

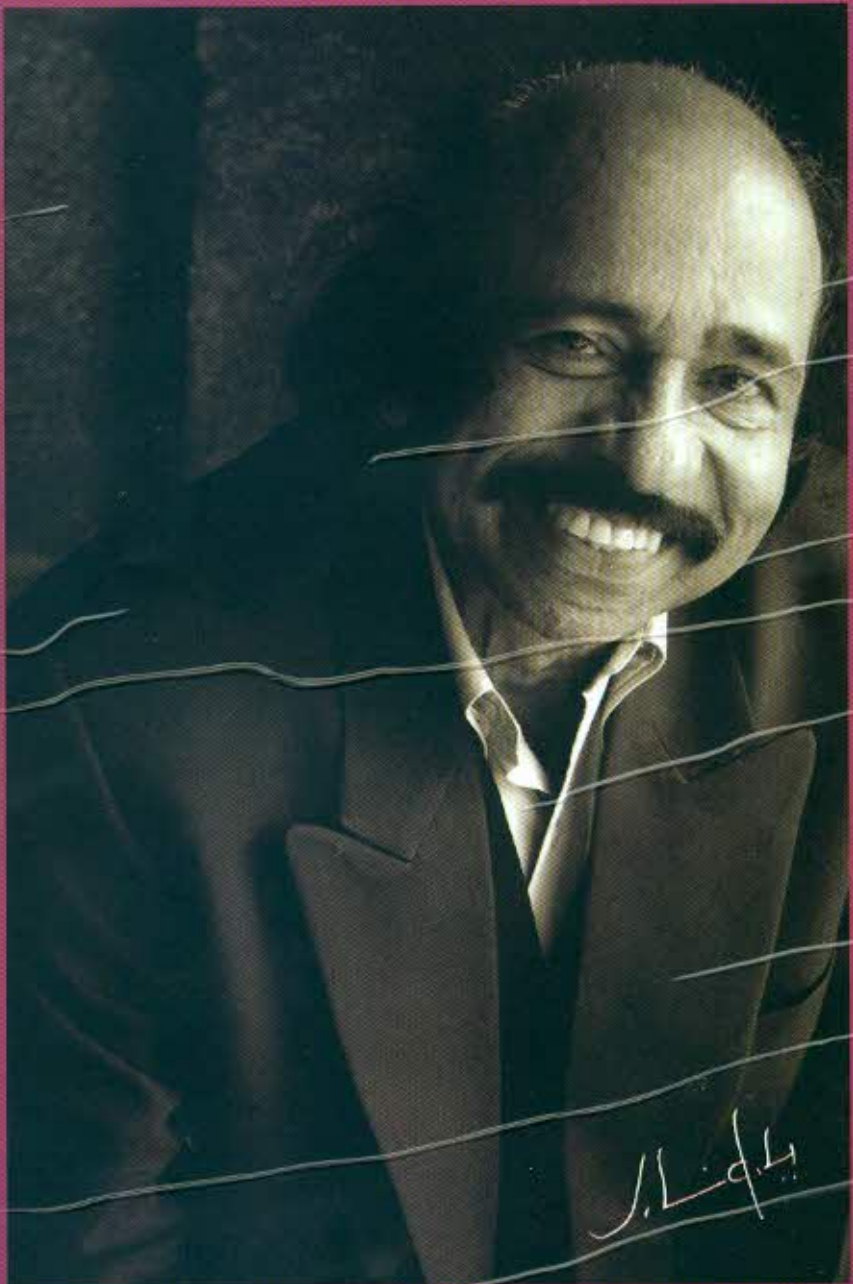


Sahitya Akademi

15 September 2008

## meet the author

K. Satchidanandan





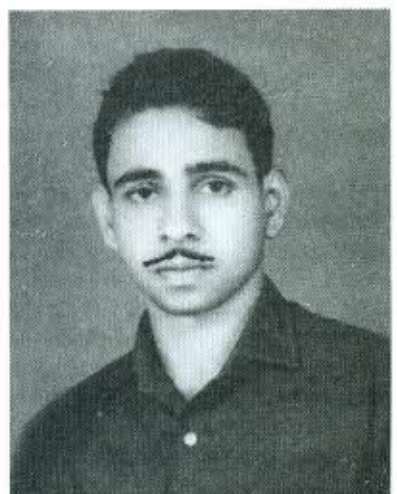
*"There is nothing inherently good or bad; no human experience is taboo to poetry."*

