

An Analysis of the Sela Sutta of the Sutta Nipāta

THE Sela Sutta belongs to the ballad poetry of the Sutta Nipāta. It may be of interest to view this Sutta in the light of the accepted criteria for the ballad and determine how far we may support this contention. Although it is difficult to give an exact definition of the term "ballad", it may be generally explained as "a type of verse of unknown authorship, dealing with episode or simple motif rather than sustained theme, written in a stanzaic form more or less fixed and suitable for oral transmission, and in its expression and treatment showing little or nothing of the finesse of deliberate art"¹. A few characteristics of the ballad, are, that "it is short, adapted for singing, impersonal and of simple metrical structure"². The Sela Sutta embodies nearly all these characteristics. It is typical of the ballads of the ancient Indian literature. A popular form of the ancient Indian ballad is the mingling of the dialogue and narrative stanzas. In this Sutta the stanzas alternate with a prose framework. The Sutta reveals instances of the dramatic element (which is more evident in Suttas like *Dhaniya*, *Hemavata* and *Padhāna*) especially in the concluding stanzas, viz. *Sn.* 570-573.³ Some of the verses are well adapted for singing, cf. *Sn.* 548⁴ etc. Winternitz⁵ considers the Sela Sutta a sermon in verse with a prose framework. According to N. A. Jayawickrema⁶ this is a "mixed ballad". However, a better explanation has been sought in the definition "Sutta Ballads"⁷—a term denoting that these Suttas are discourses in the form of mixed ballads. It has also been observed⁸ that this Sutta could be regarded as "uniform in every way" with five other Suttas of the same Vagga, viz. *Sundarikabhāradvāja*, *Māgha*, *Sabhiya*, *Vāsetṭha* and *Kokāliya*. These Suttas afford a close parallel to the "mixed ballads" of the Cullavagga of the Sutta Nipāta.

The foregoing observations, however, do not throw any light on the question of the age of the Sutta under discussion. The indisputable fact that most of the Suttas of this collection hark back to very early times has been

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v.
2. *Ibid.*
3. "*Yantaṃ saraṇamāgamha ito atthami cakkhumā . . .*" etc.
4. "*Pariṇṇahāyo suruci sujāto cārudassano . . .*" etc.
5. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. II, p. 93.
6. Jayawickrama, *A Critical Analysis of the Sutta Nipāta*, a thesis (unpublished), submitted to the University of London, 1947.
7. *Ibid.*, also cf. Winternitz, *op. cit.* II, 93 ff.
8. Jayawickrema, *Ibid.*

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often reiterated.⁹ Most of the Suttas of this Vagga, too, as Fausböll observes,¹⁰ are probably very old. The Sela Sutta, on the contrary, shows signs of lateness.

Although in Indian literature the title of a book, or section thereof, is no guide to its contents,¹¹ the title of this Sutta is a clear index as to what the Sutta is. It deals with the conversion of the Brahmin *Sela*.¹² The Sutta introduces two personalities—*Kenīya*, the matted-hair ascetic and *Sela*, the Brahmin. It is quite probable that *Kenīya* (or *Kenīya*) in this context is a proper-name,¹³ although *Kenīya* occurs as a class-name, too, as for instance in the Apadāna,¹⁴ where the monk Mahākappina is said to have belonged to the *Kenīya* class. However, it is very unlikely that any such class existed as *Kenīyas*; and, as Malalasekera surmises,¹⁵ *Kenīya* may be an alternative reading for *Koliya* (the historical clan) as actually occurring in some recensions of the Theragāthā. The Brahmin *Sela*, who was converted by the Buddha, is introduced next.

The question whether this Sutta as an original whole dealt with *Kenīya* and *Sela*, or whether it is a fusion of two ballads dealing with them separately, arises next. Two instances, however, occur in the Canonical literature dealing with *Kenīya* and *Sela* without any reference to each other. The Vinaya¹⁶ refers to the meeting between *Kenīya* and the Buddha, but this account differs somewhat from the version in the Sela Sutta, in that the narrative there is considerably longer than in the Sutta Nipāta, and no reference is made to *Sela*. On the other hand, *Sela* is referred to in the Theragāthā,¹⁷ which preserves the verses ascribed to him, but without any mention of *Kenīya*.

On the assumption that this poem was a unified whole as it is, originally, (and not a fusion of two ballads), it may be argued that the omission of *Sela* in the Vinaya account is justifiable, as any reference to him in that particular context has no bearing on the Vinaya rule that was to be laid down with refer-

9. Cf. *Ibid.*, also Winternitz, *op. cit.* II, 92 ff., Fausböll, *S.B.E.* X, (Introduction to Sutta Nipāta Translation), Chalmers, *H.O.S.* XXXVII (Introduction to Sutta Nipāta Translation), etc.

