KOH-I-NOOR: THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD'S MOST INFAMOUS DIAMOND

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Koh-i-Noor is not about the diamond, to my disappointment. Oh, sure, it makes an appearance here and there in this book. But very little is actually said here about the diamond itself, probably because the Queen of England hasn't made it available for analysis and study, and prior generations didn't record much about its specifics. Rather, this is a book of cultural history revolving around people who have owned the diamond. That's interesting, in its own way, but not what I was promised.

In fact, very little seems to be known about the specifics of the Koh-i-Noor until the British conquered the Indian subcontinent. Prior to then, it was apparently merely one of several massive gemstones circulating in the area, referred to by various not-very-helpful names, so nobody really knows which was which. Thus, the first part of this book spends most of its time ascribing modifiers like "maybe" and "possibly" to the specific path of the Koh-i-Noor through history prior to 1500, and it really only comes into focus when the British, with their detailed, Western-style written records, arrive on the scene in the eighteenth century.

That was before the British stole the diamond, of course, and put it in the Crown Jewels; it took some time for them to work up to that. From earliest history the diamond was apparently shuttled around among various Afghan, Persian and Indian potentates and despots, including the Mughals Babur and Aurungzeb. What comes through most clearly of all in these descriptions is the mediocre nature of the cultures indigenous to the subcontinent, who, until the British came, managed to occasionally and intermittently produce some high-level art and architecture, and, despite their age, nothing else worthwhile at all in terms of science, technology, or political advancement. But they managed to feature a lot of practices like arbitrary rule, extortion, exploitation, and mass killings of various kinds, as well as suttee: the burning of wives, alive (along with plenty of slaves) on a high-caste man's funeral pyre (although, to be fair, the practice wasn't universal, and it was frowned on by Muslim rulers, but it was common and of immemorial age). The British certainly improved things in India, massively, in every area, even if today's Indians aren't grateful, at least publicly. Marc Andreesen got in trouble in 2016 when he dared to tweet the mild and incomplete truth, "Anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for the Indian people for decades." That's undeniably entirely accurate, but naturally he was forced to apologize and abase himself. He shouldn't have.

While we're on the topic of the customary burning of wives, much of the difference between the Orient and the West is captured in the famous anecdote about General Charles Napier, Commander-in-Chief in India in 1851. (The Napier anecdote is not included in this book, although horrifying excerpts from the diary of John Martin Honigberger, a nineteenth-century Austrian physician in the employ of Ranjit Singh, the ruler of the Sikhs and then the holder of the diamond, are—he was in the audience for the burnings after Ranjit Singh died.) When Napier, as military leader of the British in India, blocked yet another burning, the response of the leaders of the indigenous peoples was that it was customary and not relevant to the British, so he must not interfere. Supposedly, Napier retorted: "Be it so. This burning of widows is your custom; prepare the funeral pile. But my nation has also a custom. When men burn women alive we hang them, and confiscate all their property. My carpenters shall therefore erect gibbets on which to hang all concerned when the widow is consumed. Let us all act according to national customs." Awesome. Even if it's probably too good a story to be true, Napier did end the practice in all areas he controlled, and certainly the anecdote accurately reflects the relative perspectives, and relative superiority, of the two cultures, at least until the British decayed in the twentieth century.

As everybody knows, the British stole the diamond, in 1849. Basically, they coerced Duleep Singh, the last maharajah of the Sikhs, a child and the last man standing after his various relatives prior in line for the throne had killed each other by methods such as poison and dropping rocks on each other's heads, to sign over his kingdom (essentially the Punjab) to England. This was after the British won the Second Anglo-Sikh War. One of the sadder parts of this book is Duleep Singh's later life; he moved to England and went native, but was unhappy and ended his life as a dissolute and frustrated man. The Koh-i-Noor was a chief target of the British, so before the ink was dry on the treaty the British hustled it off to England, where it remains to this day, despite various pretenders on the Indian subcontinent, from Indian nationalists to the Taliban, demanding it back.

Rather than this catalog of interchangeable despots trading the diamond back and forth over the centuries, I would have preferred an examination of the diamond itself, with a focus on the physical science of it. We do get a tiny bit of this, in a description of its recutting under the direction of Prince Albert in 1851. It was recut because the diamond, heavily promoted, was regarded as a disappointment at the Great Exhibition, because it was just a lump of stone lacking any brilliance, not resembling a Western diamond at all. This was because the "original" diamond wasn't cut in any way—it was larger than it is now, but in its natural state. That's no surprise—total lack of brilliance was the norm for Indian (and all Asian) stones, because the Indians never had the ability to cut gems for facets, and generally just kept them in the natural state or a little polished. Gem cutting, like all important modern science, was a purely European development, which is why from 1500 on or so the Mughals and other Indian rulers imported Portuguese gem cutters to improve their collections. But the Koh-i-Noor had not been so improved (it appears that most of the giant stones were not faceted until they got into European hands, presumably because the process necessarily reduces the size). In this book, though, we don't even get a picture of the diamond, which is disappointing. So if you want a modest and fragmentary cultural history of part of India that mentions gemstones, this is your book, but it's not worth reading for much more.