



A Study on Self-governance Aspects Revealed through Sri Lankan Inscriptions to Protect the Monastic Property

PIYUMI EMBULDENIYA¹ AND BUDDISHA WEERASURIYA²

¹Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

E-mail: piyumie@arts.pdn.ac.lk; buddisha@arts.pdn.ac.lk

Abstract: This study explores self-governance through ancient Sri Lankan inscriptions, especially the *Attāni* pillar inscriptions that aimed to protect monastic properties related to the Buddha *Sāsana*. The research looks at how symbols and curse texts served as tools of soft power to encourage self-regulation and discipline in society, functioning outside of imposed legal systems. By combining literature reviews with field observations at inscription sites, the study identifies a unique epigraphic tradition that conveyed ethical expectations and protective warnings through symbols like the sun, moon, monks' fan, dog, crow, cobra, and rat snake. Often paired with written curse texts, these symbols warned those who violated monastic property that they would face karmic consequences, potentially being reborn as lower beings. The study categorizes the use of these inscriptions over time and across regions, showing that their rise, during the late Anuradhapura period, reflects a nuanced understanding of social psychology and communication. The inscriptions were not just legal notices. They served as visual tools aimed at instilling fear, respect, and ethical behavior among temple visitors and local communities. Their placement in temple complexes highlights a deeper cultural mechanism for governance based on belief systems, social values, and community involvement, not merely formal legal frameworks. The findings suggest that these symbolic and textual strategies acted effectively as a self-governing mechanism, where societal values shaped behavior. The decline in their use during later historical periods is examined alongside changes in political and social conditions. Notably, the study emphasizes the ongoing significance of such inscriptions, illustrated by current beliefs and practices in certain rural temples. This continuity shows how culturally rooted belief systems can influence community ethics. Ultimately, the research argues that traditional methods of self-governance, based on shared values and symbolic communication, may offer viable models for protecting cultural property and promoting ethical social conduct today.

Keywords: *Attāni* pillar inscriptions, Monastic property, Self-governance, Sri Lanka

Received : 10 February 2025

Revised : 11 March 2025

Accepted : 19 March 2025

Published : 29 June 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Piyumi Embuldeniya & Buddhisha Weerasuriya (2025). A Study on Self-governance Aspects Revealed through Sri Lankan Inscriptions to Protect the Monastic Property. *Journal of History and Archaeology*, 1: 1, pp. 19-27.

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘self-governance’ can be defined as a set of guidelines for appropriate conduct inside the team or organization. This could incorporate a moral or legal code (Esmark 2009:31). It can refer to personal behavior or any type of institution, such as family units, social groups, affinity groups, legal bodies, industry bodies, religions, and various levels of political entities. However, Self-governance does not emerge naturally in man or society (Ibib 29-30).

It is influenced by various philosophies rooted in society. Hence, controls imposed by oneself and society on society have a positive effect on the progress of the individual and society, rather than a control based on the rule of law imposed from outside.

Instead of obeying a stressful legal system imposed by someone or a group, man instinctively obeys a rule that he builds within himself based on accepted social ethics. This has been used by the ancestors of Asian societies as a more successful strategy for social governance. But it does not seem that the above matter is being done effectively through the legal systems alien to the society which have been gradually imposed since the colonial period and which communities continue to maintain supremely in the post-colonial period.

It seems that the self-governance theory discussed above has been used in practice in the past governance system of Sri Lanka, which can be considered as a very old region among human settlements in South Asia. Although it can be discussed in many aspects, this article will only discuss how the Sri Lankan ancients used the self-governance theory to protect religious property. This research primarily questions how the ancient Sri Lankans used symbolism as a soft power to protect religious property. The main objective of this research is to explicate the significance of the Self-governed aspects revealed through Sri Lankan inscriptions to protect the religious properties belonging to the *Buddha Sāsana*.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, the research methodology contains a literature survey method and a participatory observation method. Firstly, researchers conducted the literature survey, where the study of previous research and research gaps was understood. After that, participatory observation was done at places with the spread of *Attāni* pillars in Sri Lanka, and through that, the nature of the spread of *Attāni* pillars in various regions of Sri Lanka was identified. Apart from that the current illegal involvements on cultural properties were studied as case studies to identify the issues regarding the method used for protecting the cultural properties. The collected data were categorized in order to the locations, chronology, and content. That categorization was used to understand the ideology of Self-governance revealed through the symbols depicted on the *Attāni* pillars. Finally, this research suggests that the symbols consist of conceptualized meaning to use in any community of the world to protect cultural properties as a Self-governance method.

