Kohinoor and its Travelogy: The Dialectic of Ownership and Reparations of an Artefact

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Abstract
This paper reignites the debate on the relevance of the Kohinoor diamond in the twenty-first-century, re-evaluating its links to India, with respect to travelogy, reparations and the British Raj. It aims at drawing common strings between the notions and implications of colonialism on India and Britain. The discussion on travelogy retraces the history of geographies that Kohinoor has travelled, thus moulded unto its present form. Ideas of reparations and claims, enunciated by Shashi Tharoor William Dalrymple are brought into a dialectic with the question of the ownership of the Kohinoor, and if there could be a sole owner, and whether the idea of ownership of such an artefact is problematic in itself.

Keywords
Kohinoor, Reparation, Victorian history, British Empire, Mughal Empire, Delhi Sultanate, Taliban, Persia.
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Introduction

The *Koh-i-noor* (Persian term literally meaning ‘the Mountain of Light’) weighs approximately 105 carats\(^1\) currently, and is colourless. Its history, however, has been colourful and more often than not, that colour has been blood red. There are stories of torture of the wearers of this gem, and layers of rich mythology, coveted by the richest sovereigns of the world.

The origins of the diamond are unknown. Documented proof surfaces only from the time of Shah Jahan in the seventeenth-century, who adorned his Peacock Throne with this gem. Thereafter it went through his successors for around sixty years, until Nadir Shah raided Delhi and acquired the gem from the Mughal king Mohammad Shah ‘Rangeela,’ in 1739. Nadir Shah was murdered by his own generals, and the Kohinoor now belonged to his trusted lieutenant Ahmad Shah Abdali. It went through his

successors Timur Shah, and Shah Zaman who was tortured by Shah Shuja for the gem. Shah Shuja, in turn, was tortured by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in his quest for the jewel. Ranjit Singh’s son Duleep Singh—the last king in the line after three kings died in quick succession in three years—gifted it to Queen Victoria, in 1850. Today, the precious stone is in the British Museum. That is its history over the last three centuries and a half. There are references to precious diamonds in texts before Shah Jahan’s time, but none of these mentioned diamonds can conclusively said to be Kohinoor.2

This paper delves into the travelogy of the diamond. We use ‘travelogy’ instead of ‘travelogue.’ Although both words use suffixes that are variants of ‘logos,’ ‘travelogue’ has a sense more of narration—of a speech act. Whereas ‘travelogy’ comes with a sense of historicity and epistemology. Arup K. Chatterjee, in coining this term, talks of its viability as ‘a measure of how much home the traveller constructs and what modes he adopts in the process.’3 In this paper, the artefact itself is seen as the traveller, and the various contestations for its ownership, *en route* to—and after—its numerous adventures as the tours and detours emerging from its travelogy. The travelogy of the Kohinoor highlights the manner in which it seamlessly assimilated itself into myriad cultures across history. The diamond has been an observer of time, has transformed and altered itself as it passed from one ruler to the another. It is important not only to consider the physical transformation of the diamond, but

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also the transformation it brought about in the politics of the regions it wandered across.

**Kernels of the Kohinoor**

As said, the Kohinnoor, consumed the lives of many generals and colonels. It was fought over and hounded, till it became the symbol, the kernel of Ranjit Singh’s dynasty. There have been conjectures that Syamantaka diamond mentioned in the *Bhagvada Purana* is none but the Kohinoor, itself. This claim surfaced vocally only in the nineteenth-century when the Kohinoor had become the most coveted imperial stone. William Dalrymple opines that rubies were preferred over diamonds by the Mughals, and so the Kohinoor had to contend with only a second position during their rule. It was with the western powers coming into India, that that the discourse changed gradually, and elevated the value of diamonds above rubies. Also, in the Hindu discourse—unlike that of Mughals—diamonds were valued above rubies.

