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# Rishis and Rebels: The Punjabi Sikh Presence in Early American Yoga

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This article examines the role played by five Punjabi Sikh immigrants as teachers of yoga in the United States during the early to mid-twentieth century: Wassan Singh (1882-1942), Bhagwan Singh Gyanee (1884-1962), Rishi Singh Gherwal (1889-1964), Bhagat Singh Thind (1892-1967), and Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal (1899-1985). After placing them in the context of modern yoga and its early history in America, it is suggested that as yoga teachers these five are best understood as immigrants and merchants who occupied a unique and liminal position between the prevailing antagonisms against South Asian immigration and a fascination with an imagined “metaphysical Asia.” In addition to their political activities for rights within the United States and an independent Indian nation abroad, they are cast as a significant presence in both the history of yoga and the history of the Punjabi diaspora in America.

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## Introduction

In the June 1934 issue of *The Missionary Review of the World* dedicated to the question of “Orientals,” Reverend Theodore Fieldbrave offered readers a survey of a Christian missionary field that was in his words more “difficult... and yet more unique and far reaching” than any other: East Indians in the United States. Born in Lucknow, India as the son of a Presbyterian minister and grandson of a Methodist minister, Fieldbrave himself became a Baptist and traveled to the United States to attend university. While stressing of the importance of his work and making the appeals for support that would be expected, Fieldbrave also gave a brief census of this immigrant population in his article. He divided the East Indians in North America into four main groups: about 3,000 farmers on the Pacific Coast, about 500 students in universities throughout the United States, and

about 1,000 skilled workers and merchants in the middle of the country and on the East Coast. The fourth group is the most notable. Fieldbrave felt it necessary to include as his final category “the Hindu Swamis and Yogis” in America that numbered “about 25 or 30.”

While the several dozen swamis and yogis may seem at first glance to be a relatively small number, it is also astonishingly large, and if his total number of East Indian immigrants was brought closer to the figure in the 1930 federal census of 3,130, then it would mean that close to one-percent of all immigrants from India had yogi or swami as their occupation.<sup>1</sup>

The conventional wisdom regarding yoga’s history in the United States imagines very little activity in the four decades between the mid-Twenties and the mid-Sixties. Lola Williamson claims that “the fervor for gurus and Eastern philosophies of the 1920s and ‘30s died down by the middle of the twentieth century.”<sup>2</sup> The reason usually given for this lull is a pair of immigration laws: the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 which supposedly shut the door on immigration, and by extension yoga teachers, from India, and the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 which finally allowed spiritual teachers to once again enter the country and then somehow instantly galvanized the massive interest in yoga and Eastern mysticism that was found among the Hippie Counterculture. In her work *The New Metaphysicals*, Courtney Bender has said that within this “interim” forty-year period “the ability of Asian teachers to cultivate American ashrams or followings” was “severely restricted.”<sup>3</sup>

This argument problematic for many reasons, and is also clearly refuted by the presence of dozens of swamis and yoga teachers. Fieldbrave’s category of swamis and yogis is inaccurate only in the sense that he most likely *underestimated* the total number. In addition to those within the Vedanta Society and Self-Realization Fellowship, the two groups that are most commonly acknowledged by those who do not find much yoga in early twentieth century America, there were dozens of unaffiliated yoga teachers from India during this time. There has been a thread running through histories of yoga in America that has briefly acknowledged some of them (Deva Ram Sukul, Swami Omkar, Yogi Hari Rama, Sant Ram Mandal), but this has not been much more than a simple inventory of names and organizations that appears to have been passed over from one scholar to another like a baton.<sup>4</sup> A simple catalogue of names was the stuff of “raw myth” to Marcel Detienne, and Detienne’s “raw myth” later became the grist of historical excavation for David Gordon White. The lack of work on the listing of these unaffiliated teachers, however, has kept the understanding of the early

history of yoga in America as a myth in the more common sense: a widely held but false idea.<sup>5</sup>

So far, Mark Singleton has delved the deepest into this list of yoga teachers in early twentieth century America with his 2010 work *Yoga Body*, but the archive used in *Yoga Body* for them was largely comprised of these teachers' written output in books and instructional pamphlets. While they did publish a great deal and there is a good amount of data within these textual sources, to equate these teachers solely with their texts is to rely on a *faux ami* and tend to think of them primarily as authors. When a wide range of other sources are used, yoga in early twentieth century America becomes much more expansive and takes on a radically different character.<sup>6</sup> While Singleton sees yoga teachers in early twentieth century "reach(ing) their public through the postal service," a more in-depth understanding of them (and the few archival records that show their book sales) demonstrates that print was supplemental for most of them.<sup>7</sup>

Overwhelmingly early American yoga teachers were peripatetic and travelled throughout the United States in a pattern not unlike Methodist circuit riders, revisiting cities on a regular cycle and largely accommodating seasonal weather by staying in the southern part of the country during the winter and the northern part during the summer. Once in a city, it was standard for these travelling yoga teachers to rent a hotel suite along with a demonstration room, a space smaller than a lecture hall that was typically used by travelling salesmen to demonstrate their goods to groups of potential customers. Their stays were typically longer than a week and less than a month, and would begin with a series of free lectures open to the public on a variety of topics. These free public lectures were often accentuated with musical performances, demonstrations, question and answer sessions, or the display of glass lantern slides. The lectures would feed into classes for smaller private groups who paid a fee for a series of lessons, and the public lectures and private classes would occasionally lead into dyadic services in which offer healing or counseling services for a fee.



Figure 01: Yogi Wassan and Private Super Yoga Science Class in Dallas, Texas on 23 December 1926. (From the collections of the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library)

It is well known that the bulk of Indian immigration in the early twentieth century was from the Punjab, and a large number of the travelling yoga teachers we find within archival sources from this time were Sikhs from this region. From a purely statistical standpoint, it would make sense that many of Fieldbrave's "swamis and yogis" would be Sikhs. This sense is lost in light of the dismissive position that yoga has been held in Sikh tradition and scriptural authority. In short, Sikhs do not practice yoga, let alone teach it.

While an idealized or "true" Yoga is often mentioned within Sikhism, it is in sharp and distinct contrast to the ascetic practices, rituals, and breathing exercises of those that were known in the time of the ten human Gurus and the Sikh *bhagats* as yogis. There are no less than eight accounts of Guru Nanak encountering yogis and denouncing their path and practices in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the *Varan Bhai Gurdas*, and the *Janamsakhis*.<sup>8</sup> In the twenty-eighth *pauri* of *Japji Sahib*, Guru Nanak uses the yogi as a pointed counterexample, and presents a set of virtues (contentment, modesty, faith) as replacements for the traditional marks of the yogi (earrings, begging bowl, staff). Throughout the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the yogi is described as restless, lacking understanding, entangled in the world, full of pride, and ultimately failing to be united with the Creator.<sup>9</sup> The two texts that claim to

link the Gurus to yogic practice—*Pran Sangli*, in which Guru Nanak allegedly gives a discourse on yoga, and the seventy-first *Sakhi* of Guru Gobind Singh in which he supposedly teaches yogic breathing techniques to his wife—are notable because of how marginal and disregarded they are, the former being dismissed by Guru Arjan directly as spurious, and the latter being described by an 1873 editor as being favored by the Namdharis while “many learned men do not consider it true and valid.”<sup>10</sup>

The conflict within yoga-espousing Sikhs in early twentieth century America is resolved in light of the last several decades of scholarship on yoga. Today there is a strange confederacy of Hindu nationalists, evangelical Christians, and New Age seekers who all want to believe that the yoga popularly practiced is Hindu, spiritual or religious, and has come unbroken from an ancient tradition. Scholars on the yogic traditions of India from centuries ago do not find flowing sequences of postures to calm the mind and strengthen the body, but a host of extreme practices by renunciants done largely in the hope of attaining occult powers.<sup>11</sup> This was the yoga that Guru Nanak found in his meeting with the Nath yogis described in *Sidh Gosht*. Also in sharp contrast to contemporary forms of yoga was the yoga revival of the late-nineteenth century led in the Anglophone world by the Theosophical Society and Swami Vivekananda, where we do not find postures, but do find philosophy and various forms of Western Esotericism that embrace the powers of the mind and thought.<sup>12</sup> The yoga that has become a popular global phenomenon and is widely practiced today is best thought of as what Mark Singleton calls “postural practice,” and this was a product of a combination of yogic postures and Western physical culture (Swedish gymnastics, body-building) in early-twentieth century India.

The ideas about yoga that we find dominant well through the 1950s in America support the theories of De Michelis, Singleton, and others. Mental and esoteric forms of yoga were ubiquitous in the United States, and the postural forms of practice that were coming together in India during the first decades of the twentieth century only first start slowly appearing in America in the late-1920s, as would be predicted. For the first decades of the twentieth century we find what Catherine Albanese calls a “new and American yogic product,” cautious of hatha yoga and selectively adopting aspects of yoga through Theosophy and New Thought.<sup>13</sup> Yoga in America during this time was often followed by the suffixes of “breathing” and “philosophy,” yoga teachers were often referred to as “the Hindu lecturers,” and the common ideas of yoga embraced everything from changes in diet to the development of a magnetic

personality. When yoga was physical it was often interchangeable with physical culture, but most often it was practiced seated in chairs at home or in a lecture hall. In short, the yoga found in early twentieth century America was neither the yoga that is popular today nor the yoga denounced during the time of Guru Nanak. It was in this decidedly different context that the five Punjabi Sikhs to be discussed taught what was understood in their time as “yoga.”

