covering one's head with a handkerchief in gurdwaras) constitute embodied prescriptions that any visitor has to comply with, somehow mimicking the gendered expectations of the devotees (Bonfanti, 2020). These rules are meant to manifest one's respect to the divine, as well as underpin ideal human equality. In fact, these mandatory behaviours reflect the dual nature of a worship place, which is at once the house of the

Fig. 10.1 Entrance area in front of an Italian mandir. (Bonfanti's picture)

deity and the communal home of the devotees. Like a *sevadar* (volunteer) said to Bonfanti as she was expressing gratitude for being admitted to film within their gurdwara: "We are the housekeepers here, the Guru is the lord of the house".

Not dissimilar from any household, where certain authorities and functions are taken up by particular actors, a set of custodians, clergy and a management committee operate in both temples, establishing hierarchical relations that cut across each religious community. Introducing oneself to a *granthi* or a *pujari* (equivalent of a Sikh officiant or Hindu priest who carries out daily ritual services, the first reading the Guru Granth Sahib, the latter performing puja) was a prerequisite for the authors to legitimise their visits. Besides many casual conversations with the attendees in the entry halls of the temples, biographical interviewing of worship leaders was crucial to latch what goes on in the temple to what happens outside, for the individual concerned and for the community as a whole. The feasibility of this research method, which demanded a certain mutual trust, depended on the actual linguistic skills of the interviewee as well as on how the interviewer was received by their hosts. (Since Hindu *pujaris* and Sikh *granthis* in Italian mandirs and gurdwaras were often male newcomers, their availability as informants did raise some concerns for the authors as western women. For instance, once within the temples, Bertolani reported being usually steered towards female interlocutors, while Bonfanti occasionally hired second-generation youth as informal interpreters).

Entering a house of worship in a diaspora context means to understand how social and spatial thresholds can be negotiated, in relation to the inner dynamics of an immigrant group and to the inclusive capacity of the outer society. Thresholding as a spatial process is inherent to any place of prayer, which defines its 'sacredness' by means of separation from the flow of ordinary life (Evans, 2003). Having said this, our analysis will focus upon the ways in which internal and external thresholds are demarcated in each of these temples, creating spaces for ritual as well as

mundane activities that are structured along several axes of social difference (gender and age, but also caste/class and sectarian belonging).

As far as their exterior is concerned, gurdwaras and mandirs in Italy often occupy former warehouses. The creation of such minority worship places in a suburban area met with no opposition from the local authorities, which preferred moving 'migrant life' to well-contained and less visible places (Gallo & Sai, 2013). While both temples may sacrifice the ideal architecture of a religious site made in India, with their white marbles and golden pinnacles or domes, it is the interior arrangements that qualify these spaces as functional to the ritual and social needs of the community. Although the material culture and architectures of each temple may differ, depending on its geographical location and financial assets, both gurdwaras and mandirs are internally organised with two fundamental but separate spaces: one for the prayer room (*darbar*), another for sharing meals (*langar*). While the institutionalisation of *langar* as a common kitchen and dining space derives from gurdwaras (as it actualizes the notion of human equality and the practice of *seva* free service), mandirs soon followed through (on a minor scale or with makeshift infrastructures), especially in diaspora contexts where Hindu Punjabis found the provision of homelike food convenient and comforting (Ramey, 2008). This dual thresholding is instrumental to the ritual and mundane practices that take place within Hindu and Sikh houses of worship, which host a two-fold form of religious and ethnic homemaking. As argued extensively elsewhere (Bertolani et al., 2021) in relation to gurdwaras in West London, a dual way of domesticity can be observed in such temples: a vertical one (regarding mystical concerns, making the place home to God) and a horizontal one (regarding mundane concerns, making the place homelike for the community).

