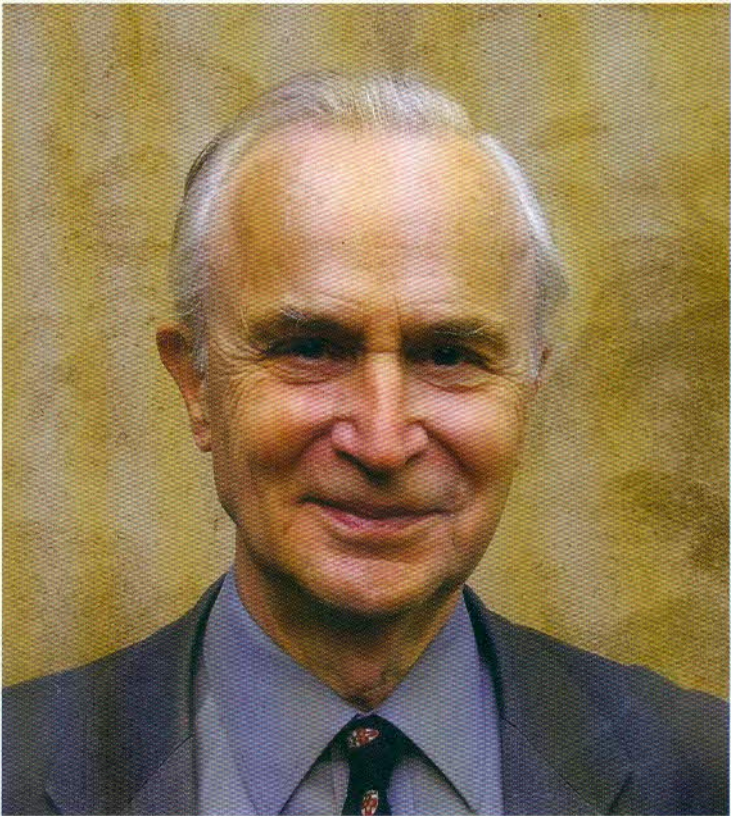




Honorary Fellowship to
Prof. Ronald E. Asher



This year's recipient of the Sahitya Akademi's Honorary Fellowship, Prof. Ronald E. Asher (b. 1926), is a renowned scholar and linguist specializing in Dravidian languages. Dr. Asher has served in significant positions in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and the University of Edinburgh where he is Professor Emeritus since 1993. The Kerala Sahitya Academy has honoured him with its Fellowship; he was a member of the General Council of the erstwhile Tamil Sahitya Academy – these are but a few of the several milestones in his distinguished academic career spanning many fruitful years.

Ronald Asher was born in a small English village with a rather poetic name, Gringley-on-the-Hill, located in the northernmost tip of Nottinghamshire and it was here that he began his education. Up to the age of ten, he attended the local village school, which, in spite of a dearth of teachers (four teachers to teach eight classes), had an admirable standard of learning. From there he proceeded to the nearby town of Retford where he won a scholarship to study at the King Edward VI Grammar School.

The grammar school had several remarkable teachers. Among Asher's particular favourites was Mr. Bartley, the English teacher. He imbued in his students a deep love for literature as he taught them to critically appraise a wide range of writers. Interest in languages, a crucial aspect of his future career, was cultivated through the study of Latin, French and German, and to the voracious reader that Asher was, this meant an introduction to other great writers. Indeed, as a boy, Asher's favourites included an eclectic mix of writers—Shaw, Keats, Dickens, Voltaire, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekov and Ibsen.

After three-and-a-half years of national service, Asher commenced upon the next stage of his education at the

University College, London. He chose the study of languages over his other love, higher mathematics, and read for a degree in French with German as a subsidiary subject. Asher's good fortune in inspiring teachers continued here too, as he came in touch with Leonard Tancock, one of the foremost translators of French literature in the twentieth century. Indeed, so profound was the impact on him, of some of these courses on French literature, that after the completion of his BA degree in 1950, Asher chose French literature of the 16th century as the subject for his Ph. D.

Around 1953, towards the end of his doctoral research (he received his Ph. D. in 1955) as he sent in applications for assistant lectureship to various French departments across the country, a post of a rather different sort caught his eye. This was a training post at the prestigious School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London, intended as a preparation for taking up one of the two lectureships in Tamil there. It would involve a rigorous stint of four years at the School's Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, combining a thorough grounding in linguistic theory with lessons in Tamil language. This appointment was indeed of a nature very different from what Dr. Asher had prepared to do for so long, but his attraction to it had two broad reasons. The first, of course, was his interest in language study in general. The study of Tamil, a language that was not part of the Indo-European group of languages (which include Latin, English, French and German, all of which Dr. Asher knew), offered a plethora of new possibilities. The second reason, however, was that he had developed a keen interest in India through the 1940s, as the debates on Independence made waves internationally. In fact he had been quite a fan of the famous V.K. Krishna Menon who used to address students in universities during Asher's student days. Thus this opportunity at SOAS would bring him close to the India that fascinated him so much. Soon enough, Dr. Asher was simultaneously offered two academic positions—the post at SOAS, and a lectureship in Renaissance French at the University College of North Staffordshire. In a critical decision that would alter the contours of his life and career forever, he opted for the London post.

