

IMPACT

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Building a nation through literature

Russia is familiar to us through their literature. Russian literature has influenced other literary traditions in the world. Leo Tolstoy, Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Anton Chekhov can be mentioned as some famous Russian writers.

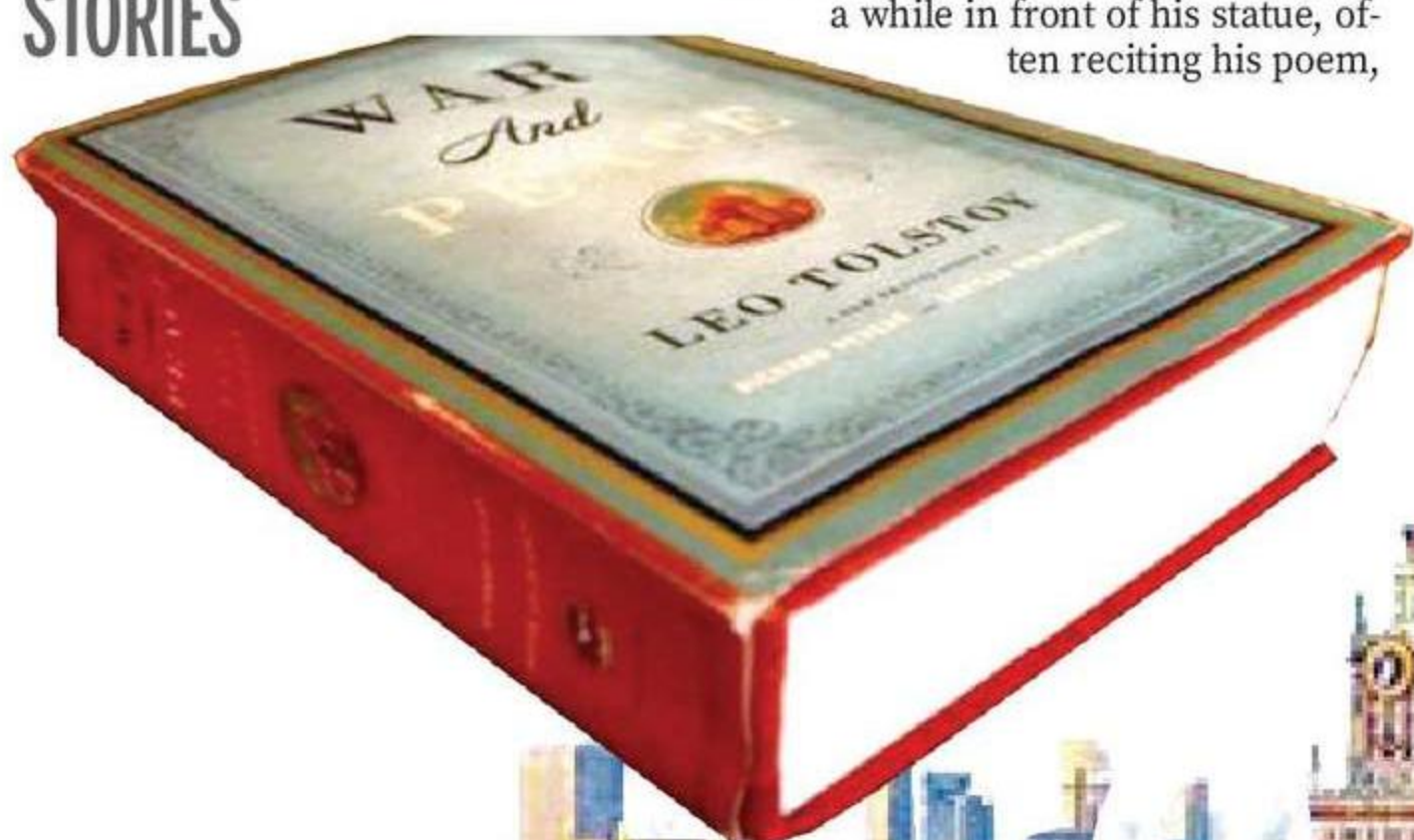
Emeritus Professor Rohana Laxman Piyadasa holds a PhD from the University of Moscow, Russia. His experiences of the Soviet Union, the fall of the hegemony, and the change in Russia's political and cultural trajectory, are vast. Throughout his time in Russia and due to his close connections, he has a profound understanding of Russian society, lifestyle, literature, and politics. In an interview with the *Sunday Observer*, Professor Rohana Laxman shared his experiences and views on Russian literature and culture.