### **Wassan Singh**

Wassan Singh arrived in America via Hong Kong in the fall of 1906 at the age of twenty-four, and for about fifteen years he worked in the lumber mills of Oregon like many other Punjabi immigrants. In 1922 he began to teach yoga classes in Washington state as “Yogi Wassan” and published his first book, *The Secret Key to Health and Prana*. Wassan Singh received local acclaim only a few months into his yogic career when he dramatically retrieved and resuscitated a boy who had drown and was at the bottom of a lake in Olympia.<sup>14</sup> He continued to teach around the Pacific Northwest until 1925 when he taught down the West Coast and published his *Soroda System of Yoga Philosophy*. That same year Yogi Wassan acquired a ranch in Vinton, Texas near El Paso, and invited students to come to his Paradise Ranch and enjoy the dry climate while learning yoga.<sup>15</sup> During this time he taught around the southern Midwest in Texas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. By 1927, Yogi Wassan began to travel on a fully national level. For the next decade and a half, he repeatedly taught in cities like New York and Los Angeles, as well as through states such as Montana and Utah. Wassan Singh’s career met a sudden end in Saint Louis, Missouri on July 17, 1942. According to family lore, he was in an automobile accident and after refusing to see a doctor or go to a hospital, he was unexpectedly found dead in his hotel room.<sup>16</sup>

The most detailed account of Yogi Wassan was done by Charles W. Ferguson, who attended one of Yogi Wassan’s public lectures as background research for his 1928 survey of American religion titled *The Confusion of Tongues: A Review of Modern Isms*.<sup>17</sup> Despite the limits of Ferguson as narrator, there is enough in his three and a half pages on Yogi Wassan to offer great detail on what his public lectures were like. On that particular evening, Yogi Wassan had an audience of about 300, “well divided between men and women” and in line with the “average middle class congregation.” He cast an impressive figure, wore a gold-colored turban with matching robe, and his speech was accented with charm and humor. Yogi Wassan began the class by chanting a long “Oom” that set the tone (and also

established his breath control and diaphragmatic strength with the audience) and then launched into a brief concert on the flute before he began to lecture on the powers of breath-control and the solar plexus. His lecture concluded with a feat of strength in which men from the audience were invited up and formed a line that pressed forward like a single-file football team against Yogi Wassan's midsection.



Figure 02: Yogi Wassan in the Los Angeles Area, Circa Late-1920s. (Courtesy of the family of Wassan Singh)

### **Bhagwan Singh Gyanee**

Bhagwan Singh's training for a career as a yoga teacher began after his 1917 arrest in San Francisco for his role as a leader in the Ghadar party, which sought to foment rebellion against the British in India. For several years, he immersed himself in an intensive study of world religions, psychology, and self-help, all the while perfecting his English, first while serving his sentence as an inmate at McNeil Island penitentiary and then in public libraries after his release.<sup>18</sup> Such rigorous, self-directed study was nothing new to Bhagwan Singh, who was nothing less than a savant in his youth in India. After completing his training as learned Sikh priest or *gyanee* (a five-year course he finished in eleven months),



Bhagwan Singh taught logic at the university level, and also studied philosophy and the *Bhagavad Gita* with Har Bilas Sarada, a reformist, nationalist, and second generation Arya Samaji.<sup>19</sup> While Bhagwan Singh was physically strong and a wrestler back in the Punjab, the yoga that he taught was intellectual and cerebral, unlike Yogi Wassan whose yoga was mostly comprised of physical culture exercises, diet, hygiene, and folk health remedies, and who in photographs and live demonstrations, pointed to his own strapping, muscular physique as proof of his teachings' validity.

The addition of the title "Gyanee" to his professional name served several purposes. It helped to separate the teacher "Bhagwan S. Gyanee" in the public's mind from the "Bhagwan Singh" who was associated with "millions of rifles" and the revolutionary "Hindu cult" that was splashed across newspaper headlines during the trial of the Ghadar Party.<sup>20</sup> The new last name also helped to mark his intellectual background and the learned nature of his teachings, a diverse combination of subjects with a heavy emphasis on psychology and pragmatic self-improvement which he called Humanology, and the organization he created in 1930, the American Institute of Culture. Like Wassan Singh, Bhagwan Singh began to teach in the Pacific Northwest, but he quickly began to spread out across the country. According to his grandson, Bhagwan Singh "travelled in every state in the United States except Maine, and lectured in every city that had more than a thousand people."<sup>21</sup> If this statement was hyperbolic, it was also underscored by evidence that Bhagwan Singh had a staggeringly prolific and expansive career for decades. He taught from New York to Los Angeles, and seemingly everywhere in-between, including towns such as Reading, Pennsylvania and Ogden, Utah.

Early in this career, he made a brief attempt to recast himself as "Yogi Bhagvan" and his teachings as "Gyana Yoga," which conveniently for someone well versed in logic, he described as "the highest technique of reasoning and logic of the Master Minds of India."<sup>22</sup> The term would have been well known to interested Americans as the yoga of wisdom, with Swami Vivekananda publishing his *Jana Yoga* in 1899 and the New Thought William Walker Atkinson publishing his *Series of Lessons in Gnani Yoga* under the name Yogi Ramacharaka in 1906 and 1907. In 1931, he published the thin booklet *Yogi Exercises*, which as Mark Singleton has previously noted, was comprised of Western physical culture and bodybuilding routines, and Gyanee framed in practical terms as a means towards "perfection in any line, whether it be in business, household work, scientific researches, religious worships, or conscious awakenings."<sup>23</sup> Later in his career, Bhagwan Singh Gyanee stopped using the words "yoga" and "yogi"

explicitly, but his subject matter and self-descriptive titles remained as common and understood euphemisms for the yoga of his time.<sup>25</sup>

Gyaneer continued to travel and nurture the various branches of his Self-Culture groups, lecturing and writing into the 1950s, until he was finally granted entry to India, where he spent the final years of his life. Once in India, Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer wrote to the American students of his Self-Culture. After thanking them for the “privilege” of knowing them and instructing them, he invited them as their “teacher and friend” to visit him in Chandigarh.<sup>26</sup> In a private letter written two years later, he wistfully hoped that his students in the United States were still meeting in their local Self-Culture groups and that through their continued discussions and questions they would inspire “a new line of thought in a series of articles and books.”<sup>27</sup>

## Rishi Singh Gherwal

Like Wassan Singh and Bhagwan Singh, Rakha Singh Gherwal added the title “Yogi” to his name and as “Yogi Gherwal” began his career as a travelling yoga teacher in 1925, two years after he arrived in New York from England on the S.S. Berengaria in August 1923. During the first several years, Gherwal was most active in the Pacific Northwest and Midwest (including Utah, Montana, Missouri, Nebraska, and Texas) and offered yogic teachings that were framed alternately in terms of psychology, philosophy, and occultism.

In 1926, Yogi Gherwal published a sixty-two-page pamphlet entitled *Practical Hatha Yoga: Science of Health, How to Keep Well and Cure Diseases by Hindu Yogic Practice*.<sup>28</sup> A side-by-side comparison strongly suggests that Gherwal was using recent issues of the periodical *Yoga Mimamsa* from the Maharashtra-based Swami Kavalayananda as a source for hatha yoga techniques, scientific descriptions of their medical benefits, and even as guide to modeling for his photographs.<sup>29</sup> The *Hatha Yoga* pamphlet and its depictions of Gherwal in *asanas* such as Bow, Fish, Grasshopper, and Cobra, is most likely the first photographic appearance of and publically available guide to *hatha yoga* postures in the United States. Physical postures in the United States were almost entirely comprised of seated yogic postures or Western physical culture exercises labeled as yoga well into the 1940s when the postures Gherwal was doing in 1926 were described as a new import.<sup>30</sup> Of the five Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers, and perhaps of any of his contemporaries in the West, Gherwal was the most interested in yoga *qua* yoga, both in the modern postural forms that are recognized today and in its classical textual forms.

His published works were filled with references to older texts such as the *Yoga Vasistha*, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, the *Prashna Upanishad*, the *Kundalini Upanishad*, and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

In the latter half of 1928, Yogi Gherwal changed his public name to Rishi Singh Gherwal. The previous year he had used the name for his first book, *Great Masters of the Himalayas: Their Lives and Temple Teaching*, which offered a wild and fanciful narrative of Gherwal's time in India immediately before leaving for Europe and America in 1923. Gherwal was directed in a dream to meet his teacher in the Hindu holy city of Brindivan, and once there, "Yogi Bhagavan Puri Ji, Master of Masters" led him on journeys into the Himalayas and Thibet where he saw his master perform an array of miraculous feats. For the next two decades before his death in Southern California in 1964, Rishi Singh Gherwal was an active teacher who travelled around the country, published a dozen books and pamphlets, and published a magazine titled *India's Message* in the 1930s and briefly reprised in the 1940s.



Figure 03: Rishi Singh Gherwal Demonstrating Yogic *Bandhas* from *Complete Yoga*, September 1937. (From the collection of the author)

### **Bhagat Singh Thind**

Bhagat Singh Thind is perhaps the most well-known and often-remembered Sikh in the history of Punjabi immigration to the United States. Along with Dalip Singh Saund who won three terms to the United States Congress and served from 1957-

1963, Thind and his fight for citizenship that went to the Supreme Court in 1923, serves a benchmark in the struggle for South Asian inclusion and progress in the United States. While Thind's service in the U.S. Army and doctoral degree in philosophy from the University of California at Berkeley are usually cited to contextualize the man and the court case, his life in the United States after the decision, a forty-three year career as a metaphysical lecturer and author who taught several forms of yoga, is mostly forgotten or ignored.

While his family places the beginning of his teaching career at 1926, about only a year after the 1923 decision in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* was rendered, Thind was lecturing in Utah on "the Universal Truth Philosophy" and the Bhagavad Gita, and in Kansas City on Vedanta and which he called "the divine truth philosophy."<sup>31</sup> In this early period of his career, Thind was not just a travelling philosopher or deserving of having his self-appointed title of "metaphysical lecturer" taken at face value, as those who acknowledge this career often do. Rather, he seems to have been particularly adept at what his contemporary yoga teachers in America did: combining the various metaphysical streams around him and presenting them as both exotic Eastern wisdom and practical knowledge applicable to the average American. Thind listed himself in the 1925 edition of the metaphysical directory *Hartmann's Who's Who* as a New Thought practitioner, and the titles of his lectures were often interchangeable with what New Thought teachers were offering at the same time, such as classes on "How to Make Yourself Beautiful and Magnetic" and "The Secret of Making People Like You."<sup>32</sup> Thind even tried his hand at prophecy in 1939 and issued a pamphlet of political predictions out of Salt Lake City which was not very accurate considering that by the end of the twentieth century Burma had not joined the United States and Australia was not jointly ruled by India and China.<sup>33</sup>

Bhagat Singh Thind was also an exponent of *Surat Shabad Yoga* or *Sant Mat* (the path of the saints), commonly described as meditation on the inner light and sound of God, and seen within the nineteenth-century *Radhasoami* movement and the larger *Sant* tradition.<sup>34</sup> As Andrea Diem-Lane has described in her work *The Guru in America*, Thind's career can be divided into two main acts: as a metaphysical lecturer during the first fifteen years and then as a Sant Mat master from the late-1930s onwards, clearly marked by the 1939 publication of Thind's *Radiant Road to Reality* which openly discusses Sant Mat.<sup>35</sup> While Thind actively taught and wrote on Sant Mat for decades, and initiated numerous students into *Surat Shabad Yoga* over the course of decades, scholars have uncovered that numerous passages in his *Radiant Road to Reality* were plagiarized from Julian

Johnson's 1934 work *With a Great Master in India*.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, various claims to Thind having been imitated by an untraceable guru in the Himalayas or simply having been born a master, he was actually initiated by Sawan Singh of the Radhasoami Satsang Beas.<sup>37</sup> While his descendants have elevated Thind to a *Sat-Guru* and *Pooran Avatar*, the reasons for him obscuring his lineage may have been more mundane, since "Thind charged money for his instruction and relied upon his students for donations to help support him (which) contradicted a longstanding tradition in Radhasoami."<sup>38</sup> Even those scholars who have pointed out the more disconcerting facts of Bhagat Singh Thind's uses of the Sant Mat tradition make two important qualifications: Thind was not the sole figure to make the kinds of adaptations and evolving claims that he did, and he was very much a significant early exponent of Sant Mat in the United States, often serving as an introduction to its techniques for other significant Radhasoami exponents who came after him.

