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JESSE ROSS KNUTSON: *The Essence of Politics. Kamandaki*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2021. 328 pp. [[but also introduction on pp. vii-xxxi]] ISBN 978-0-674-97576-7. \$35.00, £28.95, €31.50

With SHELDON POLLOCK serving as General Editor, the *Murty Classical Library of India* subscribes to the mission “to present the greatest literary works of India from the past two millennia to the largest readership in the world”. The original works covered in the *Murty Library* use a variety of languages, with Sanskrit being only one of them. As of February 2021, JESSE KNUTSON’s book (no. 28) is the second to last one. In the realm of Sanskrit *dharmasāstra* (law) and *arthaśāstra* (governance) works, it comes second, after PATRICK OLIVELLE’s edition and translation of the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* (no. 20). The editors and the generous donor Rohan Murty are to be congratulated on these two volumes (as, I guess, on all the other 27 ones). I am thankful for KNUTSON’s translation of the *Nītisāra* by Kāmandaki. So far, I had only known about the *Nītisāra* through SINGH’s (2010) coverage, but never ventured a close look.

It is unavoidable to write about Kāmandaki’s *Nītisāra* in relation to Kauṭilya’s *Arthaśāstra*. The latter is a manual on wise kingship, written about 2000 years ago. The *Nītisāra* is younger, by five to eight centuries. The mystery of the lost *Arthaśāstra* has puzzled scholars for a long time. While the existence of the text was well-known through the centuries, a manuscript turned up “sometime before 1905”, after a gap of about 1000

years.¹ KNUTSON (p. vii-viii) offers a new explanation. While the *Arthaśāstra* is “an encyclopedia of political economy and statecraft, a reference book by and for professionals”, the *Nītisāra* “foregrounded formal elegance and accessibility, thereby acquiring a degree of traction over its predecessor. It can be read quickly and on-the-go—a perfect introduction to the field for young princes, upstart warlords, or anyone else making moves, from the spy lurking in the shadows to the flashy court poet. Its popularity may have contributed to the centuries-long disappearance of the *Arthaśāstra* itself, the founding work of ancient Indian political theory.”

Of course, one might propose other theories for the missing *Arthaśāstra*. Perhaps, Kauṭilya did not offer sound economic advice? After all, this foremost economic and political theorist envisioned heavy handed involvement of the government in economic affairs, in particular government superintendents for all areas of the economy. It is unlikely that entrepreneurship could have developed its full potential in this highly-regulated economy. Perhaps, Kauṭilya’s treatise disappeared when the kingdoms heeding his advice came under pressure from kingdoms that would be less socialist?

To my mind, KNUTSON promises the reader too much when he links the field of *arthaśāstra* to “thrilling accounts of intrigue and luxurious living” (p. viii). A flavour of intrigue is found only occasionally and briefly, for example a killer in the queen’s quarter, killing with poisoned girdles or anklet-jewel on p. 91. It seems that KNUTSON (p. viii) finds Kāmandaki’s

¹ See OLIVELLE (2013, pp. 1, -53).

book more “readable” and more “captivating” than Kauṭilya’s one. Of course, these criteria are somewhat subjective and I, for one, would submit that the *Arthaśāstra* is quite entertaining and surely readable. To my liking, the *Nītisāra* contains too many lists of virtues spread along the way. KNUTSON (p. xii) tells us that “in the age’s atmosphere of subtle strategy and careful calculation, the ruler’s personality—his entire psychological and intellectual makeup—became a newly keen object of interest. *The Essence* reads at times like self-help literature for the rich and powerful or the chronically ambitious.” Indeed, the *Nītisāra*’s fifth chapter deals with the “conduct of the king and his retinue”. The subject matter treated there is virtually absent from the *Arthaśāstra*. The clever, modest, and occasionally sycophantic behaviour of court underlings is dealt with in detail.

As an economist, I find the 16 kinds of alliances interesting, that Kāmandaki describes in chapter 9. Consider, in particular, the social-exchange approach of the “recompense” alliance (*pratīkāra*) briefly explained in NS (*Nītisāra*) 9.10-11:

The recompense alliance is formed based on the thought: “I did him a favor before, and he will do the same for me.” Thinking, “I will do him a favor and he will do the same for me,” Rama made the recompense alliance with Sugriva. (KNUTSON)

Interestingly, Kāmandaki refers to the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa more often than to Viṣṇugupta (Kauṭilya), to whom he pays homage in NS 1.2-6. Remember the lost *Arthaśāstra* mentioned above.