LITERATURE SURVEY

The Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka has recorded the inscriptions containing the symbols discussed in this research under several volumes in *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, and *Epigraphical Notes*. Further, H. C. P. Bell mentioned an inscription that contains the symbols in the Report on The *Kegalle* District of the Province of *Sabaragamuwa* (1904). All the above reports only mentioned the text and translation of the inscriptions with the stampages.

Furthermore, several scholars extracted details from the above-mentioned reports and published research regarding the *Attāni* pillars, and their various aspects. Ananda Tissa Kumara mentioned the *Attāni* pillar tradition of Sri Lanka in his book titled *Forms of Attāni Grants in ancient Sri Lanka (Sinhala medium- Parani Lakdiva Attāni Pradana Vidhi)*. Further, T. G. Kulathunga's book of Epigraphical curse texts (*Sinhala medium- Abhilekhana Shapa Patha*) is the only research published about curse texts in ancient Sri Lanka. Moreover, Sirisaman Wijetunga discusses the communication methods of *Attāni* pillar inscriptions in his book titled *Inscriptional Communication of Sri Lanka (Sinhala medium-Sri Lankawe Shila Lipi Sannivedanaya)*. Therefore, it could be recognized that there is no research conducted on the aspect of Self-governance revealed through the *Attāni* pillar inscriptions of Sri Lanka.

ATTĀNI PILLARS IN SRI LANKA

According to the pottery sherds with Brahmi characteristics found from the Anuradhapura Citadel excavation, the ancient date of the written communication dates back to the 6th century BCE (Deraniyagala 1992:739-748). Nevertheless, a systematic writing method was developed in the 3rd century BCE. According to the characteristics of letters and language, Sri Lankan inscriptions are mainly categorized as below;

- Early Brahmi period (3rd century BCE - 1st century AD)
- Late Brahmi period (1st century AD - 4th century AD)
- Post Brahmi period (5th century AD - 6th century AD)
- Transitional period (6th century AD - 8th century AD)
- Early Sinhala period (9th century AD - 12th century AD)
- Post Sinhala period (13th century AD - 14th century AD)
- Modern Sinhala (15th century AD - up to now) (Dias 2001:1-3)

There could be recognized various types of inscriptions belonging to the above-mentioned categorization of time scale, such as; cave inscriptions, slab inscriptions, pillar inscriptions, rock inscriptions, copper plates, gold plates, wall inscriptions, and ola leaves manuscripts.

The use of symbols to communicate a message was practiced since the 3rd century BCE and it evolved a tradition to communicate curse texts which will discipline the society. This tradition commenced in the 9th century A.D., and it spread over several areas in Sri Lanka in various periods. Especially '*Attāni* Pillars' could be seen during the late Anuradhapura period (Ranawella 1999:113-115).

Throughout this research that could be found four main types of inscriptions communicating curse texts and symbols. Curse texts and symbols could be seen frequently at the *Attāni* pillars and rarely could be seen at the slab inscriptions, rock inscriptions, and copper plates.

SYMBOLS

Several symbols were used to communicate the idea of a curse. Therefore, that could be recognized by the symbols of the sun, moon, monks' fan (*watapatha*), dog, crow, cobra, and rat snake depicted in the inscriptions.

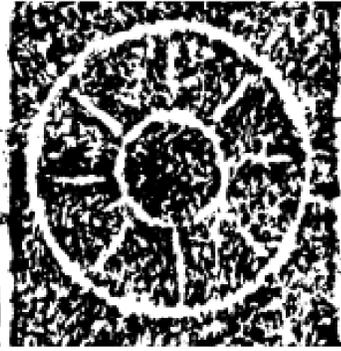


Figure 1: Sun
(Wickremasinghe 1928:
plate. 07)



Figure 2: Moon
(Wickremasinghe 1928: plate.
07)

