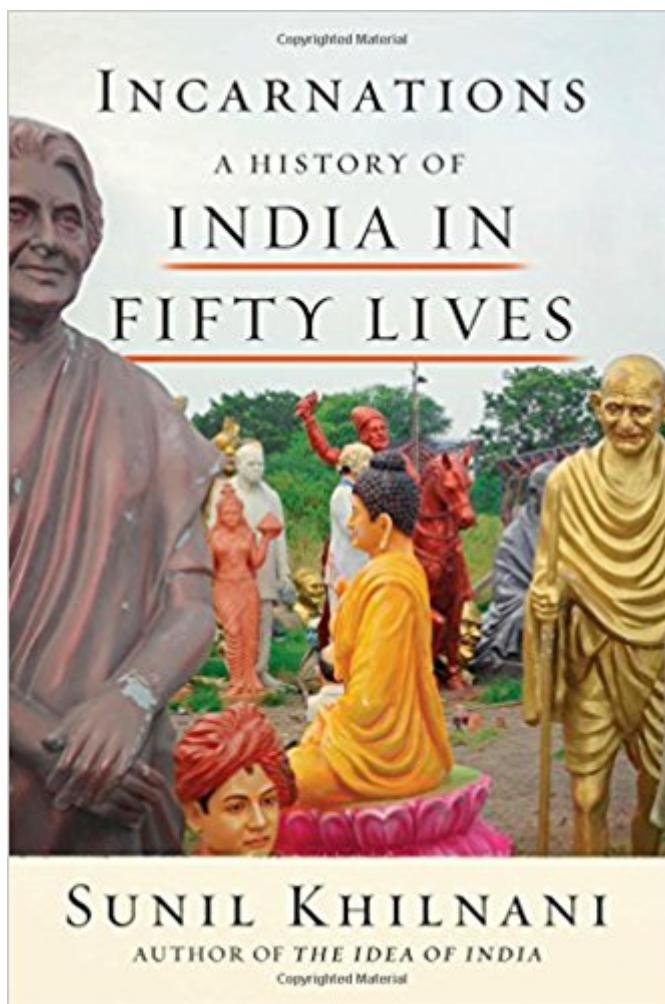


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# Incarnations: A History Of India In Fifty Lives



## Synopsis

An entertaining and provocative account of India's past, written by one of the country's leading thinkers. For all India's myths, its sea of stories and moral epics, Indian history remains a curiously unpeopled place. In *Incarnations*, Sunil Khilnani fills that space, bringing to life fifty extraordinary men and women who changed both India and the world. Journeying across India in pursuit of their stories—visiting slum temples, ayurvedic call centers, Bollywood studios, textile mills, and Mughal fortresses—Khilnani offers trenchant portraits of emperors, warriors, philosophers, artists, iconoclasts, and entrepreneurs. Some of these historical figures are famous. Some are unjustly forgotten. And all, Khilnani convinces us, are deeply relevant today. As their rich and surprising lives take the reader through twenty-five hundred winding years of Indian and world history, Khilnani brings wit, feeling, historical rigor, and uncommon insight to dilemmas that extend from ancient times to our own. We encounter the Buddha not as the usual beatific icon but as a radical young social critic. We meet the ancient Sanskrit linguist who inspires computer programmers today. We hear the medieval poets, ribald and profound, who mocked rituals and caste and whose voices resonate in contemporary poetry. And we see giants of the twentieth-century Independence movement—among them Mohandas Gandhi; Ambedkar, the Untouchable lawyer turned constitution maker; and the legendary singer M. S. Subbulakshmi—not as cardboard cutouts but as complex and striving human beings. At once a provocative and sophisticated reinterpretation of India's history and an incisive commentary on its present-day conflicts and struggles, *Incarnations* is an authoritative, sweeping, and often moving account of a nation coming into its own.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A whirlwind tour of roughly 2,500 years of Indian history in 50 fast-paced chapters. . . . Khilnani's writing is easy to read, yet authoritative. He has spent much of his career studying-India . . . [and] strives to connect the lives and ideas of his subjects to one another and to contemporary India . . . Readers can dip in and out of chapters randomly without being confused, but *Incarnations* is most rewarding when read from start to finish . . . To my mind the best thing Khilnani has done is to leave the reader wanting more." —Vikas Bajaj, *The New York Times Book Review*

