

# *The Sutta Nipāta: Its Title and Form*

## I.

### The Title.

THE Title "Sutta Nipāta" is generally translated as "A Collection of Discourses." (V. Fausböll: *The Sutta Nipāta; A Collection of Discourses, Translated from the Pāli; Sacred Books of the East* Vol. X, second edition, London, 1924). The word *nipāta* is seldom or never used in Pāli to mean a collection. The word *sannipāta* (an assemblage or collection—lit. falling in together) has to some extent the idea of a collection; but neither Canonical nor Commentarial Pāli speaks of any *sannipāta* of Suttas. Therefore any references made to *Sutta Nipāta* as "A Collection of Suttas" would not be quite apt. (The title "Woven Cadences" given by Mr. E. M. Hare to his metrical translation of *Sutta Nipāta*, *Sacred Books of the Buddhists* Vol. XV, 1944, is perhaps not intended to be an exact translation of the title *Sutta Nipāta*). Neumann (*Die Reden Gotamo Buddhos*, München 1924) translates *nipāta* as "fragments" and Oldenberg "isolated occasional speeches." M. Winternitz (*History of Indian Literature*, Vol. II) calls it "A Section of Suttas," which is the best translation so far.

The word *nipāta* usually signifies a part of a bigger work; e.g., the *nipātas* in *Āṅguttara*, *Jātaka*, *Thera* and *Therī Gāthās* etc. This usage is to be met with freely in Commentarial and other Ceylonese literature; e.g., *Dīpavaṃsa* IV, 16, *nipātaka* = consisting of *nipātas* (sections). It is apparent that *nipāta*, meaning a section of a work, is a word belonging to a period simultaneous with the arrangement and classification of the Pāli Canon, and probably it acquired this meaning only after the classification of suttas took place. It does not occur in the text proper. The complete absence of this word in this meaning in proper Canonical Pāli shows that the term belonged to a later stratum of the language.

Besides, the very title and the comparative lateness of the works which speak of a *separate book* called *Sutta Nipāta* also testify to the lateness of the name. As mentioned earlier (*U.C.R.* Vol. IV, Pt. 1), the majority of the suttas in this collection, without doubt, is old; but the work as such in the present form cannot date back to great antiquity.

## II.

In the *Āṅguttara* and *Jātaka*—two other instances in the Canon where *nipātas* are to be found—*nipāta* corresponds to a book or section. Each *nipāta*

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in turn is divided into vaggas (groups or chapters). Like any other nipāta in these works, Sutta Nipāta is also divided into vaggas. Here it conforms to the standard nipāta, but is apparently different from other nipātas in that it has no sister nipātas, all forming parts of a bigger work. On the analogy of nipātas in Aṅguttara it may be argued that Sutta Nipāta itself formed a part of a bigger work or of a separate nikāya. According to the Theravāda classification accepted in Ceylon, Burma and Siam, Sutta Nipāta is the fifth book of the Khuddaka Nikāya. Thus, one may surmise that this "nipāta" constituted a part of the bigger work, the Khuddaka Nikāya.

The nipātas of the Jātaka are somewhat different. Although they form parts of a bigger work, the latter in turn is considered as a part of a still larger work; i.e. the Khuddaka Nikāya. However, the use of the word nipāta presupposes the existence of a larger work of which Sutta Nipāta is only a part. It is an accepted fact that the Khuddaka Nikāya is a heterogeneous work which had a gradual growth. As a nikāya it is comparatively late, and is much later than the other four nikāyas (*vide* Winternitz, op. cit. Vol. II pp. 77 ff.). The Sarvāstivādins speak of only the four earlier nikāyas (which they call Āgamas), and the Theravādins themselves had reached no general agreement regarding the number of works in the Khuddaka Nikāya. Even at the present day in countries where Pāli Buddhism prevails the number of books which should constitute this nikāya is not agreed upon.

### III.

The Jātakas which form the tenth book of the Khuddaka Nikāya in the Theravāda Canon are also considered as a separate "aṅga" (lit. limb, i.e. division) in the descriptive classification known as the "navaṅga-satthusaṣana" (the Ninefold Dispensation of the Teacher) which occurs in many places in the Canon itself e.g. M.I, 130; A. II, 103, 178, III, 86 ff.; 177 ff., Pug. 43, Miln. 344 etc. Although this classification is necessarily old (*vide* E. J. Thomas: Life of Buddha p. 167, where he considers the division into aṅgas as earlier than that into nikāyas) it does not speak of any definite works, for, a jātaka may be included in a sutta, an udāna in a veyyākaraṇa etc. Like the Udāna and the Itivuttaka, the name Jātaka coincides with that of an actual work in existence. But there is nothing to say that by this aṅga was meant the present Jātaka. As Dr. E. J. Thomas (History of Buddhist Thought, p. 227) says "the probability is that the terms were used . . . to describe the character of the composition" rather than signify actual works. He points out that there are numerous instances of udānas and jātakas in various parts of the Canon which are not included in the works known by these respective names; (*ibid*) e.g., Mahāsudassana Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya, Jātakas in

Cariyā Piṭaka, Sivi Jātaka called Sivi Sutta in Miln. etc. So is also the case with Itivuttaka.

