

# Free-will and Sri Lankan Society

GENC-1001.2

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# Objectives

The aims of this lesson are to

- Briefly introduce Sri Lankan society and its structure
- Define the concept of free-will
- Introduce the nature of free-will in ancient Sri Lankan society
- Explain how free-will prevails in a multi-faceted society in Sri Lanka
- Identify the nature of free-will in contemporary Sri Lankan society

# Intended learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson students will be able to:

- Identify the structure of Sri Lankan society
- Define the concept of free-will with reference to various definitions
- Understand how free-will prevailed in the past
- Identify the importance of free-will in the multi-racial context
- Understand how free-will is safeguarded through the current Constitution
- Recognize the contradiction between international treaty agreements and conventional or religious-based acts

# Introduction- Sri Lankan society

- Yakka (*Vedda* people), Nāga (*Chulodara, Mahodara, Maniakkhika*), Deva (*Sumana Saman*) and Rāksha (*Rāvana, Vibheeshana*) were the four groups or *SivHela* lived in the ancient era. (Faiths and beliefs)
- Sinhalese people descend from Indo Aryans such as Prince Vijaya who arrived in 6 BCE. (Buddhist / Catholic )
- Tamil community can be categorized in to local and Indian (Hindu, Buddhist and Christians)
- Muslim community – Moors, Malay, Sunni and Shia
- Burgher – Catholic
- Chinese, Malay, Sri Lankan African as well as various gypsy groups

# Definitions to Free-will

- “Free-will is doing good” **Pythagoras**
- “Freedom for the people to do good is free-will” **Socrates**
- “Freedom for choice good or bad can be defined as free-will” **Aristotle**
- “Free-will is the ability not to be submissive the external authorities such as environment and customs” **Plato**
- Free will is the freedom for people to engage in good activities for the sake of obtaining the praise of the God. (**Thomas Aquinas.**)

- Freewill – ability to work without constancy or influence.  
Ability to work in accordance with his free will (Oxford 9<sup>th</sup> Edition, p 539)
- Due to dilemma of constancy, free will has been defined as a complex subject matter
- Free will or free thought is the freedom to come to a conclusion after intellectual analysis
- That is the freedom to deviate from servitude in thinking as well as practice
- When there is free will there is an opportunity to work according to his or her will. That will offer the freedom to quest.

- There is also an idea to reject traditional religious beliefs
- The idea that faith or any other authority is unaffected as a matter of the religion (British Dictionary)
- In the discussion of free will or free thought which aspiration should be fulfilled, is there should be the freedom to meet all ambitions and what is the role of the religion are been discussed lengthily
- Free-will has been considered as a more complex subject matter among the responsibility of action and result related to religious thinking, the relevance of ethical criteria, cultural limitations, attitudes as well as personal ambitions
- However, free-will can be discussed in the context of overall conditional prevail in a country or a society

# Nature of Free-will in Ancient Sri Lankan society

- Sri Lankan society is one of the societies that has evolved historically. Hence, it was possible to identify how the free-will was assessed according to the religious, social and political influence prevailed at each time period.
- There were several community groups who observed different religious beliefs during pre-*Arahath maha Mahinda* era. These include religious beliefs such as *Brahmanism*, *Ājeewaka*, *Nighantha* and Buddhism as well as people who observe other primitive religious practices. Mahawamsa depicts how these believers lived in harmony without any major conflict among each other. There was no limitation to free-will during the period.
- *Mahindagamanaya* has paved the way for religious, political and social structure in Sri Lanka. However, the existing religious beliefs or any other racial groups were not subjected to suppression. (Mahawamsa, Chapters 17, 18 and 19 )



- Opportunity for the religious beliefs to exist as it is and follow them
- Introduce substitutes to certain primitive beliefs according to Buddhism
- Commend the Principle of Non-Violence
- Agri-economy, religion was nurtured under the concept of *Wewai, Dagabai, Gamai, Pansalai* (Lanka History, 1<sup>st</sup> Volume, 1<sup>st</sup> Part)
- Locating temples and Kovils in place with the influence of Hinduism in Polonnaruwa era
- Cultural rituals such as offerings came in to existence

(Mahawamsa Chapter 14, 15, 16 & 17, History of Ceylon 1<sup>st</sup> Volume, II part)

- Society was not divided by the caste or tribe. However, with the influence of India there was a caste distinction among people. That was not done in accordance to any religious belief. These were ideas rooted with generations.
- There was no interference by such factors to gain religious or social benefits.
- The society has limitations in marriages according to cultural attitudes.
- Every aspect of the social life was operated in a society based on family, caste and tribe and the limitations or privileges were decided accordingly.
- In general, there was no state or religious influence on free will.

- A monarchical form of governance was in operation
- Although, there were feudalistic features, there was no slavery social system similar to India was in practice. Allocation of responsibilities such as the duty method at the Temple of Tooth was in operation.
- There were some welfare or ethical rule in the village council system but they were not strongly expressed as tribal primitives.
- Responsibilities were commended religiously (holder of tooth relic and bowl relic)
- Also there had a conception that a Bodhisttwa should become the King)
- Declaration of Magatha Order (The policy of don't kill since not only humans but also the animals have the right to live)
- Although, the various rulers of the monarchy have demonstrated weaknesses of the system, the circumstances that hindered free will were not known (Chapter 25/26 – 37)