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**Resum.-** Des del 2005, amb processons religioses a l'Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona (AMB), la comunitat sikh intenta preservar la seva identitat normativa, guanyar visibilitat i demanen el seu reconeixement a la societat d'acollida. La representació, reflectida en les diferències durant les processons que ajuden a la comunitat sikh a celebrar la seva identitat, també crea ansietat en alguns sectors de la població d'acollida per la invasió d'espais públics laics, amb finalitats religioses. Basant-se en 34 entrevistes semiestructurades i observacions etnogràfiques realitzades entre 2015 i 2018, aquest article: primer, explora com la visualització pública de rituals als carrers permet a la comunitat sikh "reclamar un lloc" i "fer-se un espai", en una societat d'acollida ètnicament plural; en segon lloc, analitza l'actitud de la societat d'acollida i de l'administració local respecte a les processons sikh; i, finalment, destaca les negociacions i adaptacions dutes a terme per la comunitat sikh en resposta a les polítiques estatals sobre l'ús d'espais públics.

**Paraules clau.-** Processons sikh; Apropiació d'espai; Identitat; Visibilitat; Reconeixement; Barcelona.

**Resumen.-** Desde 2005, con procesiones religiosas en el Área Metropolitana de Barcelona (AMB), la comunidad sij intenta preservar su identidad normativa, ganar visibilidad y piden su reconocimiento en la sociedad de acogida. La representación, reflejada en las diferencias durante las procesiones que ayudan a la comunidad sij a celebrar su identidad, también crea ansiedad en algunos sectores de la población de acogida, en relación a la invasión de espacios públicos seculares con fines religiosos. Basándose en 34 entrevistas semiestructuradas y observaciones etnográficas realizadas entre 2015 y 2018, este documento: primero se explora cómo la exhibición pública de rituales en las calles permite a la comunidad sij "reclamar un lugar" y "hacerse un espacio", en una sociedad de acogida étnicamente plural; en segundo lugar, analiza la actitud de la sociedad de acogida y la administración local con respecto a las procesiones sij; y finalmente, destaca las negociaciones y adaptaciones realizadas por la comunidad sij en respuesta a las políticas estatales sobre el uso de los espacios públicos.

**Palabras clave.-** Procesión sij; Apropiación del espacio; Identidad; Visibilidad; Reconocimiento; Barcelona.

**Abstract-** Since 2005, with religious processions in the metropolitan area of Barcelona (AMB), the Sikh community tries to preserve its normative identity, gain visibility and demand recognition in the host society. The embodied representation of differences during processions that help Sikh community to celebrate their identity also creates anxiety in some sections of the host population regarding the encroachment of secular public spaces for religious purposes. Drawing on 34 semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations conducted during 2015-2018, this paper first explores how the public display of rituals in the streets enables the Sikh community to "claim place" and "make space" for them in the ethnically plural host society; second, it analyses the attitude of the host society and the local administration regarding the Sikh processions; and finally, it highlights the negotiations and adaptations carried out by the Sikh community in response to state policies on the use of public spaces.

**Key words.-** Sikh processions; Space appropriation; Identity; Visibility; Recognition; Barcelona.

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## MARCHING FOR VISIBILITY, RECOGNITION AND IDENTITY: SIKH PROCESSIONS IN THE METROPOLITAN AREA OF BARCELONA<sup>1</sup>

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### 1.- Introduction

On April 14, 2019, the residents of the 'El Raval' neighbourhood in Barcelona woke up to the sound of drums, *tabla* and harmonium (Indian musical instruments). Breaking the silence of a Sunday morning, some strange voices of people singing hymns in a foreign language entered their ears. When they looked down through the balconies or windows onto the street, they were surprised by the presence of thousands of men, women and children dressed in colourful clothing, their heads covered in turbans or pink scarves. Despite the cold weather, they were walking barefoot behind a well-decorated vehicle led by 5 men with long beards and decorated turbans. These men were dressed as warriors and marched with naked swords pointed skyward. The fragrance of flowers, incense and air fresheners sprinkled on the street perfumed the whole environment. Some thought it was an ancient cult marriage ceremony, some guessed it as a Muslim festival, while others thought it was a political parade. Everyone had their doubts and anxieties regarding the event, which was taking place in their neighbourhood. Only a few knew that it was the annual *Vaisakhi Nagar Kirtan*<sup>2</sup> (Sikh procession) celebration in Barcelona. For the Sikh men and women participating in the procession, it was the most auspicious day of the year, when they commemorated the birth of Khalsa<sup>3</sup> and displayed their religious scripture (which they treat as eternal Guru), rituals, martial art skills, traditional dresses and food to the native population, and try to claim a

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<sup>1</sup> Este texto forma parte del proyecto I+D *Demografía, migraciones y nuevas fronteras estadísticas: Big Data, Registros continuos de población y Registros administrativos* (CSO2017-85670-R) financiado por el actual Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación.

<sup>2</sup> In Punjabi language, the word "*Nagar*" denotes town, and "*Kirtan*" means singing of religious hymns. Therefore, "*Nagar Kirtan*" literally means going around the town singing sacred hymns. It is mainly associated with the harvest festival (*Vaisakhi*) in Punjab.

<sup>3</sup> Khalsa (which literally means pure) refers to a special group of initiated Sikhs. It was initiated by tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, during the festival of *Vaisakhi* in 1699.

place in the host society, and connect with the Sikh diaspora through transnational social media.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the immigration boom brought a remarkable religious diversity in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona<sup>4</sup> (AMB). Newly arrived immigrants brought their religions and cultural practices to the host society, which resulted in an increasing number of religious places of different faiths and the display of religious expressions in urban public spaces (Estruch et al. 2007). For immigrant religious minorities, these religious expressions become a way to “claim place” and “make space” (Knott, 2005) for themselves in the host society. The display of religion in public spaces (streets, squares and parks) by immigrant religious minorities marked the return of religion (which was excluded from the public sphere by the host society decades ago) to urban spaces and in public debate in the AMB. Performative rituals and other religious practices on the streets that for immigrant minorities are an integral part of celebrating their unique identity and making a home outside their homeland, becomes a concern for the host community and the local administration, which were not fully prepared to deal with the tasks of managing diversity in their increasingly ethnically plural society. One of the immigrant religious groups, which is trying to gain visibility, demand recognition and preserve its normative identity through religious processions in the host society is the “Sikh community”.