The oldest existing documented proof of the diamond is in *Baburnama*—Babur’s diary—in which the emperor writes that Ibrahim Lodhi was defeated in 1518, and the Raja of Gwalior (whose dynasty of Tunur Rajputs had lorded over Gwalior for 120 years) Bikramjit ‘had gone to hell’ in the campaign. His fleeing family, trapped in Agra, handed over their treasures to Humayun for a safe passage. The tributes included the Kohinoor, which Babur surmises must have been taken by Alauddin Khilji from the Deccan, in the early fourteenth-century. Humayun offered the gem to his father, who returned it to him as a reward for the campaign. Babur informs that every appraiser ‘had estimated its value at two-
and-a-half days’ food for the whole world.” Amir Khusrau—a poet at the court of Alauddin Khilji, who ascended the throne of Delhi in 1296—also mentions a precious stone in his work Khażainul Futu. ‘[While] every diamond sparkled brightly, it seemed as if it was a drop fallen from the sun. As to the other stones, their lustre eludes description just as water escapes out of a small vessel.” The diamond Khusrau refers to may or may not have been the Kohinoor—he does not give a name.

Towards the end of Baburnama, we learn that Humayun had fallen extremely ill, in 1530, when Babur was advised to donate the Kohinoor for ‘pious causes to win the restoration of Humayun’s health.’ Babur was determined not to let go of his prize and rather offered himself as a sacrifice: ‘As advised by the saint, Babur circumabulated Humayun’s sick bed three times, praying, “O God! If a life be exchanged for a life, I, Babur, hereby offer my life for Humayun’s.”’ The text goes on tell that fever surged over Babur as he did this, and soon he was bedridden while Humayun recovered. Babur died soon after.

The above legend is interesting largely due to the causality it affords later narratives of the Kohinoor—because Babur loved the Kohinoor so much, or such was its symbolism, that he would give himself up but not the diamond. However, the counter-reading of the legend is that Babur did not trust that

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6 Babur, Baburnama, pp 343-44.
merely giving away the stone would cure his son. His assertion ‘if a life be exchanged for life’ alludes in this direction. Keeping in mind Dalrymple’s conjecture that diamonds were not as precious as rubies in the Mughal estimation, it is also interesting to note that this chapter of the Baburnama is not written in his own hand, for the emperor is referred to in the third person here. It is quite revealing to see that while the 2006 translation of Baburnama expressly mentions Kohinoor in two places, Dalrymple—the diamond’s most recent historian—contends that Babur’s stone cannot surely be said to be Kohinoor.

The diamond went out of Mughal hands when Humayun was fleeing after being defeated by Sher Shah Suri. In 1544, he sought refuge from the Safavid Emperor, Tahmasp. By a river bank, after his ablutions, Humayun, anxious and weary, forgot to pick up his jewels and rode on. A boy, Jawahar, found them and rode fast to return them to the Mughal sovereign in exile—this we know from the boy’s own account. Humayun thanked him profusely before he went to view the ruins of Persepolis.7

This was one of the two times in the known history of the diamond that it landed in a commoner’s hand, momentarily. The next time this happened was when Shah Zaman, the grandson of Ahmad Shah Abdali, was captured by his trusted friend Ashiq in 1800. Zaman was thrown inside a prison, but he was careful to hide the Kohinoor in a crack of the prison wall; already having hidden the other precious diamond Pukhraj (or Fakhraj) by a stream. Shah Shuja, the younger

7 Jahwar. The Tezkereh Al Vakiāt: Or, Private Memoirs of the Moghul Emperor Humayun (Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1832) p. 67.
brother of Shah Zaman, recaptured Kabul and sent Ashiq Sanwari to ‘hell’—as Babur would have put it. He found the Kohinoor with a mullah, who had been using it as a paperweight; the Fakhraj was with a student who had gone to the river for a swim.⁸ These what-if counterfactual moments of history are rarely mentioned in the annals of the stone. What if any of these common people had managed to retain the stone and become rich? Or what if the paperweight had just remained a paperweight and been lost to the glory hunters of the world? And yet, there is no rags-to-riches story here, only stories of riches to rags, with emperor after emperor biting the dust, lusting after the diamond.

Humayun had duly paid his tributes to Tahmasp, who had the gems evaluated by his appraisers, and the mullah’s paperweight of future was declared to be ‘above all price.’⁹ Kohinoor is not named in this text, however. Tahmasp sent the jewel to the Sultan of Ahmadnagar who, surprisingly, was not very impressed with it, and decided to pass it on to Nizam Shah, also in Deccan. The envoy stole the diamond, and the Kohinoor vanished. Mysteriously, the Kohinoor mysteriously returned to the Mughals, in Shah Jahan’s time. The diamond—now embedded within the peacock throne, made for Shah Jahan in 1635—was taken away by Nadir Shah after his invasion of Delhi in 1739, in which he razed the city down after the citizens killed hundreds of his soldiers in a single day.¹⁰ As the legend goes, Nadir Shah, having stayed in Delhi