Throughout his teaching and lecturing career, Bhagat Singh Thind also taught series of sixteen breathing exercises of pranayama (which included *Nadi Sodhan* or alternate nostril breathing) and three asana yoga exercises (which included *Hala-Asana* or Plow Pose).<sup>39</sup> There are records of him offering these exercises as early as March of 1926, through November of 1947, and in the latter years of his life when gave his student and friend Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal the charge of continuing to propagate the same.<sup>40</sup> Thind also referred to the breath as one of life's "finer forces," a clear reference to the 1894 Theosophical text *Nature's Finer Forces: The Science of Breath and the Philosophy of the Tattvas* by Rama Prasada which as a text and a catchphrase was picked up on by occultists and health reformers, Americans and transplanted Indian teachers alike, and became an unavoidable motif in the practice of yoga in early twentieth century America. These yogic exercises were not described with the explicit term "yoga," but rather given by Thind as classes in "Radiant Health" or "Breathing and Gland Exercises."<sup>41</sup>

### **Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal**

Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal's career as a teacher and lecturer was intertwined with his connection to Bhagat Singh Thind, who he considered both his teacher and close friend. He began to teach somewhere between 1924 and 1928, right around the time he met Thind. Grewal stayed active as a teacher up to his passing in 1985, giving him a remarkably long career of nearly six decades.<sup>42</sup> He authored about eighteen different titles that included poetry, lessons, pamphlets, and

monographs on diet, self-improvement, and what he called “the science of yoga philosophy.” Grewal frequently taught at centers of Unity, a New Thought church founded in 1889 by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, from Arizona and Texas to Colorado and Washington, DC. Not only did this echo the connections that Bhagat Singh Thind had to the teachings of New Thought, but it makes Grewal one of the most recent figures in a long and deep history of interconnection between New Thought and yoga that extends back well into the nineteenth century.

### **Other Sikh Yoga Teachers**

In addition to these five figures, there are records of several other Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers in the United States during the early twentieth century. In 1911 a man named Bishen Singh ran the “Hindu Temple of Science and Health” in Dallas, Texas that offered Yogi Philosophy and Psychic Healing before he was charged with illegally offering medical treatments.<sup>43</sup> Professor Hari Singh from the Punjab was being touted as a “learned Hindu yogi” and lectured on reincarnation and philosophy in Oklahoma City in 1914.<sup>44</sup> Pritam Singh Gill was a friend and travelling companion of Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal in the late-Twenties, and was also behind the short-lived Hindu Science Center in Manhattan in the mid-Thirties where he lectured on standard yogic topics of the time including dream interpretation, occult symbolism, and life after death.<sup>45,46</sup> Finally, while there is little information about his life before coming to and after leaving the United States, there is strong evidence to suggest that in the late-Twenties a man who taught across the country as Yogi Hari Rama in a nearly four-year tour and left behind a considerable organization known as the Benares League of America, was also a Punjabi Sikh.<sup>47</sup>

### **Hindu Subjects and Liminal Figures**

Overwhelmingly these five Punjabi Sikh figures were referred to, and referred to themselves, as Hindu, but “Hindu” had a very particular meaning in early twentieth century America as a categorization that encompassed all South Asian immigrants. Although this has been referred to as a singular case of “racialized religion,” that would seem to be more of a retroactive implication of our present use of “Hindu” as a religious designation.<sup>48</sup> As Nayan Shah has noted, racialized categories were tied to geographic origin from the mid-nineteenth to mid-

twentieth century, and the shifts that immigrants from India made from one bureaucratic category to another over the decades show that “Hindu” was more a matter of avoiding confusion with Native American Indians than religious essentializing.<sup>49</sup> There was enough difficulty for Americans to distinguish between Hinduism and Buddhism, and for many Sikhs, such as Wassan Singh who listed his first language as “Hindu” in the 1930 federal census, that designation was probably as close to accurate as they could hope.<sup>50</sup>

A shared designation as Hindu also came from within as Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu immigrants from the Punjab found common cause against British colonialism and worked from abroad to foment revolution through their North America branch of the Ghadar party whose publication’s masthead read “Ram, Allah, and Nanak.” Bhagwan Singh Gyanee was made the president of the Ghadar Party in 1914, quickly after his initial arrival in the United States.<sup>51</sup> He had been a firebrand in the cause, making stirring speeches in the Hong Kong gurdwara and in Canada before his arrival, and making astounding trips around the Pacific Rim to secure arms and support, resulting in an array of arrests and escapes. In the climate of the First World War, a connection between the Ghadar Party and the Germans lead to a wave of arrests that resulted in the “Hindu Conspiracy” trial in San Francisco from 1917 to 1918. The trial resulted in the dramatic courtroom murder of Ram Chandra and the imprisonment of Bhagwan Singh among others.<sup>52</sup> In the wake of the trial, Bhagat Singh Thind, who had given speeches on behalf of the Ghadar Party in Oregon in 1916 and 1917, was asked to head the party’s magazine in San Francisco, which he did for two months before joining the United States army.<sup>53</sup>

After the arrest and imprisonment of Ghadar Party members, much of the political focus on an India free of British rule remained, but was channeled into Gandhi’s movement. Bhagwan Singh Gyanee would typically devote one of his public lectures in each city to the cause of Indian nationalism as he travelled across the country, lecturing to his audiences on “Mahatma Ghandi and Current Events in India” and “The Awakening of Asia- the Orient in Turmoil.”<sup>54</sup> Rishi Singh Gherwal’s magazine, *India’s Message*, was filled with numerous pieces authored by Gandhi (usually several per issue) and Tagore, and constant updates on the situation from Gherwal and allied Westerners. Rishi Singh Gherwal made cryptic statements in his earliest writings to being “sympathetic with the Akali’s principle of non-(violent) resistance” and leaving his home “open for the political leaders” just before he left for America by way of England.<sup>55</sup> Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal also followed Gandhi during his youth in India and was part of his

*satyāgraha* movement until he came to the United States to attend college in 1921.<sup>56</sup> Like his peers, Grewal also spoke on Gandhi and Indian nationalism in the decades prior to 1947, reassuring his American audiences that a potentially independent India would be “God-fearing” and anti-Communist.<sup>57</sup> As his audiences in the 1970s became increasingly made up from the Hippie Counterculture and anti-war movement, Grewal claimed a bond with them by speaking of his own past activism on behalf on Indian independence. “I have great sympathy for the young people of today, because I used to march and demonstrate myself.”<sup>58</sup>

These same figures often fought just as hard for freedom and rights within the United States, which should not come as a surprise. South Asian immigrants were subject to a host of restrictive and limiting laws, in addition to waves of harassment, mob violence, and attacks in popular media. As Mark Juergensmeyer has shown in what he terms “the Ghadar Syndrome,” the combination of “an alien social environment” as immigrants and “the anti-colonial struggle at home,” worked as a powerful combination, making each more acutely felt and strengthening the resolve against each until they “fused into one struggle.”<sup>59</sup> The most noted of these fights for domestic freedom is with Bhagat Singh Thind, who is widely known for his quest for citizenship that went all the way to the Supreme Court in 1923.

To briefly summarize, Thind’s case was preceded three months earlier by Takao Ozawa, a Japanese man who appealed for American citizenship available only to a “white person” by arguing for a literal and visual appraisal of his pale skin. The Court rejected it on the grounds of anthropological categorization, which rendered Ozawa Asian and not white in their eyes. Thind countered in his case with his anthropological categorization as Caucasian and Aryan, buttressed with qualifying matters of his education, high-caste status, and education. Thind’s case for citizenship was also rejected, not on a scientific basis like Ozawa, but rather since he did not meet a “common understanding, by unscientific men” of whiteness.<sup>60</sup>

Virtually unknown are the parallel struggles of his peer, Rishi Singh Gherwal. Gherwal was naturalized in 1922, but in the wake of the *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* case his citizenship was revoked in 1924 in the same district court it had been granted in. *The Morning Oregonian* reported that the case generated interest in Portland since he was well-known through his lectures as “Yogi Gherwal” in the area.<sup>61</sup> While his appeal for citizenship was denied in 1930, he took the case to the circuit court of appeals in San Francisco later that year, and



was the ruling was once again against Gherwal.<sup>62</sup> Since his citizenship in 1922 included renouncing his loyalty to Britain and previous citizenship, Gherwal was in a vulnerable and liminal position and described by the press as a “man without a country.” Undeterred, Gherwal directly petitioned members of the United States Congress to restore his citizenship in 1934, and while in Washington, D.C. taught classes at the Burlington Hotel as a “Well Known Outstanding Authority on Yoga.”<sup>63</sup> Remarkably, a special one-man provision (Senate Bill 447) was passed for Gherwal that allowed him to sue the United States District Court for his citizenship, which he finally received in 1936.<sup>64</sup> Once secure in his ability to return to the United States, Rishi Singh Gherwal left soon after on his trip to India that would produce his book *Lives and Teachings of the Yogis of India*.