Sikh community is the fourth largest religious group in India, with more than 30 million devotees living around the world. Sikhism came into existence in the 15th century, with the birth of the first Sikh Guru -Nanak Dev- in 1469 at Rāi Bhoi Kī Talvaṇḍī, now Nankana Sahib, near Lahore in Pakistan. At present, most of the Sikhs are settled in the north-western states of India, i.e. Punjab and Haryana. The Sikh diaspora consists of more than 100 countries, but almost half of them live in three countries i.e. Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom (Garha and Domingo, 2017). Sikh community is a recent addition to the population in the AMB. Despite a rapid increase in the influx of immigrants during the last decade, they still make a small fraction (less than 1% in 2018) of the total foreign-born population in the AMB. But with their different physical appearance (especially, men with long beard and turban), language (Punjabi), traditional outfits and religious symbols, they make a great contribution to population diversity in the AMB. During the last two decades, they have established ten Gurudwaras (Sikh temples) in Catalonia (Garha and Domingo, 2017), of which four are located in the AMB. The first Gurudwara was established in the

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<sup>4</sup> The Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, consists of 36 municipalities. It has an area of 636 km<sup>2</sup> and more than 3.2 million inhabitants.

municipality of Barcelona in 1998 and the fourth in Santa Coloma de Gramenet in 2015. These temples organise all the religious and cultural activities of the Sikh community in the AMB. Due to their small number, compared to other immigrant groups, the Sikhs are almost invisible in the public sphere and do not receive much attention from the host society and the local administration. Mostly they are mistakenly identified by the native population as Muslims from Pakistan. Since 2005, with the celebration of annual *Nagar Kirtans*, they are trying to make a space for themselves in the host society. The material or symbolic appropriation of public spaces during these processions attract the attention of the host community and other immigrant groups. Normally, *Nagar Kirtans* are accepted as a result of the diversity brought by the recent immigration boom in the AMB, but sometimes due to their religious nature and the temporary appropriation of public spaces, which are often considered as “contested categories” (Staeheli et al. 2009), they are also seen as a potential cause of conflict between some sections of the host community and the Sikh community, which Kong (2005) described as “politics of religious processions” in urban public spaces.

Previous research on immigrant religious processions highlights their role in increasing the visibility and recognition of entrant religious minorities, preserving and transferring identity to younger generations, increasing social cohesion within the religious group, strengthening their transnational networks, creating a sense of belonging for immigrants outside their homeland and shaping the relationship with the host society for different religious groups (Werbner, 1996; Slyomovics, 1996; Nikolaisen, 2004; Jacobsen, 2008; Abdullah, 2009; David, 2012; Garbin, 2012; Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri, 2014). Sikh processions have not received much importance in previous academic studies in Spain and other parts of the Sikh diaspora. The existing research on the Sikh community in Spain focused on its migratory process (Garha and Domingo, 2017, Santos Fraile, 2007), community building (Garha, 2021) and internal social set up (Garha and Domingo, 2019, Lum, 2010), but still no attempt has been made to study its cultural activities such as festivals and religious processions and their different meanings for the Sikh community and the host population in different neighbourhoods in the AMB. This paper bridges the gap in the existing academic research by exploring the different aspects of *Nagar Kirtans* in the AMB. In this paper, my first argument is that through the public display of religious scripture, rituals and symbols, the *Nagar Kirtans* provide visibility and recognition to the Sikh community, and helps them to preserve their identity and claim a safe space for themselves in the host society; and my second argument is that the attitude of the host society and the negotiations around the appropriation of urban public spaces for processions shapes the relationship between the Sikh community, the local administration

and the host society. Therefore, the main objectives of this paper are: first, to explore how the public display of religious rituals allows the Sikh community to claim place and make space for themselves in the host society; second, analyse the attitude of host society and local administration regarding the *Nagar Kirtans*; and finally, to highlight the negotiations and adaptations made by the Sikh community in response to state policies and laws on the use of public spaces.

Fieldwork for this paper was carried out over a period of three years (2015-2018). The ethnographic research method was applied to gather empirical data about the desires and expectations of Sikh community behind the *Nagar Kirtans* in the AMB and the attitude of the host society and the local administration regarding the public display of a foreign religion in secular urban spaces. In addition, to analyse the role of *Nagar Kirtans* in improving the visibility and recognition of the Sikh community and in preserving its normative identity, 34 in depth interviews were conducted (eight with representatives of Gurudwara managing committees, twenty with regular visitors of Gurudwaras and six with the members of the host community or local administration, who deals with the permissions regarding the use of public spaces for religious events). Respondents were selected through purposive sampling method (Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010). Representatives of the Gurudwara managing committees were asked to tell about their immigration process, responsibilities and powers in the management of gurudwaras, their role in the celebrations of religious festivals (processions), their expectations behind these events and their relations with the local administration and the host society. Regular followers were asked to express their aspirations from *Nagar Kirtans*, their role in procession activities and their importance in their religious and social life. Finally, members of the host community and local administrators were asked to share their ideas about the *Nagar Kirtans* in urban spaces, their relationship with the Sikh community and their concerns regarding the diversification of their neighbourhoods.

## **2.- Different perspective on religious processions**

Religious procession is commonly understood as an organised walk around a city by a faith group for a religious purpose that may be the commemoration of a historical event (such as Ashura in Shia Muslim community, Corpus Christi and *Semana Santa* processions in Catholic community and Vaisakhi Nagar Kirtan in Sikh community), celebration of distinct identity



(Tamil processions in London, Kimbanguist Brass Band parade at the London New Year's Day) or simply to show support or dissent with the majority society over issues related to religious practices. Religious processions are different from pilgrimages, which also involves the temporary movement of people to a sacred or historical place to perform rituals of purification or sacralisation, as Hindus in India visit *Haridwar* to take a dip in the Ganges river or Muslims around the world visit Mecca to perform Hajj. A pilgrimage involves the crossing of the city boundaries and connects a religious community to a particular place (mainly sacred and historical), but the processions are strictly related to the city and its residents, who wish to show their religious traditions to other members of the city. This transforms processions as tools of an urban struggle, which helps immigrant religious minorities to claim place and make space in the host society. Even for a short time, processions change the power relations in the city between different religious groups. At the local level, processions have traditionally been an integral part of religious life for many religious communities around the world (Kong 2005) and now with globalization and greater dispersion of people, they have become transnational events that bring together religious groups beyond national borders and provide networks to revive the traditions of the homeland in their new places of residence.

Previous research has analysed processions (religious or cultural) with different perspectives. The scholars who focused on the point of view of the organising faith groups, explained the religious processions as a way of gaining visibility in society, demanding the recognition and legitimacy of religious symbols and traditions, and the preservation and transfer of the unique identity of a religious group to the next generations. While explaining the urban politics and poetics around Tamil religious processions in multi-religious yet secular society of Singapore, Kong (2005), describes "processions" as the most visible of religious activities in public spaces that have the greatest opportunity for contact with secular activities and religious practices of other faiths. Some authors explain "procession" as a strategy to expose the traditions and rituals of the entrant religious or social group in front of the host society to gain visibility. As Werbner points out that "once people have marched openly in a place, they have crossed an ontological barrier. They have shown that they are willing to expose themselves and their bodies to possible outside ridicule for the sake of their faith" (1996: 332). Others claim that immigrants "processions serve as means to attract people's attention to their collective life and "to gain respect" in the host society" (Goheen, 1993: 128). Therefore, getting the attention of "others" living in the city is considered the most important desire of religious groups that organise processions. In her interesting work on the Location

of Religion in Contemporary Western Society, Knott (2005) explains that processions or any public display of religious rituals shows a quest for visibility through the location of religion in public spaces. But, the attention obtained during the procession can have positive or negative consequences for the organising group depending on the historical backgrounds and the relationship between the organisers and the “others”, who perceive it from outside.

