

The Criteria for the Analysis of the Sutta Nipāta

1.

THE Sutta Nipāta contains older and younger material side by side. The Athaka and the Pārāyana Vaggas preserve, on the whole, older compositions. Many suttas included in the other three vaggas too can be established, without doubt, to belong to an equally old, or perhaps older stratum.

It is our present task to investigate whether the compilation of Sutta Nipāta (as a separate work) was done by gradual stages or was the work of a single editor. It is certain that at least its last two vaggas had a separate existence prior to their being incorporated in Sutta Nipāta, for, there are numerous references to them in Pāli, Buddhist Sanskrit and Chinese works, with no mention of the Sutta Nipāta at all. Parts of the rest of the vaggas too appear to have existed in separate groups, but Sutta Nipāta, as it is preserved now, is a compilation of a comparatively later date. The lateness of the compilation has no bearing whatsoever on the date of its constituent suttas. Chalmers, in the translation of Sutta Nipāta entitled, "Buddha's Teaching" in H.O.S. Vol. 37, p. xvi, remarks, "the ascertained stages of growth of a compiled 'book' by no means settle the relative date of composition of its contents, a question for solution of which internal evidence must be invoked, for what it is worth." The internal evidence which helps to establish the relative date of composition of the suttas is primarily linguistic, but this alone is not sufficient. A study of the contents of Sutta Nipāta along with its metre and style, doctrinal developments, and social conditions depicted in them will greatly supplement whatever information linguistic evidence yields. Whenever external evidence is available in support of internal evidence more definite results can be achieved.

2.

Linguistic evidence consists mainly of an analysis of words in their form and use, of tenses, of syntax and of vocabulary. As early as 1880 Fausböll (Translation to Sutta Nipāta, S. B. F. vol. X, pp. xi. ff.) has pointed out, "We not only find here what we meet with in other Pāli poetry, the fuller Vedic forms of nouns and verbs in the plural . . . the shorter Vedic plural and the instrumental singular of nouns . . . Vedic infinitives, . . . contracted (or sometimes old) forms, . . . by the side of protracted forms, but also some unusual (sometimes old) forms and words. . . We also find tmesis as in the Vedas. . .

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Sometimes we meet with difficult and irregular constructions, and very condensed expressions." He also notes that the parts of Sutta Nipāta containing these "irregularities" are much older than the suttas in which the language is fluent and the verses are melodious. This practically covers the whole field of linguistic evidence that can be gleaned in Sutta Nipāta.

A comparison of the linguistic peculiarities of the various parts of Sutta Nipāta with Vedic, the language of the Brāhmanas, Pāli of the gāthā-literature, Canonical prose, and Classical Sanskrit helps in some degree to fix the relative dates of the suttas. It has been already stressed that the importance of linguistic data should not be over-estimated, for, these alone without other corroborative evidence are not of very great value. More definite conclusions can be drawn when they are supported by other internal and external evidence.

3.

Other internal evidence consists of metre and style, doctrinal developments and ideology, and social conditions. As a rule, metre is no proper criterion of judgment in assigning relative dates to Pāli poetry. The majority of the metres employed in Pāli is to be met with in earlier literature both Vedic and early Sanskritic. The developments and modifications that earlier existing metres have undergone in Pāli may lead to some valuable information; but such changes invariably have their parallels in earlier Sanskritic literature. This minimises the importance of any evidence from this source. The changes in metre from which somewhat definite inferences could be drawn are to be met with only in very late Pāli poetry; e.g., the Ceylon Chronicles.

4.

The most popular metre in Sutta Nipāta is Anuṣṭubh Śloka. There are no less than 562 stanzas in Anuṣṭubh metre, in addition to 54 modified Anuṣṭubh Ślokas in the Vatthu-gāthā of the Pārāyana, making a total of 616 stanzas. (Vide Helmer Smith: Metres of Sutta Nipāta, Pj. II. 3, pp. 637-644). Next comes Triṣṭubh metre, which is employed in 374 stanzas. There are also 29 stanzas in Āryā metre, and 117 in Vaitālīya and its allied metres, Anpacchandasika and Vegavati. Of these 117 stanzas only 15 are in pure Vaitālīya, 41 are in Anpacchandasika, 16 in Vegavati and the other 45 in mixed Vaitālīya.