Overall, the internal thresholds in gurdwaras and mandirs are revealing of a differentiated access to spaces and performative roles, mainly depending on gender. As Dohmen (2004) convincingly argued in relation to housework in south India, 'threshold design' is a fundamental way to perform gender relations according to shared cultural codes (or possibly transgress them). In particular, in the darbar female and male attendants sit separately on either side of the room while the religious service in front of the community of worshippers tends to be the preserve of men. The langar is a place for fostering community cohesion, where attendees can talk and share a free vegetarian meal (*roti* bread and rice pudding, pulses and vegetables, with water and tea). However, while some food preparation in the kitchen may be reserved to women, food is generally distributed by men. (This also applies to the consumption of *prashad*, a food ritual gift that in Hinduism consists of fresh fruit and water offered to the deity and then returned to the worshippers as being consecrated, while in Sikhism it is a porridge made of flour, sugar and butter blessed by the guru and distributed among the Sangat after ceremonies.) A visiting ethnographer, especially western women like the authors, risks putting at stake such gendered division by virtue of their very presence. Both of us learnt to juggle, case by case, between complying with what was expected from us as women and advancing research requests that may breach such code. As Bertolani discusses in the next section, her positionality affected each of her visits. Entering a temple, participating in

rituals and ceremonies, engaging in conversations with worshippers were not only methodological conundrums. They also became interpretative keys for theoretical analysis, revealing the interplay of power and gender within seemingly male-centred religious spaces.

Besides this gendered codification of space, gurdwaras and mandirs in Italy may reveal internal differentiation with reference to caste and class. That is the case of the *Ravidassias*, an offspring of Sikhism which is grounded on anti-casteism and has thrived in the European diasporas for the last decade (Lum, 2012). When Bonfanti was drawn to do research in a Ravidassi darbar in Bergamo, she realised how that house of worship functioned as a space of political identification for people discriminated against because of their low caste status. While the general layout of the darbar resembled that of a mainstream gurdwara, significant visual elements conveyed the revolutionary charge of the temple: the adoption of the Amrit Bani (a text composed of verses by outcaste Sant Ravidass) in lieu of the Guru Granth Sahib; the presence of several portraits other than the ten recognized gurus (including political leaders like anticasteist Rao Ambedkar); and the Hari flag at the entrance gate instead of the Khalsa flag of Sikhism. While this may be a most remarkable case of internal diversity among the Punjabi communities in Italy, both gurdwaras and mandirs stand out for their association with specific social and religious identities. These often remain invisible from the outside and are downplayed by their actors themselves, in order to give a more coherent and reassuring image of Sikhism and Hinduism (Gallo & Falzon, 2013). In fact, they become significant when entering their places of worship and collecting interviews from gatekeepers and attendees. While first-time migrants remember mandirs and gurdwaras as cohesive institutions when they reached Italy and needed shelter and assistance, nowadays different migrant generations admit that internal Hindu or Sikh factions often part from one another and set up new places of worship as a form of individuation (Searle-Chatterjee, 2013). As stated by Rakesh, the patron of a new mandir initiative, interviewed in 2017:

> When I rejoined my wife we moved house. We made a larger circle of Hindu families and started funding a new mandir. The old one still remained, but we wanted to back up something more proper, a grander place, a Maha mandir.

The new mandir found an abode in a warehouse that had closed down after the 2009 recession. As if compensating for the starkness of the industrial site, the interior design of the mandir required that the idols were of "1st class order".

> It was our duty to make a temple suited for us, who had worked hard to make a better life in Italy. […] We had *murti* sculptures delivered from Rajasthan. It was a big investment but we deserved it.

This proliferation of minority worship places follows from the diversification and stabilisation of these immigrant communities over time. Yet, not all splits sound confrontational: while some are (based on internal disagreements on how a committee managed the first temple built), others merely represent the expression of other religious ways and sensibilities. A case in point is the new darbar opened in Brescia in 2019 on a plot of land which had been agreed for sale by another Sikh gurdwara

committee after years of bidding: financial transactions appeased both parties, and the two temples have since been run independently with mutual friendly visits. The historical Singh Sabha Gurdwara still functions as the main Khalsa hub in the province, the newer Sachkhand darbar as a less politicised Sikh venue for hundred families in the city (Fig. 10.2).

To sum up, gurdwaras and mandirs in Italy are revealing of how the emplacement of Indian migrants is progressing in an ever-more complex landscape. This reflects both the reception of the Hindu and Sikh minority in the country and the emergence of internal cleavages in specific localities that would otherwise remain unnoticed. At the same time, visiting these houses of worship yields interesting reflections on the lexicon of home and migration studies, questioning the relation between hosts and guests, as the focus of analysis shifts in scale from the public space to the ritual place and vice versa, between the urban neighbourhood and the worship house, where the kaleidoscopic process of minority home-making unfolds. As we have seen, mandirs and gurdwaras are instrumental to construe and transmit a coherent and reassuring cultural representation of religious diversity to the outer society (Bertolani et al., 2011; Gallo, 2012). What could better give proof to the proverbial Punjabi hospitality (Bush et al., 1998) than sharing a homemade meal in the *langar*? It is precisely there that a communitarian food preparation becomes the means to integrate the visitor in an all-welcoming practice (Nesbitt, 2005). Yet, by the habitual experience of loitering in either temple and participating in everyday

