

the Chinese people's trust in it by eradicating ills like corruption.

- Reviving Chinese nationalism and patriotism, pride in being Chinese.
- Overseeing an economic revolution designed to build a moderately prosperous Chinese society with a per capita GDP by 2021 of US \$10,000 and a fully modernized, developed, rich, powerful, and respected China by 2049—the 100th anniversary of the Communist regime.

For information on Xi and contemporary China, Allison relies a bit too much on China watchers like former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the late authoritarian ruler of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, about whom he cowrote a rather laudatory book. Allison's research would have also benefited from the following: Robert S. Ross, and Øystein Tunsjø, eds., *Strategic Adjustment and the Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia*; and Julian Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China*.⁴ These nuanced works examine China's international geostrategic policy in and of itself, and do not seek to suggest strategies to “control” China.

Allison's book is designed to bolster American self-importance and displays little of the outside-the-box thinking that the present complex international situation requires. Before theorizing the Thucydides's Trap, Allison should have looked at Laurie M. Johnson Bagby's article in the journal *International Organization*, “The Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations.”⁵ The book should have been rigorously fact-checked. For instance, America was not the “birthplace” of the automobile (9). Gottfried Daimler, a German, manufactured the first, complete with an internal combustion engine, in 1886. By saying the Greeks “essentially invented philosophy, drama, architecture, sculpture, history, naval warfare, and more” (28), Allison ignores the great Asian traditions of India and China, which is decidedly odd for a book that seeks to shed light on China.

In short, this book tells us more about the insecurities of American foreign policy “experts” than it does about China's ambitions. Taking the long view, Chinese civilization has been around for 3,500 years, while the US has existed for less than one-seventh of that time. Who, then, is the real emerging power of Thucydides's Trap? ■

NOTES

1. I have modified Allison's English here for the sake of correct grammar.
2. John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (London: Allen Lane 2007); Robert L. Tignor, et al., *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World: From the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present*, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013); and Jeremy Black, *War and the World: Military Power and the Fate of Continents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
3. Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (London: Granta, 1997).
4. Robert S. Ross and Øystein Tunsjø, eds., *Strategic Adjustment and the Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017); Julian Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).
5. Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, “The Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations,” *International Organization* 48, no.1 (1994): 131–153.

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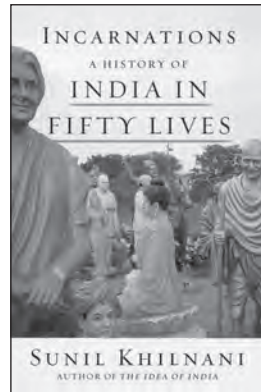
Incarnations, a History of India in Fifty Lives

BY SUNIL KHILNANI

NEW YORK: FARRAR, STRAUS, AND GIROUX, 2017

464 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0374537210, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Tommy Lamont



In his latest book, *Incarnations*, Sunil Khilnani, director of the Kings College London India Institute, helps broaden and deepen our understanding of and appreciation for the rich history of South Asia, particularly India. With the same smooth, bold, and engaging style that characterized his excellent 1997 award-winning book *The Idea of India*, Khilnani once again weaves an original narrative of the complex story of the Indian subcontinent. In *Incarnations*, the author deftly and concisely explains the lives and contributions of

fifty remarkable individuals, some of whom are well-known, such as Gandhi, Akbar, and the Buddha; and others who are less familiar, at least in the West, such as Malik Ambar and Chidambaram Pillai.

The portraits of each figure in *Incarnations* are surprisingly comprehensive, informative, and compelling, despite each one being only a few pages long. Indeed, Khilnani succinctly provides the essential details of each individual and then offers an astute analysis of their significance, while nicely combining primary and secondary sources. After reading each selection, I felt far more knowledgeable about these fascinating men and women, even those who I thought I already understood. And I came away from each selection wanting to learn more about these people, a reaction that I hope, and suspect, our students will have.

Indeed, even if students of world or South Asian history do not read the book in its entirety, *Incarnations* will prove useful to students as a terrific resource that can be consulted time and again. It is readily accessible to both eleventh- and twelfth-grade high school students and college and university students of all levels, and some of them may even enjoy the material more than instructors (such as me) who might be less interested in the many contemporary references that pop up frequently in this book, including ones to popular culture (e.g., Netflix), recent events (e.g., legalization of same-sex marriage in the US), and current figures (e.g., Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State). While *Incarnations* might not be ideal as a textbook for a course on Indian history, it would be an excellent companion text, especially at the college level. This is the type of book that I would recommend to a young person who is already familiar with the general outlines of the history of South Asia and is preparing to study more about the region or spend significant time there.

As current at one level as Khilnani's approach and narrative are, he demonstrates an appropriate respect for the deep and varied cultural and intellectual traditions of the subcontinent during the past two millennia. He has chosen an amazingly diverse group of fifty individuals to discuss, and he makes clear that these individuals are anything but lightweights. Represented in *Incarnations* is an array of original thinkers and doers of all sorts—intellectuals, political leaders, entrepreneurs, scientists, artists, and insiders and outsiders. Some historians will surely quibble with

Khilnani's list, especially the absence of Nehru, Tilak, Gopal, and other political figures. But I think that the author is right to leave these figures out and give more space to the often-forgotten figures who perhaps had as much of an impact as those aforementioned political figures. It certainly makes for more interesting reading.