For all social and religious groups, the recognition of other members of their society is very crucial for their peaceful co-existence and the preservation of their unique identity, which separates them from others. Therefore, one of the main objectives of immigrant religious groups behind the processions is to raise the demand for recognition. Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri (2014: 646) in their study of the Philippines’ Catholic community in the Italian city of Padova, affirm that during the processions, “the request for visibility implies a demand for social recognition that entails becoming full actors who can display their identity and specificity in public space”. The recognition for religious symbols and traditions is considered to have a positive impact on the integration of immigrants into the mainstream host society, while their rejection often creates a barrier to integration and peaceful coexistence. In this sense, some authors believe that the “large processional activities are clearly designed to affirm a sense of belonging and identity through expressions of solidarity and group cohesion for insiders (on a religious, social and cultural level), whilst at the same time, create recognition and visibility for outsiders or other onlookers” (David, 2012: 454).

In the current debate on the right to city and the use of public spaces for religious purposes, the processions are considered a temporary encroachment of secular urban public spaces, which according to Baumann “carries implicit norms of social inclusion and exclusion” (2009: 142). As cities have “particular notions about the form and shape that public religion should have” (Oosterbaan, 2014: 596), the celebration of religious processions in public spaces has a potential to create conflicts in the society (Kong, 2001). In this sense, Goheen (1993:128) affirms that the processions in the public streets turn the secular public space into “a landscape that could be exploited effectively through the collective performance of particular rituals to communicate, legitimate, and politicize values”. Therefore, the processions transform normal power relationships between the dominant and subordinate groups in the city, and provide the latter with a potential platform for “protest, opposition and resistance” (Jackson, 1988, 222). On the one hand, it empowers the socially invisible actors, such as migrants, to perform their rituals and preserve their separate identity in their new homes (Goffman, 1971; Kong and Yeoh, 1997), while, on the other hand, it creates anxiety in the host population regarding the encroachment of secular public spaces (Garbin,

2012). As a manifestation of the right to the city, “walking in procession” by immigrant religious minorities is also considered as a way of claiming a space for God and for themselves in their new home (Tondo, 2010: 219).

Some authors who study diaspora communities believe that processions are much more than a mere process of establishing ethnic boundaries (Johnson and Werbner, 2010: 209) that allows the diaspora to eliminate the label of “migrants” assigned to them (Liebelt, 2010), rather they describe the processions as processes of reproduction of the “de-territorialized” communities outside their homeland (Appadurai, 2001). In this sense, Saint Blancat and Cancillieri (2014) show that the religious ritual in the public space has the function of connecting the devotion of people and regional and national identity with the diaspora community. It turns local events into a glocal exercise that allows immigrants to create transnational identities and a home outside their homeland. It converts processions into a mechanism to foster community cohesion and strengthen networks with the place of origin, as well as a strategy to generate new logics of connection with the host society.

This paper focuses on the importance of *Nagar Kirtans* from two different perspectives: first from the viewpoint of the organising group (in this case Sikh community), which considers it as a tool for visibility, recognition and preservation of identity in their new home and in the Sikh diaspora; and secondly, from the point of view of the host society and the local administration in the AMB, which relates it to the management of diversity and treats it as a form of urban struggle to claim a place and make a space in the city by a foreign religious group. It also analyses the negotiations and adaptations carried out by the Sikh community and the local administration to make the *Nagar Kirtans* possible, which shape the relationship between the Sikh community and the host society in the AMB.

### **3.- Sikh community and processions in the AMB**

#### **3.1.- Sikh community in the AMB**

The pioneer Sikhs entered Spain during the late 1970s (Santos Fraile, 2013), but their number was very small. In the next decade, another wave of Sikh immigrants, mainly men of working age, entered Olot, a municipality in Girona province in the autonomous community of Catalonia, as industrial workers, looking for jobs in growing small scale industries in the region (Farajas, 2006). In this initial flow, most of them were accidentally arrived in Spain, after they were denied permission to enter the United Kingdom, which was their favourite

destination (Garha and Domingo, 2018). Mass migration of Sikhs directly from Indian Punjab to Spain began during the late 1990s (Garha and Domingo, 2019). Unlike their predecessors, they arrived with clear purposes of regularizing their legal status, participating in the labour market and permanently establishing themselves in Spain (Santos Friale, 2013; Garha, 2020b). The economic boom during the housing bubble in Spain helped Sikh workers, who were mainly engaged in the construction sector, to establish themselves in the AMB (Garha et al. 2016a). In addition, the easy availability of menial jobs, good salaries and possibilities to buy an apartment encouraged many Sikh men to bring their families to the AMB (Garha and Domingo, 2017). It contributed to a rapid increase in the size of Sikh population in the AMB. Despite the success of the family reunification process, the Sikh immigration remained highly masculine during the last two decades due to the prevalence of male breadwinner model in the Sikh society (Garha, 2020a). During the economic recession in Spain (2008-2014), most of them, who worked in the construction business, either moved to the service sector (mainly restaurant jobs) and emigrated along with the Mediterranean coast to the south of Spain, or re-migrated to Canada or the United Kingdom (Garha et al. 2015). According to the National Statistical Institute<sup>5</sup>, in 2018, 26.2 thousand Sikhs were registered in the Spanish municipal register, of which 15 thousand (60%) were in Catalonia, and in these 15 thousand, more than 10 thousand were in the province of Barcelona.

Although the Sikh community is often viewed as a homogenous ethnic and religious group, easily recognised by public signs and symbols, such as turban and beard, the Sikh identity is diverse and complex (McLeod, 1989). It has several layers based on “castes or clans” and “religious purity”. In Sikh doctrine and religious traditions caste discrimination is strictly prohibited, but many people follow their caste rules and discriminate against other Sikhs. In the AMB, the Sikh community consists of all main internal caste groups, also called “Biradaris” such as Jatt, Lubana, Ramgarhia, Tarkhann, Chamar, Valmiki or Ravidasia. These caste groups are the basis of kinship networks, which help new immigrants in search of jobs, housing apartments and sometimes marriage partners (Lum, 2010). Caste differences often become breeding grounds for internal conflicts in the Sikh community (Gallo and Sai, 2013). In addition to the caste groups, based on their religious purity, the entire Sikh community is divided into two major groups, i.e. baptised (Amritdhari) and not-baptised (Sehajdhari) Sikhs.

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<sup>5</sup> In Spain, the National Statistics Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE*) collects information about the surnames of the entire population. I make an indirect estimate of the Sikh population through their surnames as in the Sikh community all men and women share the same first surnames of “Singh” (literally means lions) and “Kaur” (literally means princess), respectively.

The baptised Sikhs are also called “Khalsa”, which represents the normative identity of the Sikhs. They carry at all times certain signs known as the five Ks, which are kes, the uncut hair; kangha, the comb; kara, the steel bracelet; kirpan, the sword or dagger; and kacch, a particular kind of underwear (McLeod 1989: 45). Each Sikh is free to decide whether he or she wants to be baptised or not. Even so, a very small fraction of the community (around 10%) is baptised in the AMB. It is mainly due to Khalsa’s strict code of conduct, which is difficult to follow in a foreign context, and due to occupational restrictions in the host labour market (due to their long beard and hairs, baptised Sikhs finds difficult to get a job in restaurant sector which is the main occupation for Sikhs in the AMB). The local administration in some municipalities of Spain also does not allow baptised Sikhs to carry a sword in public spaces, which discourages people from being baptised. The second major group is the Sehajdhari Sikhs. It is the largest group of Sikhs in the AMB. They believe in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, but do not follow the Khalsa code of conduct. They have modified their eating and clothing habits to integrate into the host society.

