



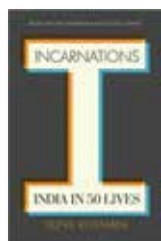
## A people's history

**ANDREW ROBINSON** delves into a welcome set of biographies telling the stories of leading figures from India's diverse past

### **Incarnations: India in 50 Lives**

by Sunil Khilnani

Allen Lane, 656 pages, £30



Historical studies of India as a civilisation tend to focus on either the colonial period and after or on the pre-colonial period. They also generally neglect biography, especially the lives of pre-colonial

Indians. Sunil Khilnani's wide-ranging new book, based on a current BBC radio series, *Incarnations: India in 50 Lives*, is therefore welcome and refreshing, not to mention appealingly free of the post-colonial academic jargon that ghettoises India. With few preliminaries or much narrative thread, it offers 50 short biographical essays arranged in chronological order, beginning in the fifth century BC with the Buddha – the first recognisable individual in Indian history – and finishing in the present day with the industrialist Dhirubhai Ambani.

Most essays kick off with a vignette of the relevance in modern India of the subject. Many are rulers, such as Ashoka and Akbar, or political figures, including Mohandas Gandhi, Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Indira Gandhi. But there are also essays on social reformers such as the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, innovators such as the industrialist Jamsetji Tata and artists such as the poet Kabir and the writer Rabindranath Tagore. Four out of the 50 were born outside India, including the Calcutta-based orientalist William Jones.

Not every choice is a shoo-in, though almost all are valid and interesting. The problem, inevitably, is with the omissions. Khilnani remarks that he hopes "readers will argue strenuously about the 50 names". No Ravi Shankar, India's most widely known classical musician? No RK Narayan, India's greatest English-language novelist? Defensible, perhaps.

But to me it seems odd to not have an essay on Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, especially given Khilnani's expertise on him. And to omit any modern scientist is strange: CV Raman, India's first Nobel laureate in science, should have been included; so probably, should Vikram Sarabhai, the founder of its space programme.

The most insightful and authoritative essays – for instance, those on Mahatma Gandhi and his opponent, the lawyer Bhimrao Ambedkar – reflect Khilnani's background as a professor of politics. He begins his take on Gandhi at a screening of a film about the plot to kill the leader in 1948. As the film's assassin shoots Gandhi, the Gujarati audience goes wild – with applause. "It is right that Gandhi should have enemies, and unsurprising that he provokes so many angles of attack," writes Khilnani, and then convincingly explains why. Less successful are his takes on artists, which feel less assured. Nevertheless, this captures the vitality, diversity and uniqueness of India's civilisation in an original and stimulating format.

**Andrew Robinson** is the author of *India: A Short History* (Thames & Hudson, 2014)



**Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, is one of the 50 Indian individuals to feature in Sunil Khilnani's new book**

'Indian history' of the American west in the form of Dee Brown's iconic *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970). Thinking in such terms, Page Smith's book leaves a lot out (we don't hear much about indigenous Americans pre-contact, and although there is a last chapter entitled 'After Wounded Knee' there is little coverage of Native Americans in the 20th century).

On its dust jacket, *Tragic Encounters* promises "a new slant on a very old subject". I'd argue the converse: namely, that it offers an old slant on a new subject – clearly illuminating the promise of people's history but also pointing to the necessity of extending the cast of eyewitnesses to include indigenous voices.

**Karen Jones** is senior lecturer in history at the University of Kent

Crawford seems more interested in the stories that circle his buildings rather than the buildings themselves. As a result the book gains focus when talking about places rather than architecture, and the actual bricks and mortar are rarely more than sketchily drawn. This is a shame, as his selection is ambitious, taking in sites such as Akhetaten in ancient Egypt, Cordoba in Moorish Spain and Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City. In the end, however, he misses an opportunity to bring these diverse examples together with a convincing argument for why we build, and how architecture informs our lives.

**Leo Hollis** is the author of books including *Cities are Good for You* (Bloomsbury, 2013)