Fig. 10.2   Prayer hall in an Italian gurdwara. (Bonfanti's picture)

doings, the authors were able to discern some cracks in the picture, stepping on thresholds that separated centre/periphery and insiders/outsiders on multiple grounds. As we illustrate in the next section, the positionality of an ethnographer-as-visitor is replete with ambivalences and contradictions, not the least depending on their own allegiances.

10.4 Methodological and Ethical Implications of Our Case Study

The positionality of researchers and of their interlocutors depends on social characteristics that are mutually attributed and negotiated, as well as on the attendant power relations. At the same time, as we have already illustrated, it is linked to thresholding activities and identity politics within houses of worship as semi-public homes. The three case studies that follow show that the positionality of the ethnographer and of other social actors can change over time as a result of biographical experiences, attributed social characteristics and context-specific conflicts, with consequences on the information collected.

10.4.1 Changing Positionality Due to Biographical Experiences

It is 2pm on a hot and sultry Sunday. I arrive at the gurdwara when the service is over and the place is almost deserted, carrying a projector and slides under my arm. A few weeks earlier I took photos during a religious festival and would like to find someone to discuss them with. At the entrance, a young man seems about to leave, but seeing me he asks in perfect Italian "Are you a photographer?" I explain why I'm there and he immediately offers to act as a linguistic mediator while I show the slides, as most of the people there struggle to speak Italian and I don't know Punjabi. I am amazed by this welcome. This man is both an insider and an outsider. Upstairs we find a dozen men and I have the opportunity to introduce myself, but the most important thing is that I have finally found my gatekeeper. He and I have mutually positioned ourselves. I was the "photographer" (after all, isn't the work of the ethnographer also to give back a glimpse of reality?). He was the mediator that would connect me with that reality by "translating" some aspects of it. (Bertolani's field-notes, May 2002)

At the beginning of Bertolani's fieldwork, her gatekeeper's positionality was that of an unconventional insider. As a Punjabi Sikh man, he was certainly part of the local religious community. Although belonging to the numerically most representative caste, he did not have a solid family network in Italy and as a result he was marginalised and discriminated against. The lack of a stable income forced him to periodically ask the gurdwara for hospitality, in exchange for *seva* (voluntary work) inside the place of worship. His excellent knowledge of the Italian language, law and bureaucracy made him a useful presence, although sometimes poorly tolerated. His unconventional positioning allowed the author to have access to "unofficial"

information from the margins of the religious community and to capture ongoing thresholding practices that resulted in relationships of power and control in the gurdwara. The latter were invisible to outsiders and mirrored forms of exploitation within the Punjabi community as well as existing conflicts within the place of worship (Bertolani, 2015). This contradicted the prevailing narrative about Sikhs conveyed to the mainstream society of a united, supportive and non-conflictual community and of the gurdwara as a welcoming and reassuring home-like place. In fact, such a view downplayed hierarchical relationships based on caste, gender and generation as well as the innumerable internal religious stratifications in favour of a single prevailing identity linked to the Khalsa (Bertolani & Singh, 2012).

Thus, the positionality of the gatekeeper influenced the collection and interpretation of data, but also that of the author within the gurdwara. Because of her relationship with the gatekeeper, her presence as outsider was perceived with a certain circumspection: she was an Italian researcher, and a young single Western white woman who dealt directly with marginalised male individuals, challenging the conventional moral order in male/female relationships. As she spent Sunday afternoons with the gatekeeper, sitting in the langar or in the courtyard of the gurdwara to discuss her research, she became the subject of gossip. Her stay contradicted the tacit and ordinary use of community spaces.

Once the research was completed, this collaboration and friendship have over time transformed into a marital relationship. The positionality of the author and her former gatekeeper have therefore radically changed with respect to the community. Bertolani is now considered an insider "by acquisition" and her presence in the gurdwara is perceived as a sign of belonging to the community and appreciation of the Sikh religion. At the same time, her biographical experiences linked to that specific gurdwara inevitably condition her analytical interpretations. Her Sikh wedding was celebrated in that place of worship, and ambivalent emotions and memories are connected to many of its spaces. Although she experienced both dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, reciprocity and control, she feels she has some sort of moral commitment to that place, and keeps confidential any information that can be harmful, relative to the local community. In short, certain biographical experiences change the meanings and emotional reactions to certain religious spaces. The latter can be considered "active" and productive (Lefebvre, 1991), as they can influence the critical view of the researcher (Magolda, 2000).