In the AMB, it is very difficult for the native population to distinguish between the Sikhs and other South Asians. Because of the large number of Pakistanis in the central districts of Barcelona, the native people often confuse them with Pakistanis and call them “Pakis”. Sometimes, due to their turban and long beard (especially baptised Sikhs), some natives also misidentify them as “Muslims” from Afghanistan and call them terrorists or followers of Bin Laden (Garha and Domingo, 2019). Normally, due to their reserved nature and no political demands, the Sikh community does not receive a lot of attention from the host community (Santos Fraile, 2013). As the Sikh religion does not encourage proselytization, there is hardly any conversion of native population to Sikhism. They do not have any social or political agenda to spread Sikhism in Europe, but they welcome everyone who wants to learn about Sikh teachings and practices. Sikhism is not yet a registered minority religion in Spain. The religious symbols (iron bracelet, turban and sword), which are essential parts of their normative identity, have no official recognition in the host society. Confusions about their identity and non-recognition of their religious symbols make them vulnerable to discrimination in the host society and the labour market. It increases the importance of events, such as Nagar Kirtans, which gives them visibility and a platform to raise their demand for recognition in the host society.

### **3.2.- Nagar Kirtans in the AMB**

For the Sikh community around the world, Nagar Kirtan is an integral part of their religious, social and political life. It is a custom that involves the processional singing of sacred hymns throughout the community. The Sikh religion emerged in a plural society, where many religious groups (the majority Hindu community, the ruling Muslim minority and several other small religious groups, such as Buddh, Jain and Parsis) were struggling to settle close to each other. In this multi-religious society, where the ruling class had a clear agenda of proselytizing the population to Islam and the majority Hindu community was tightly knitted in the boundaries of castes and clans, creating a space was a real challenge for the growing Sikh community. During the last four centuries, the Nagar Kirtans played a notable role in the unity and mobilisation of the community for common religious, social and political causes, and are currently fulfilling the same purposes in the Sikh Diaspora.

The tradition of Nagar Kirtan was initiated by a prominent Sikh Baba Buddha Ji, when the sixth Sikh guru, Hargobind Sahib, was incarcerated at Gwalior fort by Mughal emperor Jahangir between 1617 and 1619. To avoid the separation of the guru, Baba Ji and Sangat (Sikh congregation) moved to Gwalior (currently a city in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh). Out of love and devotion to the guru, they used to perform Kirtan (singing religious hymns) while doing circumambulations around the fort. Guru Hargobind was extremely pleased with the efforts made by Baba Ji to unite the community and spread the message of Sikhism, through singing Bani (religious hymns) in the streets. Hereafter, all Sikhs were encouraged to perform Nagar Kirtans in their towns to celebrate the birthdays of Sikh Gurus (Gurparabs) and to commemorate other important events in Sikh history. Since then, the Nagar Kirtans have become a way of showing love for the guru, spreading the teachings of Sikhism and protesting against the repression of exploitative regimes in a peaceful manner. With the emigration of Sikhs around the world, now the Nagar Kirtans have become transnational events that bring together the Sikh community around the globe and help them to make a place in the host societies.

The Sikh community in the AMB annually celebrate three Nagar Kirtans: first, to celebrate the creation day of Khalsa, which is also called "Vaisakhi Nagar Kirtan" (13th or 14th April every year); second, to celebrate birthday of Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1st Sikh Guru, in the month of November); and third, to celebrate birthday of Guru Gobind Singh Ji (10th Sikh Guru, in the month of January). Normally, in all Gurudwaras in the AMB, Nagar Kirtans begin at 10:00 am with a starting prayer (Ardaas) by the head priest of the host gurudwara. In this prayer, the head priest of the gurdwara requests the Guru's permission to begin the processional

march and seeks blessings and spiritual protection for all humans. After the initial prayer, the religious scripture Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji (considered as a living Guru in Sikhs) covered with beautiful garments is carried by the priest on his head to a vehicle prepared for the Nagar Kirtan and placed on a well-furnished seat. The procession vehicle is decorated with beautiful fabrics, lamps and flowers. Only during the Nagar Kirtans, the religious scripture is taken out of the Gurudwaras (sacred space) to the street (profane space) and made visible to all. In 2016 Nagar Kirtan in the AMB, priest of host Gurudwara told me that this crossing of boundary, from sacred to profane spaces (vehicle, streets and squares), requires prayers, rituals and high level of cleanliness that temporarily transforms profane spaces into sacred ones.

After placing the religious scriptures on the seat, the head priest opens it randomly and reads a hymn, which is called Mukhwak or Hukamnama<sup>6</sup>, for the congregation. Then Panj Pyare<sup>7</sup> come in front of the vehicle and guide the congregation. A drummer and two flag holders (holding the Sikh flag) also accompany them. The streets reserved for Nagar Kirtans remained closed to normal traffic (Figure 1). They are cleaned and decorated by Sikh devotees. The procession begins with 5 war cry slogans (Jo Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akaal), which is a symbolic gesture to show the martial background of the Sikh community. With the vehicle in motion, a Kirtan group, sitting next to the religious scripture, begins to sing sacred hymns. The sound of the music instruments and the voice of singers create a spiritual sonic space that engulfs the entire congregation and begins to sacralise the city environment. Sikh men and women follow the vehicle. Normally, they walk barefoot, with their heads covered with scarves and turbans to show respect for the Guru. They repeat the religious hymns sung by the Kirtan group. A human chain (young men joins hand) has been made on both sides of the road to mark the path of Nagar Kirtan, and to protect participants from accidents and to maintain order in the congregation. There are no gender-specific rules during the march, but normally, women and children walk next to the vehicle and men follow them. Most of the rituals are performed by men, while women participate in the preparation of food and the decoration of the vehicle and the route. During the march, two or three stops are made to show martial arts skills, serve food to the congregation, and make public utility announcements for the community. Gatka groups (martial-art groups) from Spain and other neighbouring countries