Despite appearing to have been the least politically active of his peers, Yogi Wassan also helped push for South Asian citizenship during the late-1920s, as found in letter from Yogi Wassan’s secretary to another yoga teacher, Deva Ram Sukul, which shows Wassan interested in circulating a petition through his students and sympathizers in El Paso, Texas and Los Angeles.<sup>65</sup>

There were immediate shock waves from the *Thind* decision. Akhoy Kumar Mozumdar was the first South Asian immigrant to earn American citizenship in June of 1913 from a ruling by a U. S. District judge in Seattle, and this encouraged Sakharam Ganesh Pandit to appeal for citizenship, which he received in 1914 by a California county court. Mozumdar was de-naturalized in Los Angeles in 1923, only nine months after the *Thind* decision, and he was represented by Pandit, who by that time was a Los Angeles-based attorney. Pandit also found his naturalization cancelled, only four months after the *Thind* decision, but unlike *Thind* and Mozumdar, he successfully retained his citizenship on appeal in November 1926. Astonishingly, like *Thind* and Gherwal, both Mozumdar and Pandit were also teachers of yoga: Mozumdar created the Society of Christian Yoga in 1906, and Pandit had his School of Applied Philosophy and Oriental Psychology in Chicago, and was noted to be a “yogi philosopher” in his original appeal for citizenship.

These numerous examples highlight not only how many yoga teachers there were in early twentieth century America and how significant they were, but how specific a strata of Indian society they came from. Overwhelmingly teachers of yoga came from the band across northern India that had the strongest British colonial presence, and they arrived as highly educated, politically-engaged English speakers who were familiar with Christianity and the modern West. In short, they would be exactly who we would expect to be fighting such legal

battles. Large parts of the histories of early American yoga and the political activity of the Indian diaspora in the United States during the early twentieth century could both be told using the same small cast of characters. For the most part, treatments of these figures up until now have unwittingly placed a large wall between the spiritual and the secular, acknowledging one aspect while neglecting or unaware of the other.

In debates over American citizenship, popular fears over immigration to the United States, and the work of Christian missions in India, Indians were more often than not essentialized and cast as a distinctly different and unassimilable "other." These portrayals of India and Indians in the United States during the early twentieth century could be seen as examples of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. But as Said and others have noted, Orientalism is not a unidirectional or unvarying phenomenon, rather it draws the West towards the East in some aspects as it pushes away from it in others. It is a dynamic that has "been one of instabilities and fusions, attraction and repulsion, an awareness of characteristics to be preemptorily rejected as well as devoutly embraced."<sup>66</sup>

Recent scholarship has shown that in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries Americans also held a romantic and idealized view of an imaged Orient, and projected it onto the landscape of the American West, individual identities and group personae, and even the concept of "the American dream."<sup>67</sup> At the same time that riots on the West Coast were violently driving away Indian immigrants, the dancer Ruth St. Denis was performing her Hindu-inspired piece "The Yogi" for audiences in 1907. As immigration laws sought to keep the "Tide of Turbans" out of the country in the late-Twenties, Art Deco made turban-style hats and "swami head" brooches a popular trend with American women.

The pull towards India was most acute within America's metaphysical seekers. The ground laid by Transcendentalists, Theosophists, and New Thought in the nineteenth century helped to establish what Catherine Albanese has called "metaphysical Asia," an imagined East that held timeless and powerful spiritual truths in the minds of American seekers.<sup>68</sup> Having little contact with Indian immigrants but endless exposure to fantastic tales of magical fakirs and supernatural yogis through written accounts and stage magicians, the default assumption of most Americans was that the average Indian was capable of working wonders or making contact with the dead. In some of his earliest advertisements, Yogi Wassan promoted himself with nothing more than the generic name "Hindoo Yogi from East India" and a sketched portrait of a man in a turban.<sup>69</sup> A specific name was apparently not necessary.

These assumptions were recounted with humor and a sense of absurdity in the memoirs of several South Asian immigrants. As a young student in America, Dhan Gopal Mukerji was offered meals and lodging in the California home of a Spiritualist in exchange for “put(ting) on (his) Hindu robe and sit(ting) in the parlor one hour a day” as a type of living prop for the séance-attending audiences that would cycle through its doors.<sup>70</sup> One woman was stunned to learn that Mukerji was not a Spiritualist, telling him that “Every Hindu is one... Spiritualism comes from India.”<sup>71</sup> In his 1941 memoir, Krishnalal Shridharani described being temporarily trapped in the omnipresent American urge to believe that “Hindus must be something,” as in “a fortune-teller, a snake charmer, a magician, or a freak,” that in turn allowed “many an Indian... to crash the gate of American society on false pretenses.”<sup>72</sup>

Often these two Orientalist forces of repulsion and attraction created strange windows of opportunity for South Asian immigrants and worked together in counterintuitive ways. Perhaps the best and most visible example was the turban, which marked East Indians and both repulsed and attracted the American public to them. The turban was fixated on in xenophobic arguments against South Asian immigration such as Herman Scheffauer’s article “The Tide of Turbans” in which he told his readers that as a marker of being an unassimilable and foreign other: “Always the turban remains, the badge and symbol of their native land.”<sup>73</sup> The salience and visibility of the turban also made it a marker for the other side of America’s Orientalist imagining of Indians as mystical sages and mental wonder-workers. A comparison between the public advertisements from Yogi Wassan, Rishi Singh Gherwal, and Bhagwan Singh Gyannee, and the private and candid photographs of these men, all show them during distinct periods to wear the turban for public engagements, but not in private. A book by the journalist Frederick Lieb claimed that Bhagat Singh Thind admitted to him that he grew out his beard and tied a turban to “convince his audiences that he (was) a Hindu.” “With (the turban),” Thind told Lieb, “they seem satisfied I am the genuine article.”<sup>74</sup>

Yoga teachers were in a unique and liminal position in early twentieth century America. They were both marginal and mobile within American society. Undoubtedly, they were subjected to the racism and hostilities that other South Asian immigrants were, but they were also able to take advantage of the fascination and curiosity with Indians that was also present, most acutely with metaphysical seekers. Through display advertisements, creating their own periodicals and organizations, and even selecting the lecture halls they rented,

travelling yoga teachers crafted their own personae and often literally paid for it. Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer and Bhagat Singh Thind often went beyond the typical rental hotel lecture hall and were hosted by fraternal orders and civic organizations like the Knights of Pythias, Elks and Rotary Club. Yogi Wassan counted members of the Oklahoma governor's office among his students. One of the most striking examples of the position held by the Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers, as well as most intimate, can be found within their marriages.

In her work *Making Ethnic Choices*, Karen Leonard offers that in the early twentieth century "the biethnic Punjabi-Mexican community was the model of family life for immigrants from India."<sup>75</sup> The unions between male Punjabi immigrants and Mexican women emerged out of several elements of the time: the barring of Punjabi women from following their male counterparts into the United States, the marginal racial status South Asians held as non-white, acute popular anxieties over immigration and miscegenation, and the host of restrictive laws that came from these fears. While Rishi Singh Gherwal appears to have remained single, the other four Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers all married European-American women, often several times, a stark exception to Leonard's subjects and a significant marker of the uniquely mobile, if still liminal, position that these yoga teachers held.<sup>76</sup>

Wassan Singh appears to have married twice: initially to a woman named Helen Bartlett in 1923, and later to a young woman from Norway named Else Goldkette Lerche in the late-1920s. Else was living with her parents in Los Angeles where Wassan Singh was based out of and frequently taught. According to her family, Else "was the love child of a Norwegian aristocrat and a Hermann Goldkette, a member of the brassy Goldkette Circus, a Jewish circus performing clan active in Europe in the 19th and 20th century."<sup>77</sup> It is unclear if Else's background influenced Yogi Wassan's dramatic on-stage teaching style, or if his strongman routines and ability to pitch himself to audience struck a familiar chord with her. In 1930 they had a son, and in a thunderous nod to the child's Scandinavian-Punjabi heritage he was named Thor Shiva Wassan. In 1939 Wassan Singh dedicated his *Rajah Yoga Book* to his son who he dubbed the "Youngest Yogi in America," and expressed his hope that Thor Shiva would follow in his footsteps and teach Yoga philosophy.<sup>78</sup>

When Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer left Hong Kong for Canada in 1913, he made arrangements and sent his wife Harbans Kaur and their three children back to India.<sup>79</sup> This would be the last time Bhagwan Singh would see his wife, since she died towards the end of the nearly five-decade period between his leaving India

and his return to the country. During his sojourn in the United States, Bhagwan Singh seems to have taken up an “American wife” named Florence Brown (1892-1965), an Oregon-born soprano ten years his junior who would occasionally provide musical performances as part of Bhagwan Singh’s lectures.<sup>80</sup> Although the length of their marriage is unclear, a marriage license shows that they married in Yakima, Washington in November 1929 and federal census records show them to have been living together in Chicago in 1940.<sup>81</sup>

A few days before Christmas in 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind married Inez Marie Pier Buelen in Spokane, Washington. With a last name that suggests at least partial German ancestry, Buelen was born in Saint Paul, Minnesota and had been a clerk, printer, and copywriter in the city of Spokane for several years prior.<sup>82</sup> On their official marriage certificate both Thind and Buelen are listed under the category of race as being white, while newspapers described the union as “Hindu Takes American Bride.”<sup>83</sup> Thind and Buelen divorced after less than five years. In March 1940, Thind was remarried in a Presbyterian church in Toledo, Ohio to Vivian Davies, a young Californian-born daughter of Welsh immigrants whose mother was one of Thind’s devoted students. Their marriage was by all accounts a warm and loving union and produced a son named David. They were together, along with Vivian’s parents and her daughter from a previous marriage, for the next twenty-seven years until Bhagat Singh Thind’s passing.<sup>84</sup> Finally, Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal was married to a Hungarian-born woman named Gladys Bajan, and together they had a son named Arjan.<sup>85</sup>

### **Skilled Merchants and Traders**

Within Theodore Fieldbrave’s attempt to divide the East Indians in America during the Thirties into four neat and distinct categories (Farmers, Students, Merchants, and the Swamis and Yogis), these five Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers all initially seem to fit into his fourth category. But upon closer inspection they confound and overlap all four categories. Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal worked in a Californian fruit farm during the summer of 1928 in-between his Bachelor’s degree at the University of Utah and his Master’s in engineering at the University of Michigan.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Bhagat Singh Thind worked in the lumber mills of the Pacific Northwest during the summers while he was earning his degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and Wassan Singh also worked in lumber mills prior to teaching yoga. More importantly, a close look at each of these figures shows that they taught their forms of yoga not simply as “Swamis and Yogis,” but

as skilled traders and merchants, who employed their skills and backgrounds and applied them to the spiritual marketplace of their time.