—Satchidanandan

K. Satchidanandan is a major Indian poet writing in Malayalam, a critic in Malayalam as well as in English, academic, editor, translator and playwright who is growing from strength to strength as the years roll by. It is doubtful whether there is any living writer who has, by virtue of the quality and quantity of his/her output, enriched Malayalam literature as Satchidanandan did. One of the pioneers of modern poetry in Malayalam, he is well-known for the subtle and nuanced articulations of socio-political contexts in his poetry. Critics have noted narrativity, irony and philosophical contemplation on the contradictions of existence as decisive elements in his poetry. Commenting on his first collection of poems translated into English, the celebrated poet Jayanta Mahapatra wrote, "In *Summer Rain* we find a depth of meaning that cries out aloud to be known and read far and wide. These are poems of great strength and power, a moving tribute to the generation in which we live." Carlo Savini, the Italian critic, finds him to be a poet "who resists all kinds of mass ideas

and conditioning," and one who "celebrates his inner freedom even while respecting the real values of man and his soul." Antonio Mennitti Ippolito speaks of his "many-stringed lyre," and says he brings all these voices together best, in his dialogic poems.

Born in 1946 in the little village Pulloot near Kodungalloor, the ancient site of Muziris, Koyamparambath Satchidanandan was aware of the wealth of historical and cultural tradition he was heir to in his immediate environs, as is evidenced in many of the poems he wrote later in life, like "Malayalam." Born into a middle class family, he grew up with the impressions of rural vistas and the simple joys of village life as well as deprivation and disease, as he reminisces in a memoir on his childhood in the literary magazine *Bhashaposhini*. After his school education in his native village, he studied biology at Christ College, Irinjalakuda for his Bachelor's and took his Master's in English from Maharaja's College, Ernakulam. Later he did his Ph.D. in Post-Structuralist poetics from the University of Calicut. He joined as a lecturer in English at K.K.T.M. College, Pulloot in 1968, and moved over to Christ College, in 1970 where he became a Professor of English. He voluntarily retired from this post in 1992 to move to Delhi and take up the editorship of *Indian Literature*, the prestigious English journal of Sahitya





At Riga, in front of  
Alexa Santic Statue

Akademi. In 1996 he was nominated Secretary of the Akademi in which post he remained for a decade (1996-2006), till his superannuation. During this tenure, he launched several new platforms for the emerging writers, especially the young, women, Dalits and tribals besides making the Akademi contemporary in the true sense.

Later, he served as a Consultant to the Department of Higher Education, Government of India and to the National Translation Mission, a Government initiative. He also edits *Beyond Borders*, a journal of South Asian literature and ideas.

Satchidanandan's early poems were highly experimental and the publication of his first collection, *Anchusooryan* (Five Suns, 1971) was an important event in Malayalam literature. The same year he launched *Jwala* (Flame), an avant garde journal dedicated to experimental writing. Before that he had already published a collection of essays on modern Malayalam poetry (*Kurukshetram*, 1970). Satchidanandan had begun his poetic career at a peculiar juncture in the history of the nation – the end of Gandhian idealism and the establishment of hard-nosed pragmatism in politics and public life, and the inauspicious beginnings of tyrannical tendencies in the use of state power. No wonder then, 'his poetic vision of those times had anxiety, optimism and irony, intertwined in equal measure,' according to Rizio Raj.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to promote modern sensibility he



L-R: Ramakanta Rath, Padma Sachdev, Nirendranath Chakraborti,  
Kedarnath Singh (right end)



In China, with writer-friends—G.N. Devy, D.R. Nagaraj, Gagan Gill, Ramakanta Rath, Laxman Gaikwad

was also translating poetry from across the world for the poetry journal, *Kerala Kavita*, and other journals, and writing critical articles on modern literature, arts and culture. By the mid-seventies, he had aligned himself broadly with the political Left in Kerala, and was close to the New Left movement and active in its cultural wing, *Janakeeya Saamskaarikavedi* (The Forum for People's Culture). He was also associated with other Left and secular forums like *Desaabhimani* Study Circle and Kerala Shaastra Sahitya Parishad, an organisation to promote scientific outlook. During this period he made poetry the medium for his inquiry into the political and social dimensions of the dream called freedom, to take the side of the oppressed, and to resist power-structures in a revolutionary manner. The poem "Fever," written in 1973, carries these lines:

"You reminded me of our forgotten days  
 As we sat face to face on the sickbed:  
 Home-children—the indistinct murmurs of  
 Old moonlit dreams.  
 But I said: "Stop this, your ancient tale of love.  
 This is the season of weapons and tears."