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⁸ Dalrymple and Anand, Kohinoor, p. 74.
⁹ Jahwar. The Tezkereh Al Vakiāt, p. 68.
for two months, finally handed the throne back to Muhammad Shah Rangeela. Robert Hunt writes:

According to family and popular tradition, Mohammed Shah wore the Kohinoor in front of his turban at his interview with his conqueror, who insisted on exchanging turbans in proof of his regard.\footnote{Robert Hunt, \textit{Hunt’s Hand-Book to The Official Catalogues: An Explanatory Guide To The Great Exhibition} (1851) p. 31}

Nadir Shah’s palace became so full of intrigue that he could not trust anyone, and he began killing anyone he suspected of treason. He called in Ahmad Khan Abdali, whom he had rescued earlier, for his private security. Before Abdali could set things right, Nadir Shah was assassinated. Ahmad Khan Abdali, however, managed to wrest the Kohinoor, and fled to Kandhar, where he founded his own kingdom, thus becoming Ahmad ‘Shah.’ Abdali then wore the diamond as an armlet alongside the Timur Ruby while assuming the throne of his new-born Durrani dynasty.\footnote{Robert Ellis, \textit{Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue, Volume 2} (of the Great Exhibition) (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851) p. 696.} The Durrani Empire had possession of the Kohinoor for approximately seventy years, beginning 1747. The stone passed on from Ahmad Shah to his son, Timur, and then to his successor Shah Zaman. We have already seen the fate of Shah Zaman at the hands of Ashiq Sinwari, and Sinwari in turn being killed by Shah Shuja, younger brother of Shah Zaman. Shah Shuja later sought asylum at the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Lahore.

Singh was after the diamond. He did not let food enter Shuja’s quarters for two days; had forged letters written in the
name of Shah to the king of Kabul to invade Lahore, in order to incriminate him. He even went to the point of torturing Shah Shuja’s son in front of him.\textsuperscript{13} Eventually, in 1813, Shah Shuja conceded, on the condition that a treaty of friendship would be signed with monetary and military aid. Once in possession of it, Ranjit Singh gave the diamond the utmost importance by wearing it only around his arm, on a regular basis. The Kohinoor became the new symbol of his throne. It remained with Ranjit Singh until his death. It then fell from one son to the other, and after a series of assassinations and alleged poisonings, the diamond ultimately landed up with his five-year-old son Duleep Singh on September 18, 1843. He retained the diamond briefly until the British seized control of Lahore in 1849 and Maharaja Duleep Singh was coerced to sign the newly drafted Treaty of Lahore. The document dictated the terms of surrender for the Maharaja which highlighted specifically under article 3, the transfer of the Kohinoor diamond to the British. With the signing of the treaty, the Kingdom of Punjab became a territory of the British Empire. Lord Dalhousie facilitated the transaction and with the acquisition of the Kohinoor he remarked with elation: ‘I had now caught my hare.’\textsuperscript{14}


The Politics of Performance

The acquisition of the diamond and the annexation of Punjab allowed the British to take away the Kohinoor across the ocean to the centre of the empire, London. It was here that the diamond reached its current destination. The infamous Kohinoor was very well received by the British monarchy, and given the utmost attention. It was granted a public display at ‘The Great Exhibition’ which took place at the Crystal Palace, in 1851. However, it was not well received by the general public. An anonymous writer, who also claimed to be the writer of *Ethel Woodville*, wrote of the stone at the exhibition: ‘if you were there, I dare say you saw it.’ Another writer says that the stone was much bigger in possession Shah Jahan (787 carats), and he had it cut by Sieur Hortensio Vorgio, who did a very bad job of it. He reduced the size of the stone substantially, as also did not make the right cuts—which is why it lacked lustre. The monarch, instead of paying the cutter, fined him ten thousand rupees.

The Kohinoor, having failed to impress at the Great Exhibition, the display had to be re-done. It was placed inside a small chamber with various mirrors and lamps, and only one person was allowed at a time. After the exasperating exhibition was over, it was decided to recut the diamond according to European standards of what its sheen should be. It was recut, by Garrard, and it reduced to its current size of

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15 Anon, *Pleasant Sundays with my children; or, Here a little and there a little, by the author of ‘Ethel Woodville’* (1863).