The accessibility and appeal of *Incarnations* are not only in the content that Khilnani provides, strong as it is, but also in his prose. Khilnani, like his spouse, Katherine Boo, and his friend William Dalrymple, knows how to tell a story and knows the subcontinent extremely well, from the region's geography and topography to the range of peoples who inhabit it. In his discussion of Bursa Munda, the late nineteenth-century Adavasi (tribal) leader and rebel, Khilnani describes conducting research while driving in remote areas of Maharashtra's interior where Munda fought and died more than a hundred years ago: "On the roads in and out of the Katkari village of Tamnath, the undulating landscape looks like a body shaved before surgery."

Of course, the subcontinent is a place where historical memory and myth are used today by people of all stripes to justify everything from terrible violence to changes in school textbooks. Khilnani takes advantage of this to make each historical figure come alive, usually by using his subjects' own words and giving the reader the sense that history is always fluid and linked to the present and the future, as well as to the past. He makes his subjects relevant by connecting them to today's South Asian world, sometimes by describing related historical sites, including temples and battlefields, and sometimes by explaining his subjects' influence on later seminal figures, or vice versa.

For example, the author begins his entry on Shivaji, the seventeenth-century Maratha warrior and thorn in the side of the Mughals, by describing how today this controversial figure inspires fear among more recent immigrants to the state of Maharashtra and its capital, Mumbai, who are often targets of Shivaji devotees, particularly members of *Shiv Sena* ("Army of Shivaji"). And when discussing Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya, the early twentieth-century chief administrator of the princely state of Mysore, Khilnani suggests watching a celluloid version of this unusual person, portrayed in the 1972 Kannada-language blockbuster film *Bangarada Manushya* (*The Golden Man*).

Western readers will find lots of useful reference points in Khilnani's narratives, which help peel away further a frequently and long-believed myth in the West that Indian civilization is characterized by little more than poverty, violence, and superstition. In the section on Kautilya, a political theorist from the fifth century BCE, the author explains how Kautilya advised his Mauryan overlords to pursue "a ruthless, if strategic, expansionary policy . . . for the state," advice that, Khilnani points out, is strikingly similar to advice given 2,000 years later by Machiavelli in *The Prince* to his Renaissance patrons. In the same entry, the author compares the 2014 US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's report on "enhanced interrogation techniques" with Kautilya's catalog of the "eighteenfold torture" recommended for traitors and other threats to a ruler:

Nine strokes with a cane, twelve whiplashes, two thigh encirclings, twenty strokes with a nakta mala stick, thirty-two slaps, two scorpion bindings, two hangings-up, needle in the hand, burning one joint of a finger of one who has drunk gruel, heating in the sun for one day for one who has drunk fat, and a bed of balbaja points on a winter night.

Khilnani also makes very good use of quotes by both the subjects of the book and historians of South Asia. Not surprisingly, he offers many excerpts of Iqbal's poetry and Tagore's verses. The author also digs even deeper for suitable quotes from some of the more ancient figures in this collection. He shares with the reader the following order issued by the famed Emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE:

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I have made the following arrangement for the reporters: the reporters may appear before me for reporting the affairs of the people at any time and place, whether I am engaged in eating or am in the harem or in the bed chamber or on a promenade or in a carriage or on the march.

Our students may giggle at the images evoked by the passage. But it surely raises some interesting questions about leadership that will provoke important discussion.

In a nod to outside influences upon South Asia and India, the author includes in *Incarnations* a few non-Indians. One of them is Annie Besant, who came to reject the straightjacket of Victorian Britain and embrace almost every challenge to that order, whether it was Irish independence or the occult. Besant, whom George Bernard Shaw called Britain's finest orator, helped launch the Theosophy movement, which Khilnani describes as "the intellectual flypaper of the Victorian Age" because it ensnared Western intellectuals with its rejection of established Christianity in favor of well-intentioned but muddled notions of Asian mysticism. Besant, intrigued by what little she understood about Hinduism and Buddhism, left her homeland in 1893 to journey to India in pursuit of a more meaningful existence. She would become a forceful advocate for Indian independence and a gadfly pestering the British government.

The inclusion of non-Indians Besant and William Jones, the latter a quirky lower official in the British East India Company, who, in the late eighteenth century, lived in Calcutta and became perhaps the "greatest Orientalist of his time," speaks to Khilnani's view of India as a "global civilization" and a "global culture" that has both absorbed aspects of other cultures and influenced them. It also likely reflects Khilnani's desire to reach a broad audience. Indeed, *Incarnations* is more ambitious than most books that purport to possess concise, authoritative mini-biographies of a society's seminal figures, collections that usually consist of what really should be termed "national heroes." *Incarnations* is instead an audacious and successful attempt to place India in the context of both world history and the contemporary world. Khilnani succeeds in showing that India has had an impact well beyond its immediate neighborhood. In that sense, *Incarnations* is part of India's "coming-out party," which so many Indian writers have been both celebrating and cashing in on.

The difference is that Khilnani's book is well worth every penny, whereas too many recent books on India are little more than piles of statistics that are soon out of date or full of dubious predictions and platitudes about the "greatness" and "relevance" of India. Indeed, some other fine collections of important historical figures of South Asia have been written recently. Yet none of them come close to being as interesting, insightful, or fun as *Incarnations*. With *Incarnations*, Sunil Khilnani has produced a superb book that should be read by anyone who wishes to better understand South Asia, especially India. ■

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