10.4.2 Changing Positionality Due to Social Characteristics and Internal Conflicts

In the early 2000s Bertolani conducted research in a small mandir that was the founding nucleus of what later became a larger mandir in northern Italy. Initially, the place of worship was managed informally in a shed close to a private house by a large Brahmin-caste kin network of Hindu Punjabis, with the involvement of a group of Italian Hare Krishna. From the beginning, a conflict arose between those

who wanted the mandir to be affiliated with the Hare Krishna movement and those who instead owned it and refused the interference of the Italians, considered too inattentive to Punjabi traditions. The disputes concerned ritual, religious and cultural aspects, but also economic and managerial ones. Bertolani was introduced to the small Hindu community by a Punjabi couple, who were close to the demands of the Italian Hare Krishna, and who presented her as a student conducting university research. She was immediately positioned as a young white catholic single woman, an outsider to the Punjabis as well as the Italian faithful. Her presence was viewed with some caution. Her male Punjabi counterparts were friendly but kept their distance to avoid gossip. Moreover, the leader of the large Punjabi kin network had always evaded her request for an interview, thus also discouraging other potential informants. Italians were equally elusive, especially if her questions concerned the mandir. At the same time, the language barrier prevented Bertolani from talking to women. After a few months, an episode changed her status. One Sunday, her gatekeeper asked her to join her as she approached the Shiva lingam, poured milk over it, and sprinkled it with red powder, showing the ritual gestures to the researcher and asking her to do the same. In her fieldnotes the author reports what happened immediately after:

> She appreciates what I have done and with a quick and unexpected gesture she pulls away the scarf that covers my head and sprinkles the red powder in my hair. She laughs at my puzzled expression, as I still don't know the reason for that. We go back to sit among the women and I immediately notice that something has changed: many of them, who have never spoken to me before, approach and congratulate me, telling me that they did not know I was married. After the service, I get involved in the kitchen by women in the preparation of ritual food. Although it is difficult to understand each other, they ask me aspects of my private life: how long have I been married? Do I have children? Evidently my status and positionality has changed. I have made a social leap in their eyes. We now share the same social identity as married women, despite the many differences. As I eventually understood, my informant's gesture was a sign of inclusion. They socially re-framed me through the use of their own symbols. (Bertolani's fieldnotes, May 2002)

After this critical episode, it was no longer inconvenient to talk to Bertolani, especially for young men. This enabled her to carry out a series of informal interviews that proved decisive, much more so than the semi-structured ones she had already conducted.

Shortly before the end of the fieldwork, a decisive conflict broke out. This marginalised the Hare Krishna group and led to the expulsion of the Italians, putting the author's gatekeepers in serious difficulty within the community. At that point, the leader of the kin network asked them the reason for the author's presence, instrumentally assimilating her to the Italian counterpart. Bertolani decided to physically abandon the fieldwork site in order not to further compromise the position of her gatekeepers, while still remaining in contact with them. Her positionality had changed again as a result of the conflict (Herod, 1999).

This example shows that positionality is context-dependent, linked not only to personal characteristics as they are perceived by people, but also to mutual and evolving relationships. Conflicts or alliances within groups may change people's access to the field, while questioning power relations between members. This can

favour or hinder data acquisition, including or excluding the ethnographer from the place of worship. It anyway challenges the idea that an insider will produce better knowledge than an outsider simply by virtue of their positionality (Herod, 1999). The relationship between the researcher and the gatekeepers can expose them to exploitation and retaliation from other group members and insinuate doubts about their loyalty and belonging, eventually leading to their marginalisation. This may be a direct consequence of the unequal power relations associated with research and the indomitable authority of the author (Mullings, 1999). The researcher has the power to write and generate a narrative of reality before leaving the field. Instead, gatekeepers and informants are part of the field and, especially if the research is carried out on small and encapsulated groups, they are held accountable for having brought the outsider into the group, providing contacts and information. Research can therefore lead to ethical dilemmas and mixed loyalties (Williams, 2016). In the example above, the author decided to stop direct data collection to avoid damaging the gatekeepers, but once again the decision on what to do can only be contextual.

