



THE
JOURNEY
OF THE
KOH-I-
NOOR

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1. Introduction

The Koh-i-Noor diamond, renowned for its exceptional size and storied past, has traversed numerous empires and dynasties, symbolizing power and prestige. Its journey from the Indian subcontinent to the British Crown Jewels has been marked by conquest, diplomacy, and enduring controversy.

Today, the diamond remains a subject of fascination and debate, with its origins and rightful ownership often discussed in historical and political contexts. As we delve into the intricate history of the Koh-i-Noor, we uncover not only the tales of its possessors but also the cultural significance it holds across different eras.

2. Origins and Early History.

The exact origins of the Koh-i-Noor remain shrouded in legend. Some accounts trace its history back over 5,000 years, with mentions in ancient Sanskrit texts. However, concrete evidence places its first authenticated appearance in the early 14th century, during the reign of the Kakatiya dynasty in southern India. The diamond was reportedly embedded in a deity's eye in a temple in Warangal. In 1310, Sultan Alauddin Khalji seized the gem during his invasion of the region.

Today, the Koh-i-Noor continues to capture imaginations worldwide, its history a testament to the turbulent and intertwined histories of empires and cultures. Its legacy is not just one of beauty and rarity but also of power struggles and the inexorable march of history, leaving an indelible mark on the annals of time.

3. The Mughal Empire and the Peacock Throne

The Koh-i-Noor entered the Mughal treasury in the 16th century. Emperor Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, mentioned a valuable diamond in his memoirs, believed by some to be the Koh-i-Noor. Later, Emperor Shah Jahan commissioned the Peacock Throne, an opulent seat adorned with precious gems, prominently featuring the Koh-i-Noor. The throne symbolized the zenith of Mughal wealth and artistry.

The Peacock Throne was not only a marvel of craftsmanship but also a testament to the grandeur and power of the Mughal dynasty. Crafted with intricate gold work and encrusted with numerous jewels, it became a symbol of imperial authority and the rich cultural heritage of the empire. The throne itself was a masterpiece, showcasing the exquisite skills of artisans who spent years perfecting its design.

4. Nader Shah and the Persian Conquest

In 1739, Persian ruler Nader Shah invaded Mughal India, capturing Delhi and its treasures, including the Peacock Throne. According to legend, Nader Shah discovered the Koh-i-Noor hidden in Emperor Muhammad Shah's turban. Upon unveiling the gem, he exclaimed "Koh-i-Noor," meaning "Mountain of Light" in Persian, bestowing the diamond with its enduring name.

This remarkable event marked a significant moment in history, as the Koh-i-Noor diamond became a symbol of power and prestige. The conquest had far-reaching consequences, reshaping the dynamics of the region. Nader Shah's victory not only demonstrated the might of the Persian Empire but also highlighted the vulnerabilities of the Mughal dynasty, which was already beginning to show signs of decline.

5. The Afghan Interlude

Following Nader Shah's assassination in 1747, the Koh-i-Noor fell into the possession of Ahmad Shah Durrani, founder of the Afghan Empire. The diamond remained in Afghanistan until the early 19th century, passing through various hands amid the region's turbulent political landscape.

Ahmad Shah Durrani, a charismatic leader, prized the Koh-i-Noor not just for its value but as a symbol of his burgeoning empire's strength and prestige. The diamond became a part of the Afghan regalia, worn proudly by Durrani and his successors. It witnessed the rise and fall of leaders, each hoping to harness its legendary aura of power and legitimacy.

6. The Sikh Empire and Maharaja Ranjīt Singh

The Koh-i-Noor returned to the Indian subcontinent when it was acquired by Maharaja Ranjīt Singh, the formidable ruler of the Sikh Empire, in the early 19th century. The diamond became a symbol of his power and was housed in his treasury in Lahore. After Ranjīt Singh's death in 1839, the empire weakened, leading to increased British interest and intervention in the region.

As tensions rose, the British East India Company sought to assert control over the region, eventually leading to the First Anglo-Sikh War. Despite the valiant efforts of the Sikh forces, they were ultimately defeated, and the Treaty of Lahore was signed in 1846. This treaty marked the beginning of significant British influence over the Sikh Empire.

7. British Acquisition and the Treaty of Lahore

Following the Second Anglo-Sikh War, the British East India Company annexed Punjab in 1849. The subsequent Treaty of Lahore included a clause mandating the surrender of the Koh-i-Noor to Queen Victoria. The young Maharaja Duleep Singh was compelled to sign the treaty, ceding the diamond to British authorities. The gem was then shipped to Britain, arriving in July 1850.

