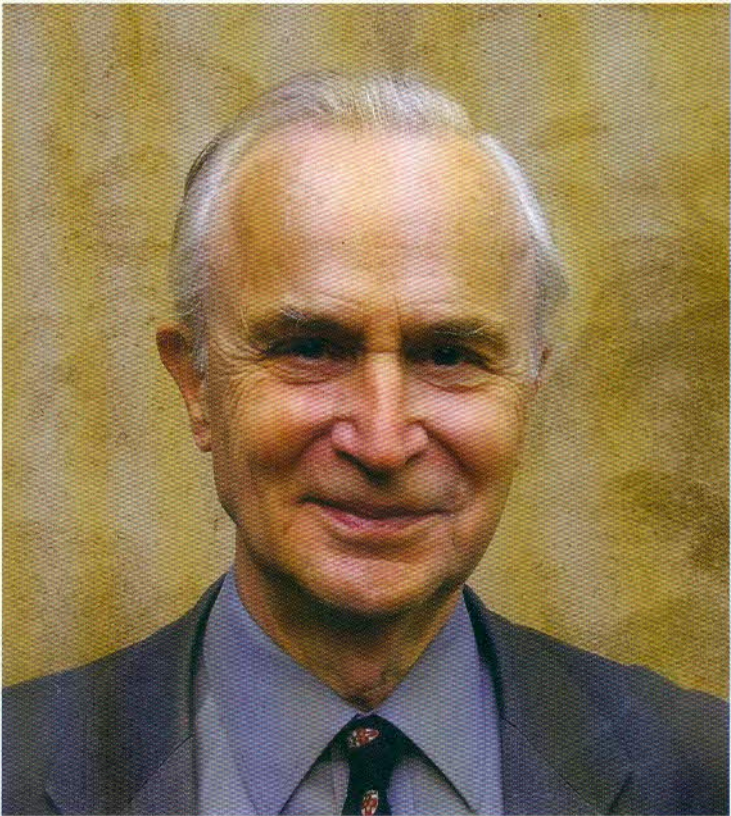




Honorary Fellowship to  
Prof. Ronald E. Asher



**T**his 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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