"An incisive work of popular history . . . undercutting, irreverent, and impish. It attempts to show, through prodigious but lightly worn scholarship, how complex and heterodox the Indian past was, and how it has been, and continues to be, constructed . . . Khilnani offers a fresh, cosmopolitan way of examining the Indian past. Everywhere he looks he sees rivers of influence and thought and ideas."

—Karan Mahajan, *The New Yorker* "Beautifully written with both scholarship and an enviably light touch, thoughtfully constructed and enviably erudite in its wide-ranging references, and as much at ease discussing higher mathematics and philosophy as politics and art, *Incarnations* is a major work by one of India's most impressive minds, and the best possible introduction to both the complexities and the charms of Indian history." —William Dalrymple, *The Guardian*

"Incisive and elegantly written . . . A work of distinction." —John Keay, *The Times Literary Supplement* "Revelatory, bold and contemplative . . . Scholarly and accessible, lively and deeply serious . . . Is this simply cashing in on the idea behind the blockbuster *A History of the World in 100 Objects* by Neil MacGregor? Can anyone ever match the erudition and verve of the erstwhile director of the British Museum? Yes and yes. And though this may be heretical, at times Khilnani may even have surpassed him." —The Independent "A tour de force of intellectual history, engagingly written." —Financial Times "Khilnani is a rare blend of scholar and cracking travel writer . . . This exceptional book serves as a further reminder of India's great strengths."

—Sunday Times (UK) "It is hard to think of this mammoth task being executed any better. Even those who know Indian history well will be introduced to figures they did not know—and discover new things about familiar figures." —The Telegraph "Fuelled by a quiet, relentless curiosity and an extraordinary ability to capture the sweep of history, *Incarnations* is an essential, and timely, read . . . It is also an exceptionally liberating intellectual journey to take. Mr. Khilnani's prose is light and fast-paced . . . the solid labour of travel, research and meetings with other scholars as well as interviewees builds a stronger foundation for *Incarnations* than most non-fiction books about India can claim. And a more entertaining one than most, too."

—Business Standard "This is a terrific book. Each biography runs into 10-13 pages, and

though the prose is deceptively easy, you probably want to take your time as you savour the book, perhaps reading a piece daily. Or even reading and rereading it in this fashion for a long time to come. I know I will be placing a copy with each of my children so that they may know, in these anxiety-inducing times, what it truly means to be Indian." *BookMint (India)*"Khilnani's choices are spirited, relevant, and aimed to provoke 'pressing contemporary questions' . . . immensely readable." *Kirkus Reviews*"An idiosyncratic and lively journey across 2,500 years of Indian history, offering bite-size essays on the lives of 50 exemplary figures whose achievements and afterlives have influenced contemporary Indian identity . . . Khilnani's essays are provocative and serious, a worthy rebuttal to the image of Indian history as 'curiously unpeopled.'" *Publishers Weekly* "How does one capture the multifaceted complexities of a country like India? Historian Khilnani presents a novel approach: weave a tapestry of 50 figures from the country's rich and ancient history that serves not only as an innovative introduction to the world's largest democracy but also a gauge to evaluate how that past informs the present . . . The well-researched yet short chapters cover a lot of ground with ease, and Khilnani succeeds in achieving his goal of emphasizing the continued relevance of history."

*Poornima Apte, Booklist*

Sunil Khilnani is the author of the acclaimed and influential *The Idea of India* (FSG, 1998). Formerly the Starr Foundation Professor and Director of the South Asia Studies Program at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C., he is currently the Avantha Professor and Director of the India Institute at King's College London. He is married to the writer Katherine Boo.