Then came the great watershed in Indian politics—the Emergency (1975-77). He had by then recognised the need for creating an intense cultural milieu for accelerating the process of social transformation. He wrote many poems protesting against the totalitarianism of those dark days. Several of his poems were censored and he was also interrogated by the Crime Branch.



At the Museum of Modern Art, New York



At the U.S. Embassy with G.P. Deshpande, Bhisham Sahni, Kamaleswar, and the U.S. Ambassador at (at the left end)

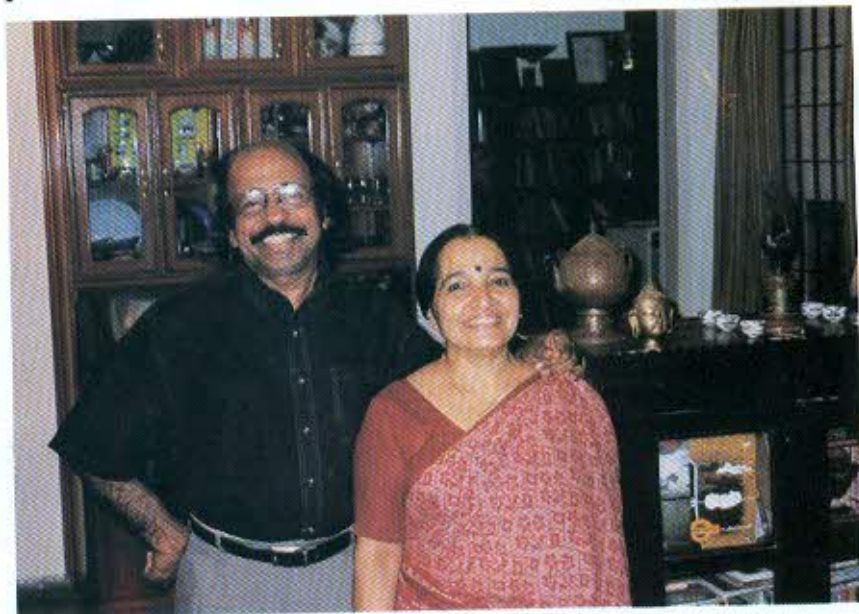
A poem he wrote in 1977, "The Poet," says it all. Read these lines:

"Leaders, critics, judges of men,  
trust him not:  
he says what he sees,  
he breaks the cage  
when you revel in his capture."

He launched a little publishing house called Prasakthi Library in 1978 that brought out anthologies of poems and short stories as well as political tracts. A collection of his

poems from 1965 to 1982 was published in 1983. He was invited to participate in the Valmiki International Poetry Festival in New Delhi in 1985. By now his poems and collections had begun to appear in other languages and his books were becoming text books in colleges.

After shifting to the national capital in 1992, Satchidanandan's poetic concerns became broader. His political goals underwent a sea-change. Now they went far beyond the definition of power; culture became his main concern.



At Home



With daughters Saritha, Sabitha and wife Smt Bindu

He wrote a series of poems on Kerala made possible by the distance and another series on the saint and Sufi poets of India as a part of recovering the secular heritage in the Indian tradition that he felt was getting lost in the sectarian communalism of right wing politics. In 1993 he visited Ayodhya as a part of a team of writers to protest against the destruction of Babri Masjid. A good part of his literary activities, after he began living in Delhi, was carried out in English, as he was addressing a national readership; but he wrote poetry only in his mother tongue, most of which he, along with others, translated into English. In the meanwhile, he remained active in his response — through

