



Dr. B. S. Thind . . . Towel for a turban, mush for breakfast.

Fruitarian Spirit Teacher Dines on Bologna in Jail

Thind in Prison, from the Omaha World-Herald, July 2, 1942

In addition to the trauma of arrest and the courtroom, Bhagat Singh Thind was subjected to humiliation and mockery once imprisoned. On the same day as his sentencing, the evening edition of the local paper, the *Omaha World-Herald*, ran a rushed, gawking article on Thind complete with a photo of him in jail, clad in denim overall prison clothes and with a towel covering his head in lieu of a turban. With a detailed description of his usual light and simple vegetarian fare, the paper relished the fact that he was forced to subsist on bologna

sandwiches, mush, and coffee. Thind was mostly magnanimous as he faced three months of imprisonment. He told the reporter that he would eat the county jail food as best he could, saying, "I wouldn't embarrass the authorities by refusing to eat. They're only following orders."

The Spiritualists

While the charge that Thind was operating as a spiritualist may seem bizarre, there were reasons behind it. Less than a week before Thind's arrival in Omaha, a trio of out-of-state spiritualists led by the Reverend Lulu Taber created a scandal in the city and were arrested on charges of obtaining money under false pretenses and failing to register with the city clerk. Taber and her partners held séances in a downtown hotel and claimed to relay messages for the anxious families and girlfriends of American soldiers fighting overseas. Local military service groups noticed that their members were spending large sums of money to contact their sons through them, and in the middle of a war, this struck the public as not only incredibly cruel and exploitive, but deeply unpatriotic. The same City Prosecutor who went after Thind, Al Raneri, helped put Lulu Taber and her associates in jail for thirty days.



A "spiritual" trumpet brought 30 temporal days . . . Scene at spiritualist's hearing today. Left to right, Mrs. Salleng, City Prosecutor A. Raneri, Mrs. Coleen Britt, Mrs. Lulu Taber. (Story at left.)

Lulu Taber and Other Spiritualists in Court, from the Omaha World-Herald, June 26, 1942

Not only did Thind come to Omaha in the immediate aftermath of this spiritualist uproar, but there were deeper connections at work. Starting in the late-nineteenth century, many Americans first encountered India through sensationalistic accounts of it as a land of magic and occult powers. An array of stage magicians, fortune tellers, and spiritualists capitalized on this connection, and engaged with American audiences in the guise of Indian wonder-workers or those who could conjure up disembodied Hindu spirits, most often wearing robes and turbans. These imagined connections were so strong in the minds of many Americans that there is a recurring theme in South Asian American memoirs of being assumed to have occult powers or the ability to contact the dead. As a turbaned man from India, Thind would have likely been presumed by the average person as some sort of magician or fortune teller.

On a Tuesday morning at the end of one of his first talks, two men who had been part of the audience introduced themselves to Thind as local detectives and told him that he would have to register with the city clerk and register as a minister of a spiritualist church, or as someone who communicated with the dead. Since fortune tellers and con artists often operated under the cover of spiritualist mediums, the local law was effectively an anti-fortune telling measure and the request was a thinly veiled accusation against Thind of being a criminal fraud. The meeting grew heated when the City Prosecutor, Al Raneri, referred to Thind as a "rug peddler" and the secretary to the Police Commissioner, Charles Weir, called him "a fake" and "a chiseler." Thind was insulted and refused to register on principle.