Taking up the division of the Pāli Navaṅga, its first aṅga, Sutta, is said to include the Vinaya, *certain suttas in gāthā*, and other sayings of the Buddha classed as sutta. It is noteworthy that Commentaries considered these sections of Sutta Nipāta which did not fall into the category of sutta, as gāthā, the fourth aṅga (*vide* DA. I, 23); but gāthā primarily consisted of verses in Dh. Th. 1 and Th. 2 (*vide* Thomas, op. cit.). The Commentary says that Sutta Nipāta consists of gāthā (verse), geyya (mixed prose and verse) and veyyākaraṇa (expositions) which, on account of their informative, instructive and expository nature are called suttas, and that the work is called Sutta Nipāta because it contains such suttas grouped together (SnA. I—Pj. II introduction). From these statements it is clear that at least some suttas, if not the majority of them in Sutta Nipāta, can be said to belong to Sutta Aṅga (*vide* Thomas, op. cit.).

Of the known instances of nipātas in the Pāli Canon, Aṅguttara as a work has nothing corresponding to it in the Navaṅga division, Jātaka may have been considered to correspond to the seventh aṅga Jātaka, and it is probable that Sutta Nipāta was only a nipāta of a similar aṅga. This only implies that Sutta Nipāta consists of some suttas representative of the type "Sutta" and therefore is a nipāta of suttas.

#### IV.

This collection should consist entirely of pieces which could be designated as sutta if the title Sutta Nipāta were to be justified. The Commentary (SnA.) states that the three types gāthā, geyya and veyyākaraṇa can be again called sutta and therefore the gāthā in Sutta Nipāta are suttas as well. It is not possible to draw a line of demarcation between gāthā and sutta. Of the 72 pieces found in Sutta Nipāta as many as 54 i.e. those forming vaggas I-IV, are called sutta by name, irrespective of whether they would strictly be categorised as sutta or gāthā, if such a division were possible. (The other 18 pieces form the Pārayana consisting of the prologue—vatthu-gāthā, the 16 pucchās and the epilogue respectively). This fact probably furnishes a clue to this problem. During the time of the arrangement of this collection the distinction between gāthā and sutta may not have been strictly observed, and things may have existed in a rather fluid state.

In the first 54 pieces a growing tendency towards standardisation can be seen. Every piece, whether ballad or discourse, is termed a sutta. The stanzas of the so-called suttas are often referred to as gāthā; e.g. Sn. 429 cd,

imā gāthā bhaṇaṃ māro aṭṭhā Buddhassa santike

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(Uttering these stanzas Māra stood near the Buddha) ; Sn. 251c,  
citrāhi gāthāhi muni-ppakāsaya

(the sage declared in colourful verse) in the narrative section of the Āmagandha Sutta ; Sn. pp. 13, 32, 46 and 48 in the narrative prose of Kasibhāradvāja, Ālavaka, Mahāmaṅgala and Sūciloma Suttas respectively,

Atha kho . . . Bhagavantam gāthāya ajjhabhāsi. (Then indeed, N.N. addressed the Bhagavā in a stanza) ; Sn. p. 78,

Sāruppāhi gāthāhi abhītthavi (extolled him with appropriate stanzas) in the prose of the Subhāsita Sutta. It also occurs at Sn. 81 = 480 in the phrase, *gāthābhigītam* (what is obtained by reciting stanzas) and Sn. 1131 a, *pārāyanam anugāyissam* (I shall sing the Pārāyana).

Besides these there are three instances of introductory verses called *vatthu-gāthā viz.* 1. A short introduction to Rāhula Sutta (Sn. 335-336), 2. the introduction to Nālaka Sutta (Sn. 679-698) and 3. the prologue to the Pārāyana (Sn. 976-1031).