When discussing the mutual influence between the positive thinking movement of New Thought and yoga in the early twentieth century, Mark Singleton has briefly cited the intertwined presence of both in the catalogs of esoteric publishers and the display advertisements in the back of yoga manuals.<sup>87</sup> In his study of nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the nebulous boundaries between its debunkers and proponents, David Walker puts forth a complementary theory: historical actors are more than scholarly data points, but were theorists of the worlds that they were immersed in and well aware of how it was constructed, debated, and defined.<sup>88</sup> To expand upon Singleton's note and connect it to Walker's theory, travelling yoga teachers in the early twentieth century can be thought of in the same way as the book publishers of their time: not just as parts of yoga's development, but as keen theorists of it whose very livelihoods depended on understanding who their audience was, what they wanted, and how they understood yoga. Yoga was recognizable to its American audience because so often it was their own needs and understandings presented back to them in a type of re-enculturation.

Today, the differences between schools of modern postural yoga are for the most part so slight (the temperature of a room, the type of music played in the background, the names given to postures, the degree to which postures are corrected) that they highlight the uniformity within contemporary yogic practice. There was no such uniformity in early twentieth century, as modern postural forms were still nascent in India, very few Indians were in America, and there was little agreement in the United States as to what yoga was and what yogis did besides general concepts of mental power, magical abilities, and superhuman longevity. What was taught within the early twentieth century under the heading of yoga was a dizzying array of philosophies, practices, and techniques.

This diversity was encouraged by the teachers of yoga themselves, who as unaffiliated professionals without an organization to defer to would have a clear desire to appeal to as wide of an audience as possible. The standard preliminary part of a travelling yoga teacher's stay in a city, a number of free lectures that were open to the public, were almost always diverse and made clear appeals to different and distinct audiences each evening. In Salt Lake City, Utah, Rishi Singh Gherwal's lectures discussed the life beyond death one night and marriage advice on the following.<sup>89</sup> In Olympia, Washington, Yogi Wassan's public offerings discussed the mystical "planes of consciousness" one night, physical culture

another, and psychology on a third.<sup>90</sup> For members of the public who were sick or needed advice, yoga teachers could function like healers or fortune-tellers. For the metaphysically inclined or traditionally religious, they could function like mystic sages or philosophers.

**PALMISTRY** TELLS ALL GOOD LUCK ON YOUR HAND

**ASTROLOGY** TELLS YOUR CAPABILITIES FORETELLS YOUR FUTURE

**CHARACTER ANOLOGY** TELLS YOUR PERSONALITY

<b>ARIES</b> March 21 April 20 MARS FIRE	<b>Taurus</b> April 21 May 21 VENUS EARTH	<b>GEMINI</b> May 22 June 21 MERCURY AIR	<b>CANCER</b> June 22 July 23 MOON WATER	<b>LEO</b> July 24 August 23 SUN FIRE	<b>VIRGO</b> August 24 Sept 23 MERCURY EARTH	<b>LIBRA</b> Sept 24 Oct 23 VENUS AIR	<b>SCORPIO</b> Oct 24 Nov 23 MARS WATER	<b>SAGITTARIUS</b> Nov 24 Dec 23 JUPITER FIRE	<b>CAPRICORN</b> Dec 24 Jan 20 SATURN EARTH	<b>AQUARIUS</b> Jan 21 Feb 19 URANUS WATER	<b>PISCES</b> Feb 20 March 20 NEPTUNE AIR
--	---	--	--	---	--	---	---	---	---	--	---

**ALL-SEEING EYE**  
THE I AM ATMA SOUL AND SPIRIT

**CONCENTRATION ON THE ALL-SEEING EYE WILL DEVELOP THE MASTER MIND, PSYCHIC POWER AND PROSPERITY**

**DEVELOPS MENTALITY AND SEES FUTURE**

**CRYSTAL GAZING**

**HINDU RAJAH HEALTH FOOD**

**HINDU RAJAH HEALTH FOOD**

**GIVES YOU PRESENT VITALITY**

**GIVES YOU PRESENT VITALITY**

**1** INDICATES HIGH SPIRITUAL POWER. INDICATES RICHES AND A LARGE FORTUNE. INDICATES STRENGTH.

**2** MEDIUM PALM. INDICATES MEDIUM SPIRITUAL POWER. INDICATES RICHES AND A LARGE FORTUNE. INDICATES STRENGTH.

**3** MEDIUM PALM. INDICATES MEDIUM SPIRITUAL POWER. INDICATES RICHES AND A LARGE FORTUNE. INDICATES STRENGTH.

**4** SMALL PALM. INDICATES LOW SPIRITUAL POWER. INDICATES RICHES AND A LARGE FORTUNE. INDICATES STRENGTH.

**5** LARGE PALM. INDICATES HIGH SPIRITUAL POWER. INDICATES RICHES AND A LARGE FORTUNE. INDICATES STRENGTH.

**6** SMALL PALM. INDICATES LOW SPIRITUAL POWER. INDICATES RICHES AND A LARGE FORTUNE. INDICATES STRENGTH.

**7** MEDIUM PALM. INDICATES MEDIUM SPIRITUAL POWER. INDICATES RICHES AND A LARGE FORTUNE. INDICATES STRENGTH.

**ARIES**  
March 21  
April 20  
MARS  
FIRE

**Taurus**  
April 21  
May 21  
VENUS  
EARTH

**GEMINI**  
May 22  
June 21  
MERCURY  
AIR

**CANCER**  
June 22  
July 23  
MOON  
WATER

**LEO**  
July 24  
August 23  
SUN  
FIRE

**VIRGO**  
August 24  
Sept 23  
MERCURY  
EARTH

**LIBRA**  
Sept 24  
Oct 23  
VENUS  
AIR

**SCORPIO**  
Oct 24  
Nov 23  
MARS  
WATER

**SAGITTARIUS**  
Nov 24  
Dec 23  
JUPITER  
FIRE

**CAPRICORN**  
Dec 24  
Jan 20  
SATURN  
EARTH

**AQUARIUS**  
Jan 21  
Feb 19  
URANUS  
WATER

**PISCES**  
Feb 20  
March 20  
NEPTUNE  
AIR

Figure 04: “Chart of All Seeing Eye, Palmistry, Astrology, Character-nology, Crystal Gazing, and Health” from Yogi Wassan’s *Rajah Yoga Book*, 1938, Page 31. (From the collection of the author)

The ability to appeal to large audiences with diverse interests was accomplished by both the rich backgrounds of teachers and their ability absorb ideas from their American environs once their yoga teaching careers began. Bhagat Singh Thind is a prime example. Not only was Thind highly educated and able to pull from his time at Khalsa College in Amritsar and his doctorate in philosophy from the University of California at Berkeley in his teachings, but he consistently immersed himself in different metaphysical traditions once in the United States. Thind was hosted on his thirty-seventh birthday by the Rosicrucians in Chicago, included the occultic phrase “To Know, To Dare, and to Keep Silent” on his pamphlets, and was a member of the New Thought Church of Truth in Spokane.<sup>91</sup>

Like other unaffiliated yoga teachers, the Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers showed a practical adeptness throughout their careers to appeal to their surroundings and anticipate the responses of mass audiences. In Salt Lake City, Utah, Rishi Singh Gherwal accentuated one of his lectures with a glass slide presentation of the Harimandir Sahib, which he told his audience was “the Golden Temple of the Mormon(s) of India.”<sup>92</sup> Bhagat Singh Thind, who was based out of Salt Lake City for several years, titled one of his books *The Pearl of Greatest Price or Nam-Rattan*, a clear nod to the Mormon scripture the *Pearl of Great Price*. Yogi Wassan, who correctly advertised himself as being from the Punjab at the beginning of his public career would eventually refer to himself with the pan-Indian moniker of “The Master Mind of India,” and in the final years of his life alternately claim to be from “Thibet, India” and the Hindu holy city of Benares.<sup>93</sup>

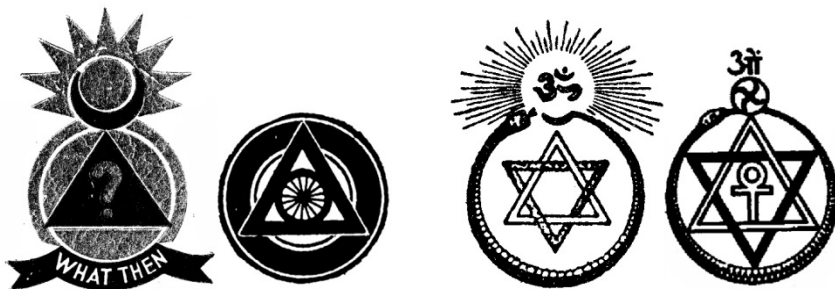


Figure 05: From left to right: Logo from Cover of Bhagwan Singh Gyanees’s *Yogi Exercises*, Logo of the Yogi Publication Society of Chicago, Logo from Cover of Rishi Singh Gherwal’s *Complete Yoga*, Logo of the Theosophical Society.



The five figures discussed were familiar with one another from the beginnings of their times in America, and once they each began to teach yoga, they comprised a well-connected network. If they could be thought of as merchants, they could also be thought of as a type of guild that exchanged information and offered mutual assistance. There have been several studies that have explored the effects social networks have among immigrant communities into bringing members into a shared occupation and fostering success within it, and the Punjabi Sikh presence in early American yoga can be seen as an example of this. While still viewing them as distinct individuals, their tightly-knit circle and similarities (along with their emergence as teachers mostly over a short period of a few years in the 1920s) are strong reasons for also thinking of these five Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers as a single cluster.

