


12:19 Lundi 30 mars 70%

## Topic 1: The Great Exhibition (1851) and the Koh-i-Noor



AI  
CHAT

**IA Narrative** Generate a text with the prompt: "Describe The Great Exhibition (1851) & The Koh-i-Noor"

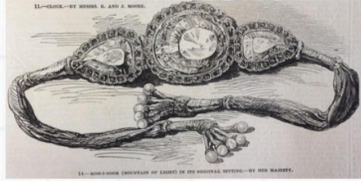
AI output: "The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was a landmark event held in London's Crystal Palace. It served as a grand showcase for the technological and cultural achievements of the British Empire and its global partners. The exhibition promoted a vision of international peace through free trade and industrial innovation.

The centerpiece of the Indian gallery was the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond, which was graciously presented to Queen Victoria to celebrate the unification of India under British rule. Visitors could admire this wealth of the colonies, which was presented as a symbol of a harmonious global network. The diamond, along with other raw materials, highlighted Britain's role as a leader of modern civilization, bringing order and prestige to the world through its benevolent administration."

**Authentic source**

**Beyond the gift: the british conquest Of the "Mountain of Light"**

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



The Koh-i-Noor, between two other diamonds, as it was originally presented to Queen Victoria

Here are the words that show a biased point of view : « international peace » « serves a grand showcase » « celebrate the unification » « symbol of a harmonious global network » « order » « prestige » « benevolent administration » those words illustrate that the AI uses the perspective of the British Government (this is the One-Sided biased), saying that this exhibition was a great symbol for the Empire and that the Koh-I-Noor was a gift delivered by India to the Queen Victoria. It also uses the Eurocentric red flags by describing the great exhibition as a symbol of progress but only for the British empire.

12:23 Lundi 30 mars

### Beyond the gift: the british conquest Of the "Mountain of Light"

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 terrors 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, so accepting the punitive Terms offered to him by the victorious Company. Within minutes, the flag of the Sikh kingdom was lowered and the British colours run up above the gatehouse of the fort.

The document signed by the ten-year-old maharaja 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 document 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.' When he heard that Duleep Singh had finally signed the document, the governor general, Lord Dalhousie, was triumphant. 'I had now "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 conquest in India. It has now found its proper resting place.'

Source: William Dalrymple, *Koh I Noor Worlds Most Famous Diamond*, 2016.



The Koh-i-Noor, between two other diamonds, as it was originally presented to Queen Victoria. Illustrated London News, 31 May 1851. NAL pressmark: PP.10. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

But the reality says otherwise : in *Koh I Noor Worlds Most Famous Diamonds* released in 2016, William Dalrymple explains to his reader the reality behind the gift of the famous Koh-I-Noor to the queen using the perspective of a ten year old maharaja of Punjab. In this text, Dalrymple expose the fact that this young men was forced and pressured to deliver the precious gift to the queen after being separated from his mother by the British orders; whereas the AI said that it was « graciously presented » to the Queen and that it was a « symbol of a harmonious global network ». The tone of this document is more violent according to the words « terrors » « frightened » « incarcerated » « long dead », etc... Therefore we can say that this doc aims to educate the reader (mostly student) on the reality of this event. Also, thanks to this doc we can notice that the AI omitted the fact that the child's parents (his mother) was a prisoner of the British Empire (« she was incarcerated in a palace outside the city). This exposes to us one of the violence of the British Government at this period, a fact the AI did not notice.

**Counter prompt : Describe the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the Koh-i-Noor diamond, but go beyond the official narrative. Highlight the untold story of this event by focusing on the perspectives of marginalized people. How did they experience the exhibition? What did they feel, and how did they live through it?**

**AI's response :**

The Great Exhibition of 1851 was presented as a dazzling celebration of human progress. Held in the iconic Crystal Palace in London, it showcased industrial machines, luxury goods,

raw materials, and cultural artifacts from across the globe—especially from territories under the control of the British Empire.

At the center of this spectacle sat one of its most famous—and controversial—objects: the Koh-i-Noor, a massive diamond taken from India and displayed as a symbol of imperial power.

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## The official story (what visitors were told)

To Victorian Britain, the exhibition was proof that they were at the peak of civilization. Millions of visitors walked through glittering halls filled with inventions like steam engines and telegraphs, alongside “exotic” objects from colonized lands. The message was clear: Britain was leading the world into a modern, enlightened future.

The Koh-i-Noor was framed as a trophy of this success—a gem that had supposedly found its rightful place under British protection after being acquired from the Sikh Empire.

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## The other story (rarely told)

Behind the glass and grandeur was a very different reality—one experienced by colonized people, workers, and those whose cultures were put on display without their consent.

### 1. Colonized people: turned into exhibits

For many individuals from colonized regions like India, Africa, and the Caribbean, the exhibition wasn't a celebration—it was a display of domination.

- Their crafts, textiles, and cultural objects were shown without proper credit or context.
- They were often described as “primitive” or “behind,” reinforcing racist hierarchies.
- Some were even brought to Britain and observed almost like living exhibits.

To them, the exhibition felt less like inclusion and more like being judged.

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### 2. The story of the Koh-i-Noor: loss, not pride

The Koh-i-Noor's journey is deeply tied to colonial violence.

## Travaux d'élèves - Topic 1

- It was taken after the annexation of Punjab in 1849.
- Officially, it was “gifted” to Queen Victoria—but in reality, this “gift” was signed over under political pressure by a child ruler, Maharaja Duleep Singh.

For many Indians, the diamond symbolized:

- Loss of sovereignty
- Humiliation of a defeated kingdom
- The stripping away of cultural and historical identity

While British crowds admired its brilliance, for others it represented something taken, not shared.

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### 3. Workers behind the spectacle

The Crystal Palace itself—though beautiful—was built by thousands of laborers.

- These workers often faced long hours and low pay.
- Their contributions were largely invisible compared to the elite organizers and inventors being celebrated.

Industrial progress, for them, didn't always mean better lives—it often meant harder, more dangerous work.

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### 4. Emotional reality: pride vs. pain

The exhibition created two completely different emotional worlds:

- For British elites and visitors: wonder, pride, excitement
- For colonized and marginalized people: alienation, anger, grief

Imagine seeing your homeland represented not as a place of culture and dignity, but as a resource to be extracted and displayed. Imagine seeing a sacred or historic object—like the Koh-i-Noor—placed behind glass, admired by those who now controlled it.

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## Why this matters today

The legacy of the Great Exhibition still shapes debates today:

- Should artifacts like the Koh-i-Noor be returned?
  - Who gets to tell history—and whose voices are left out?
  - How do we remember events that were both innovative and exploitative?
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## In short

The Great Exhibition of 1851 wasn't just a showcase of progress—it was also a stage where power was displayed, inequality was normalized, and many voices were silenced.

To some, it was a symbol of human achievement.

To others, it was a reminder of everything that had been taken from them.

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At first, the AI clearly affirmed that the Koh-i-Noor was a gift to the Queen, but then with the counter prompt it explains that « this “gift” was signed over under political pressure by a child ruler, Maharaja Duleep Singh. » With this counter prompt, the AI also highlighted the hard working conditions of the people behind the Great Exhibition and the racism colonized people would endure. What is interesting though, is that it has not only given the perspective of marginalized voices but it has underlined the difference between the perspective of the British Empire and the other actors, giving us clearly a look at both sides of the story. Now, we can understand that this exhibition was not a good representation for the colonized people.