

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

by

**Chandana Jayawardana and Ven. Medagampitiye
Wijithadhamma**

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 *Samantapāsādikā*. Its validity as a source in this endeavour will be discussed in the study. As the *Samantapāsādikā* was based on previous Sinhala commentaries (*Sīhalaṭṭhakathā*), the contents of which may cover a period, at least*

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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).