105 carats from 787 in Shah Jahan’s time. The story of the Kohinoor’s curse also took root in the British aristocracy, with Prime Minister Peel dying on the very day it landed in England, in July 1850, and also with Queen Victoria getting injured the same day. Amongst the British monarchs, there has been a superstition that it would bring bad luck to male members; and so it is only women who have been seen to wear the jewel in their crown.

Kohinoor—the cursed stone, the coveted stone—as we have seen, has been an artefact of ‘performance.’ The stone perfected the art of performing the spectacular in a politics of symbolism. The archives of the stone—or what is written in stone, if you will—had to be created and re-created according to the recreational demands of the times it waded through. While Nadir Shah had it archived as a symbol of conquest of Hindustan by Marvi, a legend was also simultaneously thrown in that it had been taken away by a clever stratagem, by an exchange of turbans with Muhammad Shah Rangeela. Rangeela, with his entire city burnt down to ashes in 1739, still was holding on to the gem—the symbol evoked through this legend is powerful.

On the deathbed of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the symbol was reinvented once again. The diamond was now powerfully linked to the mythical Syamantaka, which had made even Lord Krishna an accused in its theft. This reinvention was to create a Hindu-Sikh lineage for the diamond, and obliterate its documented history only in the hands of Muslims. Lord Dalhousie was the one who eventually managed to prise the gem out of Duleep Singh’s hands in 1850; and he had to fight

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17 ‘Late English News,’ in Freeman’s Journal (Sydney: December 16, 1852) p. 3.
very hard to prove that the diamond is not a bad omen; that in fact Shah Shuja had said that the wearer of this diamond is the conqueror of the world. Theo Metcalfe was asked to write down the history of the diamond in which he recorded the turban-exchange story to elevate its symbolism. It is not just the artefact, but the facts that also accompany it, that feed into its symbolism.

Significations of the Kohinoor

The central question forming the base of this article is the signification of the diamond. What does it signify that makes it so important, and how does it manage to perform the centre-stage every now and then? The current interest in the stone is of course, because of various repatriation claims—by India, Pakistan and Afghanistan; and also by religious groups. We shall address that in a later section. Here, let us delve into the idea of signification.

To understand signification, we can start with the Saussurean model of signification. This involves a signifier—the object/act that carries the sign; and the signified—the meaning. In the case of the Kohinoor, interestingly, the more the signifier depleted in physical size, the more potent it became as the signified. The signifier-signified paradigm is controlled by a set of rules of ‘la langue’—and it is here perhaps, in the media, that a solution lies to this paradox of inverse ratio of the two categories.

Umberto Eco suggests that the Saussurean model is limited because ‘Saussure did not define the signified any too clearly, leaving it halfway between a mental image, a concept, and a psychological reality; but he did clearly stress the fact that the signified is something which has to do with the mental activity of anybody receiving a signifier...’ Eco’s meditation provides the clues. The diamond in question is a mental image, that got entrenched as a concept as it extracted more blood and adorned more thrones; it is a psychological reality that appeals to jingoism, that massages every community’s belief that they were the most powerful in their ‘past.’ It is the hope of waking up to a glorious ‘tomorrow’ through invoking the imagined ‘yesterday.’

Eco opines that there may be more clues to understanding this problem in Charles Sanders Peirce’s take on semiosis.20

By semiosis I mean an action, an influence, which is, or involves, a co-operation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs.21

Eco contends that ‘it is clear that the “subjects” of Peirce’s “semiosis” are not human subjects but rather three

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abstract semiotic entities, the dialectic between which is not affected by concrete communicative behaviour.\(^{22}\)

The two assertions provide useful insight into the signification of Kohinoor. There is the object—the stone; the sign—, the sign that the stone sends out—whether it is the idea of glory or curse; and there is an interpretant, who completes the cycle. No two of these are able to unlock the meaning without the third. Eco’s contention that all three are abstract entities makes it even more interesting—the stone, its message, and its reception are all in the realm of abstraction—and therefore the size of the stone barely matters in this tripartite discourse. As the stone packs more history in its core, the play between the three entities get more intense.

The Kohinoor has been a traveller playing a game of musical chairs. Its exchange has not merely been an exchange of artefact, but that of power, and the meanings of power. It has not only been a producer (of gaze and conflict) in the journey, but also a consumer (of meaning). The question of origin, inevitably, enters the matter of signification, in an attempt at appealing to bolster the both the Peircian ‘sign’ and ‘interpretant.’ The author/authority is always invoked—owing to human obsession with the idea of origin, invoked by verisimilitude of human origin, both biological and religious.