Dr. Asher remained in SOAS till 1965. After the first four years at the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, he joined the Department of India, Pakistan and Ceylon as a

lecturer in Tamil. During this stint at SOAS, Dr. Asher spent a considerable period of time in South India, divided into two separate research leaves, each of which had a major impact on his career. The first part of the year '55-56, when he first came to India, was spent in Chengam, North Arcot, where his principal objective was to learn colloquial Tamil, while the second part was spent in Madras city. However, with the view that he would soon be transferred to another department, he broadened the scope of his study, which, as of then, had been mostly technical and language-oriented, to include literature too. With Dr. Mu Varadarajan as his mentor, he was introduced to Sangam poetry, and also to the works of Subramania Bharati and Bharatidasan. He also made a beginning in prose literature through the novels of Dr. Varadarajan and the stories of Akilon. A conversation with Rajaji led him to sample Kalki too. He wrote his first book on Tamil, *A Tamil Prose Reader* with R. Radhakrishnan in 1971. Some years later, in 1973, he went on to write his famous book *Some Landmarks in the History of Tamil Prose*. His relationship with Tamil has seen him becoming the President of International Association of Tamil Research, 1983-90.

After an interlude at the University of Chicago (1961-62) as a visiting Professor of Tamil, Dr. Asher came to India on his second year of research leave (1963-64). By this time he had already decided that he would learn another Dravidian language, and the obvious choice seemed Malayalam, in which he already had some basic grounding. Thus when he came to India on this occasion, he divided his time between Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Though his principal aim was linguistic research on the spoken language, Dr. Asher held that a working knowledge of the written language was also of paramount importance. Thus he turned to a guided reading of Malayalam fiction.

Completely enthralled by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's novel *Pattumma's Goat* and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Tottiyute Makan* (*Scavenger's Son*), Dr. Asher realized that here indeed were two brilliant writers whom he had to meet. However, soon enough Asher developed a deep, lasting friendship with both of them, and he never went to India without meeting the two of them. In later years, Dr. Asher went on to publish *Scavenger's Son*, a translation of Thakazhi's novel (1975), to the revised version of which he added a brilliant introduction in 1993, *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant: Three Stories of Muslim Life in South India* (1980), a

translation of three of Basheer's novels *Childhood Friend*, *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant* and *Pattumma's Goat*. It is also noteworthy that during his first stay in Kerala, he met the poets G. Sankara Kurup and K. Ayyappa Paniker, and developed deep bonds of friendship with them. It was indeed due to his deep involvement with Malayalam language and literature that he was awarded the Gold Medal of the Kerala Sahitya Academy for distinguished services to Malayalam in 1983.

Intimate contact with these leading figures in the world of letters inspired Dr. Asher to keep up his involvement in literature even as he moved to the Department of General Linguistics in the University of Edinburgh in 1965, and where he remained until 1993 serving in various very important positions such as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts. Though he continued to show interest in Renaissance French Literature (his 'first love'), and theoretical linguistics (his "definitive career"), most of his future work was heavily concentrated on the Dravidian languages. A number of postgraduate students, both British and South Asian, did their doctoral research on South Indian languages, under his supervision.

Dr. Asher was visiting professor of linguistics in University of Illinois in 1967 and in University of Minnesota (1969), of Tamil and Malayalam in Michigan State University in 1968, of Dravidian Studies in College de France, Paris, in 1970, of linguistics and international communication in International Christian University, Tokyo, 1994-95 and of 20th Century Malayalam Literature in Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam.

Dr. Asher has to his credit, seminal works like *National Myths in Renaissance France* (1993), *Atlas of the World's Languages* (ed. with C. Moseley, 1994), *The Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics* (ed-in-chief, 1994), *Concise History of the Language Sciences from the Sumerians to the Cognitivists* (ed. with EFK Koerner, 1995), along with his contributions to Malayalam and Tamil, such as *Studies on Malayalam Language and Literature*, 1989, *Malayalam* (1997), *V.M. Basheer: Svatantryasamara Kathakal* (Basheer: Stories of the Freedom Movement. ed. 1998), *Basheer: Malayalattinte Sargavismayam* (Critical essays on the novels and stories of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer) and *Colloquial Tamil* (with E. Annamalai, 1992).

Many years into his retirement though, Dr. Asher even now maintains close links with the world of letters, and has continued to write, edit (among other projects, he was the Consulting Editor for the 'spin-off series' from *The Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics*) and translate (from Tamil and Malayalam), teach at international universities as a visiting professor (he particularly valued the opportunity of being the first to occupy the Vaikom Muhammad Basheer Chair at the School of Letters, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala) and complete various research projects, most of which are about the languages and literatures of India.

Sahitya Akademi has pleasure in honouring Professor Ronald E. Asher with its Honorary Fellowship, the highest recognition it gives to any scholar or writer from abroad.

Professor Ronald E. Asher
Linguistics & English Language
The University of Edinburgh
Adam Ferguson Bldg
George Sq
Edinburgh EH8 9LL
Scotland, UK



Sahitya Akademi

(National Akademi of Letters)

Rabindra Bhavan

35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110001 (India)

Tel. : 91-11-23386626 Fax : 91-11-23382428

Email : secy@ndb.vsnl.net.in