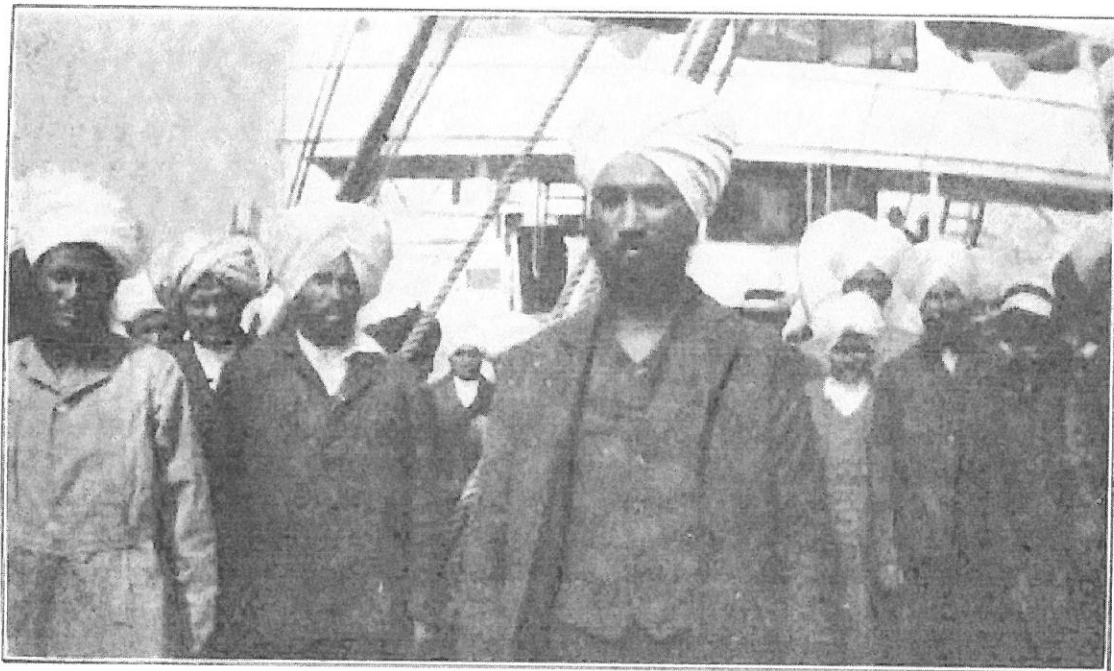
Thind returned to the Rome Hotel and gave his afternoon lecture and was immediately arrested by the same two detectives. A property bond was supplied by John Laurie Wallace, an artist and friend who painted Thind's portrait on an earlier trip through Omaha in 1926.² The bond allowed Thind to stay at the hotel until a hearing the next afternoon where he was to be represented by a local attorney. A reporter for the *World-Herald* interviewed Thind on Wednesday morning and received a scathing critique of the local government: "If this is a symbol of democracy in your community, it is dead." That afternoon, in a volatile hearing, Thind was asked to remove his turban, a humiliating request for a Sikh man who kept his hair uncut and covered as a part of his faith. Charles Weir, who insulted Thind at city hall the previous day, called him "nuts" in the courtroom. Judge George Holmes declared that Thind was "unworthy of belief" and proceeded to give him the maximum jail sentence of ninety days and a fine of one hundred dollars before he was led away to the county jail.

Doug Coulson has suggested that Thind's involvement with the Ghadar Party and their efforts to overthrow British colonial rule in India played an unspoken but influential role in the Court's decision.¹ Judge Charles Wolverton, from the District Court in Oregon, noted with suspicion in 1919 that Thind was involved with Ghadar Party, a group of South Asians in America that attempted to foment rebellion and overthrow British colonial rule in India. Thind was involved in Ghadar activities and had visited its leader Bhagwan Singh Gyane in prison, but Wolverton was assured by Thind's sympathies to America and statements given on Thind's character. As Coulson notes, by the time of the Supreme Court case a few years later, there was a much more highly-charged environment against any suspected "foreign radical" and those connections would have been much more detrimental to Thind in 1922.

It is also worth considering how much the verdict was influenced by Thind's appearance as a Sikh with a beard and turban. Within the conflicting arguments in the decision, there is a strong appeal to assimilation as being a matter of appearance and visual recognition with the use of terms such as "familiar observation" and "readily distinguishable." At the end of his opinion, Sutherland noted that "the children of... European parentage quickly merge into the mass of our population and lose the distinctive hallmarks of their European origin," but "the children born in this country of Hindu parents would retain indefinitely the clear evidence of their ancestry."

At the time of the decision, "Hindu" was alternately used as a racial and geographic, not religious, designation for those from South Asia. Since the majority of South Asian immigrants were male laborers from the Punjab, the common descriptions of "Hindu" immigration or images used to depict them were of a group of turbaned and bearded Sikh men. Herman Scheffauer described Indian immigration as a "Tide of Turbans" in a 1910 article, and claimed that "always the turban remains, the badge and symbol of their native land, their native customs and religion." Even if Thind did not appear before the Court, or

his image was not seen by the Justices, it is highly likely that just from Thind's Indian origins and description as "Hindu," they would have pictured him as a turbaned man.



