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Kohinoor

The Story of the World's Most Infamous Diamond

William Dalrymple
Anita Anand

juggernaut

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To our own precious gems – Ravi, Hari and Simon;
Olivia, Ibby, Sam and Adam

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Introduction

On 29 March 1849, the ten-year-old maharaja of Punjab, Duleep Singh, was ushered into the Shish Mahal, the magnificent mirrored throne room at the centre of the great fort of Lahore.

The boy's father, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was long dead, and his mother, Rani Jindan, had been forcibly removed some time earlier, and incarcerated in a palace outside the city. Now Duleep Singh found himself surrounded by a group of grave-looking men wearing red coats and plumed hats, who talked among themselves in an unfamiliar language. In the terror of the minutes that followed – what he later remembered as 'the crimson day' – the frightened but dignified child finally yielded to months of British pressure. In a public ceremony in front of what was left of the nobility of his court, he signed a formal Act of Submission. Within minutes, the flag of the Sikh Khalsa was lowered and the British colours run up above the gatehouse of the fort.

The document signed by the ten-year-old maharaja, later known as the Treaty of Lahore, handed over to a private corporation, the East India Company, great swathes of the richest land in India – land which until that moment had formed the independent Sikh kingdom of Punjab. At the same time Duleep Singh was induced to hand over to Queen Victoria the single most valuable object not just in Punjab but arguably in the

entire subcontinent: the celebrated Koh-i-Noor, or Mountain of Light.

Article III of the treaty read simply: 'The gem called the Koh-i-Noor, which was taken from Shah Sooja ool-Moolk by Maharaja Runjeet Singh, shall be surrendered by the Maharaja of Lahore to the Queen of England.'[1] When he heard that Duleep Singh had finally signed the document, the Governor General, Lord Dalhousie, was triumphant. 'I have caught my hare,' he wrote. He later added: 'The Koh-i-Noor has become in the lapse of ages a sort of historical emblem of the conquest of India. It has now found its proper resting place.'[2]

The East India Company, the world's first really global multinational, had grown over the course of little more than a century from an operation employing only thirty-five permanent staff, headquartered in one small office in the city of London, into the most powerful and heavily militarized corporation in history: its army by 1800 was twice the size of that of Britain. It had had its eyes on both Punjab and the diamond for many years.

Its chance finally came in 1839, at the death of Ranjit Singh, when Punjab had quickly descended into anarchy. A violent power struggle, a suspected poisoning, several assassinations, a civil war and two British invasions later, the Company's army finally defeated the Sikhs first at the bloody battle of Chilianwala, on 13 January 1849, and then again, conclusively, shortly afterwards, at Gujrat (both now in the Pakistani Punjab) on 21 February. On 12 March 1849, the whole Sikh army laid down its arms. Veterans shed tears as they dropped their ancestral swords and matchlocks on to an enormous pile of weaponry. One grey-bearded old warrior saluted gravely and, folding his hands, exclaimed:

Aaj Ranjit Singh mar gaya
(Today Ranjit Singh has truly died)[3]

At the end of the same year, on a cold, bleak day in December, Dalhousie arrived in person in Lahore to take formal delivery of his prize from the hands of Dr Login, Duleep Singh's stiff British guardian. Still in the armlet that Maharaja Ranjit Singh had designed for it, the glittering egg-shaped diamond was removed from the safe of the Lahore *toshakhana*, or treasury, and placed in a small, soft kid-leather bag which had been specially made by Lady Dalhousie. The Governor General wrote out a receipt, 'I have received this day the Koh-i-Noor diamond', to which all present then added their personal seals.[4]

Less than a week later, Dalhousie wrote to a junior assistant magistrate in Delhi, asking him to undertake some research on his glittering new acquisition.[5] Theo Metcalfe was not the most diligent or scholarly of East India Company officials. A noisy, convivial figure, he loved dogs and horses and parties, and since his arrival in Delhi had quickly accumulated significant gambling debts. But for all that Theo had a tendency to cut corners and get into what his father described as 'scrapes', he had a genuine interest in gems. He also had immense charm, and Dalhousie liked the boy. He therefore chose Theo to carry out an important and somewhat delicate task.