Kāmandaki especially highlights the united alliance (*saṅgatasandhi*, NS 9.6cd-8):

The united alliance is preceded by a friendship formed among good men; it lasts for life, involves the sharing of common goals, and is never broken for any reason, whether in prosperity or calamity. Because of its superiority, the united alliance is like gold, and therefore other scholars call it the golden alliance. (KNUTSON)

As far as I am aware, this *saṅgatasandhi* has no *Arthaśāstra* equivalent. However, it has a Roman cousin, SENECA's (2011) *societas*, which amounts to the mutual giving of *beneficium* whenever the need or opportunity arises.

The maṇḍala theory is as important in the *Nītisāra* as it is in the *Arthaśāstra*. KNUTSON (p. xxiii) links the fourfold division of the army with the game of chess and asserts: "Whatever the ultimate origins of chess, one can assert without any doubt that classical Indian political theory bears a profound connection." Here, I would certainly agree with KNUTSON and refer to WIESE (2016). KNUTSON and SINGH (2010) rightly point out the anti-war passages found in the *Nītisāra*, in particular NS 9.75: "A war puts oneself, one's friends, wealth, kingdom, and glory in danger's balance. Who other than a fool would do it?" (KNUTSON) Neither of these two authors misread this passage in a purely pacifistic manner.

So far, I have missed the main point of a book review. After all, my task is not to praise or criticise the *Nītisāra*, but to provide a critical assessment of KNUTSON's translation. The editors and KNUTSON himself prefer accessible English and in this respect, KNUTSON's efforts are a clear success. For example, I really like the translation of NS 2.11:

ānvīkṣiky ātmavidyā syād īkṣaṇāt sukhaduḥkhayoḥ |
īkṣamāṇas tayā tattvaṃ harṣaśokau vyudasyati ||

Critical inquiry is knowledge of the self, so called because it “inquires into” joy and sorrow. Examining the true reality through critical inquiry, one can abolish both joy and sorrow. (KNUTSON)

This translation surpasses the one by MITRA AND MITRA (1982) or DUTT (1896) because it elegantly hints at the etymological word play based on the root *īkṣ* (present in *ānvīkṣikī*, *īkṣaṇa*, and *īkṣamāṇa*).

In general, I do not think that the former translations suffer from being “extremely literal” (p. xxx). Usually, the opposite is true and it is too difficult to know how the Sanskrit text links to the translation. Occasionally, KNUTSON would also go beyond the requirements of a translation. In most cases, this is no problem. A Sanskritist will easily realise that “Brihaspati” is added by KNUTSON as a useful explanation in NS 2.4, while the Sanskrit text has *surapurodhas* (“the god’s priest”). But, for my taste, KNUTSON strays too far from the Sanskrit original in 2.10:

varṇās caivāśramās caiva vidyāsv āsu pratiṣṭhitāḥ |
rakṣet tā rakṣaṇāt tāsāṃ taddharmasyāṃśabhān nṛpaḥ ||

The individual branches of knowledge have established the castes and life-stages. By examining and protecting the castes and life-stages, the king partakes of a portion of their individual dharma.

(KNUTSON)

The social classes and life-stages depend on these branches of knowledge. The king should protect the branches of knowledge and, by protecting them, he partakes of the *dharma* of the classes and stages. (HW)

KNUTSON needlessly introduces “examining”, which is not present in the Sanskrit text.² Furthermore, note that *vidyā* is feminine as are *tāḥ* and *tāsām*.

In the same chapter, KNUTSON indicates that a Vedic student was expected to live with the *guru* “until his death” (NS 2.22-23):

gurau vāso 'gniśuśrūṣā svādhyāyo vratacāraṇam |
trikālasnāyitā bhaikṣaṃ gurau prāṇāntikī sthitiḥ ||
tadabhāve gurusute tathā sabrahmacāriṇi |
kāmato vāśramānyatvaṃ svadharmo brahmacāriṇaḥ ||

The proper dharma for the stage of celibate study consists in living with a *guru*, maintaining the ritual fire, Vedic recitation, maintaining the vow of celibacy, bathing three times a day, collecting alms, and living with the *guru* until his death. If the *guru* has passed away, one may reside with his son, or with fellow celibate students. Otherwise, if one wishes, one may move on to the next stage and become a householder. (KNUTSON)

“Until his death” is presumably meant to refer to the *guru*’s death by KNUTSON. On the basis of *prāṇa* as “lifebreath”, *antika* as “reaching to the end”, and *abhāva* as “death”, KNUTSON’s translation is understandable. A rather similar passage in AŚ (*Arthaśāstra*, KANGLE (1969a)) 1.3.10 reads:

brahmacāriṇaḥ svādhyāyo 'gnikāryābhiṣekau bhaikṣavratitvam ācārye
prāṇāntikī vṛttis tadabhāve guruputre sabrahmacāriṇi vā

² At least as far as KNUTSON himself edits the text. Note, however, the variant reading *īkṣaṇād rakṣaṇāt tāsām* in MITRA AND MITRA (1982).