HINDU LABORERS COMING TO THE PACIFIC COAST

'The Newest Immigration Problem: The Hindu Invasion of the Pacific Coast' from Mission Magazine, November

1911

United States v. Thind was a landmark legal decision, and today it is viewed alongside a series of federal laws in 1917, 1921, and 1924 that effectively shut the door to immigrants coming to the United States from Asia for the next four decades. But the Thind case also kept a sizable number of people locked *inside* the country. In the wake of the Supreme Court case, Thind's American citizenship was revoked along with scores of other naturalized South Asians. Since becoming naturalized required renouncing their previous loyalty to the British, they were left stateless and subject to a host of restrictive policies that left many of them with few options.

Out of necessity and ingenuity, Thind, along with several dozen South Asians during the interwar decades reinvented themselves as itinerant spiritual teachers and metaphysical lecturers who would travel from city to city, giving lectures and holding private classes. The

four decades of Thind's life after the decision as a travelling metaphysical teacher are far less known than his legal battles. One incident in this career has remained almost entirely forgotten: his arrest and imprisonment in Nebraska on accusations of operating as an unregistered spiritualist minister, or someone who claimed to communicate with the dead.



Postcard of the intersection of Sixteenth and Jackson Street in Omaha, Early-1950s

From Rome Hotel to Roman Holiday

Thind began his career as a travelling lecturer and teacher in 1924, not long after he lost his citizenship status. Highly educated and able to pull from a deep study of philosophy, psychology, and various religious traditions, he would typically lecture twice a day in any given city- once in the morning, again in the evening- and offer a class on healing and breathing in-between at noon. In late June of 1942, Bhagat Singh Thind arrived in Omaha. He had just come from Los Angeles, after spending what he described as "the loveliest two weeks of my life" with his family, and set himself up downtown in the five-story Rome Hotel where he would stay and hold his lectures and classes. Omaha was familiar to Thind. He had visited the city several times over the last eighteen years, including a previous stay at the same Rome Hotel, and he counted several of the city's notable residents as friends.

Shortly after his initial arrest, Thind wrote to Gyanee from jail and told him of his plight. Gyanee, who was teaching and lecturing in Denver, sent money to Thind's family in Los Angeles to keep them afloat in the face of their breadwinner potentially being in jail for the next three months. He also called Thind on the telephone to buoy his spirits. More importantly, Gyanee came up with a plan that would get his friend out of prison. With the help of Gyanee and local supporters, Thind registered with the Omaha City Clerk as a minister of the Sikh faith and was freed on bond. The move, logical for Gyanee given his own past as a Sikh minister, allowed Thind to follow both the letter of the law and his own deep sense of honesty and rectitude. He refused to register with the City Clerk of Omaha as a spiritualist minister, despite how easy it would have been and how much trouble it would have avoided, simply because it was not true. Given the many times Thind served as a representative of the Sikh faith, to be considered a Sikh minister was much closer to the truth.

Wm. H. DORRANCE, Sheriff
DOUGLAS COUNTY
OMAHA, NEBR.



Dr. Bhagwan S. Gyanee

Hotel Cosmopolitan

Denver

Colorado

Letter to Bhagwan Singh Gyanee from Bhagat Singh Thind in Jail, courtesy of Surinder Pal Singh

Thind's release may have also allowed the authorities in Omaha to end the affair quickly and save face. A series of letters poured into the *World-Herald* from people both near and far

that were outraged at his imprisonment. The owner of an Omaha bookstore who recently met Thind wrote to the paper and described him as "a gentle soul" who should not be "locked up behind steel and stone like a common criminal." A man from Iowa objected to Thind's treatment in jail and noted the contradiction of imprisoning him "while the united nations fight for the freedom of mankind, speech, and religion." One of Thind's students from Los Angeles told of the benefits she received from his teachings and wondered what was wrong with a city that would treat an American citizen and veteran in such a manner.