How does literature link with our lives?

Literature is associated with human existence as it seeks out the meaning of enjoyment, inspiration, and happiness. Over time, folklore was developed among the people, growing with the people, professions, thoughts and aspirations. Earlier, tools for expressing human emotions were developed. People used coal, stones, and rocks. Accordingly, the spiritual expressions of man were expressed in the form of literature. Later, after the 16th century, people began to utilise advanced printing, and technological printing.

After that, writing became the beginning and evolution of literature. Human civilisation began to diversify. People began to search for new things. They started doing creative things.

THE UNIQUE QUALITIES THAT CAN BE SEEN HERE ARE LOVE, MUTUAL TRUST, SOLIDARITY, GENTLENESS, AND BEAUTY THAT ARE THE HALLMARKS OF RUSSIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE. THESE STORIES EXEMPLIFIED THE IDEA THAT BAD THINGS ARE FREQUENTLY DEFEATED AND GOOD THINGS ARE CONQUERED. PUSHKIN WAS A WRITER WHO NURTURED CHILDREN'S STORIES



They began looking for answers to their problems.

Over time, we see a new concept developing called subject literature. People developed and created literature as well as subject literature to appreciate aesthetics, life, and existence. An advanced civilisation is developed with both these elements. This is rich literature. In observing the characteristics of rich literature, language is key and must be adapted in such a way that it can express any expression.

This requires the use of applications, phrases, examples, and metaphors. They can be identified as tools that nurture language literature, especially creative literature. It is not possible to identify the development, existence, or modern human society without literature. Literature is an essential element. Whether we like it or not, some people say that I do not like literature, but we subconsciously recite poems, sing hymns, and use different phrases when we speak.

People use these in their culture combining them in modern society. Complex, colourful, and advanced literature can be found all over the world. It is integrating, growing and evolving. So, I see literature as an essential social space, an existence, and a part of life itself.

How is Russian literature intertwined with the Russian people?

Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is one of the greatest novels. I think this has been translated into Sinhala in three parts. There is a translation from the original as well as an English translation. It is one of the most widely translated books in the world.

The most glorious epoch in Russian literature is the pre-Russian Revolution, the tsarist era before the October Revolution of 1918. We found literature that taught people about life, love, affection, camaraderie, brotherhood, courage, trust, and commitment to man, as well as extreme human emotions. It is in this social stage that we meet many writers like Tolstoy and Alexander Pushkin.

These writers not only used their social and life experiences, but also tried to creatively transcend certain boundaries set by society. In that sense, we can see the essence of Soviet literature. The beauty of Russian literature, the overflowing humanism, the love of man for man, and the harmony of humanity can be seen in this literature. Alexander Pushkin says, "All these things can happen, because we are human." People can be anything. Anything can have an action and a reaction. So, we have to respect people, we have to respect humanity.

I always see the humanitarian quality nurtured by Soviet literature. On the birthday of Alexander Pushkin, most people would certainly bring a bouquet of flowers to Pushkin Square in the main city of Moscow and stay for a while in front of his statue, often reciting his poem,

and remembering him.

I have never seen a time when people became so attached to literature. At noon, Pushkin Square is filled with flowers. Adults, young people, and children come regardless of age. Adults teach little ones about him. Young men grow beards like him. I have never seen such a literary society. Pushkin Memorial Day is one of the most special days I have ever seen.

This shows how important this is to the lives of the people. No matter how people are busy, they do not forget to stop by Pushkin Square for a minute. This is the life of the Russians. This is how Russian literature makes people feel.