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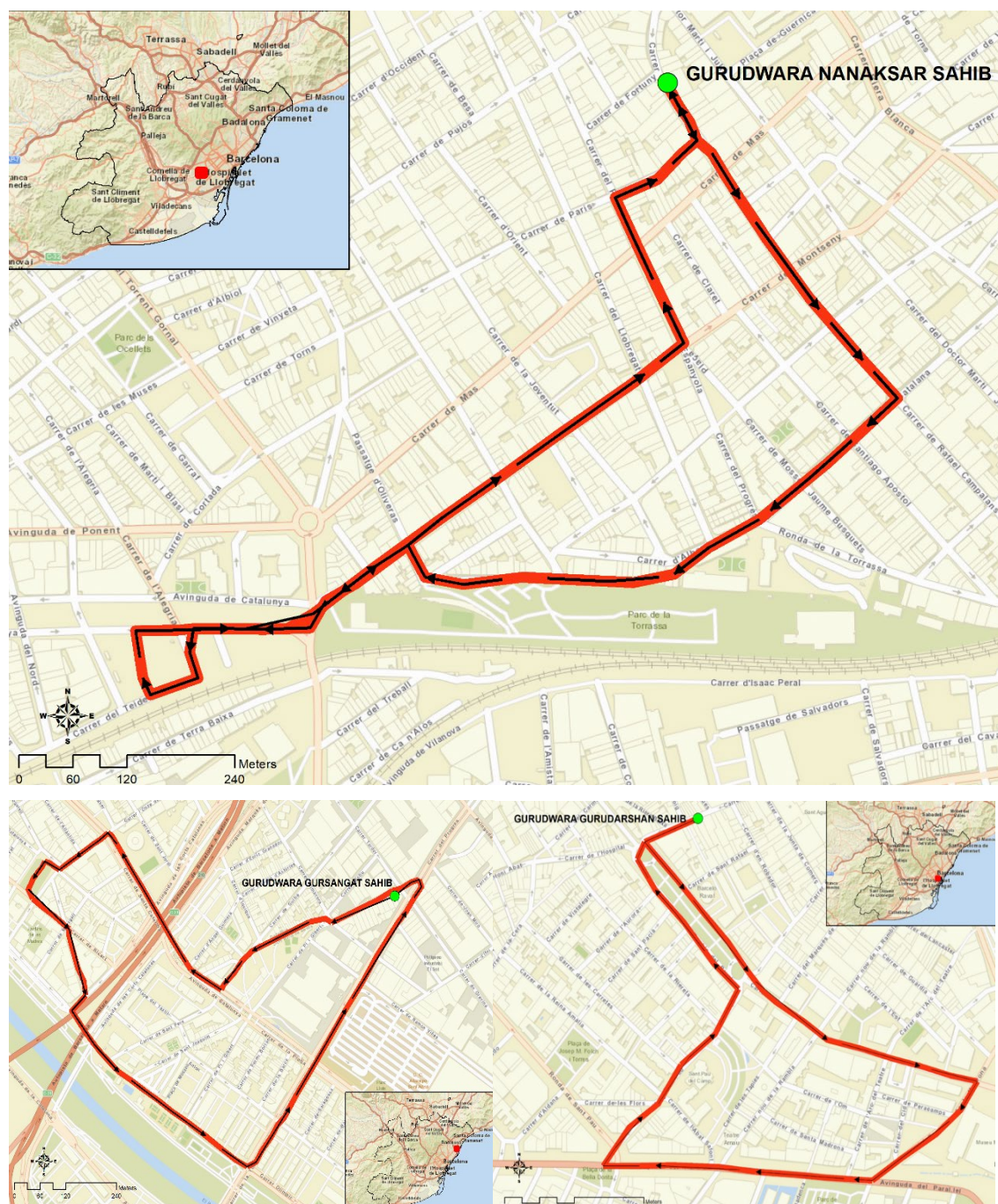
<sup>6</sup> It refers to a hymn from the Guru Granth Sahib, which is given as an order to Sikhs.

<sup>7</sup> In Sikh tradition, the *Panj Pyare* (the Five Beloved) term is used for the men who were initiated into the Khalsa (the brotherhood of the Sikh faith) by Guru Gobind Singh. The *Panj Pyare* are now considered as the living body of guru that carries the soul of guru forever.



such as Italy, France or Germany, come to demonstrate martial art for the congregation. These groups consist of men and women of different age groups from 10 to 60 years. To spread the message of Sikhism, information leaflets are distributed to the host population. The leaflets are published in three languages Spanish, Catalan and English to reach the maximum population in the neighbourhood.

**Figure 1.- The routes of Nagar Kirtans celebrated in the AMB, 2017-2018**



Source: Own elaboration.



After arriving at the place prepared for the congregation, the religious scripture is placed on a high seat, decorated with flowers and colourful garments. After bowing their heads in front of Guru, people sit on the floor covered with blankets and mattresses in front of religious scripture. All Kirtan groups (national and international) perform according to the schedule prepared by the organisers. After Kirtan, some honours are awarded to the distinguished dignitaries of the Sikh community, the host community and the local administration to recognize their services for the Sikh community and society at large. Free vegetarian food has served everyone regardless of their religion, colour or socioeconomic status. Normally, Nagar Kirtan ends at 04:00 pm with a thanksgiving prayer, seeking happiness and prosperity for all humanity. Then, the religious scripture returned to the Gurudwara sahib, where the head priest offers last prayer and then places it in Sach Khand (Guru's rest room).

#### **4.- Nagar Kirtans and quest for visibility, recognition and identity**

In addition to their importance as religious events, for the Sikh community in the AMB, the Nagar Kirtans have four implicit objectives: first, to provide visibility to the Sikh community in the host society; second, to demand recognition for the Sikh religion, traditions and symbols of faith in the host society; third, to preserve and transfer the normative identity of Sikhs to the next generations; and finally, to bring together the transnational community of the Sikh diaspora.

##### **4.1.- Nagar Kirtans and quest for visibility**

In previous research, religious visibility is defined as “a likelihood that someone will be identified in public, through clothing or personal grooming, as a follower of a specific religión” (Colic-Peisker, et al. 2019). It is used to show the mainstream society, the distinctive character of ethno-religious groups, and often brings negative consequences for them. But for the Sikh community gaining religious visibility in the host society is a way of showing their separate existence and claiming a space for them in their highly diverse neighbourhoods. The majority of the Sikh population in the AMB lives in multi-religious and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods with a high proportion of immigrant population. In these neighbourhoods, the host population is unaware of their existence, beliefs and way of life. The locals often confuse them with other immigrants, especially with Muslim backgrounds such as Pakistanis or Afghanise. This confusion sometimes makes them a target of islamophobes in the host

society, who mistreat them and sometimes call them terrorists or followers of Bin Laden. This has also happened in many other countries of the Sikh diaspora, such as the USA and the UK, where Sikh men faced discrimination because of their physical appearance, especially after the tragic incidence of 9/11 (Sidhu and Gohil 2008). Therefore, to avoid any confrontation with the host society, most Sikhs feel that they should inform and educate the local population about their different identity. As stated by Karam, a regular visitor of Barcelona Gurudwara, “our community must not pay for the sins of Jihadist terrorists. We should inform the local people that our religion is different. We do not spread hate and we want to live in peace and harmony with the host society. I am sure if we tell the local people they will understand”.

Due to the fewer possibilities of showing their distinctive identity on normal days, for the Sikh community, the annual Nagar Kirtans give them opportunities to show their differences from other immigrants in the AMB. Gurmeet, a member of gurudwara managing committee, in his interview highlighted the importance of Nagar Kirtans as events that “allow public display of religious scripture, symbols and rituals of the Sikh community and provide a contact with the host society”. This demonstration of the difference is used as a tool of boundary-making that separates them from other immigrant religious minorities, especially Muslims, who are often categorised by the host population as fundamentalists and against the secular norms of Western societies. As explained by Manjit, a member of gurudwara managing committee, “It [Nagar Kirtan] provides an opportunity for the local people to see Guru Granth Sahib Ji. It makes them clear that our god is different from Muslims and we do not preach hate in the name of religion”.