The Koh-i-Noor may have been made of the earth's hardest substance, but it had already attracted an airily insubstantial fog of mythology around it, and Dalhousie wanted to establish the solid truth about its history before dispatching it to his queen. Theo was 'to collect and to record as much accurate and interesting information regarding the Koh-i-Noor' from the jewellers and courtiers in Delhi so as to reconstruct as far as possible its history, 'while belonging to the Emperors of Delhi, and to transmit it, as soon as he has obtained it, to the Government of India'.[6]

Theo went about his task with characteristically slapdash enthusiasm. But as the gem had been stolen away from Delhi during a Persian invasion a full 110 years earlier, his job was not

easy. Even he had to admit that he had gathered little more than bazaar tittle-tattle: 'I cannot but regret that the results are so very meagre and imperfect,' he wrote in the preamble to his report. He nevertheless laid out in full his findings, making up in colour for what he lacked in accurate, substantiated research.

'First,' wrote Theo, 'according to the tradition of the eldest jewellers in the City of Delhee, as handed down from family to family, this diamond was extracted from the mine Koh-i-Noor, four days journey from Masulipatnam to the north west, on the banks of the Godavari, during the lifetime of Krishna, who is supposed to have lived 5,000 years since…'[7]

Theo's report, which still exists in the vaults of the Indian National Archives, continued in this vein, sketching out for the first time what would become the accepted history of the Koh-i-Noor: a centuries-long chain of bloody conquests, and acts of pillage, looting and seizure. Theo's version of events has since been repeated in article after article, book after book, and still sits unchallenged on Wikipedia today.

Discovered in the deepest mists of antiquity, the great diamond was said to have been looted, probably from the eye of an idol in a temple in southern India, by marauding Turks. Soon, Theo Metcalfe's report continues, the 'jewel fell into the hands of the Emperors of the Ghoree dynasty, and from then successively of the Tughluq–Syed and the Lodhi dynasties, and eventually descended to the family of Timur [the Mughals] and remained in their possession until the reign of Mohammud Shah, who wore it in his Turban'. Then, when the Mughal Empire crumbled under the invasion of the Persian warlord Nader Shah, 'the Emperor and he exchanged Turbans, and thus it became the property of the latter'. Theo went on to claim that it was named Koh-i-Noor, or Mountain of Light, by Nader Shah, and that it passed at his death to his chief Afghan bodyguard, Ahmad Shah Abdali. From there it spent nearly one hundred years in Afghan hands, before Ranjit Singh extracted it from a fleeing Afghan Shah in 1813.

Shortly after Theo delivered his report, the Koh-i-Noor was dispatched to England where Queen Victoria promptly lent it to the Great Exhibition of 1851. Long queues snaked through the Crystal Palace to see this celebrated imperial trophy locked away in its specially commissioned high-security glass safe, itself contained within a metal cage. Trumpeted by the British press and besieged by the British public, the Koh-i-Noor quickly became not only the most famous diamond in the world, but also the single most famous object of loot from India. It was a symbol of Victorian Britain's imperial domination of the world and its ability, for better or worse, to take from around the globe the most desirable objects and to display them in triumph, much as the Romans once had done with curiosities from their conquests two thousand years earlier.

As the fame of the diamond grew, and as Theo's enjoyably lively but entirely unsubstantiated version of the stone's history circulated with it, the many other large Mughal diamonds which once rivalled the Koh-i-Noor came to be almost forgotten, and the Mountain of Light achieved a singular status as the greatest gem in the world. Only a few historians remembered that the Koh-i-Noor, which weighed 190.3 metric carats when it arrived in Britain, had had at least two comparable sisters, the Darya-i-Noor, or Sea of Light, now in Tehran (today estimated at 175–195 metric carats), and the Great Mughal Diamond, believed by most modern gemmologists to be the Orlov diamond (189.9 metric carats), today part of Catherine the Great's imperial Russian sceptre in the Kremlin.[8]

In reality, it was only in the early nineteenth century, when the Koh-i-Noor reached Punjab and the hands of Ranjit Singh, that the diamond began to achieve its pre-eminent fame and celebrity – so much so that by the end of his reign pious Hindus were beginning to wonder if the Koh-i-Noor was actually the legendary Syamantaka gem mentioned in the *Bhagavad Purana*'s tales of Krishna.