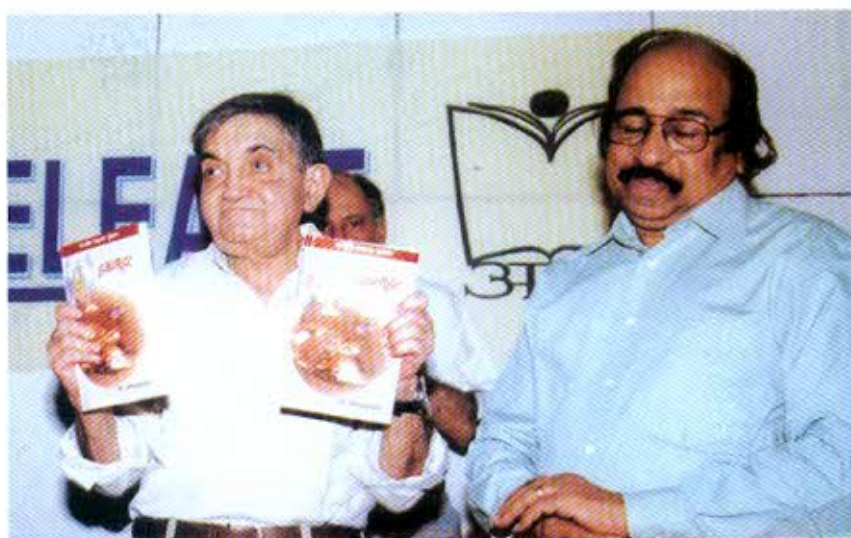
writing, public speeches and participation in demonstrations — to human rights violations and injustices committed against the weaker sections. He played an active role in the campaign against the genocide in Gujarat in February 2002. His life in the metropolis drastically changed his mental topography and realigned it with his present milieu. Look at these lines from the poem, "My Body, a City,"

"Remember;  
When you burn this body  
You are burning a city.  
Remember:  
When you burn this body  
You are burning a people."

His literary activities took



Receiving the Vayalar Award 2005 from Prof. M.K. Sanu



Nirmal Verma releasing *Huklahat*

him to different parts of the world. He represented India at the Sarajevo Poetry Days in former Yugoslavia in 1985. In 1988 he visited the U.S.S.R. as part of a poets' team to take part in the Festival of India there. He led the writers' team to China during the Festival of India in China in 1994. He took part in the Ivry Poetry Festival in France in 1997, led a team of writers to Sweden and visited the U.S.A. as a writer the same year. He led a group of writers to Italy in 1999, visited China again in 2000; in 2002 he was invited to the World Poetry Academy in Verona, Italy. His collection of poems in French was published in Paris in 2002. In 2003 he visited France again for readings in five cities as part of

the poetry festival, *Printemps des Poetes*. The next year he visited Syria as also New York and Pakistan as part of Indian writers' delegations; his collection in Italian was published from Rome the same year. He was the Indian invitee to the Berlin Literary Festival in 2005; he also read at the Frankfurt Book Fair. He was also an invitee to the Leipzig Book Fair and the Abu Dhabi Book Fair in 2006. He again visited Germany in 2006, after his retirement from the Akademi when his German collection was released during the Frankfurt Book Fair. The same year saw the publication of his *Collected Poems (1965-2005)* in three volumes. The first volume of his *Collected Translations of Poetry* came out in



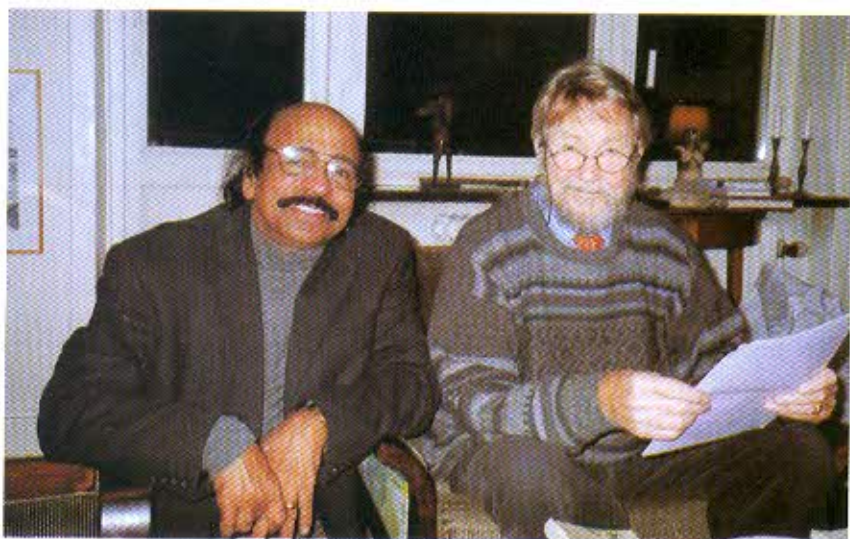
Receiving Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award from M.T. Vasudevan Nair

2007. He again visited Italy in 2007 and made a reading tour in the Gulf countries. He was invited to the Jaipur International Literary Festival in 2008.