(Chalmers, *ibid.* p. xvii) maintains that Anuṣṭubh is later than Triṣṭubh and quotes the example of the four "Athakas" in Triṣṭubh metre preceded by the Kāma Sutta in Anuṣṭubh Śloka, stating that it "manifestly forms a late preface to the Athaka Vagga as a re-edited whole." He notes the change of metre in Sāriputta Sutta and remarks that "the equally edifying ślokas

Nos. 955-62 suggest an editorial preamble to the vigorous tristubhs with which the *Atthaka Vagga* ends." He refers to the only Tristubh verse in *Dvayatānupassanā Sutta* (Sn. 728), and the Tristubhs that are freely distributed in the *Pārāyana* as being much older than the rest of the stanzas in those sections which he calls "scholastic accretions." He advances another hypothesis that "the longer the metrical line the later is the composition likely to have been." (*Ibid.*)

Keith (*A History of Sanskrit Literature*, p. 417) too believes that the longer metrical line is a later development in Classical Sanskrit. Thus, it may be possible, purely on theoretical grounds, that those verses of *Sutta Nipāta* in *Āryā*, *Vaitālyā*, *Aupacchandāsika*, *Vegavatī* and mixed *Vaitālyā* metres belong to a later stage of composition. Yet, there is no reason to assume that all the stanzas in the historically earlier Tristubh and Anuṣṭubh metres are anterior to those written in later metres.

Unlike other metres *Āryā* and *Vaitālyā* are measured by the number of morae. (Vide Macdonell, *A Vedic Grammar for Students*, p. 436 n. 2). These metres in which the sum-total of morae was absolutely fixed probably developed from popular poetry according to Keith; (*Op. cit.* p. 418) and belong to the Classical epoch. Thus, Chalmers' hypothesis is generally applicable to the verses of *Sutta Nipāta* though he is not quite correct in the application of his hypothesis to Tristubh and Anuṣṭubh metres.

Both Tristubh and Anuṣṭubh metres can be traced back to Vedic. About 40 per cent. of the stanzas in the *Rgveda* are written in Tristubh, whereas Anuṣṭubh constitutes only about 8 to 9 per cent. (Vide Macdonell, *op. cit.* pp. 438 ff.). Though the former is very popular in the *Rgveda* the latter is the most predominant metre in the post-Vedic period. (Macdonell, *ibid.*) Thus, generally Anuṣṭubh *Ślokas* in *Sutta Nipāta may be expected* to be later than the Tristubh verses. Here, the hypothesis regarding the length of the metrical line is inapplicable, as Tristubh which is considered older has a longer metrical line (4 X 11) than Anuṣṭubh (4 X 8). Moreover, over 86 per cent. of the stanzas in *Sutta Nipāta* are written in these two metres, and the number of stanzas written in other metres is just under 14 per cent. This being the case, Chalmers' suggestion, however true it may be, is of no great practical importance.

The historical order of these metres occurring in *Sutta Nipāta* would be:—
1. Tristubh and Anuṣṭubh, 2. *Āryā*, *Vaitālyā*, *Aupacchandāsika*, *Vegavatī* and Mixed *Vaitālyā*. There is no guarantee whatsoever that stanzas written in older metres are necessarily earlier than those in later metres. Therefore, metre by itself is no sound criterion for fixing relative dates, and it only forms a very useful source of confirmatory evidence.

5.

Style, like metre, is closely allied to linguistic evidence. As *Sutta Nipāta* is not a homogeneous work, its style varies in its different sections. Its poems range from simple popular ballads like *Dhaniya* and *Kasibhāradvāja Suttas* to scholastic compositions like *Dvayatānupassanā Sutta*. It also contains simple narratives like *Pabbajjā* and *Padhāna Suttas* or the *Vatthu-gāthā* of *Nāḷaka Sutta* and *Pārāyana Vagga* as well as dialogue ballads of various types, besides didactic poems like *Kimsiṅga* or *Dhammacariya Suttas* in which the editorial hand is keenly felt.* A simple and easy style unhampered by poetic embellishments, excessive rhythm and metrical perfection suggests an early composition rather than a later one. The use of excessive alliteration, assonance, and *śleṣa* (word-play) and all such accompaniments of a 'heavy style' is generally a sign of lateness. The use of such poetical devices is greatly limited in the sections of the *Sutta Nipāta*, which from other evidence can be classed as very early.