This growing fame was partly the result of Ranjit Singh's preference for diamonds over rubies – a taste Sikhs tended to share with most Hindus, but not with the Mughals or Persians, who preferred large, uncut, brightly coloured stones. Indeed in the Mughal treasury, the Koh-i-Noor seems to have been only one among a number of extraordinary highlights in the greatest gem collection ever assembled, the most treasured items of which were not diamonds at all, but the Mughals' beloved red spinels from Badakhshan and, later, rubies from Burma.

The growing status of the Koh-i-Noor was also partly a consequence of the rapidly growing price of diamonds worldwide in the early and mid nineteenth century. This followed the invention of the 'brilliant cut', which fully released the 'fire' inherent within every diamond, and which led in turn to the emerging fashion in middle-class Europe and America for diamond engagement rings – a taste which was eventually refracted back to India.

The final act in the Koh-i-Noor's rise to worldwide fame took place in the aftermath of the Great Exhibition and the press coverage it had engendered. Before long, huge, often cursed Indian diamonds began to make regular appearances in popular Victorian novels such as Wilkie Collins's *Moonstone* and Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli's *Lothair*, where the plot follows a bag of uncut diamonds acquired from a maharaja.

So it was that the Koh-i-Noor finally achieved in European exile a singular status it had never achieved before leaving its Indian homeland. Today, tourists who see it in the Tower of London are often surprised by its small size, especially when compared to the two much larger Cullinan diamonds kept in the same showcase: at present it is in fact only the ninetieth biggest diamond in the world.[9]

Yet remarkably, the Koh-i-Noor retains its fame and status and is once again at the centre of international dissension, as the Indian government – among others – calls for the gem's return.

Even then, Indian officials cannot seem to make up their mind about the Koh-i-Noor's perennially foggy history: on 16 April 2016, the Indian Solicitor General, Ranjit Kumar, told the Indian Supreme Court that the Koh-i-Noor was given freely to the British in the mid nineteenth century by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and had been 'neither stolen nor forcibly taken by British rulers'. This was by any standards a strikingly unhistorical statement, all the odder given that the facts of its surrender to Lord Dalhousie in 1849 are about the one aspect of the diamond's history not in dispute. In the recent past, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and even the Taliban have also all laid claim to the gem, and asked for its return.

Yet 170 years after it was written, Theo's anecdotal version of the Koh-i-Noor's trajectory, based on Delhi bazaar gossip, has never been fully reassessed or properly challenged. Instead, the exact opposite has happened: as the other great Mughal diamonds have come to be forgotten by all except specialists, all mentions of extraordinary Indian diamonds in sources such as the *Memoirs* of the Mughal emperor Babur or the *Travels* of the French jeweller Tavernier have retrospectively come to be assumed to be references to the Koh-i-Noor. At each stage its mythology has grown ever more remarkable, ever more mythic – and ever more shakily fictitious.

Yet anyone who tries to establish the facts of the gem's history will find that unambiguous references to this most celebrated of gems are still, as Theo Metcalfe put it, 'very meagre and imperfect' – indeed they are almost suspiciously thin on the ground. For there is simply no certain reference to the Koh-i-Noor in any Sultanate or Mughal source, despite a huge number of textual references to outsized and hugely valuable diamonds appearing throughout Indian history, particularly towards the climax of Mughal rule. Some of these may well refer to the Koh-i-Noor, but lacking sufficiently detailed descriptions, it is impossible to be certain.

In fact, there are actually no clear and unambiguous mentions

of the Koh-i-Noor in any historical document before the Persian historian Muhammad Kazim Marvi makes what seems to be the first extant, solid, named reference to the stone in his history of Nader Shah's invasion of India in 1739. This was written as late as the mid 1740s, a decade or so after the gem had been taken away from India. Significantly, Marvi's is the only contemporary chronicle, among a dozen or so detailed accounts left by Persian, Indian, French and Dutch eyewitnesses, specifically to mention the great diamond, and to do so by name, although most give detailed lists and breakdowns of Nader Shah's bejewelled loot.