This significant moment marked the Koh-i-Noor's entry into British possession, where it was initially displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. The diamond quickly became a subject of fascination and curiosity, captivating the British public with its storied past and legendary size. Over time, it underwent several recuts to enhance its brilliance, eventually being set into the British Crown Jewels.

8. The Koh-i-Noor in British Crown Jewels

Initially displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, the Koh-i-Noor's uncut appearance underwhelmed viewers. In response, Prince Albert commissioned a re-cutting of the diamond to enhance its brilliance, reducing its weight from approximately 186 carats to its current 105.6 carats. The Koh-i-Noor was subsequently set into various pieces of royal jewelry and currently resides in the Crown of Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother, showcased in the Tower of London.

To this day, the Koh-i-Noor remains one of the most famous and talked-about gems in the world, not only for its beauty but also for its complex and layered history. Its presence in the Tower of London attracts countless visitors each year, all eager to catch a glimpse of this legendary jewel and the stories it carries with it.

9. Modern Ownership Claims India

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has consistently sought the return of the Koh-i-Noor, asserting it was taken unlawfully during colonial rule. The Indian government contends that the diamond is an integral part of the nation's heritage and was acquired through coercive means. However, the British government maintains that the diamond was obtained legally under the Treaty of Lahore and has declined India's repatriation requests.

Pakistan has also laid claim to the Koh-i-Noor, arguing that as the diamond was surrendered in Lahore, now part of Pakistan, it rightfully belongs to them. In 1976, Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto formally requested the diamond's return, a plea that was rejected by the British government.

The Afghan government has asserted ownership based on the diamond's history under Ahmad Shah Durrani. In 2000, Taliban representatives demanded the Koh-i-Noor's return, stating it was taken from Afghanistan to India before reaching Britain. This claim, like others, has been dismissed by the UK.

Iran's claim stems from Nader Shah's acquisition of the diamond during his 1739 invasion of India. Iranian officials have occasionally called for the Koh-i-Noor's return, citing its Persian heritage. Nonetheless, the British government has not entertained these claims, maintaining legal ownership of the diamond.

10. Historians' Perspectives on Ownership

Historians offer diverse viewpoints on the rightful ownership of the Koh-i-Noor. Some argue that the diamond's transfer to British hands was a product of imperial exploitation and should be rectified by returning it to its place of origin. Others contend that the gem's complex history, marked by numerous exchanges and changes of power.

This perspective suggests that the Koh-i-Noor symbolizes the interconnected histories of the regions it has passed through, and its current location in the British Crown Jewels serves as a reminder of those intricate ties. Amidst these debates, some historians emphasize the importance of dialogue and collaboration between nations to address historical grievances and foster a more inclusive understanding of shared cultural treasures. Regardless of differing opinions, the Koh-i-Noor remains a powerful emblem of the past, inspiring ongoing discussions about cultural ownership and historical justice.

Conclusion

The Koh-i-Noor diamond is more than just a gemstone—it is a symbol of power, conquest, and colonial history. Its journey from the temples of India to the British Crown Jewels reflects centuries of shifting empires and contested legacies. While Britain maintains that it legally acquired the diamond through the Treaty of Lahore, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran all stake claims based on historical precedent and cultural heritage.

The debate over its rightful ownership remains unresolved, with the diamond serving as a reminder of colonial-era disputes that continue to shape international relations. Some historians argue for its return to India as an act of historical justice, while others emphasize its complex and multinational history, making repatriation a difficult decision.

Ultimately, the Koh-i-Noor represents not just a piece of exquisite craftsmanship but also the lasting impact of imperialism. Whether it remains in the Tower of London or is eventually returned to its place of origin, its legacy will continue to spark debate and fascination for generations to come.

Recommended Reading

Books

1. Koh-i-Noor: The History of the World's Most Infamous Diamond - William Dalrymple & Anita Anand

- A well-researched, narrative-driven account of the diamond's tumultuous history, covering its origins, conquests, and modern controversies.

2. The Mountain of Light - Indu Sundaresan

- A historical novel that fictionalizes the journey of the Koh-i-Noor through the courts of Mughal emperors, Persian rulers, and British officials.

3. The Peacock Throne: The Drama of Mogul India - W. Dalrymple & Giles Tillotson

- Explores the grandeur of Mughal India, with references to the Koh-i-Noor as a symbol of power and wealth.

4. *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi 1857* - William Dalrymple

- Provides important historical context about the Mughal Empire's decline, which played a role in how the British came to possess the Koh-i-Noor.

Academic Articles & Papers

1. "Diamonds and Empire: The British Acquisition of the Koh-i-Noor" - *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*

- A scholarly analysis of how the British came into possession of the diamond and its implications for colonial history.

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