Immediately following his release from prison, Thind wrote to Bhagwan Singh and resiliently stated, "tomorrow I start again." With an updated display ad in a local newspaper that pointedly invited the "Truth-seeking, liberty-loving, thinking public of Omaha," Thind resumed his lectures at the Rome Hotel. While interviewed in jail by the local paper, Thind revealed that he was losing money in Omaha and that "no day has produced enough for expenses here." It is likely that he stayed in Nebraska for the principle of finishing what he started and defying those who tried to stop him. In August, after Thind's work in Omaha was finished, he left the city and went to Denver where he met up with Bhagwan Singh Gyanee. A small black and white photograph of the two of them outdoors with their arms around each other marks the reunion and the deep friendship between Thind and the man he affectionately described in letters as his "older brother."



On February 19th, 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind was denied American citizenship by the Supreme Court. Almost two decades later, he struggled for his freedom in a prison cell.

Bhagat Singh Thind is remembered today for his attempts to become an American citizen. Thind came to America from the Punjab region of modern day India in 1913 to further his education, and supported himself by working in the lumber mills of the Pacific Northwest. In 1918, he joined the U.S. Army and was granted American citizenship in the state of Washington, only to have his newly acquired citizenship status quickly cancelled by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Thind then applied for citizenship in Oregon in 1919 and received it the following year, only then to have the Immigration and Naturalization Service appeal it and send his case up to the Supreme Court where it was heard in late-1922.

The Court ruled unanimously against Thind in 1923. The decision is usually understood as a matter of racial prejudice (<https://www.saada.org/tides/article/hindus-too-brunette>). With

(<https://www.saada.org/tides/article/hindus-too-brunette>)

Hindus Too Brunette To Vote Here
FEBRUARY 19, 1923

HINDUS TOO BRUNETTE TO VOTE HERE

On this day in 1923 (February 22), the U.S. Supreme Court decided unanimously to bar South Asians from becoming American citizens and to denaturalize those who had already done so in the landmark decision, *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*. Thind, who immigrated to the United States in 1913 and even trained at Camp Lewis in Washington to fight with the U.S. Army in World War I, had begun his personal struggle for citizenship five years earlier, in 1918. Through its decision, the Supreme Court quashed the hopes of Thind and fellow South Asians in the United States to gain full recognition as American citizens. It was not until 1946, more than two decades later, that South Asians were again allowed the right of citizenship.

An article published in the *Literary Digest*, "Hindus Too Brunette To Vote Here," provides an explanation of the racial logic behind the Supreme Court decision. "The issue at hand was what was meant by 'white,' Thind, and many others, argued that according to the 'racial science' of the day, South Asians were descendants of Indian Aryans who belonged to the 'Caucasian race.' Using this racial algebra, Thind too was 'white' and thus eligible for citizenship." The Supreme Court responded:

Read more about the 1923 decision

American citizenship reserved for "free white persons," the Court ruled that Asians were not white and Thind was ineligible for citizenship. The decision, authored by Justice George Sutherland, is more contradictory upon closer inspection. To rule against Thind, the Court had to go against lower court rulings on racial eligibility that it agreed with just a few months earlier in the case of *Takao Ozawa*. *Ozawa* was a Japanese-American who argued for his eligibility for citizenship based on his skin tone and character, but was denied on account of the anthropology and racial science of the day that classified him as "Mongolian" and therefore *not* Caucasian. Thind argued for his inclusion largely on those same standards and offered evidence that would classify him as Caucasian, but was rejected in favor of common, popular understandings of race.

The British

While Thind was aware of the confusion between himself and spiritualists-at one point he said that the police "have me confused with those spooks"- he also believed that another force was behind his troubles in Omaha. During his initial arrest, he accused the city prosecutor of being "part of the British government scheme to run me out of the country," and while in jail he suggested to a reporter that, "they (meaning the British) want to kill me." Thind's insinuations of British involvement in his arrest were used by the local papers to paint him as irrational and paranoid, but his opinions on Indian self-rule and the British were repeatedly brought up in court. Perhaps the best evidence that there was a political motivation in Thind's arrest came from Judge Holmes, who in passing sentence on Thind said, "I believe he is here to stir up dissention and we're at war. This man has got to be stopped."