10. *Ibid.*

11. E.g. the *Kena Upaniṣad* is so called as it commences with the word *Kena* (the Instrumental Singular of the Interrogative Pronoun *Ka*) as pointed out by Hume (*The Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads*) which is not at all connected with its contents.

12. Cf. Rhys Davids, *J.P.T.S.*, 1896, p. 94.

13. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, s.v.

14. Apadāna, Vol. II, p. 469: "*Bārānasiyaṃ āsanne jāto kenīyajātiyā;*" also cf. Malalasekera, *ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. Vinaya (Mahāvagga) Vol. I, p. 245.

17. Theragāthā, Vv. 818-841.

ence to *Keniya*.¹⁸ Such a view would remain plausible only in the absence of any other reference either to *Keniya* or to *Sela*, separately. But the fallacy of this assumption becomes obvious from the fact that no reference is made to *Keniya* in the Theragāthā, where the verses attributed to *Sela* occur. It is of interest to note that the verses attributed to *Sela* were probably known to the Buddhist Sanskrit work *Divyāvadāna*,¹⁹ where reference is made to *Śailagāthā*, among other *Sūtras* called *Munigāthā* and *Arthavargīyāni*. There are two more instances in the Pāli Canon where *Sela* and *Keniya* are mentioned, but in both instances they are referred to together. Firstly, in the Majjhima Nikāya²⁰ where the Sutta under discussion occurs identically; secondly, in the comparatively late Apadāna,²¹ where *Sela* refers to *Keniya* in his verses. Other references to them are to be found in eight post-Canonical works.²² However, the post-Canonical accounts are not sufficiently authentic²³ to be of much importance, in that they are either adaptations from the Canonical accounts, or records of an oral tradition, or borrowings from various narrative works. In view of the general lateness of the accounts in which both are mentioned together, it is likely that two narratives dealing with *Keniya* and *Sela* have been fused into one ballad.

The hypothesis that this Sutta is a fusion of two ballads raises the question as to what the ballads are. Although they are incapable of being positively ascertained, it appears that the one concerning *Sela* is that preserved in the Theragāthā,²⁴ while the ballad regarding *Keniya* is from a then-floating tradition, drawn upon both by the Sutta Nipāta and the Vinaya. The fusion itself follows a definite pattern. The prose and the verse of the Sutta occur alternately. First comes a long prose introduction followed by the first twenty stanzas attributed to *Sela* in the Theragāthā. Next a prose passage dealing with *Keniya*, and establishing continuity with the introduction. The Sutta

18. The reference is to the laying down of the rule regarding drinks, which was occasioned by the drinks offered by *Keniya* to the Buddha and the monks. See *Mahāvagga*, I, p. 246.

19. *Divyāvadāna*, 20: "Athāyusmān Śroṇo bhagavaiā kṛtāvakāśaḥ asmāt parāntikayā guptikayā udānāt pārāyānāt satyadrṣṭaḥ śailagāthā munigāthā arthavargīyāni ca sūtrāṇi vistareṇa svareṇa svādhyāyam karoti". Also cf. *J.P.T.S.*, 1896, p. 95.

20. M. No. 92.

21. Apadāna, I, p. 318.

22. *Milindapañha*, p. 167 f., *Paramatthajotikā* (Sn.A), II, 440; 446; 455; *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, I, 270; 276 f., II, 413; *Papañcasūdanī*, II, 779; 782; *Manorathapūraṇī* (AA), I, 219; *Paramatthadīpanī* (Thag A), II, 47 f., *Paramatthadīpanī* (Ud. A), 241; *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*, I, 323; 384.

23. Cf. Winternitz, *op. cit.*, II, 101.

24. *Theragāthā*, Vv. 818-841. It may be noted that the verses in question in the *Theragāthā* are identical with those of this Sutta, with the exception of Sn. 568 and 569.

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concludes with the four remaining verses attributed to *Sela* in the Theragāthā. Thus, even if the verses attributed to *Sela* are omitted, the prose passages maintain continuity.

The language of the prose, as in almost all the Suttas of this collection, is quite similar to the prose of the Nikāyas in idiom, syntax and style.²⁵ The expressions employed are stereotyped. One of the many instances of the similarity of the prose of this Sutta to that of the Nikāyas is afforded by a comparison of the introductory prose here, for instance, with the introductory prose section of the Ambaṭṭha Sutta.²⁶ The prose, though not an essential factor of the ballad, is employed as an aid to the narrative, and serves as "a connecting thread running through the whole ballad linking up the various parts"²⁷.

