

# Indian Tradition of Palm Print Authentication and the Globetrotting Journey of Kohinoor Diamond

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## Abstract

'Kohinoor' literally means 'mountain of light', yet the origin of the world's most famous diamond by that name is shrouded in darkness. The legend has it that Kohinoor is actually the *Syamantaka* diamond which finds a mention in *Bhāgavata Purāna* and is associated with Lord Kṛṣṇa. The gemologists believe that Kohinoor was excavated from South India's Kollur fields which were the site of only diamond mines across the world till 1725 CE. What is known for sure is, that in the early decades of 17th century, Kohinoor was in possession of the Prime Minister of Qutb Shahi Kingdom of Golconda, an erstwhile princely state in which Kollur diamond mines were located. From Golconda, Kohinoor followed a zig-zag trajectory, spanning many provinces and countries, exchanging hands between several rulers, sometimes in spirit of cooperation, other times as the fallout of an aggression. Two such transfers are documented as treaties of friendship, duly palm printed by sovereigns who received the coveted jewel. This communication highlights that during the medieval era, Indians were aware of palm prints being used as a mark of authentication of identity. In fact, palm prints subsequently turned out to be the precursors of fingerprints which, as we now know, are the most infallible means of identification.

**Key words:** Fingerprints, Kohinoor, Palm prints, Treaty.

## 1 Introduction

Since ancient times, palm print authentication has been intertwined with Indian culture (Sodhi and Kaur 2003, pp. 4–9). An Indian scripture, *Samudra śāstra*, compiled by a sage, Samudra Ṛṣi in 3102 BCE tells us a great deal about the patterns formed on palms by raised areas called ridges (Puri 1980, pp. 113). These ridges, which are the key to palm print identification, flow from one end of the hand to the other. However, the flow is not smooth, but is frequently interrupted by specific characteristics, such

as bifurcations, abrupt endings and dots. Further, each ridge characteristic possesses an intricate structure. The direction of ridge flow, the sequence of ridge characteristics and the intricacy of each ridge characteristic, when considered in totality, impart uniqueness to the overall ridge pattern on a specific palm. Indians were the first to realize that the pattern which the ridges make on the palm of any one hand is not replicated on any other hand (Sodhi and Kaur 2013, pp. 1–3).

In the last quarter of nineteenth century, Sir William Herschel, Magistrate of Jungipoor entered into an agreement with a local contractor, Rajyadhar Konai for supplying material for construction of roads. In order to

authenticate the covenant, Herschel asked Konai to impinge the impression of his right palm on the agreement. Konai obliged by the conditions of the agreement (Herschel 1916). Subsequently, it was realized that it is more advantageous to use thumb impression as against that of entire palm (Home Department Proceedings 1896). With that the palm printing and fingerprinting came into the public domain (Sodhi and Kaur 2003, pp. 126–136).

Two centuries before Herschel, the importance of palm printing was, no doubt, known, but its practice was restricted to the royalty. Many rulers of medieval India were in the habit of signing routine documents, but would impinge their palm prints on more important ones, especially if these were treaties or royal edicts. Concerning such Mughal *farmāns* (royal edicts), Hasan writes (1936, p. 92):

Three marks of distinction were established as a tradition by which the king, according to the rank of addressee and the extent of favor desired to be bestowed upon him, could exalt him by: (i) putting his signature in addition to the official seal, (ii) adding a line or two at the top in his own hand, (iii) putting the mark of the royal hand on the *farmān*. The mark of the royal hand was the highest distinction...I have not found any case in which it (palm print) was put on a *farmān* to any royal servant...

It is implied that during the 17th and 18th centuries, palm print signatures were put only on those official documents that were sent to individuals of status. Hence such deeds were outside the purview of commoners. References to documents bearing palm prints of Jahangir (Beveridge 1909, pp. 273–274) and Aurangzeb (Puri 1980, pp. 21–22) are available in literature. Shah Jahan too followed the practice of impressing palm prints on royal proclamations quite frequently (Bigley and Desai 1990, pp. 185). Figure 1A shows the palm impression of Shah Jahan on a *farmān* addressed to Raja Dalan Singh of Gidhour (in present day Bihar) (Havell 1904, pp. 15).