Almost as soon as South Asians arrived in the United States in significant numbers at the turn of the century, the British were concerned with the threat that their political organizing in America posed to colonial rule in India. Coordinated efforts between the British, Canadian, and American governments across three continents covertly monitored Indians in the United States, tightened borders and immigration, and repressed political activity.³ British surveillance of South Asians in the United States continued through the interwar decades and was not limited to political activists and organizers. Swamis, yogis, and metaphysical teachers were also a surprisingly serious concern for British Intelligence, who gathered information and kept files on many of them, and noted with uneasiness that these charismatic figures exercised a significant form of soft power as they spoke to American audiences in one city after another and generated sympathy for India and Indian self-rule.

Thind was a combination of each kind of figure that worried the British: he was involved with the political movement for Indian independence, he led the most visible case for South Asians to gain American citizenship, and he was one of the dozens of travelling lecturers that

crisscrossed the country. Perhaps more than nearly anyone else, Thind was aware of the extent to which the British government monitored South Asians in the United States. There are existing records of over a quarter-century of covert British surveillance of Thind by the time of his arrest in Nebraska, starting with his involvement with the Ghadar Party in Oregon in 1916. He consistently appears in British Intelligence lists of "Indian Extremists" and he was referred to in one letter as "the notorious Indian seditiousist." There are reports from agents who provided detailed descriptions of Thind's movements and associations, attended his speeches, and dutifully collected his promotional materials in cities such as Detroit, Saint Louis, and in 1926, fourteen years before his arrest, Omaha, Nebraska.

