

South Asia  
Reviews 1973

A Reader on the Sanskrit Grammarians, edited by J. F. Staal. (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1972) Pp. xxiv + 557, <sup>6 plates.</sup> \$35.00.

This is an admirable work, although few will feel fully competent to admire it. Professor Staal has assembled articles and other writings about the ancient Indian grammarians from Pāṇini on. Many of these writings are now difficult of access, and few of them will be familiar to <sup>more</sup> than a handful of scholars, but they are all worthy of notice to-day, either as historical documents or as still valid contributions to knowledge, or in many cases as both. Their interest is greatly enhanced by the introductions (and occasional bridging passages) with which Staal sets them in context. Staal is writing about scholars who are writing about scholars who are writing (in Sanskrit) about Sanskrit; this sounds like the last word in arid scholasticism, but Staal writes with such clarity, enthusiasm, and even wit, that it is lively and even at times fascinating reading. P Staal divides his (secondary) authors into seven sections, chronologically arranged, beginning with the ancients (Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, al-Bīrūnī, and the Tibetan historian Taranātha) and ending with the moderns, from Leonard Bloomfield to Renou, who not unnaturally occupy nearly half the book. Staal ~~also~~ relates his meta-grammarians to the general history of linguistics: for example, Bloomfield "was attracted to the Indian grammarians because of their alleged positivism"; while Whitney had been "convinced that <sup>in</sup> linguistic description is nothing but an inventory of elements . . . His Sanskrit grammar is a perfect illustration of this approach". Generative grammar ~~is~~ is the antithesis of Whitney's view; Chomsky's stress on the open-endedness of language has earned several pages in this book for Wilhelm von Humboldt, who did not know much Sanskrit but saw language as Erzeugnis, a human "product", i.e. constantly generated according to rules.

The book has thus been written and compiled primarily with general linguists in mind; Staal is careful to explain <sup>whatever</sup> ~~what~~ appertains to Sanskrit grammar as the book proceeds. Nevertheless, we doubt whether the book can be fully intelligible to someone who knows no Sanskrit; we might even go further, and doubt whether at least a nodding acquaintance with Pāṇini would not be necessary for a reader to understand the latter three quarters of the book. In the early and generally less technical sections Staal is dealing not just with foreigners' discovery of the Indian grammarians, but inevitably ~~it~~ also with the discovery of Sanskrit itself and its establishment as a field of European learning. The English first studied Sanskrit for practical reasons,

the Germans from an interest in Indian religion and philosophy; in this, Staal remarks, they resemble the early Muslim and the Buddhist scholars respectively. At first the British were the better Sanskritists, but within two generations this relationship was decisively reversed, and many of the Sanskritists in Britain and India were Germans. This early part of the book, in which the editor is most prominent, will certainly interest, if not exactly the "general reader", at least the general student of Indology. Colebrooke compels our admiration. August Wilhelm von Schlegel strikes notes which are still poignant, as when he writes that the Sanskrit texts which Colebrooke had printed in Calcutta "are not editions in our sense, but manuscripts multiplied by printing"; or when he complains to Wilson, the first Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, of the high price of Sanskrit books published in England.

Unfortunately the appeal of this specialized book is further limited by the fact that nearly half of the compiled material appears in its original French or German. To have translated it would have been very laborious; but Professor Staal must know that the number of Indologists (we cannot speak for linguists) who read German is sadly limited. German (or Dutch?) has on p.70 even entered the English, when Goldstücker is appointed "honorary professor at the University College, London" (my italics). But the general level of accuracy in presentation is high. The only really serious slip in proof-reading which we noticed was that the bottom half of p.61 is repeated as the top half of p.62. ~~Pāṇinī and Sātavahana are consistently misspelled.~~

The value of the book is enhanced by a chronological table of the Sanskrit grammarians (on p.xxiv), photographs, three indices, and a magnificent select bibliography. The illustrations show statues of the grammarians and manuscripts of their works. The bibliography lists over two hundred further items relevant to the book's theme, and will enable students to pursue for themselves any aspect of the study of the Sanskrit grammarians that interests them. This is in itself a contribution to scholarship, for, as Staal notes in his preface, there is as yet no "helpful introduction to the subject". We are the happier to learn that this brilliant but still formidable production is paving the way for a one-volume general introduction which Professor Staal is preparing with two collaborators. Whether Professor Staal has already made Pāṇini and Patanjali more accessible to general linguists we cannot judge; but he has certainly made them more accessible to Sanskritists.

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