Irrigation Practices and Norms in Sri Lanka by the 5th Century CE: A Survey based on the Samantapāśādikā

by

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Abstract

One of the key elements of water heritage in Sri Lanka is the ancient water related infrastructure, generally referred to as the ‘ancient irrigation system’. The present studies on this system began in the colonial era, especially during the Dutch and later British times. That encounter was not limited to reviewing the existing situation, but attempted to restore it to the original function of the ancient system. In the absence of clear evidence, to identify the original function, colonial designers began to conceptualise a new system with inputs for their own “colonial” knowledge. This paper attempts to resurrect the norms and practices of the ancient system, not based on the colonial interpretations but based on the 5th century Buddhist commentarial work, the Samantapāśādikā. Its validity as a source in this endeavour will be discussed in the study. As the Samantapāśādikā was based on previous Sinhala commentaries (Sīhalaḥṭṭṭhaṭṭakathā), the contents of which may cover a period, at least
Irrigation Practices and Norms in Sri Lanka by the 5th Century CE: A Survey based on the *Samantapāsādikā* from the 3rd century BCE to the 5th century CE. The irrigation related contents as depicted there, are discussed under four key elements, (1) Physical (hydraulic infrastructure, water sources, flows, applications), (2) Agro-productive (soils, crops, technology, capital, labour, knowledge, skills), (3) Organizational (human organization to govern, operate and sustain the system) and (4) Normative (rules and rights, and obligation related to access).