#### **4.2.- Nagar Kirtans and demand for recognition**

As mentioned earlier, Sikhism is not yet a minority religion officially and legally recognised in Spain. Therefore, the Sikh community suffers a lot of discrimination regarding the use of its religious symbols in public spaces and in the labour market. As an immigrant group trying to make space in the host society, an implicit desire behind the celebration of Nagar Kirtans is to demand recognition of their existence in the city, their different religion, religious symbols (turban, 5Ks and flags) and traditions (martial background). Most importantly, the Nagar Kirtans are used to raise the demand for recognition regarding the permanent presence of the Sikh community in the city. Through Nagar Kirtans a clear message is sent to the host community that the Sikhs are part of the host society, and they want to share their traditions,

rituals and beliefs with everyone who lives in the city. As explained by Kamal, a regular gurudwara visitor, "Nagar Kirtans show that we are here for a permanent settlement. We are not tourists and now this city also belongs to us, just like any other individual". Some respondents also claim that marching on the streets of the AMB helps them cultivate a sense of belonging with their new home. It transforms this foreign land into their home, where they feel safe and as accepted members of society. Manjit, a regular gurudwara visitor, explains "As I walk freely through the streets during Nagar kirtan, I feel a sense of belonging with this land and these people. I no longer feel like an immigrant. I want the local community to recognise me as one of them".

In addition to the recognition of their existence, the Sikh community also wants recognition for their religion as a minority religion in Spain. Currently, due to the lack of any legal or political status, Sikh community has no right to demand any support for the celebration of religious events and no legal basis to defend the rights of the followers under the laws regarding the freedom of religion enshrined in the Spanish constitution. Marriage ceremonies organised in the gurudwaras do not have any legal validity in the Spanish law. Therefore, to obtain recognition as a minority religion, the organisers invite political leaders and administrators to the Nagar Kirtans and raise their demands in front of them. In 2016 Nagar Kirtan in Hospitalet de Llobregat, Gurumukh, a member of the organising committee told me that "we like to invite political leaders and local administrators, as it provides recognition and legitimacy to Sikh religion and traditions in the political and administrative sphere... I hope in future they will accept our demand for registration". The Nagar Kirtans are also used as a platform to raise awareness and demand recognition of Sikh religious symbols in the host society. The public display of symbols of Sikhism, such as the Sikh flag, khanda, turbans, traditional weapons, 5ks and ik onkar, raises awareness about the presence of Sikhs in the host community and enables them to differentiate between Sikhs and other immigrants. The host population begins identifying Sikhs with their turbans or iron bracelets. Inder, a regular gurudwara visitor, points out that "the native people, who participate in Nagar kirtan, begin to recognise the Sikh community as a different religious group. Otherwise they call all brown people "Paki"". The Sikh community is very proud of its martial background and its entire history is full of tales of its bravery in wars. The demonstration of the martial arts during the procession is used, on the one hand, to commemorate the martial background of the Sikh community and, on the other hand, to raise the demand for recognition of their martial background in the host society. In this concern, Kartar, an instructor of martial art group, explains "With the public demonstration of martial art skills,

we convey a message to the host society that we are ready to fight any crime and injustice in the host society and everyone should recognize us as saint-soldiers". The Sikh community hopes that their recognition as a martial group will facilitate their entry into the armed services in their new homes, which was their second important occupation in their homeland after agriculture.

#### **4.3.- Nagar Kirtans and identity preservation**

Nagar Kirtans are also important as they revive the memories of main events in the Sikh history. For young generations, it provides a link with their glorified past. Many events in Sikh history are related to Vaisakhi Nagar Kirtan, including the creation of Khalsa in 1699, and the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh in 1919. During Nagar Kirtans many Sikh writers, poets and preachers commemorate the historical events and glorify the sacrifices made by the Sikhs gurus and saints for the welfare of humanity. Kulbir, a regular Gurudwara visitor, claims that "it gives us the opportunity to commemorate the sacrifices made by our Gurus and ancestors to fight against injustice, which we want to teach to our children". In this way, Nagar Kirtans also contribute to the preservation and transfer of normative identity of Sikhs to the young generations. Children, who participate in Nagar Kirtans, are encouraged to dress as Sikh warriors. They were taught about the heroic past of Sikh warriors and their tales of bravery and high standard of moral ethics during the time of war or peace. They were also encouraged to be baptised and follow the Khalsa code of conduct. Gurmukh, a member of Gurudwara managing committee says that "In Nagar Kirtans we prepare the next generation of Sikh warriors, who will continue this fight against injustice in society". The strict adherence of the Nagar Kirtans rituals (as they are celebrated in Punjab), prepares the young generation to keep these processions alive in the diaspora.

For children born in Spain or emigrated with their parents, Nagar Kirtans provide opportunities to learn the fundamental principles of Sikhism. Harsimran, a regular visitor of gurudwara, says "In Nagar Kirtans, with our actions we tell the host society and the younger generations about two basic principles of Sikhism i.e. Seva [service of humanity] and Simran [Chanting the name of god]". All roads reserved for Nagar Kirtans are cleaned and decorated by the devotee Sikhs. Free vegetarian food, juices and fresh fruits are served to all visitors, which shows the dedication of the Sikh community in Seva, and the chanting of the hymns from sacred scripture while walking in Nagar Kirtan shows their dedication towards Simran. Many Sikhs also feel that Nagar Kirtans promote social cohesion in the Sikh community,

which is divided into different sects and castes. At the time of Nagar Kirtan, all Sikhs cooperated with each other. Gurmukh, a gurdwara committee member says, “at least in Nagar Kirtans the entire Sikh community works together, forgetting their internal differences of castes and religious beliefs”.

#### **4.4.- Nagar Kirtans and diaspora**

Some respondents also highlight the role of Nagar Kirtans in fostering ties in the Sikh diaspora. Sikh devotees around the world visit Barcelona to participate in Nagar Kirtans. Many religious experts, preachers, kirtan groups and martial art performers also come from different countries to perform in these events. It brings together the Sikh diaspora community to celebrate their unique transnational identity in their new home. Jasbir, a regular visitor of gurudwara, explains that “during Nagar Kirtans many groups come from outside, such as the UK, Germany, France or Italy. It widens our community network. When they celebrate, we also go there to show our support with them”. These transnational links also help to establish religious places and raise common concerns in different countries of the Sikh diaspora. Now with the help of telecommunications technology, Nagar Kirtans are broadcasted by several TV channels, such as Sikh Channel UK and Chardi Kala TV, in the diaspora. These virtual links connect the transnational Sikh community with live streaming and cross the barriers of geographical distances. It transforms Nagar Kirtans, which are local events in the city, to glocal events that reunite diaspora.