10.4.3 The Author's Positionality as a Political Tool

During a recent research in a small gurdwara, Bertolani was introduced to a woman that would act as her gatekeeper and to a group of other young women between the ages of 25 and 35. They had lived in Italy for a long time, were very active in the voluntary service (*seva*) and spoke fluent Italian. The author involved them in some focus groups on the role of women in Sikhism, which soon turned into animated and participatory discussions. Finally, these women asked the researcher to help them make a series of requests to the male leadership of the gurdwara during a public assembly. These demands concerned the participation of women in religious services. During the focus groups the women had realised that they were only marginally involved in them. Indeed, religious service remained firmly in the hands of the *granthi* and the male leadership and most of the women's volunteer work involved teaching Punjabi to children, cleaning and preparing food in the gurdwara kitchen. Furthermore, they had realised that they were capable and willing to perform religious *seva* like their male counterparts, but that they needed community authorization to do so. They knew that this desire would be thwarted even by their mothers, because it defied Punjabi customs and gender roles (Bertolani, 2020).

Initially, this request puzzled the author because it overturned pre-existing power relationships. It was no longer the researcher who asked informants or gatekeepers to do something but the other way round. The request also revealed her positionality as a white Western woman who could relate equally to older men in charge of prestigious roles. Few days later an assembly was organised at the end of the religious service. The hall was full of people sitting on the ground and the spatial arrangement of those present followed the hierarchical order within the community: the president of the gurdwara and a dozen other elders were sitting in a row, while the author was sitting in front of them with one of her informants acting as an

interpreter. All the other men sat on her right, while the women sat with the children on the left. During the assembly it was reiterated that in Sikhism women are equal to men and that they can also perform religious voluntary service. The author asked if this was really happening in that gurdwara and what were the obstacles that prevented it. A discussion arose in Punjabi between those men who argued that this required specific skills to be acquired by attending religious schools, and those who believed that women could be taught if they so desired. Since the president supported this second solution, five women timidly raised their hands and asked to participate in the training.

The episode was significant in revealing intersectionality in that religious community and that place of worship, on the basis of gender and generation. The women who had legitimised themselves by making a series of requests through the author were not "ordinary" faithful. They were the daughters and nieces of the president of the gurdwara, together with their friends. They therefore enjoyed an informal status that empowered them to put their ideas forward. However, they were young women who found themselves within unequal power relationships based on gender and generation, and often had conflicting expectations, relative to their mothers, about gender identity and traditional Punjabi customs. They had taken advantage of the focus group discussions on gender equality in Sikhism and had used the author as an intermediary for a public confrontation, aware that her presence and her power linked to writing (Mullings, 1999) would have forced gurdwara male leaders to take a clear and official position, consistent with the theoretical teachings of Sikhism. The episode also clarified the researcher's positionality according to them, as a white Western woman who could relate equally to older men in charge of prestigious roles. After that episode, the author's analytical awareness changed too. She had experienced firsthand a sort of "examination" and had placed herself for a moment in the position of the women she had represented. Although she was only the spokesperson for some instances, she had sensed the effect of a hierarchy based on gender and generation and the weight of any negative judgement linked to the contestation of the established order. She had voluntarily experienced the positionality of those young women that were looked upon with condescension and paternalism rather than with real attention, both by their "fathers" and "mothers".

As this example highlights, the power relationships between researchers and informants can reverse and change over time. Gatekeepers or informants may use a researcher's presence for their own advantage. Since the production of knowledge is a relational process and is about constructing social meaning (Magolda, 2000; Herod, 1999), awareness and attention are required from the researcher, who can hardly ever be neutral or irrelevant. This can also raise political demands for change and contestation of power balances, with potentially unpredictable outcomes. There is no longer a clear distinction between being in the field and leaving it, Salemink (2015) claims, as long as relationships with informants or interlocutors are retained over time. However, the author may leave a number of unresolved conflicts as a by-product of the research, which constitutes an ethical dilemma (Williams, 2016).