Moreover, far from being a loose, singular gem that the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah Rangila could secrete within his turban, and which Nader Shah could craftily acquire by a turban swap – one of Theo's unsourced stories that is still repeated – according to Marvi's eyewitness account, the emperor could not have hidden the gem because it was at that point a centrepiece of the most magnificent and expensive piece of furniture ever made: Shah Jahan's Peacock Throne. The Koh-i-Noor, he writes from personal observation, in the first named reference to the stone – until now untranslated into English – was placed on the roof of this extraordinary throne which cost twice as much as the Taj Mahal to build. Marvi writes:

> An octagon, shaped like a European hat, with circular brim, had its sides and canopy gilded and studded with jewels. On top of this was placed a peacock made of emeralds and rubies; onto its head was attached a diamond the size of a hen's egg, known as the Koh-i-Noor – the Mountain of Light, whose price no-one but God Himself could know! The wings were studded with jewels; many pearls, each the size of a pigeon's egg, were strung on wire and attached to the pillars supporting the throne. Everything appertaining to this throne was adorned with gold and jewels…and the ground was covered with a pearl-edged

> braid... This throne and its railing were all in pieces, dismantled for transportation, and would be re-assembled in order... The present writer saw this throne when the victorious armies had left Delhi and proceeded to the capital Herat, when it was, by royal command, propped up within Nader's royal tent, along with two other rare gifts: a diamond known as the Darya-i Noor, the Sea of Light, and a ruby known as the 'Ain al-Hur, the Eye of the Huri.'[10]

There is one oddity in Marvi's eyewitness statement: in earlier accounts, the Peacock Throne is always said to have had not one but two peacocks. Possibly it had been reassembled differently by Nader Shah in Herat? Maybe the peacock containing the Koh-i-Noor had already been removed by the time Marvi saw it, so that Nader Shah could wear it on his arm – as its subsequent owners did? Or did Marvi simply see the throne side-on? Whatever the truth, from the 1750s on, the Koh-i-Noor appears to have been detached from the Peacock Throne, and there are an increasing number of references to the passage of the gem – now worn as an armlet – in previously ignored and untranslated Persian and Afghan sources, and then after 1813 in a growing crescendo of Sikh chronicles and European travel accounts.

From these, and from new work by a team of modern gemmologists led by Alan Hart and John Nels Hatleberg, who have recently used laser and X-ray scanning technology to reconstruct the original form of the Koh-i-Noor before it was recut on its arrival in Britain, it has become possible to write an entirely new history of the diamond. What follows is an attempt to free the Koh-i-Noor for the first time from the fog of mythology which has clung to the stone since many of these stories were first propagated by Theo Metcalfe's report 170 years ago.

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In the first part of this book, 'The Jewel in the Throne', William Dalrymple tells the sweep of the early history of the Koh-i-Noor. Tracing Indian ideas about diamonds in ancient texts, and through possible medieval and early modern sightings of the gem during Mughal times, to its clear emergence into history at the moment of its seizure by Nader Shah, he continues the story via Iran and Afghanistan to Punjab, and the Koh-i-Noor's temporary disappearance at the death of Ranjit Singh. By this time the diamond was more than an object of desire and had instead become a powerful symbol of sovereignty.

Anita Anand continues the Koh-i-Noor's story in the second part of this book, 'The Jewel in the Crown', giving the fullest account yet written of the most contested chapter in the diamond's history: how the Koh-i-Noor was taken from a boy who had lost his kingdom to a colonial power, seized from the Sikh court and passed to the British crown and the Tower of London.

The resulting narrative tells a tale not only of greed, conquest, murder, blindings, torture, seizure, colonialism and appropriation through an impressive slice of South and Central Asian history, but also of changing tastes and fashions in jewellery, ornamentation and personal adornment; and different understandings of the role, alchemy and astrology of precious stones. It reveals some unexpected and previously unknown moments in the diamond's history, such as the months the diamond spent hidden in a crack in the wall of a prison cell in a remote Afghan fort, and the years during which it languished unrecognized and unvalued on a mullah's desk, used only as a paperweight for pious sermons.