Bhagwan Singh Gyanee's friendship to Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal and Rishi Singh Gherwal are evidenced in person letters, and a photograph shows him embracing Bhagat Singh Thind in Denver, Colorado in 1942.<sup>94</sup> A quarter-century earlier, Thind had visited Gyanee in prison during the Ghadar German Conspiracy trial.<sup>95</sup> Their rigorous travelling schedules often placed these teachers within close proximity to one another. Yogi Wassan and Rishi Singh Gherwal taught a few blocks away from each other in San Diego in 1930.<sup>96</sup> Rishi Singh Gherwal and Bhagwan Singh Gyanee lectured one-tenth of a mile down the street from one another in New York City in 1933, and Bhagwan Singh Gyanee and Bhagat Singh Thind taught in different rooms within the same building in New York City in 1935.<sup>97</sup> There is record of Rishi Singh Gherwal and Bhagat Singh Thind intentionally teaching alongside one another in Chicago and then holding a large dinner for 150 of their guests and students.<sup>98</sup> Rishi Singh Gherwal used an anatomical chart for his 1927 book *Great Masters of the Himalayas* that was clearly from Yogi Wassan's previously published *Hindu System of Health Development* of 1924, and Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal was literally handed a manual of breathing exercises by Bhagat Singh Thind and told to carry on and teach his students.<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the goal of national independence they held in common with other Indians, their shared status as "Hindoo" subjects in America, and the appeals they made to the varied interests of their audiences, there was still a retained core of a distinct Sikh identity among these five figures. In varying ways they served the

Sikh community within the United States, presented Sikhism to their audiences, and represented Sikhism to the wider public.

Bhagwan Singh Gyanee led Sikh congregations in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Vancouver, and in the United States as a *granthi*. As the title of *gyani* he took on as his last name would indicate, Bhagwan Singh was well-qualified for the role with an extensive education and training in *kirtan*. On at least one occasion, Bhagat Singh Thind also served as a *granthi* in the United States. In January of 1931, while Thind was in San Antonio, Texas giving a series of lectures, a Punjabi Sikh immigrant named Bishan Singh Sekhon passed away in the city. Sekhon was employed by the Ford Motor Company in Detroit and came down to San Antonio to recover from a workplace accident. After Sekhon's friends arrived from the north, Thind conducted funerary services for a combined Detroit and San Antonio *sangat*.<sup>100101</sup>

Bhagat Singh Thind explicitly cast his teachings as connected to Sikhism. He adorned the cover of his booklet *The Soul Celestial* with a large *khanda* and included a full-page portrait of the "Universal World Teacher" Guru Nanak in his first book *Divine Wisdom*, and in pamphlets advertising his lectures and classes from New York to San Francisco, he offered his teachings as the "Soulful Science of the Sikh Saviors" and cited Guru Nanak with large banner quotes of "Truth is Higher Than Everything, But Higher Still Is True Living." Rishi Singh Gherwal added the same quote to the cover of his magazine *India's Message* in late-1933, and promised two years earlier in the introductory editorial to the first issue that it would "bring the spiritual message to the American people... the message of India first given out through the Upanishads and then through Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Guru Nanik and others."<sup>102</sup> In the book he wrote after returning from his 1936-37 trip to India, Gherwal included extended sections on Guru Nanak, a reproduced section of Sukhmani Sahib, an account of the Golden Temple and the community created by Sant Uttar Singh at the reconstructed Manji Sahib, and his encounters with the female Sikh *sant* Bibi Gulab Kaur who had allegedly been alive for the previous twelve years without food or water.<sup>103</sup> Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal titled a five-volume set of books that he authored "The Golden Temple Series."

In 1933, Sikhism was represented at a series of large public events by no less than three of these yoga teachers, forty years after the original 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago which introduced Swami Vivekananda to America. At a commemorative Second World Parliament of Religions known as "The World Fellowship of Faiths" held in Chicago alongside the Century of

Progress World's Fair in September, Rishi Singh Gherwal gave a lecture titled "How the Sikh Religion Helps to Solve Man's Present Problems" in which he gave an overview of basic Sikh history and then claimed the Sikhs as predecessors of Gandhi's *satyāgraha* or soul-force, saying, "Sikhs are great for sacrifice because their foundation is built on sacrifice."<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer served as the Sikh representative to a supplementary session of the Second Parliament held in New York City at the end of 1933.<sup>105</sup> During one of many preliminary conferences held in Chicago that lead up to the World Fellowship of Faiths, Bhagat Singh Thind served as the spokesperson for "the Sikh group" in August, and several years later he spoke on the "Sikh Saviors' Message to the World" as part of the Fellowship's summer series of dinner meetings in 1938.<sup>106</sup>

Perhaps the most personal and material example of retained Sikh identity can be found in the *kara* worn on the wrist of Yogi Wassan that was passed down to his son Thor Shiva, who then passed it down to his son Christian who continued to wear it more than a century after his grandfather arrived in the United States.<sup>107</sup>

Although the Punjabi Sikh presence in early American yoga may appear to be a historical phenomenon, it is a history that is still being unpacked and has numerous living connections to the present, both within the Punjabi diaspora and the development of modern yoga.

Two of the previously mentioned figures have been the subject of significant legacy projects undertaken by their descendants. Through the efforts of his grandson Surinder Pal Singh, numerous writings by Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer have been recently republished, a wealth of materials related to him have been donated to the online South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), and the history of Bhagwan Singh has been retold by his grandson both in person and in print for various events marking the centenary of the Ghadar movement.<sup>108</sup> Likewise, David Bhagat Thind, the son of Bhagat Singh Thind, has gone to great lengths to preserve and shore up his father's work and legacy over the last decade: reprinting books and pamphlets, releasing recorded lectures and filmed demonstrations by Thind on audio CDs and DVDs, creating a website, and commissioning the 2010 biography *Doctorji*.

Three years after the death of Rishi Singh Gherwal, his former student Ernest Haeckel began to take classes at the Center for Yoga in Los Angeles with the American teacher Ganga White. Haeckel travelled with Gherwal to India in 1936 and 1937, and Gherwal's 1939 book *The Lives and Teachings of the Yogis of India* includes Haeckel's photographs and account of Gherwal's sister-in-law who he

refers to as “the living saint.” Haeckel and his wife were the first two members of Ganga White’s organization in Los Angeles, and in the early-1980s a retreat center in Santa Barbara named the Mahatma Gandhi Yoga Ashram was acquired by Ganga White and his partner Tracey Rich with Yogi Haeckel’s blessing.<sup>109</sup> Today the ashram serves as the retreat center for the White Lotus Foundation and trains yoga teachers from around the world.

In 1970, after having previously studied with teachers such as Indra Devi and Selvarajan Yesudian, a middle-aged America yoga teacher named Charles Schoelen met Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal and the two traveled around the world together. Grewal gave his student Charles Schoelen the title of “yogi” and instructed him to represent himself as such. As Yogi Shalom, Schoelen taught classes, recorded instructional courses, and published books of the relaxation-centered style he called “Yoga of the Old Masters” that he continues to disseminate to the present day.<sup>110</sup>

In their own time, Indian teachers in the United States existed under a shadow of suspicion cast by the general public, a result of a mixture of anxieties over immigration, a religious and racial prejudice against South Asians, and a weariness of the very real presence of the many frauds and con artists who operated under the cover of Eastern mysticism. In our own time, the ubiquity of modern postural forms of yoga, and the misguided belief that the yoga popularly done today is ancient and Indian, fosters suspicion from those today that look back upon figures such as Yogi Wassan and Bhagwan Singh Gyane and cannot find the flowing sequences of poses through which they recognize “real” yogic practice. For those familiar with Sikhism, the dissonance between the propagation of yoga and the Sikh identity of these five figures only adds another problematic layer to this suspicion. The same questions have been present for over a century: Did they really believe what they were teaching? Or were they frauds, and was it all a money-making scheme done at the expense of the gullible and naive?

To view yoga teachers as immigrants and skilled merchants, while casting them within the contexts of modern yoga and yoga’s early development in America, offers a kind of middle ground in which we neither have to solely take their claims at face value nor replicate the criticisms made of them. The five Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers all drew from impressive bodies of knowledge and life experience to construct the forms of yoga that they presented to the public. They were not custodians of a pure and unbroken yogic tradition brought from East to West, but in their time and place neither was anyone else. It would also be unrealistic to dismiss the litany of testimonial letters written to these teachers or

the impression they left on their students by looking for validation of their teachings through an unrealistic standard. Despite referring to Yogi Wassan as “a sideshow freak,” “a holy mess,” and “a fraud with only a thin chemise of occult knowledge to hide the nudity of him,” Charles Ferguson was perhaps also inadvertently accurate in his assessment when he said that the Wassan “was not a miracle man, save to those who wanted precisely what he offered- a chance to put an (errant) and recalcitrant human body under mental and spiritual control.”<sup>111</sup>

Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal taught for decades after his career at the Ford Motor Company, spending much of his retirement travelling and writing with no need for any of the money his classes or books would bring. Rishi Singh Gherwal saw his practice and teaching of yoga and political hopes for India and the wider world as part of a unitary whole.<sup>112</sup> Hugh Johnston has stated that although Bhagwan Singh was a capable *granthi* in the early-twentieth century, his “heart and conviction were in his nationalistic patriotic message.”<sup>113</sup> Decades later, when Bhagwan Singh was seventy years old, he looked back on that nationalistic period and described it as a necessary yet fanatical time that he wanted to move on from, seeing his mission as promoting education and tolerance.<sup>114</sup> Somewhere between religion and politics, it is reasonable to see Bhagwan Singh’s Self-Culture movement as what he ultimately saw as his life’s work, a combination of Eastern spirituality and Western science that was forged through his own rich personal experience and could develop the individual with an ultimate aim of societal improvement and universal understanding.

These five Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers were nothing less than a massive presence in the early history of yoga in America. With over eighty books and pamphlets authored between them, and decades of travel across the country in which they steadily delivered public lectures and taught private classes, it is reasonable to estimate that their influence extended to hundreds of thousands of Americans. Taken as a whole, their efforts during the Thirties were comparable to, if not larger than, the size and reach of the two groups that have dominated attention on yoga’s early history in the United States: Yogananda’s Self-Realization Fellowship and the Vedanta Society.<sup>115</sup> As varied as the careers and teachings of Wassan Singh, Bhagwan Singh Gyanee, Rishi Singh Gherwal, Bhagat Singh Thind, and Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal were, they function well as models of that which is most representative of yoga through the first half of the twentieth century: highly educated, politically engaged, peripatetic teachers from India lecturing and leading private classes on an eclectic variety of topics that were held together under the ideas of pragmatic self-improvement and an

imagined metaphysical Asia. To reconcile the fact that yoga was taught by a small cadre of Punjabi Sikh is to get beyond the constructed ideal of yoga as a single ancient Hindu tradition that has been transmitted to the present, and also be receptive to the reality that early twentieth century America contained Indian-born teachers of yoga who were occultists, atheists, Christians, Sufis, and also Hindu.

