

Epigraphical Evidence of Human Rights in Ancient Sri Lanka

K.K.D.K.Bowatta¹ and K. Dehigama²

¹*Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka*

²*Library, Faculty of Engineering, University of Peradeniya*

Documents asserting individual rights, such as Magna Carta (1215), the English Bill of Rights (1689), the French Declaration on the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789), and the US Constitution and Bill of Rights (1791) are the written forerunners to modern concepts of human rights. These rights exist as natural rights or as legal rights, in both national and international laws. Some believe that the idea of human rights was not known in the ancient world (Freeman, 2002). Despite this idea, the Hindu Vedas, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, the Bible, the Quran (Koran), the Analects of Confucius, the Inca and Aztec codes of conduct and justice are some of the ancient sources which deal with duties, rights, and responsibilities of people.

Studies of human rights that existed in ancient Sri Lanka is hitherto unknown. This paper examines inscriptions that record information on the concept of human rights which prevailed in ancient Sri Lanka. Data were collected from inscriptions recorded from all over the country. The selected inscriptions were from 1st century B.C. to 13th century A.D.

Among the findings, it can be seen that the 'right to live' (Article 3 Universal Declaration of Human Rights - UDHR) was practiced by the time of King Kassapa IV (963-980 A.D.), for example, the Kukurumahan-Damana pillar inscription mentions that "whoever have come for refuge shall not be arrested".

It is seen in ancient Sri Lanka where the concept of human rights began to take a greater meaning. In the Badulla pillar inscription, it is stated "for fine that has been imposed, the master of a house may be taken [in restraint]; his wife or children shall not be taken in restraint". This meets the terms with the prevention of arbitrary persecution of Article 5 UDHR.

The Devinuwara pillar inscription of Parakaramabahu II (1236 A.D.) complies with Article 10 and 11 of UDHR, i.e., 'fair trial and to be innocent until proven guilty'. Accordingly, it states, "punishments shall not be inflicted or caused to be inflicted, for the mere reason that a charge of guilt has arisen, without investigating in accordance with the evidence and establishing the guilt" (Paranavitana, 1953).

In fact, there are fundamental differences between human rights today and in the past. Rights that spring from natural laws have been considered as natural rights of ancient times. Ancient inscriptions clearly depict that people should have rights regardless of their race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, age, and sex. This study shows that modern concepts of dignity and of equal and inalienable rights that are the foundation of freedom, justice and peace existed in ancient Sri Lanka. Most importantly, in ancient times, society has had systems of propriety and justice in addition to ways of administering to the health and welfare of the members of the country.