The oft recurring refrain belongs to the field of popular poetry of all periods. It is also probable that the ballads in which the dialogue element predominates (e.g. *Suttas* like *Dhaniya* and *Hemavata*; and not the quasi-dialogue ballads in which an interlocutor asks a question and Buddha is seen replying with a long uninterrupted discourse), were dramatised and became widely popular. These two facts do not lead to any clue regarding the relative dates of poems, but it could be noticed that style goes hand in hand with metre to support linguistic data, and that it is very useful as a criterion for fixing relative dates for these ballads.

The form in which these *suttas* are found (*viz.*, entirely in verse, or mixed verse and prose, etc.) is sometimes helpful as a criterion.

6.

Doctrinal developments, generally, are a good index to the time of composition of individual sections, rather than of a work as a whole. This is true of the majority of the works of the Pāli Canon, as they contain material drawn from more than one stratum. No well-defined *developments* as such are to

*There are at least 6 *suttas* (*viz.* *Hiri*, *Dhammacariya*, *Kimsiṅga*, *Uṭṭhāna*, *Subhāsita*, and *Attadanda*) which derive their names from their opening words. The *suttas* that are named after a word or simile in the body of the text are more numerous. There are 11 *suttas* (*viz.* *Ālavaka*, *Muni*, *Hiri*, *Kimsiṅga*, *Rāhula*,—the *Vatthu-gāthā* are in irregular Anuṣṭubh—*Subhāsita*, *Kokāliya*, *Vatthu-gāthā* of *Nāḷaka*, *Dhotaka pucchā*, *Todeyya pucchā*, and *Jatukani pucchā*) in which the opening lines are written in a different metre from that (or those) of the rest of the poem. In five of these the opening stanza (or stanzas) is in Anuṣṭubh. Less numerous are the poems in which the concluding stanzas are written in a metre different from that of the rest of the poem: e.g. *Dhaniya*, *Sabhiya*, *Vaṅgasa*, *Sundarikabhāradvāja* and *Paṣāra Suttas*.

be noticed in the older ballads of Sutta Nipāta, but a gradual change can be marked in the later ones. Some fundamental concepts already found in the earlier ballads and other early literature are seen undergoing a gradual crystallization in the later ballads. New ideas are also seen finding their way. One such instance is the concept of "vāsana" (which will be discussed in a later article).

7.

(Closely connected with doctrinal developments is the *growth of ideas*. In as much as the doctrinal emphasis lay on the earliest tenets of Buddhism—which Mrs. Rhys Davids prefers to call "Sākya"—in the majority of these ballads, so also could be noticed the gradual formation of definite ideas and concepts which in course of time came to play an important rôle in later Buddhism. Along with this appear standard technical expressions which too in course of time became fixed. Some terms are seen in the transitional stage of being crystallised in these ballads. The later ballads mark the gradual drift from primitive "Sākya" to monastic Buddhism which replaced it. The trend of development, if successfully traced, will enable one to place these suttas in some sort of chronological arrangement.

8.

Social conditions depicted in Sutta Nipāta reflect an age when Brahmanism held sway and caste exerted great influence. The ballads show that in spite of the effort of the Buddha to break down these barriers he was obliged to give new values to what was best in Brahmanism; (e.g., the Buddhist connotation of brāhmana, etc.), in order to make his message universally acceptable. Society was mainly agricultural and there lived rich herdsmen like Dhaniya (a Vaiśya?) and Brahmin farmers like Bhāradvāja. The samanas and paribbājakas are accepted institutions and many paribbājakas are represented as getting their individual problems solved by the Buddha.