That [specific law, HW] of a Vedic student consists of Vedic recitation, tending the fire, ablution, the practice of subsisting on alms-food, and living until death with his teacher—or, in his absence, with his teacher’s son or with a fellow student. (OLIVELLE (2013))

In both the *Nītisāra* and the *Arthaśāstra*, we have

- locative singular *gurau* or *ācārye*, respectively,
- *prāṇāntikī*, and
- *sthiti* or *vṛtti*, respectively.

Assuming that both passages have a very similar meaning, the translations for AŚ 1.3.10/NS 2.22-23 differ significantly. While KNUTSON seems to think that “until death” (*prāṇāntika*) refers to the teacher’s death, other translators³ have the student’s death in mind. KNUTSON also understands “absence of him” (*tadabhāva*) as a reference to the teacher’s death. In contrast, the other translators entertain the more neutral understanding of “the teacher’s absence” which may come about by death, but may also be due to other circumstances.

To make matters even more complicated, one should consider the possibility that *prāṇāntika* means “near a person” as in AŚ 8.1.11 (where Olivelle (2013) translates *prāṇāntikacaratvād rājñāḥ* as “because they operate near the king’s person”). Then, *gurau prāṇāntikī sthitiḥ* might well mean “living near the *guru*”, assuredly in order to serve him. This interpretation goes well together with the usual manner (described in the *dharma* texts) in which students stayed with their teachers many years,

³ For example, KANGLE (1969b), MITRA AND MITRA (1982), and OLIVELLE (2013).

but normally not until one or the other died.⁴ MITRA AND MITRA (1982, p. 44) mention that a student living until his own death with his teacher would be called *naiṣṭhika* and, indeed, this possibility is mentioned in the important law text ascribed to Manu.⁵ Obviously, AŚ 1.3.10 and NS 2.22-23 are difficult passages. However, there is no indication to this effect by KNUTSON (nor by any other translator mentioned so far)⁶.

In general, I find the explanations offered by the author helpful, but would have liked more comments on translational difficulties. For example, the author translates *sukhaṃ hi phalam arthasya* (NS 1.49) as “the goal of power is happiness”. I have two questions. Firstly, should one not translate *phala* as “fruit”, “consequence”, or the like? Secondly, KNUTSON quite often translates *artha* as “power”. This is in line with the understanding that Kāmandaki writes about politics, and hence power issues. Indeed, a king’s worldly gain is concerned with power. Still, I am not convinced that “power” is a suitable translation of *artha*, in particular when it comes to the *trivarga* or just the juxtaposition of *dharma* with *artha* as in NS 1.17 (where, incidentally, *phala* is translated as “fruit” by KNUTSON).⁷

⁴ In particular, this holds for the classical, not the early period of the *āśrama* system. See OLIVELLE (1993).

⁵ See *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 2.243. This dharma text has been edited and translated by OLIVELLE (2005).

⁶ Note, however, MEYER (1926) whose translation on p. 3 suggests that *prāṇāntika* in AŚ 1.3.10 refers to the teacher’s death, while the note on p. 670 argues for the student’s death.

⁷ Let me mention a few other infelicities possibly to be addressed for the second edition. Should *tau hatvā* in NS 1.51 not be replaced by *tān hatvā* as do MITRA AND MITRA (1982, p. 24)? Furthermore, *gurusevana* refers to

As a minor complaint, the author (or the editors) could have been more forthcoming with respect to the contents given on pages v and vi. While the reader just learns that chapter 1 starts on page 2, he would have appreciated the additional information that this first chapter is about *indriyajaya* (“conquering the senses”) and that it contains a subsection on *vidyāvṛddhasaṃyoga* (“association with wise men”). The index is sparse. It contains mainly names, but hardly any concepts or topics.

In summary, KNUTSON has done a huge favour to Sanskritists and interested amateurs alike. It will be to his credit that the *Nītisāra* will in future be studied alongside the *Arthaśāstra*: an important work on Old Indian politics, second only to Kauṭilya’s master piece.

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service provided for a *guru*, not to searching him out (NS 1.61). I would submit that the translation of *nāvṛtter bhayam ṛcchati* as “[he] never encounters the danger of unemployment” (NS 2.14) is too modernistic. Finally, translate *hi* in NS 2.16 by “indeed”, not by “therefore”.

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