An interesting feature of this Sutta is that no narrative verses are to be detected. Although the "Muni" of the Sutta Nipāta is to be seen in *Sela* as a monk, the language and the ideology of the verses suggest that the Sutta as a whole belongs to a comparatively late period. Probably an older layer is to be seen in *Sn.* 562-567, for, a similar poetic section may be detected elsewhere.²⁸ On the whole, however, *Sn.* 562 to the end sounds very poetic, while the earlier portion of the Sutta is rather laboured and seems to be adapted from a prose version, as *Sn.* 552 suggests.²⁹

The metre of the verses is Anuṣṭubh Śloka. Old linguistic forms (particularly Vedic, for which the Sutta Nipāta is well-known) are not very common. A few old forms such as *brahā* (*Sn.* 550), *abhinḥaso* (*Sn.* 559, 560), *bhonto* (*Sn.* 562) and the Imperative *vinayassu* (*Sn.* 559) may be observed. The rest of the language of the verses is suggestive of a later phase of Pāli. No old idioms are to be cited.

Another important characteristic of the Sutta is its development in ideology. The ideas of *Mahāpurisalakkhaṇa* (the characteristics of a Great Being) and *Cakkavatti* (the Universal Monarch) occur both in the prose and the verse. The concepts *Mchāpurisa* and *Cakkavattin* probably hark back to pre-Buddhistic times, or at least belong to the early Buddhist period. The term *Mahāpuruṣa* occurs in the Aitareya Āraṇyaka³⁰ where it means "the year" (*saṃvatsara eva*), the essence of which is said to be "the sun" (*ādityo rasah*),

25. Cf. Jayawickrama, *Ibid.*

26. D.N., I, 87.

27. Jayawickrama, *Ibid.*

28. Cf. *Sn.* 410 ff.

29. Cf. *Sn.* 552 with stereotyped Canonical expressions such as "dhammiko dhammarājā cāturanto vijitāvī . . ." etc.

30. *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, III, 2,3; also see *Śāṅkhāyana*, VIII, 3.

which in turn is identified with " the incorporeal Supreme Spirit " (*sa yaścāyamaśarīrah pragñātmā yaścāsāvāditya ekametaditi vidyāt*). It is also a name for *Viṣṇu*.³¹ *Cakravartin* occurs in the Maitri Upaniṣad,³² where fifteen mythical figures are referred to as *cakravartins*. Both concepts were probably well known to ancient India as evident from the popular floating tradition as embodied in the Great Epics, Kathāsaritsāgara and Hitopadeśa.

The thirty-two Characteristics (*lakṣhaṇas*) are very likely of mythological origin and probably first attributed to *Devas*³³—a contention justified by the fact that *Viṣṇu* has been referred to as *Mahāpuruṣa*. Hence, these concepts are more of adaptations from the then-current ideas than pure developments in Pāli Buddhism.³⁴ It is usually taken for granted that the *Cakkavatti* ideal developed only after the rise of Magadhan imperialism, as suggested by Rhys Davids.³⁵ Although this view seems plausible as the idea was foreign to early Buddhist doctrines, the foregoing observations indicate that these concepts were pre-Buddhistic, but revived during the Asokan times when the Pāli Canon was reaching completion. The reference to the *Cakkavatti* ideal in the Jaina Scriptures³⁶ and particularly in the later Buddhist Sanskrit literature,³⁷ further strengthens this contention.

The foregoing observations may suffice to indicate that the *Sela Sutta*, as it stands in contrast to many a Sutta of the Sutta Nipāta (which usually abound in archaic linguistic forms, old idiom and early phases of the doctrine) is decidedly a later addition to that text.

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31. Monier Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v.

32. See *Maitri Up.*, 1.4. The question of the date of this Upaniṣad is not in direct relation with our considerations here.

33. Cf. *P.T.S. Dictionary*, s.v.

34. It is of interest to note that the Jains, too, have a list of external signs which characterize a Great Man. Cf. Guérinot, *La Religion djaina*, pp. 37-38: " Le Maître qui enseigne le monde, disent-elles, le Bienheureux, Mahāvīra, l'Arhat, l'Omniscient, mesure sept emfans de stature (1 m. 70 environ). Son corps est de forme symétrique et régulière . . ." etc., also Masson-Oursel, Willman-Grabowska and Stern, *Ancient India and Indian Civilization*, pp. 145-146.

35. Cf. e.g. *Bhandarkar Commemoration Volume*, p. 125.

36. *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* (Translated by Jacobi) *S.B.E.* XLV, p. 85, f.n. 1. Although the origins of Jainism were pre-Buddhistic, Jaina literature is comparatively late since the Jaina Canon reached completion about the fifth century, A.D. See Rādhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 288.

37. See *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, Ch. II, where *Mahāmāti* is depicted questioning the Buddha regarding the nature of a *Cakravartin*.