### **5.- Nagar Kirtans and the host society**

#### **5.1.- Attitude of the host society**

Any expression of religion in public spaces by a religious minority has the potential to create conflicts with the mainstream society. The attitude of the mainstream society towards the religious expressions of a minority group in public spaces depends largely on the perception of that group in the minds of the majority population and their own ideology about religion. This perception is based on historical relationships, contemporary interaction, and the presentation of the minority group in social media as potential danger or harmless allies. During the last four decades, the separation of church and state, and the strong secularisation of the host society has pushed religion to the private sphere of devotees. In

addition, due to the large number of immigrants of Muslim origin and the growing number of jihadist terrorist attacks in countries such as France, Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom, and their representation in social media as an existential threat to Europe, began a debate regarding the freedoms and rights of immigrant religious minorities in Spain. The situation has also been exacerbated by political parties that promote Islamophobia for their political gains (Allevi 2009). In relation to the Nagar Kirtans in the AMB, the attitude of the host society is based on the presentation of the Sikhs in the local media and their interaction with the community in their neighbourhoods. During my field work many native people, who had some direct contact with the community, affirm that despite a short time of stay in the AMB, with its hard work, honesty, desire to serve humanity and the absence of proselytism or any other political agenda of dissemination of Sikhism, the Sikh community has managed to earn respect in the host society as hardworking, welcoming and tolerant community. This positive image in the minds of the local community allowed them to celebrate their religious traditions in their new neighbourhoods. Even people who occasionally protest against the celebration of Nagar Kirtans, mistakenly relate it to Jihadist terrorism or Islamic invasion of public spaces. Their concerns are marked by several factors including the ideas about secularisation of urban spaces, the fear of terrorism, the invasion of public spaces, the loss of identity of neighbourhoods, time spent in neighbourhoods and generational differences.

In the AMB, a small number of people, who are agnostic atheists, are strictly against any expression of religion in public spaces. They perceive Nagar Kirtans as an invasion of a foreign religion in their public spaces. For them, as a neighbour, who proclaimed himself an atheist, of a gurdwara in Barcelona explains, the host society has fought hard to expel the religion from public spaces and limit it to the private sphere of followers, now with the immigrant religious minorities, religion is again returning to public spaces, which is totally unacceptable. Anti-religious sentiments in a section of society, also generate concern for the local administration about the justification and legitimacy of Nagar Kirtans in the AMB. Judith, a cultural mediator explains that “some people complain about the display of religion in public spaces. They want religion to remain in the private sphere and not to be displayed in the streets in any form”. Some people also feel uncomfortable with the presentation of bare swords and the demonstration of martial art, which for a normal Sikh is an essential part of a Nagar Kirtan. They began to question the idea of Sikhism as a “religion of peace”. As Pablo, a cultural mediator noted: “During Nagar Kirtan, Sikh men demonstrate their martial art skills. It creates suspicions in the minds of the locals who know nothing about the Sikh traditions and perceive it as a demonstration of power and violence”. It also strengthens the

arguments of atheists, who consider religion as a cause of conflict and want to get rid of any representation of religion in public spaces.

The other important factors that affect the attitude of the host population are the “generation” and the “duration of stay” in the neighbourhood. Especially, the elders, who have spent their entire lives in the neighbourhoods (where these Nagar Kirtans takes place now), feel that their streets and squares are invaded by other religious groups, which do not belong to this land. Marta, a neighbour, who has spent her entire life in the neighbourhood, explains her concern as “I have spent all my life in this neighbourhood. I have seen local Catalans leaving this neighbourhood, and Pakis, Philippines, Moros and other immigrants occupying their apartments. Now many religious or social events take place daily in my neighbourhood and I have no idea what is happening. Now even our public spaces, streets, squares and parks are regularly invaded by foreigners... I feel strange in my own neighbourhood”. On the contrary, the young generation and the other immigrant minorities, who have short stay in the neighbourhood, these Nagar Kirtans are a part of their new highly diverse society. They see them as a social event to come in contact with an entrant religious group, which is trying to get visibility and recognition in the host society. Albert, a neighbour, affirms “I like this procession, I don’t know anything about Sikh religions, but I feel that events like this bring different cultures together. We should enjoy this diversity instead of hating each other”.

Some people criticise the disturbance caused by the use of sound amplifiers speakers and people marching on the streets. As the roads reserved for Nagar Kirtans remain closed for normal traffic, it disrupts the daily routine of some neighbours. Paco, a neighbour in Barcelona, explains that “these people create too much sound with the drums and sound amplifiers, and create congestion for normal users. I think these events should not be allowed in public spaces”. While others consider them as an opportunity to taste delicious Indian food and see different outfits of multiple shapes and colours. Antonio, a neighbour, states that “I like the vegetarian food served in Nagar Kirtan. It is free and served to everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs and socioeconomic status. It brought us the taste of India”.

In the AMB, people have limited information about the Sikh community, which does not allow them to differentiate between Muslims and Sikhs. It is one of the reasons why many Sikhs believe that by informing and educating the local community about their distinctive religious identity through Nagar Kirtans, they can build a bridge of trust with the host community.

## 5.2.- Attitude of the local administration

During the last decade, diversity management has become the most challenging task for the local administration of different municipalities in the AMB, which is trying to accommodate immigrant religious groups in their new neighbourhoods, while respecting the sentiments of the local population. Article 16 of the Spanish constitution of 1978, protects the right to religious freedom of all citizens of Spain and declares that there shall be no State religion, but the State may impose restrictions if necessary to maintain public order as protected by law. As a subject of local jurisdiction, permits related to any public display of religion and culture are issued by municipal governments. Therefore, local politics and the ideology of the ruling political party in the municipality affect the decision regarding the celebration of events in public spaces. The Sikh community has four gurudwaras in the AMB, located in the municipalities of Barcelona, Hospitalet de Llobregat, Sant Adria de Besos and Santa Coloma de Gramenet. These municipalities have adopted an intercultural approach (Bouchard 2011), towards diversity management. The Barcelona City Council framed an Intercultural Plan for Barcelona 2010, to meet the demands of different ethno-religious minorities. Following the intercultural approach that encourages the interaction between different ethnic or religious groups, the main priority for local administration in all municipalities is to use Nagar Kirtans as a place of interaction between different groups, who share neighbourhoods with the Sikh community. The welcoming nature of the Sikh community and its openness to the involvement of all neighbourhood residents in Nagar Kirtans, makes them perfect places for social interaction. As it suits to the intercultural plan, sometimes local municipal councils also provide funds for the publication of pamphlets about the program in different host languages.

Normally, for the Nagar Kirtans, some members of the Sikh community (mostly representative of Gurudwara) contact public administration and negotiate the terms and conditions regarding the use of public spaces. They try to convince the local administration about their demands, which are explained by Kartar, a representative of Gurudwara, as “The main demands of the Sikh community are first, to reserve main roads for the Nagar Kirtans; second, to have as much time as possible; third, to have adequate space for the congregation; and finally, to have the provision of public services, such as police security, ambulance, public toilets, etc.” Although, for the local administration, its main priorities, as highlighted by Judith, a cultural mediator, are “to create the least disturbance for the host community, regulate the use of sound amplifiers to avoid noise pollution, the safety of the people involved in Nagar Kirtans and others, keep other roads clear for regular traffic and promote



social cohesion through mediation of conflict situations (if any) within the group or between different groups". Taking into account the aforementioned interests of both parties, negotiations are held regarding the date, time, space and the provision of basic services in Nagar Kirtans.

In general, the Sikh community appreciates the efforts made by the local administration to make these Nagar Kirtans possible in the AMB. Despite the objections of some natives, the local administration tries to promote social cohesion and peaceful coexistence in the neighbourhoods. Manjit, a representative of Gurudwara, affirms that "The local administration is very helpful, we cooperate with them and comply with all the requirements, such as public safety insurance and permits related to the use of public spaces. They simply demand that we allow everyone to participate in Nagar Kirtan". Similarly, when talking about the attitude of the host society and local administration regarding the Nagar Kirtans, Victor, a cultural mediator, summed up as "It is because of their positive image in the host society, Sikhs can march with naked swords in the streets of Barcelona. Other immigrant communities cannot even think about this".