The name Kohinoor is of course Persian, and contesting sources attribute it either to Babur, in the sixteenth-century, or Nadir Shah in the eighteenth-century. The stone itself is older than its name. So, it was formulated as the lost mythical Syamantaka by the Jagannath temple priests in Ranjit Singh’s

\(^{22}\) Eco, A Theory of Semiotics, p. 15.
time. As mythology forms in the wanderings and the travelogy of the stone, new archives perform themselves out, obfuscating the old. For example, a website with almost obvious political and religious leanings, claims that the stone was the eye of an idol in Andhra Pradesh. When one looks up nineteenth-century archives, which is also a long way into the stone’s travels, one sees this legend associated not with Kohinoor, but with what is now Orloff—the pride of Czars of Russia in the nineteenth-century. New media texts—as also old media with lesser reach—can thus conflate and perform new archives.

The question of the means of obtaining this gem also played an important part in its signification. The stone had been either obtained as a gift (Shah Jehan for example) or by conquest (Nadir Shah). The British had not obtained it by either—they had obtained it by coercing the child Maharaja Duleep Singh, after separating him from his mother. Queen Victoria, thus rested uneasy with the diamond. Duleep Singh was under the care of John Login and his wife Lena after separation from his mother Jindan. He gradually embraced Christianity, and shifted to London, where he was one of the favourites of Queen Victoria. It was, therefore, a huge moral dilemma for her—she could not return the stone to Duleep, neither consider it her own till he gifted it to her. Therefore,

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23 ‘The Kohinoor Diamond in the British Crown Jewels was the Eye of Hindu Goddess of Warangal,’ in India Divine

he was summoned, the stone placed in his hand, and this time, both under despondency of his fortune, and his love for the Queen, he gifted it to her with these words, ‘[/]t is to me, Ma’am, the greatest pleasure thus to have the opportunity, as a loyal subject, of myself tendering to my Sovereign—the Kohinoor.’

This was the last time Duleep Singh ever came into contact with the diamond. This event was a pivotal moment in the history of the Kohinoor as it symbolized a moral transition of the diamond from the previous owner. It removed the aspect of guilt from the British monarchy and facilitated the ease with which the British were able to assimilate the diamond into the Royal Jewels without any burden affecting their moral conscience. Even though the Kohinoor was in possession of Queen Victoria, she hadn't worn it due to the circumstances under which it was acquired. She only started wearing the diamond and utilizing it as a symbol of the British monarchy when Maharaja Duleep Singh formally handed it over to the Queen.

Being a land of conquest, India was formed after several kings fought to rule over this golden land. Through the possession of each individual ruler, the Kohinoor started to reflect the culture of their respective kingdoms, thus transforming into a *traveller*. By travelling from kingdom to kingdom, the diamond ultimately became a lasting symbol of the wealth and power of each ruler. The itinerant stone, thus, has been a rolling stone—a stone rolling on the steep incline of history, grating, getting reduced in size, and increasing in stature with every new cut at the hands of the world’s most famous diamond cutters.

Curse of the Stone

An important part in the signification of the Kohinoor is its acquisition of the reputation of being cursed. In acquiring the symbol of being powerful, the idea of curse follows as a natural corollary, following the age old adage—‘power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ In the case of the Kohinoor the corrupting power rests only with the monarch handling it, but the stone itself.

History helps the manufacturing of this legend. As we have already seen, the legend of Babur has him giving up his life for his son’s in case he wants to keep the stone. Shah Jahan is not a despot, but must pay for the diamond, his own son Aurangzeb imprisoning him. His favourite son, Dara Shikoh also must add to the price, with his head. Muhammad Shah Rangeela, the dancer and singer, unworthy of such a stone, must pay with his capital being burnt down to ashes by Nadir Shah. Ghulam Hussain Khan, describing the summer of 1739, tells: ‘In a few days the stench arising from so many unburied bodies, which were filling the houses and streets, became so excessive that the air was infected throughout the whole city.’