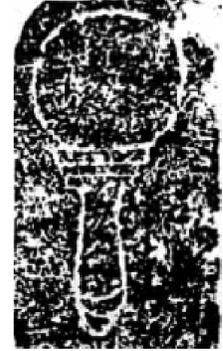


Figure 3: Monks' fan
(*Watapatha*) (Wickremasinghe
1933: plate. 24)

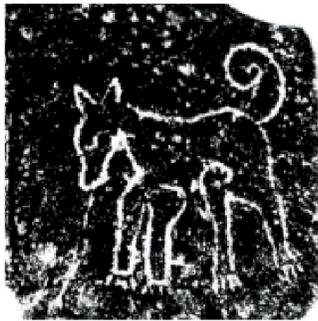


Figure 4: Dog (Paranavitana
1943: plate.09)



Figure 5: Crow
(Wickremasinghe 1933: plate.
24)



Figure 6: Cobra
(Wickremasinghe 1933: plate.
24)

The set of symbols mentioned above is constructing a sentence, and communicating a fear to protect cultural properties with the symbols of the sun, moon, monks' fan (*watapatha*), dog, crow, cobra, and rat snake (Kumara 1990). The curse text on these inscriptions states that anyone who misuses religious properties will be reborn as a dog, crow, cobra, or rat snake for eternity until the sun and moon cease to exist.

The symbols depicted in the inscriptions could be categorized in order to the locations, chronology, and content as follows.

Name of the Inscription	Period (century CE)	Ownership	Symbols						
			Sun	Moon	Monks' fan	Dog	Crow	Cobra	Rat snake
<i>Āllevāva</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Udaya</i> II				✓	✓		
<i>Panduvastu</i> wara pillar inscription	9	King <i>Sena</i> II			✓			✓	
<i>Māmaduva</i> slab inscription	9	King <i>Sena</i> II				✓	✓		
<i>Kōngollāva</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Sena</i> II		✓	✓	✓	✓		

Name of the Inscription	Period (century CE)	Ownership	Symbols						
			Sun	Moon	Monks' fan	Dog	Crow	Cobra	Rat snake
<i>Iluppakanniya</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Sena</i> II				✓	✓		
<i>Nayindanāva</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Sena</i> II			✓	✓		✓	
<i>Anuradhapura</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Sena</i> II				✓	✓		
<i>Kibissa</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Sena</i> II	✓	✓					
<i>Naccaduva</i> pillar inscription No.1	9	King <i>Sena</i> II	✓			✓			
<i>Naccaduva</i> pillar inscription No.2	9	King <i>Sena</i> II	✓		✓			✓	
<i>Malwatu Oya</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Udaya</i> II				✓	✓		
<i>Ambagahavāva</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Udaya</i> II				✓	✓		
<i>Kirigallāva</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Udaya</i> II				✓	✓		
<i>Halpanu āla</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Udaya</i> II			✓	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Āṇḍiyāgala</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Udaya</i> II			✓	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Panduvastuvara</i> pillar inscription No.1	9	King <i>Udaya</i> II	✓	✓	✓			✓	
<i>Panduvastuvara</i> pillar inscription No.2	9	King <i>Udaya</i> II	✓	✓	✓				
<i>Kinihirikanda</i> pillar inscription	9	King <i>Udaya</i> II						✓	
<i>Dāsgiriya Sri Isipatanārama</i> pillar inscription	9-10	Abhā Salamevan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
<i>Mallāvi Shivapuram Shimale</i> slab inscription	9-10	-				✓	✓		
<i>Buddanehela</i> pillar inscription	10	King <i>Kassapa</i> V	✓			✓	✓		
<i>Kukurumahana Damana</i> pillar inscription	10	King <i>Kassapa</i> IV	✓	✓		✓	✓		
<i>Mādirigiriya</i> pillar inscription	10	King <i>Kassapa</i> V				✓	✓		✓
<i>Agitge vāva</i> pillar inscription	10	King <i>Kassapa</i> V	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
<i>Bilibāva</i> pillar inscription	10	King <i>Kassapa</i> V	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
<i>Ātaviragollāva</i> pillar inscription	10	King <i>Dappula</i> V	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
<i>Alutvāva</i> pillar inscription	10	?	✓	✓		✓	✓		

