

## **Evolution of Tamil Language and Culture: A Study of Pēraciriyar Urai of Tolkāppiyam**

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### **Abstract**

Written more than two thousand years back, the language used in Tolkāppiyam is almost impossible for laypeople to read without an elaborate commentary (referred to in Tamil as ‘Urai’). The cultural context of the original text can also be understood only with the aid of Urai. The evolution of the language spanning over two thousand years and the many cultural changes which triggered it can be traced in the Urai written for Tolkāppiyam by the famous scholar Pēraciriyar, who lived in the twelfth century. Pēraciriyar’s contributions make it easier for linguists and etymology scholars to trace how Tamil has evolved in the past two thousand years.

### **Introduction**

Ancient treatises on literature and grammar had been read by contemporary readers without annotations and explanatory notes to help them understand it. Language continues to evolve constantly. Not only does the syntax of the language changes but also old words fall out of use and its meaning becomes forgotten. That is why when the classics were read in the same era of its publication, it was easily understandable by the readers without an elaborate commentary.

According to Murugan, “Urai the elaborate commentary unfolds the importance of the text and synthesizes all the details which otherwise may be missed by the reader and if the words and the context are not familiar to the reader, then it becomes indispensable to the comprehension of the meaning of the text”.

This is even mentioned by the author who says that texts were read without elaborate commentaries when they were read in the age they were published in (Pēraciriyar, 653). That is to say, the words of the text were still in current use and the context was also easily understood by the readers and so did not require any explanation from a scholar in that area (Pēraciriyar, 656).

From these lines, it is evident that the readers of Tolkāppiyam did not require any additional explanatory notes when they read it. Not only Literature but also Treatises on Grammar were

read casually by readers in the Sangam Age with a firm grasp on all the nuances of meanings present in the text without the assistance of a critical essay or an explanation.

The works written in the Sangam Age, like all literature, reflects the socio-political situation of that Age. As the old political set-up started changing, because of internal change or because of an invasion of a new culture, the literature written also began to evolve. Interaction with neighbouring cultures is minimal during peace as the only interaction is through trade and commerce, and maximum during War as the interaction between the two cultures engaged in conflict have a constant interaction no matter the outcome of the war. As through conquest, both the Invading Culture and the Subjugated Culture are thrown into close proximity which leads to both loss and gain of parts of the old identities. Language also evolves with the borrowing of new words and with old words no longer in use. So, the text which is perfectly intelligible to the readers of the same Era is read by readers in a different Era, additional explanatory notes are required to identify the old words which have fallen into disuse and words which have evolved. Insights from experts in Etymology and linguistics is required to decipher the text and so, explanatory notes are provided which are considered mandatory to help read the literary work. This tradition of rating the text along with the expert's explanation has been established for more than two thousand years (as is evidenced in Tolkāppiyam).

The period between Eighth and Thirteenth century AD is the golden age of critical work as many explanatory works were written in this Age.

If scholars had not written explanatory notes for those texts, it is highly probable that those texts would not have been popular among people and would have disappeared. It is also likely that a hypothetical lack of scholarship in that field would have made it impossible for readers in this Age to read them. Classical texts would not have gained fame or be as well known as they are currently. The explanatory notes, not only explain the classical texts but they also serve as a signpost of the Age in which it was written. The evolution of the Language is made apparent because of these explanatory Literature.

Tolkāppiyam, which is widely regarded as a classical masterpiece, has had numerous scholars throughout the Ages. Scholars like Iḷampūraṇar, Cēṇāvaraiyar, Nacciṇārkkīṇiyar, Pērācīriyar, Teyvaccilaiyār, Kallāṭar have written Urai for Tolkāppiyam.