Satchidanandan has 26 collections of poetry including four Selected Works and three Collected works in many editions, two plays, three travelogues, 18 works of literary and social criticism, three collections of interviews given by him, 17 collections of world poetry, two collections of plays and a monograph in translation, 27 of his works in translation in other languages, ten works edited in Malayalam, ten in English and one in Hindi besides three

made presentations in about one hundred and twenty-five national and international seminars/symposia/conferences; given interviews to more than forty journals and publications; has been at the helm — or, has been a member — of not less than 41 important committees delegations/official bodies. He has won twenty one awards at the state, national and international levels.

Summing up, the words of the poet himself come in handy: "I consider it fortunate to have begun writing at a time when modernism was emerging in my language. That gave me my aesthetics and my association



With Lars Lindqvist, Swedish Poet

original works in English. More than ten of his works have been prescribed as texts for study in universities. Poems, articles and book reviews by him have appeared in nearly one hundred and fifty publications; his poems are included in more than thirty anthologies. More than ten documentary films and television films feature him. An equal number of websites carry his works.

The sheer volume of Satchidanandan's activities demonstrates his many-faceted genius. He has edited nearly twenty journals and publications; read his poems in more than fifty national and international meets; delivered lectures, read papers or

with the radical Left in the seventies, intensified my social concerns. My pursuit of Bhakti poetry liberated my spirituality from institutionalized religion, and the political experience of the eighties and nineties taught me to disbelieve all totalitarian ideologies and look for an alternative, democratic, subaltern politics. All of them, I believe, have also gone into the making of my poetry in direct or oblique ways." Here one meets a truly great poet of our times; a poet who has tried all the options to remain articulate even under the most trying circumstances; a poet who looks up to the future, keeping democracy within his vision.



## A Select Bibliography

### Poetry

- Anchusooryan* (Five Suns, 1971)  
*Ezhuthacchan Ezhutumpol* (When Ezhuthacchan Writes, 1979)  
*Peedhanakalam* (The Times of Torment, 1981)  
*Venalmazha* (Summer Rain, 1982)  
*Ivanekkoodi* (Him, too, 1987)  
*Veedumattam* (Shifting House, 1988)  
*Kayattam* (Ascent, 1990)  
*Malayalam* (1996)  
*Apoornam* (Imperfect, 1998)  
*Vikku* (Stammer, 2002)  
*Sakshyangal* (Witness, 2004)  
*Anantam* (Infinite, 2006)  
*Satchidanandante Kavitalakal* (Poems 1965-2005, 3 Vols, 2006)

### Plays

- Saktan Tampuran* (3 one-act plays, 1983)  
*Gandhi* (1995)

### Prose

- Kurukshetram* (1970)  
*Samvadangal* (Dialogues, 1986)  
*Samskarathinte Rashtreeyam* (The Politics of Culture, 1989)  
*Anveshanangal* (Enquiries, 1991)  
*Veenduvicharangal* (Rethinkings, 1992)  
*Soundaryavum Adhikaravum* (Beauty and Power, 1993)



Reading at Frankfurt Book Fair

- Muhurtangal* (Contexts, 1996)  
*Pala Lokam, Pala Kalam* (Many Times, Many Climes, 1998)  
*Kalayum Nishedhavum* (Art and Dissent, 1999)  
*Adithattukal* (Foundations, 2006)

### Translations

- Nazrul Islam* (Selected Poems, 1976)  
*Brechtinte Nooru Kavitalakal* (100 poems by Bertolt Brecht, 1977)  
*Karutha Kavita* (Black Poetry, 1982)  
*Latin American Kavita* (1982)  
*Pablo Neruda* (Selected Poems, 1976)  
*Nooru Russian Kavitalakal* (100 Russian Poems, 1989)  
*Samakaleena Hindi Kavita* (1989)  
*Magadh* (SreekantVerma, 1990)  
*Vakkukalude Akasam* (Sitakant Mahapatra, 1999)  
*Urangunnnavarkkulla Kathukal* (Letters to the Sleeping, Swedish Poetry, 2007)  
*Ezhu Laghunatakangal* (7 plays by W B Yeats and Brecht, 2008)

### Original Works in English

- Indian Literature: Positions and Propositions* (1999)  
*Authors, Texts, Issues* (2002)  
*Indian Literature: Paradigms and Praxis* (2008)