Picture a stretch of territory of nearly 1.9 million square miles, housing 1.7 billion people. These people speak 26 major languages and more than 1,500 lesser languages and dialects. How can such a place be a single nation? In fact, in recent years, that territory has consisted of three countries: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. But historically it was, in the view of historians and geographers, just one country. That's India. 2,500 years of Indian historyIn his engrossing new book, *Incarnations: India in Fifty Lives*, the eminent Indian historian Sunil Khilnani sets out to paint an impressionistic history of that endlessly complex country. The 50 lives he sketches in a series of brief essays span the full 2,500 years of the subcontinent's discoverable history. Khilnani's subjects include poets, religious leaders, emperors, artists, actors, film directors, social activists, political leaders, industrialists, and more.

The effect is dizzying. In his attempt to convey a sense of India as a whole, he highlights instead the many, many small parts that make the country appear implausible. In the subcontinent, the whole is not greater than the parts. Without question, India has produced a great many gifted and influential individuals. From the Buddha and the Emperor Ashoka to Mohandas Gandhi, India has made its presence known to the world. These three towering figures are all included in *Incarnations*. Most of the rest are unfamiliar to most Western audiences. Even having spent time in India and read some of its history, I recognized no more than a handful of the 47 others portrayed in the book. Unsparing portraits of India's greats Khilnani's selection of subjects is unorthodox. For example, the country's founding Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is missing. Many of the others portrayed in the book are unlikely to figure in anyone else's list of India's greatest individuals. "If you don't yet know the arresting stories [told here], he writes, that is perhaps not accidental. Instead of Nehru and other latter-day personalities whom others might include, he sketches the lives of such individuals as Malik Ambar, a gifted seventeenth-century Abyssinian slave turned Deccan warrior king and Chidambaram Pillai, a dogged Tamil nationalist who took on the steamship might of the British Empire. It's unlikely that even a well-educated Indian in any field but history would recognize either of these names. *Incarnations* is no celebration of India's greatness. Khilnani's portrayal of his subjects is often merciless. Virtually every one of the essays in the book shows their dark side. Mohandas Gandhi, for instance, is portrayed in a particularly unflattering light. But so are most of the other people included in the book. Don't read *Incarnations* expecting white-washed Indian history. Diversity squared The United States today pictures itself as ethnically diverse. The Census Bureau reports that more than 350 languages are spoken in American homes. But only a relative handful communicate exclusively in any language but English or Spanish.

America's diversity pales beside that of India. There, 29 languages are each spoken by at least one million people. The top 10 are spoken by at least 33 million. Indians who can carry on conversations in five or six languages may still be unable to communicate with a majority of their countrymen. In religion, too, the two countries contrast sharply. In the US today, two major variants of Christianity encompass most of the population. India is "the only place on earth where each of the world's four great religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) has at different times ruled large areas. Even today, all four claim large numbers of faithful in India. Sunil Khilnani's *Incarnations* will help you

gain a sense of the depth of Indian history and the breadth of its differences. It won't help you understand India, because no one can do that.

A thoughtful compilation of personalities who made an impact on India and outside over 2,500 years. It is a nice way to present the impact they made rather than their life stories which are well known. The author has also chosen a few lesser known persons, who nevertheless left a big impact on the nation.

I was interested in reading a good history of India, and was recommended this book by a friend. I really enjoyed it and found it a good way to get a broad view of India as told through the lives of 50 people throughout Indian history. Each story was an easy read and moved fast, and it was a good way to cover a lot of interesting ground in an easy to read way.

Vignettes from India's long history, written with great style and efficiency.

Extremely well written book. Very entertaining.

Very good overview in a "living" history of India's complicated cultural past and present.

Quite enlightening and insightful with information about rare Indian individuals left out of history books.

Excellent work by Khilnani. A good place to start if seeking an overview of India's history.

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