Also, the former village of Tolstoy (*Yasnaya Polyana*) is several kilometres away from Moscow. It is an extremely large forest park. The park is regularly visited by young people, locals, fans and foreigners. His home is located in this park.

Speaking of Tolstoy, I am reminded of our prince Siddhartha. Just as Prince Siddhartha left the palace, this great tycoon, Tolstoy, left the great forest, the land, and everything. He lived a very simple life.

I think the life of the Russian people is so wonderfully intertwined with the literature of writers, creators, and artists. Probably because of this, the founder of the Russian Revolution later said that Leo Tolstoy was the mirror of the Russian Revolution. It means that this writer laid the groundwork, the philosophical basis for the Russian Revolution.

But he never talked about politics. He is not involved in anti-Tsar programs. But I think his creations were important to open people's intellect through his writings, to inspire people to think, to elevate humanity, and to understand the cruelty and brutality of the Tsarist regime.

What are your views on Russian children's literature?

Russian literature is extremely creative. The writers express the experiences that naturally developed in the moods. Among the writers of fairy tales were Tolstoy and Pushkin, who expressed the most beautiful things. Trees, birds, water, how the sun rises, how the sun sets, how the seasons change, the animal world according to the changing seasons, all these were in the stories of these writers.

The unique qualities that can be seen here are love, mutual trust, solidarity, gentleness, and beauty that are the hallmarks of Russian children's literature. These stories exemplified the idea that bad things are frequently defeated and good things are conquered. Pushkin was a writer who nurtured children's stories.

He wrote so many poems on the subjects of life, aesthetics, sexuality, mutual understanding, and bonding, which are extremely romantic in children's and teen literature. He became so popular that Alexander Pushkin was a poet, a short story writer and a creator who created new worlds for children, teenagers and adults at the same time.

At one point in his life, he revolutionised his creations. There was a group of his friends rebelling against the Tsar. Along with them was



Pushkin himself as a militant poet. He is an extremely creative poet. His creations were embraced by people to the extent that they transcended social class.

So, when Pushkin's other friends were tortured, imprisoned, and even killed, the Tsar decided to deport Pushkin from St. Petersburg without killing him. Literature before the Russian Revolution was humanistic. It affects children, adults, and young people. If foreigners and tourists from around the world come to Petersburg, they will definitely see and enjoy the historical sites. To this day, there is a piece of paper that says "Pushkin is hard." It was difficult to even get his body out because there were so many people.

This has been written in history. These discourses, myths, and beliefs are still discussed among the younger generation. The place where he was deported and where he was buried can still be seen today. Still, people are celebrating his last day. There is an interrelationship between Russian literature and people's lives.

I remember at one point, the last president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, saying that Russia was not only the city where Lenin was born, but also the city where Lenin grew up, and not just the city where the Russian Revolution took place.

This city was the former city of Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Lermontov. The culture here is rich. One cannot read the life, culture, and politics of the Russian people without understanding the breadth of their culture. The social and political meaning of that statement is very strong.

Your views on how Russians and Russian literature come together.

A: I think that throughout the psyche of the Russian people, love and romance have been introduced into the literature and embedded in the lives of the people. One of the reasons that humanitarianism is gaining traction is their literature. Every writer contributed to this. For example,

Tolstoy gave up all this and eventually worked as a farmer. When we talk about his death, he lived as a normal human being. He was told to do his last work as an ordinary man in his forest. His tomb is still buried in the Yasnaya Polyana grounds as the tomb of a very simple man. Here, we see how people elevate human life.

It highlights the importance of love, affection, humanity, brotherhood, and understanding. Above all, romance in Russian literature is to be understood as a human quality. Dostoevsky is a writer whose writings emphasise the mystery of life in some way. A study of his diary reveals how humane the writer's view of society was.

He was a man who lived in various places. At one point, he starts writing in front of a hospital where there are lunatics. Sometimes, he spends the night with them, and he writes with a great deal of sympathy and optimism about humanity. Through this literature, one can see that mutual respect, mutual understanding, and trust existed in that society.

What are the connections between politics and the Russian culture?

