

# TRANSLATING RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Muireann Maguire and Cathy McAteer (eds), *Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0340>

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Version 1.1

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-983-5

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-984-2

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-985-9

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-986-6

ISBN DIGITAL ebook (HTML): 978-1-80064-989-7

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0340

Cover Design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme as part of the RUSTRANS academic project, 'The Dark Side of Translation: 20th and 21st Century Translation from Russian as a Political Phenomenon in the UK, Ireland, and the USA' (grant agreement no. 802437).



European Research Council  
Established by the European Commission

# Tolstoy Embracing Tamil: Ninety Years of Lev Tolstoy in Tamil Literature

*Venkatesh Kumar*

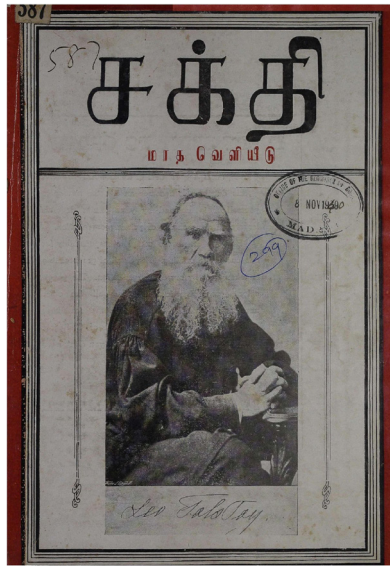
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Rao Sahib K Kothandapani Pillai (1896–1979)

The earliest Tamil writer to take the initiative of translating Tolstoy's works into Tamil was Rao Sahib K Kothandapani Pillai, born in 1896 at Andalur Semmangudi village in South India, and, not entirely incidentally, my own grandfather. His version of three stories by Tolstoy was published in 1932 as *Kadhaimanikkovai* (*Stories from Tolstoy*), an academic textbook for primary-school children, and republished in 1948 as an edition for school-leavers. The three stories he chose were 'Two Old Men' ('Dva starika', 1885), 'How Much Land Does A Man Need?' ('Mnogo li cheloveku zemli nuzhno?', 1886), and 'A Lost Opportunity' ('Upustish' ogon'—ne potushish'', 1885). As a diplomat who read Tolstoy for pleasure, Kothandapani Pillai was well-placed to select and curate Tolstoy's texts in a way that would both appeal to, and inculcate Tolstoy's moral values in, Tamil readers. He probably worked from Aylmer and Louise Maude's English translations, supplemented by Munshi Premchand's Hindi version. The first edition of his *Stories* was a direct translation of Tolstoy's tales, but the revised 1948 version marked an intriguing departure in which

Kothandapani Pillai separated the stories into several fragments, interspersed with rhyming couplets from the oldest surviving work of Tamil literature, the long poem *Thirukkural* by Thiruvalluvar (who lived in the first century A.D.). By linking couplets from the *Thirukkural*—which expounds on politics, war, love, and pleasure—Kothandapani Pillai added to Tolstoy's prose, he transferred the native cultural capital of the former to the Russian writer's work, since both discuss moral problems and life experiences. By so doing, he made the Tamil reader's access to Tolstoy's message both direct, and unforgettable.<sup>1</sup> In addition to my grandfather's work, there were numerous other translations of Tolstoy into Tamil during the 1930s and 1940s. A new Madras-based publisher, Sakthi, even established their reputation by choosing Tolstoy's 'What Then Must We Do?' ('Ini naam seiya vendiyadhu yadhu'; 'Tak chto zhe nam delat', 1886), translated into Tamil by Sri Brahmachari Vishwanathan, as their first publication, with Tolstoy's portrait as the cover image. Sakthi Publications continued publishing Tolstoy's other works in Tamil until the 1950s.



Front cover of *Sakthi Monthly Magazine* (November 1940) with an image of Tolstoy.

Later, during the 1960s and 1970s, Progress and Raduga Publishers (in Moscow) published numerous Tamil translations of works by Tolstoy, Maksim Gorky, Fedor Dostoevsky and Anton Chekhov. Progress commissioned fifty

1 A second volume of Kothandapani Pillai's Tolstoy translations, the 1930 *Stories* (*Kathaikkothu*), has regrettably been lost.



books by Russian writers in Tamil, while Raduga produced seventy-nine.<sup>2</sup> Other key Tolstoy translators include Narayanan Vanamamalai (1917–80), born in Tirunalveli in the district of South India, who translated the play ‘The Power of Darkness’ (‘Irulin valimai’; ‘Vlast’ t’my’, 1886) in 1942, for Sakthi; later he also translated the novella ‘Family Happiness’ (‘Kudumba inbam’; ‘Semeinnoe schast’e’, 1859) into Tamil in 1951. K. (Kumbakonam) Pattabiramiyer Rajagopalan translated six more of Tolstoy’s short stories into Tamil in 1941 as *Tolstoy Kadhaigal*, again for Sakthi Publications. Pattabiramiyer Rajagopalan (1902–44) was a journalist and translator born in Kumbakonam, South India. A writer who contributed to the Tamil reception of Russian literature in the 1980s and 1990s was Poornam Somasundaram (1918–81), whose translations (which included Pushkin and Gorky as well as Tolstoy) were published by both Progress and Raduga. Naturally, as Poornam Somasundaram’s example shows, Tolstoy was not the only Russian to influence Tamil literature: others, however, arrived in translation only from the 1960s onwards. Pushkin first appeared in Tamil in 1968, Dostoevsky in 1964, Gorky in 1952, and Chekhov in 1957. Thus, Tolstoy made the first, and arguably profoundest, impact in the world of Tamil literature.

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2 My statistics are derived from Pe. Govindasamy, *Thamizhil Soviet Ilakkiyangal* (Chennai: New Century Book House, 2018).