Name of the Inscription	Period (century CE)	Ownership	Symbols						
			Sun	Moon	Monks' fan	Dog	Crow	Cobra	Rat snake
Gārandigala rock inscription	10	King Kassapa III				✓	✓		
Kataragama pillar inscription	10	King Dappula V			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Colombo Museum pillar inscription	10	King Kassapa IV			✓	✓	✓		✓
Vihāregama pillar inscription	10	King Kassapa V or Sena V	✓	✓	✓				✓
Māda Ulpota pillar inscription	10	?				✓			
Polonnaruva pillar inscription	10	King Mahinda V	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Koṭṭange rock inscription No.1	?	?	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Malagane pillar inscription	10	King Udaya II			✓	✓	✓		✓
Maḍavala rock inscription	15	King Parākramabhāhu VI	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Ganekanda Vihara rock inscription	11	?				✓	✓		
Mārassana vihara slab	18	?	✓	✓		✓	✓		

CURSE TEXTS AND SYMBOLS AS THE SELF-GOVERNANCE PRACTICE IN ANCIENT SRI LANKA

Through the above explanations, it is clear, how ancient Sri Lankans used symbols to protect religious property. This paper already discussed the symbols, the distribution of the inscriptions with those symbols, and the nature of the inscriptions with symbols. Here it is expected to inquire to what extent these symbolic inscriptions are the basis for self-governance in ancient Sri Lanka.

Firstly, it should be emphasized about the peculiarities in the use of symbols. Depiction of symbols in these inscriptions can be categorized into four types as shown below.

- Depicting all symbols with curse text
- Depicting a few symbols with curse text
- Depicting only the curse text
- Depicting only symbols

In some cases, written using letters, the curse text under discussion is included at the end of the inscription. The most popular form of this type of inscription is the form of all or some symbols in addition to the written text. Rarely, the form of only symbols can be observed in stone slabs or pillars. It is clear that there was a need to communicate the fact more clearly by communicating the curse text in the most common letters while also communicating through symbols. The idea of communicating through these symbols was so ingrained in society that it is clear that in some cases

it was not necessary to show all the symbols. Sometimes just using the dog or the crow is enough to communicate the whole idea.

It is also important to pay attention to the height and width followed in displaying characters and symbols. Here, in every case where symbols have been used together with letters, it could be observed that the symbols are several times larger than the size of a letter. The text of the document often records legal information such as the persons who made the grant and that information is not particularly important to the people who come to the temple on a daily basis. But the purpose of communicating to society through symbols is very special. Therefore, these symbols are shown more prominently in the sentences. This confirms its strong need for social communication.

Thus it could be confirmed that the curse text in the epigraph was intended to be communicated more intensively to the devotees coming to the temple. The next question to be asked is why such a strong need for communication arose in that society.

Buddhism in Sri Lanka, which started very simply in the third century BC, became very popular and developed century by century due to the patronage of kings, ministers, merchants, and the acceptance of the general public. Therefore, it has been confirmed by the archaeological excavations carried out in many sites of that era that various valuable objects were collected in the temple complexes. Therefore, temple complexes were not just religious centers. Therefore, it may have been a necessity of that period to establish stronger security for the temple complexes. It can be assumed that with such a purpose, symbols were used to communicate the curse text to all who came to the temple.

It is clear from the sources that by the end of the Anuradhapura period the society was more complex than the beginning. There may have been various disturbances in the society due to various migrations, invasions, genetic mixing, propagation of ideologies, etc. And since the end of the *Anuradhapura* period was not as prosperous as its beginning and middle, various immoralities may have developed. Therefore, the need to protect the valuable property in the temples may have arisen. Therefore, it can be assumed that curse texts and symbols may have been made for the protection of property.

It is clear from the observation of inscriptions belonging to the medieval period that the tradition of writing these curse texts started in the last half of the *Anuradhapura* period and gradually decreased in popularity with the end of the *Anuradhapura* period. It is important to find out the reason for that. This does not mean that medieval society was more moral than before. There are several reasons for that as follows.

- Due to various disturbances in the medieval period, the kingdoms migrated from one place to another in a short period of time, so there were no grants to religious places as in the Anuradhapura period.
- Due to frequent invasions, kings had to repair destroyed religious places rather than make new grants.
- Emergence of other strategies to implement ethical concerns such as security of property in places of worship.