Bruce La Brack described early Punjabi migration to the United States as a tale of sojourners who found themselves in a type of entrapment: socially isolated, channeled into specific occupations, hemmed in by biased laws, and unable to leave the country with certain reentry or bring over family from India.<sup>116</sup> It was in this difficult climate that the men in Karen Leonard's richly detailed study found themselves "making ethnic choices" in rural California during the early twentieth century, and entering the exogamous marriages that birthed Punjabi-Mexican-Americans. Leonard pushed against earlier thinking that saw Punjabi immigrants in California as one of many interchangeable and unremarkable Asian groups whose simple labor helped build agriculture in the state. She argued for not just the uniqueness of the Punjabi immigrants in the United States, but made a case for how remarkable they were as people of personality, determination, and skill. In her *Making Ethnic Choices* she cited a 1939 article in which a Punjabi farmer in the San Joaquin delta named Har Chand was described as a "man of energy and dreams... an empire builder at heart."<sup>117</sup>

It is neither possible nor desirable to refute what La Brack has called the "kind of encapsulation" that Punjabis existed within during the early twentieth century, or deny that the dominant mode of Punjabi immigrant was a farmer on the West Coast. But during the decades between the restrictive immigration laws of 1917 and 1924 and the openings creating by the legislation of 1952 and 1965, a handful of immigrants from the Punjab, propelled by energy and dreams, built small empires throughout the country by lecturing and teaching what was understood in their time to be yoga. Figures such as Wassan Singh, Bhagwan Singh Gyane, Rishi Singh Gherwal, Bhagat Singh Thind, and Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal all charted a very different course from accepted models of Punjabi migration to the United States. They were the most visible Sikhs and spokespeople for Sikhism in America for nearly half a century. They used their various backgrounds to craft their own personae and create their own livelihoods. They fought against oppressive laws within the United States and for a free Indian nation abroad, and ultimately managed to carve out lives and families for themselves in America.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> By comparison, in 2014 a similar percentage of the total American population earned their living by farming.

<sup>2</sup> Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> See Ronald M. Johnson's chapter "The Ramakrishna Mission to America: An Intercultural Study" in *American Studies in Transition* (1985) p. 84, J. Gordon Melton's "The Attitude of Americans towards Hinduism from 1883 to 1983" in *Krishna Consciousness in the West* (1992) p. 86, Carl T. Jackson's *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States* (1994) p. 131, J. Gordon Melton's *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (1996) p. 182, Vijay Prashad's *The Karma of Brown Folk* (2000) p. 49, Polly Trout's *Eastern Seeds, Western Soil: Three Gurus in America* (2001), p. 62-63, Brad Gooch's *God Talk: Travels in Spiritual America* (2002) p. 94, Fred W. Clothey's *Religion in India: A Historical Introduction* (2007) p. 233, Philip Goldberg's *American Veda* (2010) p. 118, Srinivas Aravamuda's *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (2011) p. 223, and Georg Fuerstein's *The Psychology of Yoga* (2014) p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 4 of David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), with reference to Detienne on p. 123.

<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing, the author has compiled an archive of over 5,000 documents (pamphlets, advertisements, ephemera, etc.) from 150 different individuals involved in early American yoga, interviewed over a dozen descendants of early American yoga teachers and students, and extracted data (dates, locations, course titles, student names, etc.) from nearly 2,000 separate classes. General descriptions of yoga during the early twentieth century, particularly among unaffiliated teachers, are made through working with these sources.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 137.

<sup>8</sup> Kamala Elizabeth Nayar and Jaswinder Singh Sandhu, *The Socially Involved Renunciate: Guru Nanak's Discourse to the Nath Yogis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> For examples see SGGGS 886, 903, 98, 156, 219.

<sup>10</sup> Sirdar Attar Singh (trans), *Gooroo Gobind Singh's Religion and Doctrines* (Benares: Medical Hall Press, 1873), p. vi.

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<sup>11</sup> See the trilogy of works by David Gordon White: *The Alchemical Body* (1996), *Kiss of the Yogini* (2003), and *Sinister Yogis* (2009).

<sup>12</sup> See Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Albanese, "Sacred (And Secular) Self-Fashioning: Esalen and the American Transformation of Yoga," in *On the Edge of the Future: Esalen and the Evolution of American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 45-79.

<sup>14</sup> "Hindu Hero at Near-Drowning," *Ellensburg Daily Record*, 6 June 1922.

<sup>15</sup> Yogi Wassan, Pamphlet for Texas Ranch, 1927, in Louise Evans Collection at Stanford (M1135 Box 23)

<sup>16</sup> Death Notice, *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*, 17 July 1942; Interview with Christian Wassan, Grandson of Wassan Singh, 12 August 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Given the publication date of *Confusion of Tongues*, Ferguson's location in New York City at the time, and the correspondences between the subject matter mentioned by Ferguson and an advertising pamphlet in the collection of this article's author, it is likely that the lecture by Yogi Wassan that Ferguson attended was on Sunday November 27, 1927 in the Papae Building on 100 West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Surinder Singh Pal, Grandson of Bhagwan Singh Gyanee, 25 March 2013.

<sup>19</sup> See Chapter 3 of Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

<sup>20</sup> See "Millions of Rifles," *Salt Lake Telegram*, 3 January 1918, and "Chandra is Prisoner in Default of \$25,000 Bail," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 July 1917.

<sup>21</sup> An article for the *Victoria Daily Times* on 4 July 1957 noted the contrast between the man of "peace and goodwill" who was lecturing in the city to the "most wanted" revolutionary Bhagwan Singh from four decades earlier.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Surinder Singh Pal, Grandson of Bhagwan Singh Gyanee, 25 March 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Bhagwan Singh Gyanee, "The Man," (Self-published pamphlet, 1930) p .2.

<sup>24</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, p. 140-141; and Bhagwan Singh Gyanee, *Yogi Exercises* (Tacoma: Self-published, 1931) p.3.

<sup>25</sup> For example, a display advertisement for Gyanee in the *New York Times* for 23 September 1933 that was printed next to an advertisement for Rishi Singh Gherwal shows the two to be virtual interchangeable.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Bhagwan Singh Gyanee to Students of Self-Culture, 10 October 1959, SAADA.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Bhagwan Singh Gyanee to Julia, 05 October 1961, SAADA.



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<sup>28</sup> Rishi Singh Gherwal, *Practical Hatha Yoga: Science of Health, How to Keep Well and Cure Diseases by Hindu Yogic Practice Practical Hatha Yoga* (Unknown: Self-Published, 1926). *Hatha Yoga* does not include a title page or clear date of publication, only a photograph dated 1923 and mentions of a lecture given in late-1925. The Library of Congress Copyright Office, in the twenty-third volume of its *Catalogue of Copyright Entries* gives the pamphlet a clear publishing date of 1926, however.

<sup>29</sup> Compare the "Sarvangasana or The Pan-Physical Pose" article (pages 54-75) from the October 1924 issue of *Yoga Mimamsa* with the section "Sarvang-Asana" from the "Regeneration of the Thyroid Gland" chapter (pages 16-26) in Gherwal's 1926 *Hatha Yoga*.

<sup>30</sup> See "Yoga Comes to the Western World," *Physical Culture* (May 1940), p. 30-31, 57-59.

<sup>31</sup> "Time Line of the life of Dr. Thind," <http://www.bhagatsinghthind.com/about.html>, Accessed 25 March 2013; "Hindu to Give Free Lectures," *Ogden Standard Examiner*, 23 March 1924; and "East Indian to Lecture Here," *Kansas City Star* (MO), 11 June 1924.

<sup>32</sup> William C. Hartmann (ed.), *Hartmann's Who's Who in Occult, Psychic and Spiritual Realms* (Jamaica NY: The Occult Press, 1925), p. 63; Display Ad, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 17 September 1927; Display Ad, *New York Times*, 8 April 1933.

<sup>33</sup> Bhagat Singh Thind, "A Political Prophecy Based on Truth of Life," (Salt Lake City: Self-published, 1939), (SAADA).

<sup>34</sup> See Amanda de la Garza, *Doctorji: The Life Teachings, and Legacy of Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind* (Malibu: David Bhagat Thind, 2010), p. 40-58.

<sup>35</sup> See Chapter Four of Andrea Diem-Lane, *The Guru in America: The Influence of Radhasoami on New Religions* (Neural Library, 1995 and 2008).

<sup>36</sup> See David Lane, "The Radiant Road to Deception: A Case Study of Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind's Plagiarism," in *Understanding Cults and Spiritual Movements 2*, nos. 2-3 (1987), p. 20-23.

<sup>37</sup> Kirpal Singh, *Heart to Heart Talks, Volume One*, Edited by Malcolm Tillis (Delhi: Ruhani Satsang, 1976), p. 87-88.

<sup>38</sup> Andrea Diem-Lane, *The Guru in America*, Chapter 4.

<sup>39</sup> These teachings of Thind's have been posthumously compiled in a 2005 booklet and DVD titled *Science of Breathing and Glands*.

<sup>40</sup> Bhagat Singh Thind, "Sixty-Two Free Lectures on Divine Realization," (Self-published promotional pamphlet, March 1926); Display Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, 8 November 1947; and Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal's 16-page pamphlet "Breathing Exercises: As Given by Dr. B.S. Thind."

<sup>41</sup> See Display Ad, *New York Times*, 15 April 1933.

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<sup>42</sup> Advertisement for Lectures at Unity Center of Flushing (American Religions Collection at UC Santa Barbara, Drawer 28, Folder 2); and "India God-Fearing Land, Noted lecturer Says Here," *Saint Petersburg Times*, 30 January 1940.

<sup>43</sup> "Bishen Singh v. The State," *Texas Criminal Reports*, Volume 66, 1913, p 156-166.

<sup>44</sup> "Life's Inequality: Hari Singh Says He Will Also Solve Other Human Enigmas," *The Oklahoman*, 17 April 1914, p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal, *Philosophy of Karma: Cause and Effect* (Titusville: Self-Published, 1975), pp. 47-48.