Again in the Bhābru (or Bairat) Minor Rock Edict of Aśoka (*vide* Hultsch : *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. I, p. 172) the fourth " *dhammapaliyāya* " (section of the Scriptures) which is identified with the Muni Sutta of Sutta Nipāta (*vide* Dharmānanda Kosambi : *Indian Antiquary* 1912 pp. 37 ff.) is called Muni-gāthā (Stanzas on a Sage). The sixth which is identified with the Sāriputta Sutta of the Sutta Nipāta (*ibid.*) is called Upatisasine (the question of Upatisa). Here too is noticeable the tendency towards standardisation, for, what were known to Aśoka as gāthā and pasine are called suttas in Sutta Nipāta. Thus, it can be seen that an attempt has been made to designate as Suttas, as many pieces of Sutta Nipāta as possible. Hence the compiler has found no difficulty in classifying this work as a nipāta in a larger group of Suttas. It is very unlikely that he had the Sutta Piṭaka in mind, and it is quite probable that Sutta Nipāta was meant to be a nipāta among suttas in general, if not in the aṅga of Suttas, although finally it came to be considered as a nipāta of the Khuddaka Nikāya.

### V.

#### The Form of the Sutta Nipāta.

The Suttas of the Aṭṭhaka Vagga and the Pucchās of the Pārāyana Vagga are entirely in verse, whereas suttas of the other three vaggas are of two different types, one in pure verse, the other partly in verse and partly in prose. The 20 Suttas in Vaggas I-III which are entirely in gāthā-form and called " Verse Ballads " (*vide*. S. M. Katre : *Early Buddhist Ballads and their Relation*

to Older Upanishadic Literature) are distributed in the following manner: 7 in Uruga Vagga, 9 in Culla Vagga and 4 in Mahā Vagga. The "Mixed Ballads" (in prose and verse) occur as 5, 5 and 8 in the three respective vaggas. The absence of Mixed Ballads in the Aṭṭhaka and Pārāyana Vaggas and the ascending order in which they occur in the other three vaggas may furnish valuable data in discussing the relative chronology of these suttas.

The **prose** in these suttas is not an essential factor in the dialogue or discourse as the case may be. It is employed as an aid to the narrative or to describe the nidāna (the context). The only prose in seven<sup>1</sup> of these eighteen Mixed Ballads is the passage describing the circumstances leading up to the dialogue or discourse in verse. Six suttas<sup>2</sup> contain an additional prose passage, following the verse, which is very similar to one another in five instances describing the confession of faith by the Buddha's interlocutors. The other five suttas<sup>3</sup> contain three or more prose passages many of them interspersed with the verses.

## VI.

A close examination of the prose passages shows that they did not, as a rule, form an essential part of the ballad to begin with. In four of the last category of Suttas i.e. except the Dvayatānupassanā, it serves merely as a connecting thread running through the whole ballad linking up the various parts. Generally, when what is stated in the stanzas is not sufficient for the listener to grasp what has transpired between the end of one part and the beginning of the next part of the ballad, prose is introduced giving the necessary details; e.g. Sn. p. 14,

Atha Kho Kasibhāradvājo brāhmaṇo mahatīyā kaṃsapātiyā pāyasaṃ vaḍḍhetvā Bhagavato upanāmesi (Then the brahmin K. served out milk-rice in a large bronze bowl and offered it to the Bhagavā). Also see Sn. p. 110. Sometimes with the change of speaker prose is introduced; e.g. Sn. p. 79, in Subhāsita Sutta; and often for both the above reasons; e.g. Sn. p. III Sela and pp. 94-100 Sabhiya Suttas.

The **language of the prose** is quite similar to that of the prose Nikāyas in idiom, syntax and style. The stereotyped expression in the prose of Sutta Nipāta does not permit one to infer that it preserves the exact words of the narrators or reciters of these ballads. Generally, ballad-reciters state *in their*

1. Parābhava, Ālavaka, Mahāmaṅgala, Sūciloma, Vaṅḡisa, Dhammika and Kokāliya.

2. Vasala, Brāhmaṇadhammika, Sundarikabhāradvāja, Māgha and Vāseṭṭha.

3. Kasibhāradvāja, Subhāsita, Sabhiya, Sela and Dvayatānupassanā.

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*own words*, such facts as are necessary for the listeners to follow the narrative in the ballads. Here the prose states the same facts though clothed in the standard Canonical garb; and probably this standardisation has taken place long after the composition of the ballads themselves.