The older ballads reflect a time when Buddhism had not developed into a full-fledged monastic (coenobitic) system. It is the muni, the bhikkhu, or the samana, that these ballads are concerned with. There are only two references to *thera* in the whole of Sutta Nipāta, both occurring in introductory prose at pp. 59 and 92 respectively. The latter reference is not to Buddhist *theras*, but to those who are "firmly established in their own religious beliefs." The conditions among the bhikkhus were most probably far different from those prevalent during the time of the composition of the Thera- and Therīgāthās. There appears no organised monastic body; but on the contrary there were the munayo (ascetics in general) or the bhikkhus who were expected to lead the life of a muni.

The social conditions reflected in Sutta Nipāta regarding peoples and castes, countries and towns, Brahmins and sacrifice are no different from those reflected in the prose Nikāyas. It is probable that the majority of the Pāli works generally depict conditions prevalent at the time of their composition, but the difference of a century or two hardly makes any fundamental difference in the structure of society and mode of life in those far-off days.

Incidental references to contemporary history would enable one to draw some conclusions regarding the time of composition. Often such references are not made directly. They occur as anachronisms. One such instance is to be noticed in "mandira"—a political division; which probably came into being after the formation of a large empire. Thus, any evidence gathered from this source too will be seen to supplement what has already come to light from other sources.

9.

External evidence is of utmost importance. Several Canonical works make reference to, and quote from certain suttas and sections in Sutta Nipāta. This necessarily proves that the sections of these works which refer to and quote from Sutta Nipāta are decidedly later than those respective suttas of Sutta Nipāta. The references made to the Aṭṭhaka and the Pārāyana Vaggas will be discussed later. Equally numerous are the references made to these sections in the later BSK and Chinese Buddhist literature. The Aṭṭhaka Vagga occurs in full in Chinese (i.e., No. 198 Thai Shu Tripitaka). Besides these references in literature there is important inscriptional evidence in Asoka's Bhābra edict. All these external data are connected with individual suttas and there is no specific mention of Sutta Nipāta in any early work. It is mentioned for the first time in the Milinda Pañha.

10.

Another criterion is the *indirect evidence* from the position of the suttas as they occur in the vaggas. Some suttas are placed at the head of the vagga for their outstanding merit (e.g., the opening suttas of the Uraga Vagga) while other opening suttas bear definite signs of lateness (e.g., Ratana). Of equal importance are the suttas occurring at the end of the vagga. The Muni Sutta, in spite of its being an old piece is placed at the end of the Uraga Vagga after a relatively younger piece Viṅaya Sutta. On the other hand, the late Dvayānupassanā Sutta concludes the Mahā Vagga.

In the light of all these conflicting data it is not possible to formulate a working principle to be guided by. However, it will be seen that some of these suttas are younger in time and in general tone. When older suttas in similar

positions are also taken into account these younger pieces point to a redaction of the suttas subsequent to an earlier collation rather than to their being interpolations.

A striking similarity is to be seen in the Vinaya. The popular tradition has been embodied in the opening chapters of the Mahā Vagga, while a later addition, the account of the "Councils" occurs at the end of the Culla Vagga. (Vin.). Also cp. Samyutta I, the opening member of Pv. etc.

The three opening suttas of the Uraga Vagga have earned for themselves their present positions probably because they are characteristic as examples of early Buddhism showing the Dhamma considered as the true word of the Buddha. The popular element is keenly felt at the same time, e.g., the sudden appearance of Māra in Dhaniya Sutta.

11.

All the data from the various sources taken together help to determine the respective ages of composition of the different suttas in Sutta Nipāta. No definite date can be assigned to any of them. Some suttas present difficulties in the form of characteristics of both old and young compositions. In such instances an interpolation is to be suspected if such younger characteristics are restricted to only a few stanzas. Some suttas may betray no signs of lateness linguistically. Subject-matter and other evidence may show that they are late, and these should be taken into account in preference to linguistics data. It is needless to emphasise that linguistic evidence alone is no safe guide. As a rule, those suttas adjudged as late on linguistic grounds will be found to be late from other non-linguistic evidence as well. All the other criteria have to be applied before one arrives at a final decision if that were possible.

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