### Own Works in Translation

- Tant de Vies* (French, Paris, 2002)  
*I Riti Della Terra* (Italian, Rome, 2004)  
*Ich Glaube Nicht an Grenzen* (German, Heidelberg, 2006)  
*How to Go to the Tao Temple* (English, 1998)  
*So Many Births* (Selections, English, 2001)  
*Stammer and Other Poems* (English, 2005)  
*Voh Jise Sab Yad Dha* (Hindi, 1996)  
*Apoorna aur Anya Kavitayen* (Hindi, 2000)



With Swedish friends in Stockholm, 2006

*Huklahat* (Selections, Hindi, 2004)  
*Nanna Mai Nagara* (Kannada, 1996)  
*Kavitai Meendum Varum* (Tamil, 2002)  
*Sareeram Oka Nagaram* (Telugu, 2004)  
*Sagar Teerer Kavita* (Assamese, 2001)

*Sachidanandaner Kobita* (Bengali, 2001)  
*Ghar O Anyanya Kavita* (Oriya, 2002)  
*Peele Pathe Da Supna* (Punjabi, 2002)  
*Ham Janjeerom Mein Rahte Hai* (Urdu, 2004)  
*Luknat* (Urdu, 2008)

## A Chronology

- |      |   |      |   |
|------|---|------|---|
| 1946 | Born at Pulloot in Kerala on 28 May   | 1975 | Opposes Emergency, poems censored, questioned by the CBI, active in People's Cultural Forum; second daughter Sabita born  |
| 1959 | First poem in <i>Kalakusumam</i> magazine   | 1977 | Selected poems in the <i>Kerala Kavita</i> Series of Modern Poets   |
| 1965 | Graduation in Science from Christ College, Irinjalakuda   | 1978 | <i>Prasakti</i> , own little publishing house brings out its first books; active in the Popular Science movement and <i>Desabhimani</i> Study Circle                    |
| 1967 | Masters in English Literature from Maharajas College, Ernakulam; joins as lecturer in KKTMC College, Pulloot                    | 1980 | Promoted Professor; arrested for leading a protest march against the police torture of Dalits in the neighbourhood; writers protest; acquitted by the Kerala High Court |
| 1969 | Marries Tulasi Devi (Bindu)   | 1982 | Participates in World   |
| 1970 | Moves to Christ College; First book, <i>Kurukshetram</i> , a study of modern Malayalam poetry                                   |      |   |
| 1971 | First collection of poems, <i>Anchusooryan</i> (Five Suns); edits avant-garde journal <i>Jwala</i> ; first daughter Sarita born |      |   |

- |      |   |      |   |
|------|---|------|---|
| 1983 | Poets' Meet in Bhopal<br><i>Collected Poems, 1965-1982</i>  |      | Translation of Poetry; first collection in Tamil; <i>Ivanekkoodi</i> textbook for MA at Kerala University;  |
| 1984 | Kerala Sahitya Akademi C.B.Kumar Award for a book of criticism  |      | study on Pablo Neruda textbook for BA at Calicut University   |
| 1985 | Takes part in Valmiki World Poetry festival held by ICCR in Delhi, visits the Union Carbide, Bhopal with fellow poets to protest; sent by ICCR to represent India at Sarajevo Poetry Days in Yugoslavia   | 1992 | Joins Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, as Editor of <i>Indian Literature</i> ; guest at the SAARC Conference in Kolkata; daughter Sarita gets married to Christopher Fernandez                               |
| 1987 | Collected Works, revised edition; represents Malayalam at 'Kavibharati', Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, first Hindi collection  | 1993 | Oman Kerala Cultural Centre Award; visits Ayodhya as part of a SAHMAT team for night vigil against communalism  |
| 1988 | Visits USSR as part of the "Festival of India" Team; Represents Malayalam at 'Kavita Asia', Bhopal; Member, Malayalam Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi; own collection <i>Ezhuthachan Ezhuthumbol</i> (When Ezhuthacchan Writes) textbook for BA at Calicut University | 1994 | Leads the Writers' Delegation to China for 'The Festival of India' in China.  |
| 1989 | Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry for <i>Ivanekkoodi</i> (Him, too); collection in Gujarati   | 1995 | Doctorate in post-Structuralist aesthetics from Calicut University; <i>Summer Rain</i> , first collection in English, collection <i>Desatanam</i> (Roaming Places) textbook for BA at Kerala University |
| 1990 | Sreekant Verma Fellowship from MP for   | 1996 | Selected Secretary of the Sahitya Akademi; Ulloor Award for <i>Desatanam</i> ; Selected Critical Essays <i>Muhoortangal</i> (Contexts); edits <i>Gestures</i> , the first                               |