Narrative prose should be compared with **verse employed for narration**, found in abundance in Sutta Nipāta. The Commentator himself attributes several stanzas to the " Saṅgītikārā " (reciters at a Saṃgīti or " Council " i.e. compilers); e.g. Sn. 30, 251-252, 355d, 401d, 429cd, 449 and the epilogue of the Pārāyana (at SnA. 42, 292, 351, 377, 387, 394 and 603 respectively). In addition to these he attributes to the Saṅgītikārā, such repertory phrases as, *iti Bhagavā* (Sn. 355 etc.), *iti brāhmaṇo* (Sn. 459 etc.) and prose elements in Sabhiya, Sundarikabhāradvāja, Māgha, Sela and Dvayatānupassanā Suttas (at SnA. 351, 405, 394, and 398, 400, 414, 456 and 504 respectively). The *vatthu-gāthā* of the Nālaka Sutta and Pārāyana Vagga also belonged to the saṅgītikārā according to the Commentary (SnA. 483 and 580 respectively).

On a broad basis, the language, metre and style of the passages which are attributed to the Saṅgītikārā are no different from those of the other parts of the ballads to which they belong, for, their language, like that of the rest of the gāthās in Sutta Nipāta preserves an earlier phase of Pāli than the standard Canonical expression of the prose of Sutta Nipāta. (Also *vide* Geiger, Pāli Literatur und Sprache, p. 1.). It is quite probable that in most cases this " narrative element " in verse goes back to the time of the composition of the ballads themselves.

On the other hand, the narrative prose in its present form cannot, in any way, date back earlier than the period when the Canonical prose idiom was gradually being fixed and acquired an accepted standard form. It is not improbable that this prose dates back only to the time of the arrangement of Sutta Nipāta as a separate work. Prior to that time no fixed prose narrative may have been attached to these ballads, and the reciters used their own words when necessary. Thus, the prose in Sutta Nipāta can be considered as being much younger than the gāthās.

### VII.

The poetical pieces in Sutta Nipāta are of three main types:—1. Simple didactic verse, 2. Dialogue in verse and 3. (didactic) discourse or dialogue following a prose introduction. Type 2 can be further sub-divided into (a) pure dialogue in verse, (b) dialogue consisting of a discourse in answer to a question.

There are 21 Suttas belonging to **type 1**, *viz.* I, 1, 3, 8, 11, 12; II. 1, 3, 6, 8, 10; III. 8; IV. 1-6, 8, 12, 13 and 15. Some of these suttas like

I. 1 (Uraga) and I. 3 (Khaggavisāṇa) etc. are simple ballads with a regular refrain running through them. Others like I. 8 (Metta), II. 1 (Ratana) and II. 3 (Hiri) etc. dilate on certain topics of religious or doctrinal importance; still others such as some of the suttas from the Aṭṭhaka Vagga (included in the above list) show the attitude of a true follower of the Buddha to certain then-current issues. The last two sub-types are more in the nature of discourses rather than simple ballads.

There are 30 pieces belonging to **type 2**; 20 of which *viz.* I. 2, 5, 9; IV. 9 and V. 2-17 (the sixteen pucchās) can be said to belong to type 2(a) i.e. dialogues in verse. Class 2(b) consists of the 10 suttas, II. 2, 9, 11, 13; III. 11; IV. 7, 10, 11, 14 and 16 in which a discourse in verse is given in reply to a question asked by an interlocutor.

**Type 3** consisting of the so-called "Mixed Ballads" includes 16 suttas; *viz.* I. 6, 7, 10; II. 4, 5, 7, 12, 14; III. 3-7, 9, 10 and 12. Some of the suttas like I. 7 (Vasala), II. 4 (Mahāmaṅgala), III. 3 (Sundarikabhāradvāja), III. 5 (Māgha) etc. are discourses in the form of ballads; while others like I. 6 (Parābhava) I. 10 (Ālavaka) and II. 12 (Dhammika) are dialogues on matters of doctrinal importance.

The other 5 pieces which are not included in the above classification are I. 4 (Kasibhāradvāja S.), a prose and verse mixed narrative with dialogue, V. 18 (the epilogue to the Pārāyana) a prose and verse mixed narrative, and III. 1 (Pabbajjā S.), III. 2 (Padhāna S.) and V. 1 (the Vatthu-gāthā of the Pārāyana), simple narratives in verse.

### VIII.

The ballads of Sutta Nipāta are popular in character, though they describe incidents connected with the Buddha and his teaching. There is a great deal of popular lore incorporated in the gāthās e.g. Sn. 137-141, 667-678, etc. There are also many popular teachings in some of the suttas, e.g. I, 6, 7, 8 and the late Ratana Sutta (II. 1); but all of them are at the same time characteristically Buddhist. The ballads also contain many passages and ideas common to the earlier Upaniṣads and the Epics; (*vide* Katre, op. cit.).