A: Lenin said Tolstoy was the mirror of the Russian Revolution when studying the creations of Russian Literature prior to the Russian Revolution. Tolstoy never appeared in political campaigns. But in his creations, we can see the brutality of the Tsarist regime, the destruction of humanity, the suffering of man, the pain of losing love, despair, and humanity.

It means that this writer laid the groundwork, the philosophical basis for the Russian Revolution. Russian folklore was greatly influenced by writers such as Tolstoy, Pushkin, and Dostoevsky, who built the social consciousness that led to the Russian Revolution. People began to demand the humanism they upheld. It was the basis for the revolution against the Tsarist regime.

In the case of literature after the Russian Revolution, it is necessary to discuss whether this Soviet political movement was somehow reformed over the past seventy years, or whether it had some authoritarian influence on literature and creation. As a result of not doing so, the critics of Russian society, who wrote about the spirituality of human suffering in the aftermath of the New Revolution began to be limited.

I think today, those issues have been discussed in society once again. But I still believe that this is a matter of balancing that sublime new society and not in a detrimental way. There is some discussion on this issue in modern Russia. The question arises as to whether the creators were influenced by a certain bureaucratic shape that gradually developed in the social system that was created against the old Tsar system.

As a result of this, designers had to leave the country, restrict their creations, and have problems controlling themselves. But today this is somehow being re-discussed and a new conversation is emerging.

I think it will grow in a good way. But what I personally still believe is that the spiritual mindset that is still nucleating in Russian man is that humanism, mutual respect, and trust are still there. Here, this bond is formed by the influence of the literature produced before the Russian Revolution against the old Tsarist system. It was elevated by the same revolution. In the later period, certain problematic situations were being discussed.

How did Russian literature come to inspire Sri Lankan literature?

A: I think Russian literature was first introduced to us by translating Russian books into English and then translating those English books into Sinhala. That's how we first read Russian books. Writers like K.G. Karunathilaka, and Cyril C. Perera were the early writers who emerge from that literature.

But after that, the Russian Revolution was successful and relations between Sri Lanka and Russia were established. Writers such as Padmaharsha Kuranage and Dedigama V Rodrigo were among the first young people to go abroad for education, studied the Russian language, studied the lives of the people, and translated the sentiments and feelings of that society into Sinhala from the original books.

I think in that sense, today, the *Karamazov Brothers'* book, the great novel Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, has been translated. Also, *War and Peace*, the greatest literary work, has been translated from Russian literature into Sinhala. A large number of short stories, novels, and political and social literature have been translated. While I was studying in Russia, I was fortunate enough to meet a special person.

The first night I went to study in Russia, I spent the night at the university hotel. Dedigama V. Rodrigo came to meet me there. I spent the same day with him, and he was taking me to different places. We talked a lot about literature, politics, and society. We talked about his amazing creations.

He taught Sri Lankans about Russian literature, writing, and vision through his own experiences. This great man did a great service to inculcate art and literature in our country. I also want to remember Padma Harsha Kuranage.

These writers introduced Russian literature to our literature through many things. This is an excellent way to rethink, interpret, and elevate humanism while also teaching Sri Lankan society about love, affection, and sexuality. Their contribution to us is immense and unique.

The influence of Russian literature affected our short stories, novels, and lives. Martin Wickramasinghe went to the Soviet Union and wrote a book. In that book, he tells us there are lots of things, many wonderful things in this wonderful society that we can take with us.

In my university life, I have met Russian researchers who did research for a PhD on Martin Wickramasinghe as well as research on Gunadasa Amarasekara. There were students in Russia who studied drama, folklore, and dance in Sri Lanka. I think translators, writers, and designers have played a significant role in building a bond between Russia and Sri Lanka. The influence of these people is important in inspiring a new thinking pattern in society.

THESE WRITERS NOT ONLY USED THEIR SOCIAL AND LIFE EXPERIENCES, BUT ALSO TRIED TO CREATIVELY TRANSCEND CERTAIN BOUNDARIES SET BY SOCIETY

