

Historian A.R. Venkatachalapathy wins Sahitya Akademi Award for work on V.O. Chidambaram

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CHENNAI

Historian A.R. Venkatachalapathy, whose tireless efforts and research yielded new findings on the Indian freedom movement and freedom fighters including V.O. Chidambaram and Bharathiyar, has won the Sahitya Akademi Award, 2024, for his book, *Tirunelveli Ezuciyum Vaa.Vuu.Ci. Yum 1908*.

A professor of the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), Chalapathy, as he is known among his friends, was a student of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. An authority on Tamil society and culture, he worked at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University before joining MIDS. His first book, *VOC Kadithangal* (VOC Letters), was published in 1984 when he was just 17.

"It is unexpected. Since T.M.C. Ragunathan's book, *Bharathi Kaalamum Karuthum*, this is probably

the first research work to get the award. Tamils generally feel that VOC did not get his due and, therefore, I am delighted that a book on VOC won the prestigious award. I also hope it will inspire the younger generation to study the history of Tamil society and culture," he told *The Hindu*.

Tirunelveli Ezuciyum Vaa.Vuu.Ci.Yum 1908 discusses the uprising in Tirunelveli 114 years ago in March 1908, after VOC was arrested for making a speech praising freedom fighter Bipin Chandra. VOC urged the people to boycott foreign goods, and the uprising remains a testament to how society as a whole revolted against British rule in India.

"Every public building in Tinnevely [Tirunelveli] town, except the Sub-Registrar's office, was attacked. The furniture and records of these buildings were set on fire as well as portions of the buildings themselves; the municipal



A.R. Venkatachalapathy

office was gutted. Twenty-seven persons were convicted and sentenced for participation in the riot," according to the Sedition (Rowlatt) Committee Report, 1918.

The incident drew nationwide attention, and S. Kasturiranga Iyengar, owner of *The Hindu*, sent a special correspondent to Tirunelveli and Tuticorin (now Thoothukudi) to report for the newspaper.

It was the uprising that witnessed ordinary people rally against the British and stand hand-in-hand with advocates and students. At least 10 *jutka* (horse cart)

drivers, a barber, an eatery owner, a goldsmith, a marriage broker, three retired policemen, a native doctor, a cattle dealer, a municipal overseer, a labourer, a woodcutter, a weaver and many shopkeepers were shot, arrested or convicted. In an interview to *The Hindu* in 2022, Mr. Venkatachalapathy requested Chief Minister M.K. Stalin to erect a memorial pillar to honour those who took part in the uprising.

His other book, *Swadeshi Steam*, gives a detailed account of the launch of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company by VOC in 1906, which challenged the might of the British merchant navy.

"In his verse autobiography, VOC mentions meeting Swami Ramakrishnananda who, he says, sowed the seeds of Swadeshi in his heart. Under VOC's leadership, Tuticorin became the hub of the Swadeshi movement in South India. Tirunelveli and Tuticorin drew all-India attention,

and VOC became a national hero," Mr. Venkatachalapathy told *The Hindu*.

Other works

He visited the descendants of British Collector Robert W.D.E. Ashe, who was assassinated by Vanchinathan, and published a collection of essays as *Ash Adichuvamil*.

He compiled Subramania Bharati's letters in *The Hindu*, which was published as a book, *Subramania Bharati: Writings in The Hindu*. It was the only organisation that gave him the space to express his views during 1910 to 1913, when many publications were banned by the British.

The book, *Tamil Characters*, gives an introduction to important Tamil personalities, including M. Karunanidhi, M.G. Ramachandran and Jayalithaa.

The Brief History of A Very Big Book: The Making of the Tamil Encyclopaedia deals with the making of a Tamil Encyclopaedia.

Chief Minister congratulates historian on winning award

The Hindu Bureau

CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin on Wednesday congratulated historian and writer A.R. Venkatachalapathy on winning the Sahitya Akademi Award, 2024, for his book, *Tirunelveli Ezucchiyum Vaa.Vu.Ci. Yum 1908*.

In a social media post, Mr. Stalin said the award had come at a time when Mr. Venkatachalapathy, who had conducted research on freedom fighter V.O. Chidambaram for 40 years, had brought out another book titled, *Swadeshi Steam*. "This gives double delight," he added.

Mr. Venkatachalapathy had corrected the term 'rebellion' used by the British rulers by changing it to 'uprising', Mr. Stalin added.

Governor R.N. Ravi also congratulated Mr. Venkatachalapathy on winning the award.