L-R: Ashok Vajpayee, Vinod Kumar Shukla, Gurdial Singh, Girish Karnad, Esther Anantha Murthy, Sitanshu Yashaschandra at Frankfurt Book Fair

- anthology of SAARC Poetry; second Hindi collection
- 1997 Mahakavi P. Kunjiraman Nair Award for Malayalam, takes part in International Poetry Days in France, visits Sweden as part of a writers' delegation, first visit to US.
- 1998 Kolkata Bharateeya Bhasha Parishad Award for *Desatanam*, edits *Signatures*, Indian Modern Poetry for NBT.; second English collection
- 1999 Leads the Writers' Sahitya Akademi Award for travelogue for *Pala Lokam, Pala Kalam* (Many Worlds, Many Times); *So Many Births-Three Decades of Poetry* in English; Collections in Assamese and Bengali; visit to Sharja; *Ivanekkoodi* text book for BA at Calicut University
- 2002 Gangadhar Meher National Award for poetry; Bahrin Keraleeya Samajam Award; Eminent Member in World Poetry Akademi in Verona, second reading



Receiving the Dante Medal in Italy

- 2000 Delegation to Italy; Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for drama for *Gandhi*; Senior Fellowship from the Dept. of Culture, Govt. of India; first collection of essays in English, *Indian Literature: Positions and Propositions* Kumaran Asan Award for 'Selected Poems'; again in Russia to take part in the Bicentenary of Pushkin's birth, again in China as part of a Govt. delegation, recording of poems in the 'Archive of World Literature' by the US Libraray of Congress, third collections in Hindi and English
- 2001 Odakkuzhal Award for 'Selected Poems,' Kerala tour in Italy; launches *Pachakutira* (Green Horse) little magazine; fourth collection in Tamil; collections in Punjabi and Oriya; visits France on French Govt's invitation; French collection published in Paris; second collection of Essays in English, *Authors, Texts, Issues*; takes part in ICCR's lit. fest, 'At Home in the World'; visits Gujarat after the Godhra genocide with Mahaswetadevi, writes articles and poems about it to faces the ire of communalists; *Malayalam* textbook for BA at Calicut University
- 2003 Again in France for



Receiving the Knighthood Medal from the Italian Foreign Minister

- 2004 *Printemps des Poetes*, readings in five French cities; Sabita gets married to Nitin Gulati  
Writers' Delegation to Syria and Pakistan; again in US on Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's invitation; 'Selected Poems' and the fifth collection in Hindi; collections in Urdu and Telugu; collection in Italian published in Rome
- 2005 Pandalam Kerala Varma Award for *Vikku* (Stammer); Vayalar Award for *Sakshyangal* (Witness); Bappu Reddy National Award; Friendship Medal from the Govt. of Poland; fifth collection in English; again in Sweden to translate Swedish poetry; represents India at the Berlin Literary Festival and at Frankfurt Book Fair, 2005
- 2006 Retires from Sahitya Akademi; his birth place in Kerala celebrates the poet's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday; 'Sahityasree' from Delhi Hindi Sahitya Sammelan; third visit to Germany to read at the Leipzig Book Fair; Special Guest at Abu Dhabi Book Fair; German collection published from Heidelberg; fourth German visit to part take in Frankfurt Book Fair 2006. Complete Poems (1965-2005) published in three volumes; first volume of Complete Translations of Poetry; Sree Kerala Varma Award; Knighthood of the Order of Merit from the Govt. of Italy; participates in Afro-Asian Literary Conference at Neemrana
- 2007 K. Kuttikrishnan Award; a documentary on the poet, *Venalmazha* (Summer Rain) released in Kerala, participates in Kritiya International Poetry Festival in Kerala
- 2008 Subrahmania Shenoi Award; *Ente Kavita* (Own Selection of Poems); second Urdu collection; participates in Jaipur Literary Festival, Indo-Arab Literary Festival in Abu Dhabi, invited to Prakriti Poetry Festival at Chennai; Kovalam Literary Festival in Kerala and Asia-Pacific Literary Conference, Delhi