Nadir Shah would have to pay for his impunity with his own generals killing him. Ahmad Shah Abdali would have to pay for wrenching the stone from Nadir Shah’s son Shah Rukh, with a debilitating disease, that made half his face hollow. His grandson Shah Zaman would be blinded in pursuit of the diamond by Ashiq Sinwari; and Ashiq Sinwari in turn would be blown by a cannon for his deed, by Shah

Shuja. Shah Shuja would be tortured by Ranjit Singh; and Ranjit Singh would have to pay with a line of successors killed within years of his death. In England, the Prime Minister would die on the day of the arrival of the diamond.

In the Hindu mythological imagination, the stone is the third eye of Shiva, meant to unleash wrath at those who were unworthy. The monarch and the stone, both are then, locked in a contestation of power in this construction of the idea of curse.

In England, the diamond, of course generated tremendous curiosity, and a myriad romantic tales were told, with the ‘curse’ as their leitmotif. Wilkie Collins’ *Moonstone* (1868) has a cursed diamond in possession of an English girl, as she is pursued by Hindu priests to restore the stone to the idol’s eye. *The Sign of Four* (1890) by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle details the tale and travails of a looted Agra treasure. William Stephens Hayward’s *Idol’s Eye: Being Adventures in Search of a Diamond* (1883), or Victor Herbert’s play *Idol’s Eye* (1897), or a century later Cheryl Zach’s *The Curse of Idol’s Eye* (1997) all play upon the same idea. Even in modern day literature, the idea of cursed stone holds currency, with the recent film *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (2017) playing the ‘idol’s eye’ yet again.

Reparation and Repatriation

With such a complex travelogy and symbolism, it is apparent that the Kohinoor would also become the symbol for reparation of the damage caused by colonialism. That the discourse of reparation is caught in symbols of colonialism and violence is almost self-defeating.
The counter-discourse to this is reparation of refurbishing. There are examples of this from within the historical colonial context itself. Sir John Login, who was the keeper of the Kohinoor till its transfer was made to England, sincerely hoped that the diamond would be sold to the highest bidder and the sums obtained thus would be used for the welfare of Punjab.27 In search of a good model for the reparation theory, Alfred L. Brophy, discussing the reparations for the damage caused to black people on the West coast of USA, defines the term as ‘programs that are justified on the basis of past harm and that are also designated to assess and correct that harm and/or improve the lives of victims into the future’.28

The above points apply, of course, to the American situation where the historically oppressed and the historical oppressor live in the same country. These points cannot be applied in the case of postcolonial nations of the commonwealth, except in a larger sense of a globally connected village, where the West/North is responsible at large for reparations to the East/South.

In the recent times, claims have been made by Shashi Tharoor that the United Kingdom should acknowledge that the Kohinoor is an Indian artefact.29 This is where the discourse of diplomacy significantly differs from historical evaluations, which delineate the workings of power rather

27 Dalrymple and Anand, *Kohinoor*, pp. 113-34.
than operating from within the discourse of power. Tharoor, however, is aware that the colossal weight of colonialism cannot be compensated, and describes reparations as a tool not for empowerment but for atonement.\textsuperscript{30} The idea of ‘atonement’ carries the baggage of religion, and does not entail an immediately graspable idea. The matter of colonialism itself is a hotbed for ideological battles. While Tharoor paints a relatively simplistic thesis of colonialism as exploitation, which however is factually well founded, we know that the picture is much more nuanced. The national struggle itself had a myriad contesting ideologies, and various marginalised groups saw colonialism as an opportunity to finally escape the clutches of centuries of internal colonisation.

In terms of repatriation, the ‘Hindustan’ of British India is a changed entity—it is three nations now. Who does the Kohinoor belong to then? The last time it was in the sub-continent, it was at Lahore, which is geographically in Pakistan now. The counter-argument is, Pakistan, founded on the two-nation theory—how can it lay claim to what belonged to an empire governed by Sikh monarchs? Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, asserted a claim to the stone in 1976. He argued that the repatriation of the diamond would be symbolic of new international equity.\textsuperscript{31} Bhutto was executed soon after this, following a military coup in his country. Later, the Taliban in Afghanistan also made claims to the stone, for the stone was in their territory for a good seventy years during the Durrani dynasty, and Shah Shuja had to part with it under duress. Iran also has claims on

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Dalrymple and Anand, Kohinoor, p. 192.
\end{quote}
the gem, for the name is Persian, and Nadir Shah took it to Persia.

