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.

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