<sup>46</sup> Display Ads, *New York Times*, 13 October 1934, 27 October 1934, and 5 January 1935.

<sup>47</sup> Through copyright records and the first advertisements for his lectures in 1925, it appears that the birth name of Yogi Hari Rama was Hari Mohan Singh. Further, Yogi Hari Rama lectured on and reprinted the sayings of the Punjabi teacher of Vedanta Swami Rama Tirtha. Yogi Wassan referred to Yogi Hari Rama as his "Guru Brother" in a 1941 display ad and Rishi Singh Gherwal referred to "many years of friendship" between himself and Yogi Hari Rama in a 1930 pamphlet. Perhaps significance can also be read into the fact that Yogi Hari Rama appointed exactly thirteen authorized American teachers of his Super Yoga Science, with the layered meaning of thirteen/"tera"/yours for Sikhs.

<sup>48</sup> J.L. Hochschild and B.M. Powell, "Racial Reorganization and the United States Census 1850-1930: Mulattoes, Half-Breeds, Mixed Parentage, Hindoos, and the Mexican Race" in *Studies in American Political Development* (22(1):2008, 59-96)

<sup>49</sup> Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); and Monisha Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants* (Delhi: Pearson Education India, 2007) p. 32.

<sup>50</sup> From 1886 through 1910, newspapers would regularly described figures such as Vivekananda as "Buddhist swamis."

<sup>51</sup> Surinder Pal Singh, "Bhai Bhagwan Singh Gyanee: The Story of My Grandfather," <http://www.sikhpioneers.org/P1BhaiBhagwanSinghGyanee.html>, Accessed 28 March 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Intriguingly, another jailed conspirator named Hari Singh was mentioned as giving lectures on yoga for several years prior in a *Los Angeles Times* article from 15 July 1917. It is unclear if this was the same Hari Singh who lectured on yoga in Oklahoma City in 1914.

<sup>53</sup> Amanda de la Garza, *Doctorji: The Life Teachings, and Legacy of Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind* (Malibu: David Bhagat Thind, 2010) p. 8-14.

<sup>54</sup> Display Ad, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 03 July 1930, and Display Ad, *Reno Evening Gazette*, 08 March 1932.

<sup>55</sup> Rishi Singh Gherwal, *Great Masters of the Himalayas: Their Lives and Teaching* (Santa Barbara: Self-published, 1927) p. 9.

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<sup>56</sup> "Teacher, Author Slates Lectures at Yoga Center," *Fresno Bee Republican*, 06 May 1969.

<sup>57</sup> "India God-Fearing Land, Noted Lecturer Says Here," *Saint Petersburg Times*, 30 January 1940, and "India's Future Uncertain," *Saint Petersburg Times*, 10 March 1940.

<sup>58</sup> Advertisement for Lectures at Unity Center of Flushing (American Religions Collection at UC Santa Barbara, Drawer 28, Folder 2).

<sup>59</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Ghadar Syndrome: Immigrant Sikhs and Nationalist Pride," in *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition* (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979) p. 172, 173.

<sup>60</sup> A good summary of the Ozawa and Thind cases can be found in the fourth chapter of Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) p. 79-109.

<sup>61</sup> "Hindu Citizenship Case Again Heard," *The Morning Oregonian*, 14 January 1930.

<sup>62</sup> "Battle to Become U.S. Citizen Lost," *The Morning Oregonian*, 13 February 1931.

<sup>63</sup> Display Ad, *Washington Post*, 14 May 1934.

<sup>64</sup> "Special Act Permits Hindu to Sue U.S. To Regain Citizenship," *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 October 1935.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from Nora Jackson to Deva Ram Sukul, 2 May 1927, Louise Evans Collection at Stanford (M1135 Box 23).

<sup>66</sup> John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 211.

<sup>67</sup> See Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) and Richard Francaviglia, *Go East, Young Man: Imagining the American West as the Orient* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 330-393.

<sup>69</sup> Display Ad, *The Oregon Daily Journal*, 20 April 1921, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Dhan Goapl Mukerji, *Caste and Outcast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 211.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 212.

<sup>72</sup> Krishnalal Shridharani, *My India, My America* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941), p. 106, 104.

<sup>73</sup> Herman Scheffauer, "The Tide of Turbans" in *Forum*, June 1910, p. 618.

<sup>74</sup> Frederick G. Lieb, *Sight Unseen: A Journalist Visits the Occult* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939) p. 41.

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<sup>75</sup> Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> There is only one reference to Gherwal being married and can be found at: [http://assets00.grou.ps/0F2E3C/wysiwyg\\_files/FilesModule/meditationtime/20101115182913-cwjrnzvwjsozathms/Beverford\\_final.pdf](http://assets00.grou.ps/0F2E3C/wysiwyg_files/FilesModule/meditationtime/20101115182913-cwjrnzvwjsozathms/Beverford_final.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> Personal Communication from Lydia Wassan, Great-Granddaughter of Wassan Singh, 9 May 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Wassan Singh, *Rajah Yoga Book* (Self-published, 1939), p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> S.P. Singh, "Bhai Bhagwan Singh Gyanee: The Story of My Grandfather," (SAADA).

<sup>80</sup> Lecture Notice, *Boise Capital News*, 17 April 1932.

<sup>81</sup> The 1940 census also places Florence Brown Gyanee in San Francisco a few weeks later, but this is most likely a product of Bhagwan Singh Gyanee's travelling.

<sup>82</sup> Directories for the city of Spokane 1920-1924.

<sup>83</sup> Photo section, *Oakland Tribune*, 4 January 1924.

<sup>84</sup> Amanda de la Garza, *Doctorji: The Life Teachings, and Legacy of Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind* (Malibu: David Bhagat Thind, 2010), p. 28-29; and 1920 United States Federal Census

<sup>85</sup> 1940 United States Federal Census.

<sup>86</sup> Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal, *Philosophy of Karma: Cause and Effect* (Titusville: Self-Published, 1975), pp. 47.

<sup>87</sup> Mark Singleton, "Transnational Exchange and the Genesis of Modern Postural Yoga," in *Yoga Travelling: Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective* (Cham: Springer, 2013), p. 48.

<sup>88</sup> David Walker, "The Humbug in American Religion: Ritual Theories of Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism," in *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Volume 23, Number 1 (Winter 2013), p. 30-74.

<sup>89</sup> Display Ad, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 4 February 1927.

<sup>90</sup> Display Ad, *Olympia Daily Recorder*, 2 March 1922.

<sup>91</sup> Bhagat Singh Thind, *Wisdom and the Wheel: Book Three* (Saint Louis: Self-published, 1930), front matter; Pamphlet for San Francisco lectures in May 1928 (SAADA); and Amanda De La Garza, *Doctorji: The Life, Teachings, and Legacy of Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind* (Malibu: Privately published, 2010) p. 30.

<sup>92</sup> Display Ad, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 16 October 1926.

<sup>93</sup> Display Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, 24 October 1924; Display Ad, *Seattle Daily Times*, October 12, 1929; Display Ad, *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), 12 February 1939; and Display Ad, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 13 September 1941.

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<sup>94</sup> Letter from Bhagwan Singh Gyanee to Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal, 26 October 1950 (SAADA); Letter from Bhagwan Singh Gyanee to M.A. Husain, 2 August 1953 (SAADA); and Item #20120320-664 (SAADA).

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Surinder Singh Pal, Grandson of Bhagwan Singh Gyanee, 25 March 2013.

<sup>96</sup> Display Ads, *San Diego Union*, 23 August 1930.

<sup>97</sup> Display Ads, *New York Times*, 23 September 1933 and 25 May 1935.

<sup>98</sup> "Splendid Chicago Group," *India's message*, July 1931, p. 18.

<sup>99</sup> See Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal's 16-page pamphlet "Breathing Exercises: As Given by Dr. B.S. Thind."

<sup>100</sup> "Hindu Dies Here: Native Teacher Will Conduct Funeral Services," *San Antonio Express*, 18 January 1931.

<sup>101</sup> To give some idea of the possible size of the Sikh community in each city, the federal census for 1930 listed 181 "Hindus" residing in the state of Michigan and 49 in the entire state of Texas.

<sup>102</sup> *India's Message*, January 1931, p 1.

<sup>103</sup> Rishi Singh Gherwal, *Lives and Teachings of the Yogis of India: Miracles and Mysticism of India* (Santa Barbara: Self-Published, 1939).

<sup>104</sup> Rishi Singh Gherwal, "How the Sikh Religion Helps to Solve Man's Present Problems," *India's Message*, October 1933, p 8.

<sup>105</sup> Church Notices, *New York Times*, 31 December 1933.

<sup>106</sup> "World Religious Leaders to Seek United Objective," *Fresno Bee Republican*, 27 August 1933; "Fellowship of Faiths," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 13 August 1938.

<sup>107</sup> Telephone Interview with Christian Wassan, grandson of Wassan Singh, 12 August 2010.

<sup>108</sup> See *The Art of Practical Living* (2006) and *The Art of Living* (2007), both published by Unistar Books in Chandigarh.

<sup>109</sup> "Brief History of the White Lotus Foundation," <http://www.whitelotus.org/yoga-center-his.html>, Accessed 12 March 2014.

<sup>110</sup> Telephone Interviews with Charles Schoelen, 28 September 2012 and 16 March 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Charles W. Ferguson, *The Confusion of Tongues*, p. 311-312.

<sup>112</sup> Rishi Singh Gherwal, "For Lasting World Peace Try Yoga," *India's Message*, January and June 1945, p. 45-47.

<sup>113</sup> Hugh J.M. Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014) p. 43.

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<sup>114</sup> "Former 'Most Wanted' Man in City," *Victoria Daily Times*, 04 July 1957, p 17.

<sup>115</sup> According to reports sent from the Vedanta Society to the United States Department of Commerce for their Census of Religious Bodies, in 1926 they had three centers and 200 total members, and in 1936 they had ten centers and 628 total members. During this same period of time, Yogananda's own *East-West* magazine reported only about a dozen Yogoda Sat-Sanga centers within the country.

<sup>116</sup> Bruce La Brack, "Immigration Law and the Revitalization Process: The Case of the California Sikhs," in *From India to America: A Brief History of Immigration; Problems of Discrimination; Admission and Assimilation* (La Jolla: Population Review, 1982), p. 60.

<sup>117</sup> Referenced in Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, p. 61