Due to the facts mentioned above, epigraphic cursing was not common, but the situation is seen from time to time in the historical context. Not only was it seen later in the historical context but it was also observed in this study where it is being updated in the present. As a prominent example of such a place, *Talawa Marassana Rajamaha Viharaya* belonging to Kandy district can be studied exceptionally.

Marassana is a village with traditional features dating back to the Kandyan period and there are inscribed symbols containing the idea of curses on the panel still visible in front of the *Tampita Patimaghara*. In order to better visualize the symbols engraved on the stone, this slab is plastered with chalk every year so that the symbols appear, and the villagers believe that if you eat any food there without contributing to the temple, you will get negative rewards as it remains on the slab. Villagers say that no native has ever damaged this temple except when the Portuguese damaged it in the sixteenth century. It reveals how the slab has been very important to protect and maintain the property of this temple even today. It means that the use of curses and symbols for the protection of temple property, which was maintained as a past tradition, is a concept that can be used more effectively than imposing laws for the protection of religious property.

This is clearly identifiable as a self-governance practice. Due to a conceptual framework established in the society, he or she controls himself or herself, and the generations after him or her are disciplined accordingly. Although it can be observed that psychologically man is often tempted to violate rules, there is fear and obedience to social norms. This can be used more effectively for social welfare. This can also be identified as the model that Eastern people have used over time for social well-being. But with the westernization that happened later, it can be observed that effective results have not been achieved by only preparing legal frameworks instead of the social values that people in the east follow.

CONCLUSION

For centuries, legal systems have helped to protect social values in Eastern countries, and the various belief systems that have prevailed in the society have also contributed to the protection of social values. These studies also discussed the effectiveness of a belief in social well-being beyond similar laws. The study found that quality outweighed the contribution of laws in terms of effectiveness.

The using symbols for communicating was also clarified by this study. The study also made it clear how important a factor pictography can play as a method to discipline the society. When examining the positive effect of the use of curse words used by Sri Lankans for self-governance, which was a primary objective of the study, it can be confirmed that it has surpassed even the legal system of ancient Sri Lanka and played a unique role in social well-being. This tradition, which was popular during the early days of the Anuradhapura period, was rarely used later, and even today in some traditional villages, it is used to protect common property. It is clear that this method is more effective in disciplining the society.

It is a well-known fact that even though we have developed an advanced legal system in the post-colonial period, in parallel with the global legal system, those laws have not contributed enough to discipline the society. Therefore, it can be suggested through this study that it is important to update social welfare by creating self-governance using the belief systems rooted in the society, which is the old system familiar to the Eastern society of the world.

REFERENCES

- Bell, H. C. P. *Report on The Kegalle District of the Province of Sabaragamuwa* (Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, 1904).
- Deraniyagala, S. U. *Prehistory of Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Department of Archaeology 1992).
- Dias, M. *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol.VIII (Colombo: Department of Archaeology).

- Esmark, Anders and Triantafillou, Peter, “A Macro Level Perspective on Governance of the Self and Others”, in *The Politics of Self-governance*, ed. Eva Sørensen and Peter Triantafillou (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009).
- Gamage, D. P. *Epigraphical Notes Nos. 22-23* (Colombo: Department of Archaeology, 2020).
- Kulathunga, T. G. *Abhilekhana Shapa Patha (Sinhala medium) - Epigraphical curse texts*. (Author Publication, 2005).
- Kumara, A. T. *Parani Lakdiva Attāni Pradana Vidhi (Sinhala medium) - Forms of Attāni grants in ancient Sri Lanka*. (Kelaniya: Vidyalankara Press, 1990).
- Paranavitana, S. *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol. IV (Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, 1943).
- Ranawella, S. *Inscriptions of Apa Kitagbo and Kings Sena I, Sena II and Udaya II* (Colombo: National Library of Sri Lanka, 1999).
- Wijetunga, S. *Sri Lankawe Shila Lipi Sannivedanaya (Sinhala medium) - Inscriptional Communication of Sri Lanka*. (Warakapola: Ariya Publishers, 2007).
- Wickremasinghe, D. M. D. Z. *Epigraphia Zeylanica, Vol. II* (Colombo: Department of Archaeology, 1928).
- Wickremasinghe, D. M. D. Z. & Codrington, H.W. *Epigraphia Zeylanica, Vol. III* (Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, 1933).