### **Pērācīriyar**

One of the main reasons for scholars to write notes for Tolkāppiyam was to make it popular and bring it to the people. Iḷampūraṇar, Cēṇāvaraiyar, Nacciṇārkkīṇiyar, Pērācīriyar, Teyvaccilaiyār, Kallāṭar have written the best Urai for Tolkāppiyam but the contribution of Pērācīriyar stands out. It should be noted that these explanatory notes are still read today along with the original text. According to scholars, the Age in which Tolkāppiyam was written is likely between the 2nd and 1st century BCE. Pērācīriyar's Urai was written in the twelfth century AD. In this essay, the

contributions of Pēraciriyar will be discussed and how the original text which is read with the Urai of Pēraciriyar serves as a record that traces the evolution of Tamil culture and Language.

There are six scholars in Tamil Literature who have Pēraciriyar as their names. There are only four books written after Pēraciriyar's notes. He is considered the greatest scholar in Classical Tamil Poetry and his explanatory notes are filled with the context and carefully given examples that highlights the meaning of the original text. According to A V SubramaniaAyyar, of all the explanatory notes written for Tolkāppiyam, Pēraciriyar's version is the best as it is filled with meticulous research presented in layperson terms.

### **Name**

It should be noted here that Pēraciriyar is not the real name of the writer, which is not known. Pēraciriyar is a Tamil word which means Professor and it is given to him in adulation for his scholarship. Other scholars like Nachinaarkiniyan have also praised him as Pēraciriyar out of reverence and deep respect.

### **Birth place**

The place of birth of Pēraciriyar could not be found from his work or from other works written about him.

### **Age**

According to Mu Vai. Aravindhan, it is highly probable that Pēraciriyar lived in the twelfth century A.D. as he has written explanatory notes in which he has alluded to the following works: Naṇṇūl, Taṇṭiyalaṅkāram, Yāpparuṅkalam.

### **Religion**

There is plenty of evidence from the text that Pēraciriyar was a follower of Vaitikanerī (a Classical form of Hinduism). In an explanation, he notes "God, Sage, Cow, Priest, King, Rain and Country" placing them in the order of importance he considers them to have.

"Cocks can refer to all birds which are masculine

Except the peacock whose long feathers make it feminine" (Tol. Porulatikaram. 1598).

For this verse, he has written that peacocks with their long feathers have the grace usually associated with the female birds and that it does not have the qualities usually associated with masculinity. His frequent references to peacocks, the vehicle of Lord Murugan, clearly shows his devotion to Lord Murugan.

Pēraciriyar quotes religious literature, especially about Shiva, Murugan and Thirumaal, extensively in his explanatory notes and from this, it can be understood that he was an ardent follower of Vaitikanerī.

### **Explanatory notes**

There is ample evidence to suggest that Pērācīriyar has written the explanatory notes for the whole Porulatikaram. From these lines where he had referred to other passages in Porulatikaram, it is evident that he has written explanatory commentary for the whole book.

It is also interesting to note that Pērācīriyar did not mention the names of other scholars who had written explanatory notes for Tolkāppiyam. He only mentions what they had posited and he refutes their claims. He has elaborated Ḥampūraṇar's brief critical evaluation of some of the verses and has given a longer explanation.

For the first stanza of Meyppāṭṭiyal, Ḥampūraṇar has given the explanation for “Paṇṇaittōṇriya” as the stage on which plays are usually staged where emperors and kings indulge in sexual games with actresses. Pērācīriyar has developed this image to write that emperors and small kings were mesmerized by the actresses who were on stage and began to play erotic games with them.

Pērācīriyar has classified the heroine's expression (Meyppādu) into three: Puṇarummuṇ tōṇrummeyppāṭu (expression before the relationship begins), kaḷaviṛkuriyameyppāṭu (expression of passion), kaṇṇiṛkuriyameyppāṭu (expression of passion expressed by the wife). Pērācīriyar's notes are objective and are filled with scientific analysis of the text.

Tolkāppiyam is one of the oldest literary works in the world and it is not surprising that there have been numerous scholars who have written explanatory notes for it. Tolkāppiyam and the numerous explanatory notes serve as a record of the evolution of the language and the culture in Tamil Nadu. Pērācīriyar's notes strike a fine balance between classical Tamil that existed 2000 years back and the Tamil that is spoken and written in the present day.

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