Besides these similarities that Sutta Nipāta bears to the earlier Upaniṣads and epic literature, it has much in common with the earlier Sanskrit literature even in form. The narrative-ballads, *viz.* Pabbajjā, Padhāna and Nālaka (vatthu-gāthā only) Suttas have their counterpart in the Ākhyāna (ballad) literature in Sanskrit. Their common characteristic is the alternation of dialogue stanzas with narrative stanzas. Discussing these Suttas Winternitz (op. cit., Vol. 11, p. 96) remarks that they are "precious remnants of that

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*ancient sacred ballad-poetry* from which the later epic version of the life of Buddha grew, in the same way as the heroic epic grew out of the secular ballads or Ākhyānas."

In the same way, the riddle poetry found in the Sutta Nipāta, such as the Ālavaka and Hemavata Suttas in which a yakkha asks a question has parallels in the Mahābhārata (*vide* Winternitz, *ibid.* Vol. I, p. 352 and P.V. Bapat, The nāgarī edition of Sutta Nipāta, p. xvii). The poetical riddles or "Brahmodya" of the R̥gveda, e.g. I. 164, VIII. 29 are not very different from the riddle-poetry of Sutta Nipāta (*cp.* Kasibhāradvāja S.). The mixed prose and verse narrative dialogues of the Brāhmaṇas are an exact parallel to the "Mixed-Ballads" of Sutta Nipāta. From these it is evident that the early Buddhists not only used the same traditional floating literary material, but also made use of the same literary modes common to the earlier Sanscritic literature.

### IX.

The **dramatic element** which is not rare in Sutta Nipāta has its parallels in the earlier literature. It is clearly noticeable at I. 2 (Dhaniya S.), I. 9 (Hemavata S.), III. 2 (Padhāna S.) and IV. 9 (Māgandiya S.). It may be said that the majority of the dialogue ballads can be dramatised; but in the absence of any positive evidence it cannot be established with certainty that any of them were dramatised in early times. There is only a certain degree of probability.<sup>4</sup>

There is no doubt that these ballads *were sung*. The internal evidence of Sutta Nipāta itself testifies to it; e.g. Sn. 81 = 480 gathābhigītam (what is obtained by *singing stanzas*), Sn. 682a, Seḷenti gāyanti ca vādiyanti (they cry exultantly, *sing* and play instrumental music). As suggested by Katre (*op. cit.*) it is probable that these stanzas were sung to the accompaniment of music (*cp.* Sn. 682a); but the only evidence he puts forward is the occurrence of the word vīṇā (lute) at Sn. 449b, vīṇā kacchā abhassatha (the lute dropped from under his arm *lit.* arm-pit). Judging from the fact that a vīṇā (which is usually associated with his three daughters) was incongruous with the *early* Māra-legend and that the parallel line in Mahāvastu reads, vināsaṃ gacchi ucchriti (His pride was all shattered—Mvastu. II. 240) much significance cannot be attached to this line. However, the very form of the gāthās suggests

4. There are numerous references in the Nikāyas to dramatic performances e.g. naṭa, nacca, visūkadassana, pekkhā, samajja and sobhanika; *vide* O. H. de A. Wijesekera, "Buddhist Evidence for the Early Existence of Drama," I.H.Q. XVII, where he has analysed the data giving many references. It is probable that Buddhist ballads were dramatically recited at Samajjas and similar occasions.

that they were sung, and it is probable that the regular dialogue ballads were sung on suitable occasions (*samajjas*?) by two or more reciters, each singing the respective words spoken by the characters in the ballad.

In Dhaniya, Sutta, for instance, two reciters would sing the alternate stanzas representing the dialogue between the herdsman Dhaniya and the Buddha, a third would introduce Sn. 30, the words of the narrator, while Māra appears singing Sn. 33. Here is a regular dramatic piece. Such ballads can be compared with the *Ākhyāna-Hymns* of the Ṛgveda (e.g. hymn about Saramā and the Panīs, Rv. X. 108, or the dialogue between Yama and Yāmī, Rv. X. 10), which are regarded by some as the earliest forms of dramatic literature in India and by others as ballads (*vide* Ghate's Lectures on Ṛgveda, p. 121 n. 1). In fact, the Akhyāna-hymns of the Ṛgveda, on account of their dual characteristic of being ballads and dramatic pieces at the same time, can be said to bear a very close resemblance to the dialogue ballads of Sutta Nipāta.

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