## **6.- Adaptations and negotiations for peaceful coexistence**

Migration produces changes in social, political, economic, geographic and legal contexts, which affects the celebration of religious events by immigrants in their new homes. It creates a need for negotiation between the immigrant group and the local administration to make these events possible in a way that does not hurt the sentiments and daily life of others in the city. In order to strike a balance between the restrictions imposed by the local administration and the expectations of the Sikh community with respect to the Nagar Kirtans, some negotiations take place between the Sikh representatives and the local administration. First of all, regarding the date of celebration, the Nagar Kirtans in the AMB are not celebrated on the exact date of the event, which they commemorate, as Vaisakhi Nagar Kirtan can be celebrated two or three days before or after April 13, depending on the nearest weekend. The final decision on the date is made by the local administration. Mostly, local authorities offer various options depending on the availability of public spaces. The representatives of the Sikh community then select a date and inform the public administration and the Sikh congregation about the final decision. In the AMB, all Nagar Kirtans are held on Sunday between 10:00 am to 04:00 pm, because this time slot

suits the Sikh working population and is less disturbing for the local population. The local administration also prefers this time slot because during this time the traffic is minimal and it provides an opportunity for local people to participate in the event and enjoy the diversity it brings to their neighbourhoods.

Regarding the availability of space, traditionally, in Punjab the main roads (with historic or symbolic importance) of the cities are selected for the processional march and the central squares are used for martial art demonstrations, but in the AMB, the availability of space entirely depends on the local administration. The Sikh representatives make an assessment of the expected participation in Nagar Kirtans (ranging from 10 to 12 thousand participants) and then demand the space that is required for all the rituals and activities of the procession. After assessing the demands of the Sikh representatives, the local administration demarcates roads and public squares that can be reserved for Nagar Kirtans. The Sikh community always tries to obtain permits for the main roads with some symbolic importance (as the organizers of Barcelona Gurudwara try to obtain permission to enter La Rambla, which has a greater symbolic importance in Barcelona, and the organizers in Sant Adrià de Besòs try to reserve the square in front of the municipal council office), but the local administration mainly avoids the use of main roads, to reduce the inconvenience for other users. Public school grounds, auditoriums, or playgrounds are assigned for congregations, as they are readily available on Sundays. The use of sound amplifiers and the demonstration of weapons, political flags and slogans are allowed at the minimum level possible for the Nagar Kirtan. Participants cannot perform martial art demonstrations, which can be dangerous for themselves and others. In addition, participants are refrained from raising politically sensitive issues (related to Punjab or diaspora), which can create conflicts within the community and with other immigrants from India.

## **7.- Conclusions**

Since its first arrival in the AMB, gaining visibility and recognition as a separate religious group remained a major concern for the Sikh community. The Sikh community has very little exposure in public spaces due to its small share in the total foreign-born population and low socio-economic status. Moreover, Sikhs are often mistakenly identified as Pakistanis or Afghanis due to the large number of Pakistani immigrants in the AMB and their somewhat

similar physical appearance. This confusion sometimes makes them victims of hate-crimes and discrimination in the labour market, which stems from prejudices against the Muslim community in some sections of the host society. Therefore, to avoid any confrontation with the host society and inform them about Sikhism, since 2005, the Sikh community has begun to celebrate annual Nagar Kirtans. These processions have helped the Sikh community in the AMB to display their religion in the public sphere and to mobilize the Sikh community for social and political concerns in their homeland and in the diaspora. The annual Nagar Kirtans, which are organised in the highly diverse neighbourhoods of the AMB, have played a very crucial role in increasing the visibility and recognition of the Sikh community and have helped them to claim a space for themselves in their new neighbourhoods. They also facilitated the preservation and transfer of the normative identity of Sikhs to the next generations that prepares them to carry out these religious customs in the future.

In addition to tools of visibility and recognition, these Nagar Kirtans also shaped the relationship between the Sikh community and the host society. The public display of religion during Nagar Kirtans, which on the one hand fosters a sense of belonging in the Sikh community with its new home, on the other hand, educates the host community about the teachings and principles of Sikhism that are fully compatible with Western values of liberty, equality (gender, racial and socioeconomic) and fraternity. Through Nagar Kirtans, the Sikh community conveys a message to the host society that they are here for a permanent settlement and want to share their culture and beliefs with the host society. They respect the diversity of the host society and want to be recognised as respected members of it. They want legitimacy for their religious symbols (turban and sword) and freedom to fulfil their religious obligations according to the Khalsa code of conduct. Most of the people in the host society have a very good relationship with the Sikh community and describe them as hardworking, honest and tolerant people who make a great contribution to the host society. They describe Nagar Kirtans as a bridge that links the host community with the Sikh community and promotes cultural diversity. But for some parts of the host society, Nagar Kirtans have different meanings. They perceive them as an invasion into their public spaces that they liberated from religion a few decades ago. They have strong feelings against the display of religion in the streets and relate it to the invasion of Islam in Europe, which they thought would eventually erode the culture of the host society. Some people also protest against the use of sound amplifiers and appropriation of public roads and squares for religious activities, as this causes inconvenience to the local population. The demonstration of weapons and martial arts is also a factor that generates concern in the host society

regarding the power relations in the city. The attitude of the host society also depends on the “generation” and the “duration of stay” in the neighbourhood. The elders, who have spent their entire lives in the neighbourhood where Nagar Kirtans take place, see these events as an invasion of their public spaces by a foreign religious community, while other immigrants and young generations, who are recent residents of the neighbourhood accept them as fruits of the diversity brought by the recent immigration boom in the AMB.

Some of these conflicts related to the appropriation of public spaces, during the Nagar Kirtans, are negotiated by the local administration with their direct and indirect interventions. For the local administration, where interculturality is now a dominant discourse, the Nagar Kirtans are necessary representations of the diversity that provides the host society with new spaces of interaction. The local administration encourages Nagar Kirtans as it fits well into its agenda of bringing different faith groups together on a common platform and eliminating the prejudices they had over each other. These events are also used to listen to the specific problems of the Sikh community, which helps the administration to understand the needs of the community and allows it to make efforts to solve them peacefully and constructively. The Sikh community also adapts many religious rituals and cooperates with the local administration and the host society to make these events possible.

With the emigration of Sikhs to different parts of the world and their passion for preserving their religious customs and unique identity, the celebration of the Nagar Kirtans, which were local events for the Sikh community in India, have become transnational events that brings together the globe Sikh diaspora. The celebration of Nagar Kirtans in the AMB, makes it a part of the global network of Sikhs worldwide. Until 2018, most of the Sikhs in the AMB belong to the first or one and half generation. With their regular efforts, they have created a very positive image in the minds of the host society and the representatives of the local administration. They are emerging as a very productive and constructive part of the host society, which believes in the well-being of all. It will be interesting to see how future generations of Sikhs will respond to the task of preserving their normative identity and religious traditions, like the Nagar Kirtans, in a super diverse society of the AMB.

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