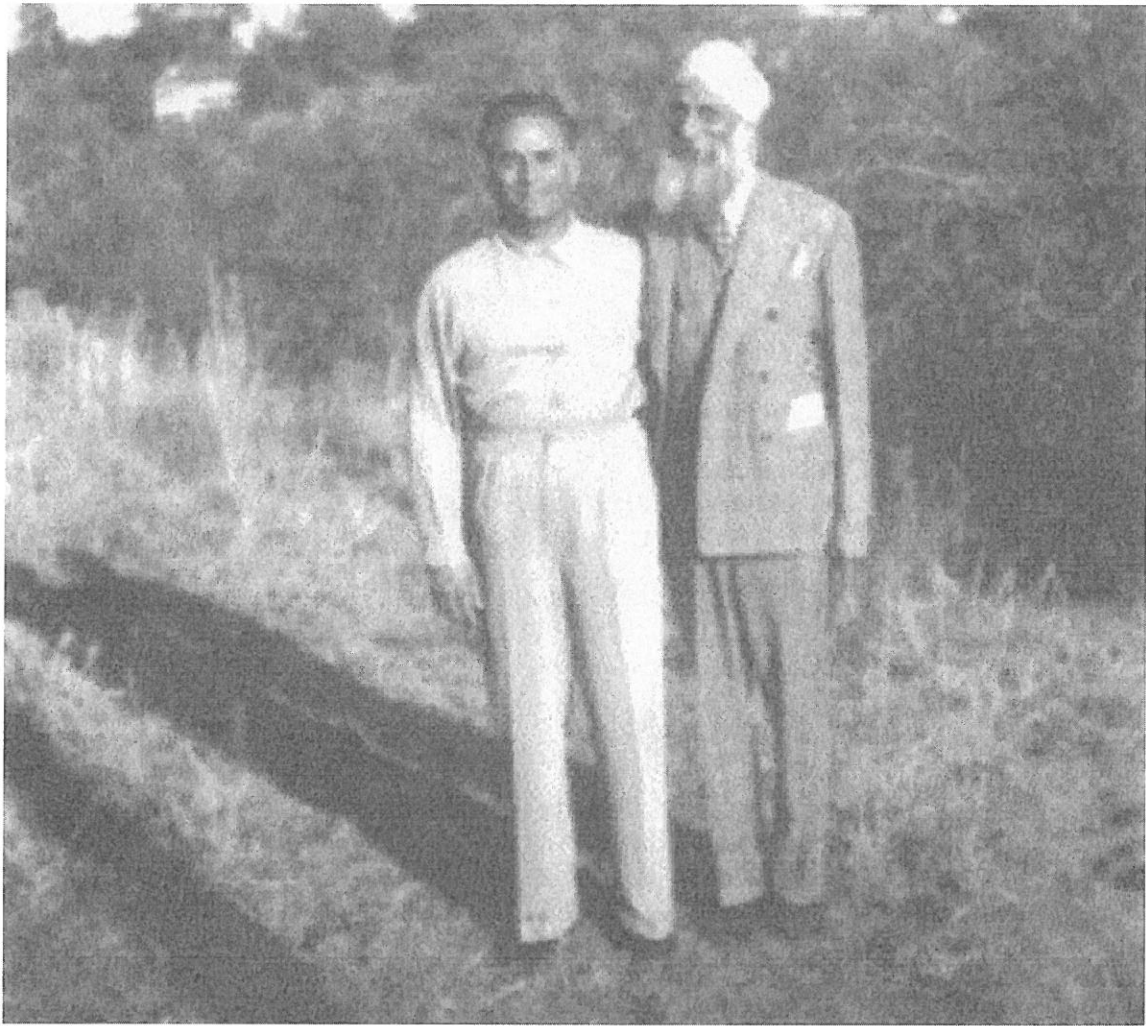
Sir,

With reference to your despatch No. 257
Confidential, of February 23rd last (A. 917/11/45)
acquainting me with the past record of the
notorious Indian seditiousist, Bhagat Singh Thind,
I have the honour to report that this individual
has recently been prominent in Omaha, where
he has been delivering a series of lectures,
programme of which is enclosed herein. Information
which reaches me from time to time indicates
that the revolutionary Indian abovesentioned

British Intelligence Report on Thind's Activities in Omaha, May 6, 1926

Release

Whether or not he was imprisoned for his ties to Indian nationalism, the greatest support Bhagat Singh Thind received during his time in the Omaha jail was from his friend Bhagwan Singh Gyanee. It was a reversal of the time when Thind visited Gyanee decades earlier when he was imprisoned on McNeil Island for his role in the Ghadar Party.



(<https://www.saada.org/item/20120320-664>)

Photograph of Bhagat Singh Thind and Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer

Conclusion

Thind continued as a prolific travelling lecturer and author until his death in Los Angeles in September 1967. While he continued to make repeated visits to cities where he had previously taught, there are no records of him ever returning to Nebraska.

Between his 1923 Supreme Court case and his stint in jail, Bhagat Singh Thind had become a naturalized citizen through the Nye-Lea Act of 1935 that opened a path to citizenship to any veteran of the First World War regardless of their racial eligibility. But as his time in Nebraska made clear, to be an official American citizen in theory and to be treated like one

in practice were two different matters. The ambiguous logic of the opinion rendered in Thind's 1923 Supreme Court case- that whiteness, and by extension, American citizenship, was determined by the "common understanding by unscientific men"- was as much a legal ruling as it was an cold assessment of the lived reality for South Asian Americans.

It would be difficult to give a single, simple reason for why Bhagat Singh Thind ended up in an Omaha, Nebraska jail: whether he was a victim of circumstance who came to the city at the wrong time, profiled and treated harshly because of his race and visible religious identity as a Sikh, prosecuted for his political beliefs and past associations, or some combination of all of these. Thind himself described the events in Nebraska as being "born of racial, national, and religious bigotry." This complexity echoes the decision of the Supreme Court nineteen years earlier when Thind's racial classification, his ties to the Ghadar Party and opposition to the British, and the "distinctive hallmarks" of his faith all came together and rendered him and so many others ineligible for American citizenship.⁴

1. See: Doug Coulson, *Race, Nation, and Refuge: The Rhetoric of Race in Asian American Citizenship Cases* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), p 47.

2. Wallace (1864-1953) was a significant figure within the Omaha art world for over six decades, and his portrait of Thind was both one of his personal favorites and one of his most publicly acclaimed works. It was shown across the country and was considered for inclusion in the Smithsonian's Collection of Fine Arts. After Wallace's death, the portrait of Thind was purchased for the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha as part of a permanent memorial to the artist. 3. See: Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

4. Bhagat Singh Thind wrote three letters to Bhagwan Singh Gyanee during the period surrounding his arrest in Omaha: one from jail on July 1st, and two from the Rome Hotel on July 6th and 28th. The author is grateful to Surinder Pal Singh, the grandson of Bhagwan Singh Gyanee, for providing copies of these letters.