The three vignettes above allow us to highlight some aspects of positionality as a methodological issue, when it comes to doing research in places of worship. In the

author's experience, her positionality was the outcome of an ongoing relational process, but it was also a matter of perception. The researcher's impression of being an insider rather than an outsider did not always coincide with that of her informants, both being self-attributed by the researcher and externally attributed from others. Moreover, her positionality had different dimensions. From a material point of view, it translated into the possibility of physically accessing and remaining (or not) within certain religious spaces. Instead, from the emotional point of view, positionality involved emotions linked to biographical memories or experiences or implied mixed loyalties towards the community or certain places of worship (Williams, 2016). The criteria by which the researcher's positionality was defined relied on changing social characteristics (e.g. gender, age, marital status, caste or class belonging), but also on cultural and ethnic origins. The researcher, her gatekeepers and informants had to mutually negotiate these criteria, translating their positionality into a more or less stable condition. Conflict or negotiation allowed for changes in positionality which thereby assumed different rhythms, like those caused by a disruptive event or by a cumulative process. Finally, the social actors have used their own and others' positionality for different purposes ranging from heuristic ones (linked to research purposes) to political ones. As one of the vignettes shows, some interlocutors have tried to introduce change or, conversely, maintain existing power relations within a place of worship, using the positionality of the researcher for their goals.

10.5 Conclusions: Doing 'Community Home Visits' Within Migration and Diaspora Studies

The relevance of minority religious places has gained momentum in migration studies since the late nineties, starting with the South Asian diaspora experience (Vertovec, 1997; Johnson, 2012; Hausner & Garnett, 2015). In this chapter the authors focused on the Indian diaspora in Italy, considering Hindu and Sikh houses of worship as crucial settings where home-making takes place, i.e. where these groups try to ease their migratory process through a ritual environment. On one hand mandirs and gurdwaras provide a safe base for the community itself; on the other, they contribute to their social emplacement in the destination country (Bertolani et al., 2011; Gallo, 2012; Gallo & Sai, 2013). The argument presented here emerged from a distinctive ethnographic approach, which considers houses of worship as semi-public homes and insists on the challenges of entering such religious spaces and exploring their manifold social functions. Drawing on our research visits to gurdwaras and mandirs in northern Italy, we have proposed two analytical perspectives. The first is a socio-spatial analysis of the thresholds of access to places of worship, while the second deals with positionality and navigation of identity politics in the field. In practice, these two lines of inquiry feed into each other, since the internal complexity and social stratification, as manifest in a worship house, can affect the ethnographer's role as a visitor or a guest.

Houses of worship can be considered as an ongoing space of thresholding, where degrees of openness/closure and inside(rs)/outside(rs) are being produced. As the authors have argued with reference to gurdwaras in London's Southall (Bertolani et al., 2021), approaching a minority house of worship as a collective home in a diasporic context means to capture how the devotees attach to such spaces positive domestic connotations, such as familiarity, safety and comfort. Moreover, a minority place of worship "works out as a proxy of home away from home – both of the homeland and the dwelling abroad –" (ibidem: 4) as it reproduces specific historical and cultural legacies. Last, the heterogeneity of the Indian diaspora, which combines an ethnic minority status together with Sikh and Hindu religious belongings, called us to observe places of worship as spaces of complex identity reaffirmation vis-à-vis the mainstream society.

Following Kilde's (2013) overview on the study of religious spaces we have fallen back to the classical work by Smith (1992). The latter theorises ritual as a process which literally 'takes place', exploring the political contexts (internal and external) in which a place of worship is sacralised. As we maintain in this chapter, the construction of a minority religious space provides a vital infrastructure for the group identity in relation to the majority society. However, the same religious space designates hierarchies and power relations across group members. There are therefore two spatial fronts (internal/external) where ritual actions and meanings take place, which may be considered separately but happen jointly, thereby revealing the inherent duality of places of worship as semi-public homes. Although we have mainly focused on the internal space, the external one, which has only been hinted at here, is no less important in the study of places of worship. Such an approach has systematically informed our visits to minority temples, invariably questioning our ability to have access and stay in those home-like spaces – in other words, our positionality as researchers. At the beginning of the chapter, we asked why it is important to enter and do research within mandirs and gurdwaras. Our experience as ethnographers suggests that entering houses of worship is fundamental to better understand the social differentiations and tensions within ethnic-religious communities that would otherwise remain under-addressed in migration and diaspora studies (McLoughlin, 2009). Querying the analogy between a ritual space and a communal home also meant to further expose the critical roles and positionalities that visiting ethnographers may take up, eventually shifting the thresholds of domesticity before them under continuous reshuffle.

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