A good number of edicts palm printed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh are also available in archive records (Singh 2000, pp. 525). Figure 1B depicts one such impression which has been reproduced from a treaty (dated April 13, 1827) between Ranjit Singh and Fateh Singh, the ruler of Kapurthala (in present day Punjab) (Singh 2001, pp. 149).

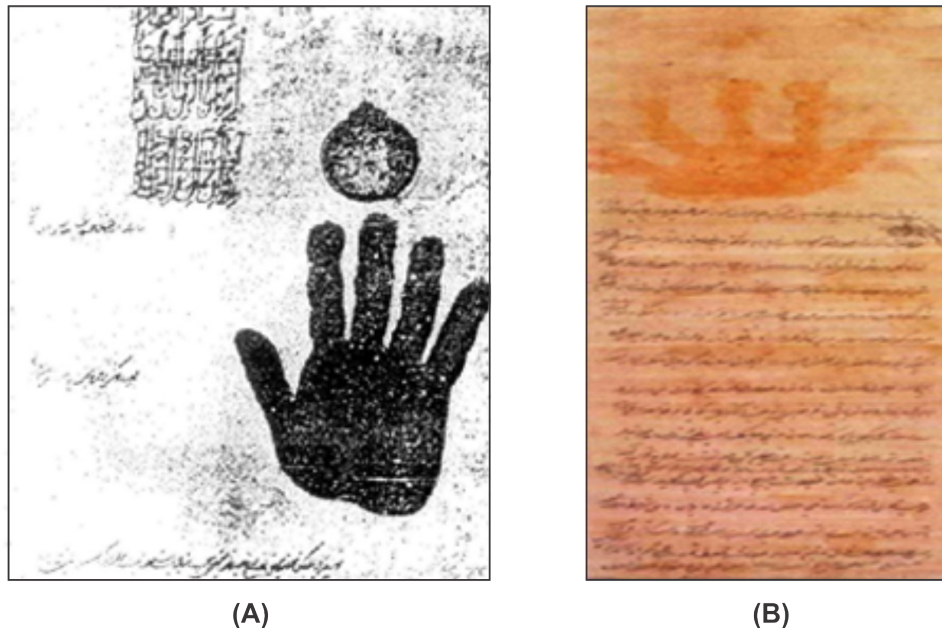
## 2 Association of Kohinoor with palm prints

The adventurous journey of Kohinoor began in 1656 from Golconda and traversing successively through Delhi, Herat (in Persia), Kabul and Lahore, the diamond finally reached London in 1850. Twice during this journey, the exchange of gem was accompanied by treaties that were palm printed: first time by Shah Jahan, when the pearl was passed on from Qutb Shahi dynasty to Mughal dynasty and second time, about one and a half a century later, by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, when it was bequeathed from the Kingdom of Kabul to the Kingdom of Lahore.

### 2.1 The first authentication

If palm printing the treaties was diligence on the part of Shah Jahan, collection of jewels was his passion (Dalrymple and Anand 2016, pp. 24–42). It was because of this passion that he was aspiring to extend his suzerainty over the Golconda diamond mines. He was aware that Mir Jumla, the Prime Minister of Golconda, was a shrewd diamond merchant. What no one knew, however, was that Mir Jumla had extracted the Kohinoor gem from the Kollur mines and, without informing the monarch, Abdullah Qutb Shah, had kept the pearl in his possession (Varma 2018). He was astute enough to perceive when and where to use the prized item for his personal advancement (Sukumar).

Mir Jumla got this opportunity in 1656, when Shah Jahan deputed his son, Aurangzeb to besiege the Qutb Shahi royal family in Golconda fort. By that time Mir Jumla's relationship with Qutb Shahis had started turning sour. Moreover, he had begun to feel that he possessed too high an acumen to be the premier of a small kingdom like Golconda. It was time to switch sides (Dalrymple and Anand 2016, pp. 24–42). He befriended Aurangzeb and started negotiating peace between the two parties. As a part of the deal, Abdullah Qutb Shah consented to marry his daughter, Padishah Bibi Sahiba to Aurangzeb's eldest son, Muhammad Mirza; Shah Jahan lifted the siege of Golconda fort, sent a robe of honor to the Qutb Shahi family, along with a "treaty of friendship stamped with his hand dipped in vermilion"; Mir Jumla gifted Kohinoor to Shah Jahan and was promptly appointed as Prime Minister of Mughal empire (Hansen 1981, pp. 173–174).