India, needless to say, has staked this claim severally—first in 1947, to retrieve the symbol of sovereignty (this symbolism having taken signification in Ranjeet Singh’s time). Also in 1947, there was a claim from Orissa because Ranjit Singh had apparently bequeathed it to the Jagannath temple. Kuldip Nayyar, the Indian High Commissioner at London, raised the demand again in 1990. In 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not raise the issue when he was in London, but under popular pressure, the government had to state that they would make all efforts to bring back the Kohinoor. Clearly, repatriation is not a matter of reparation, but of realpolitik—whichever government brings it back, becomes the symbolic victor apparently setting right a historical wrong.

Popular media opinion, however, remains that the Kohinoor defined the essence of India, that it was forcefully looted during the colonial era. Intimidation of the 10-year-old Maharaja, locking up his mother, and forcing him

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33 Andrew Marszal, ‘Britain did not Steal Most Famous Diamond in Crown Jewels from India,’ in *The Telegraph*, April 18, 2016  

to sign the Treaty of Lahore—this historical fact is the basis of this popular sentiment.

Dalrymple argues, in an interview, that if ‘British took the diamond by force, so did the Indians’.35 We have already seen the long history of Kohinoor substantiating that claim. Ranjit Singh, who is invoked again and again in nostalgic accounts, himself used torture to extract the diamond from Shah Shuja Durrani. On the other hand, Queen Victoria was ‘racked with guilt’36 with the way the diamond was taken from India. The current central government in India has a double-speak on the matter. In the Supreme Court in 2017, it was argued that repatriation is not possible on the following grounds—first, that as per the Treaty of Lahore of 1849, the Kohinoor was gifted to the Queen of England which invalidates the Indian claim of the Diamond being stolen. Apart from this, under the provisions of the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972, the Archaeological Survey of India is given the authority by law to retrieve antiquities that are illegally exported from India. However, a gift given to the queen cannot be acquired back. Furthermore, the act also restricts the government from negotiating with the British with regards to artefacts that are taken during the colonized era as it predates the act. On the other hand, the government has also issued a public statement that they would do everything in their power to

35 Ibid.
have the diamond repatriated. The court, in the light of this chided the central government. C.J.I. Khehar asked:

The Centre’s affidavit clearly says though it is not possible to make them return the diamond we will continue to explore it. Yes, they say it is not possible but through diplomatic channels it may be possible. What kind of petitions you are filing?

The symbolism of the stone has created a deadlock—all parties know that status quo on the matter will remain, and yet the politicians of South Asia stoke the matter—over the promise to bring back ‘the hare’ that Dalhousie had taken with him. David Cameron visited India in 2015 and as the topic of the Kohinoor rose, he replied that as per the British Museum Act of 1963, the artefacts that were installed in the museums of Britain could not be removed. He further explained the situation by stating that if one artefact is removed from the museum, there would be claims over the other artefacts and soon the British museums would become empty.

Though Britain would not agree to return the diamond; should they ever agree to give up their ownership over the diamond, can India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran decide who the diamond truly belongs to? One country claims ownership based on the diamond’s origin (India); where the other claims it based on its name (Iran); the third highlights

37 ‘Court Cannot Order Back Kohinoor Diamond; Try Diplomatic Channels: SC’ in Live Law
38 Darlymple and Anand, Kohinoor, Chapter 13.
the violence to take it from them (Afghanistan); while the fourth uses territorial argument (Pakistan). And Britain, feels it legally possesses the diamond. But can this diamond that has wandered through vast swathes of time and territory, actually belong to anyone? Physically it may be resting in the Tower of London, and yet in terms of signification, it lights up the history of a dozen dynasties.

**Conclusion**

The Kohinoor in its uncut and cut versions has merely mocked the monarchs and outlived them to recount the tale. That the politicians and popular media continue to be obsessed with the idea of repatriation, point to the militaristic nature of public discourse. That Ranjeet Singh, and his three successive successors, in their deaths, claimed several wives and slaves as Satis in their funerals is barely the matter of discussion; that Nadir Shah ground Delhi into dust is less important than the turban-exchange by which he obtained the gem; that Shah Jahan was imprisoned by his own son is only as spectacular as his peacock throne—is testimony to the fact that the world still harbours medieval violence in its underbelly. The stone rests best on the tiara of the Queen of England, in the vestiges of classical imperialism, while she ponders if she is nursing a curse; and the stone wonders, if it yet again, is cursing the nurse.

One cannot help but wonder how Brexit may still alter the travelogy of the Kohinoor.