**Figure 1** Palm print of (A) Shah Jahan on a *farmān* and (B) Maharaja Ranjit Singh on a treaty.

Shah Jahan embedded Kohinoor into his peacock throne (Stronge 2004, pp. 52–65). In 1739, Nadir Shah invaded Delhi, during the reign of Muhammad Shah (also called *Rangila*), the seventh generation descendant of Shah Jahan, and carried away Kohinoor to his capital city, Herat in Persia.

## 2.2 The second authentication

Nadir Sah was murdered in 1747, but his most trusted General, Ahmad Shah Abdali (or Durrani) saved his family from massacre. As a goodwill gesture, the wife of Nadir Shah bestowed the gift of Kohinoor diamond to Abdali (Axworthy 2006, pp. 322–323). Soon thereafter, Abdali established his sovereignty over Kabul, with his rule extending up to Peshawar. After his death, Kohinoor passed on to his son, Timur Shah and then to his grandson, Shah Shuja (Davenport 1897, pp. 57–59).

By the time Shuja ascended the throne in 1800, the Durrani empire had started crumbling, while that of Maharaja Ranjit Singh had spread out from its capital city, Lahore to the very borders of Peshawar. Shuja proved to be a weak king and in 1809 he was dethroned and forced into exile by a rebel, Shah Mahmoud. Leaving his wife, Wafa Begum under the protection of Ranjit Singh (Burnes 1894, pp. 309–310), Shuja wandered from place to place, look-

ing for allies who would assist him in regaining his kingdom. However, rather than consolidating his regnum, he fell into the hands of Ata Muhammad Khan, the Governor of Kashmir, who put him under arrest (Faiz 1912, pp. 122). It was then that Wafa Begum negotiated a deal with her host, Ranjit Singh that if the latter would rescue and bring back her husband, she would give him the Kohinoor (Davenport 1897, pp. 57–59).

In the spring of 1813, the forces of Ranjit Singh defeated Ata Muhammad Khan, freed Shuja from captivity and brought him safely to Lahore. Initially, Shuja was reluctant to fulfill the promise made by his wife, but later agreed to handover Kohinoor to Ranjit Singh in return for a formal treaty of friendship, a few lakh rupees and assistance in getting back his throne. Ranjit Singh did enter into a treaty of friendship with shuja and, ‘in order to validate his testimony, impinged his palm, coated with a paste of saffron, on the treaty’. The following is recorded in the memoirs of Shuja (Shah 1836) :

Uttering words of friendship and unity, bringing a written document much to the same effect, *dipping his hand into saffron water to print a paw-mark on the treaty*, swearing by his sacred book, the Granth, and by his Guru, Baba Nanak, with his hand on the blade of his

sword, that any troops deemed necessary by His Majesty for the reconquest of the province of Kabul and the punishment of the scoundrel rebels will be provided by the Sikh government (*italics ours*).

Finally on June 1, 1813, Ranjit Singh got the possession of Kohinoor (Prinsep 1834, pp. 97–98). After the death of Ranjit Singh, Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General, seized Kohinoor from the royal family of Punjab and in 1850 presented it to Queen Victoria. At present, the diamond is on display at the Tower of London.

### 3 Conclusion

Indians knew about the relevance and significance of the science of identification before any other civilization had an inkling of it. In the medieval era they became cognizant of the fact that the palm print of each person is unique. Several edicts and treaties of that era bear the palm print of the author instead of or in addition to his seal/signature. In this historical review, we have cited examples of two such treaties which were stamped by the palm prints of sovereigns, as marks of their identification, as well as of stately proclamation, while receiving the Kohinoor diamond.

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