

## About Padmashri Acharya Chandnaji



What else can you call someone that has given eyesight to hundreds and thousands of people other than a hero? Acharya Shri Chandanaji has done just that. To date, she has been given the ability to see 289,579 people and is still continuing to do so among many other monumental goals she has taken on.

Acharya Shri, as she is known to most, is not your typical hero. 86 years old and cloaked in all white, she is a Jain nun who took her religious vows at a very young age and has been living by her motto, “compassion in action”, ever since. To her, “obstacles are just milestones” and she somehow always finds a solution to any obstacle she comes across.

It all began one day when Acharya Shri was walking through the Indian state of Bihar and noticed a number of blind people, but moreover that no one in town was wearing glasses. She inquired and realized that the services to help fix people’s vision didn’t exist and even if they did, most people wouldn’t be able to afford them. As a result, otherwise functioning members of the community were deemed useless and cast aside. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that on average, 50% of cases of avoidable blindness are due to untreated cataracts. And in India, that number jumps to 80%, which was unacceptable to her so she took on the enormous task of doing something about it.

Her experience in Bihar helped her come to the realization that in order to do more she needed to create an eye hospital where like-minded individuals could come together to help further her cause. So in 1970, she joined a non-profit, non-governmental organization called Veerayatan (The Holy Land of the Enlightened Souls), which was founded by Gurudev Shri Amar Muni.

The organization’s pillars are simple: through “Seva” (service to humanity), “Shiksha” (education), and “Sadhana” (self-development), Acharya Shri and her team will go on to change so many lives and alleviate human suffering regardless of gender, race, or religion.

In 1974, through the newly formed Veerayatan organization, Acharya Shri envisioned and created an “eye camp” that took place over several days. But the eye camps were just the beginning. Acharya Shri believes that the guiding principle to transform an entire community is

education. Every time she visits a village that does not have a school, she asks the locals “While there are many temples in this village, why not turn the entire village into a temple by building a school?”

Her approach is holistic. She understands that imparting an education doesn’t just mean building a structure. Veerayatan creates value-based, high-quality educational centers as ground zero for the development of an entire village. The children that are educated are being taken off the streets and away from a life of begging and crime. They now have the ability to go home and educate their parents and in turn, the parents are given hope and are empowered to better themselves. Gradually generations and generations of uneducated, poverty-stricken families are breaking free from this cycle. Together with the Veerayatan schools, Acharya Shri is building awareness about the protection of natural resources, cleanliness, and good hygiene, and living a non-violent and addiction-free life.

And in these small towns where gender equality was previously a pipe dream, Acharya Shri – a trailblazing woman herself – is helping to dramatically reduce child marriages and ensure that girls are being educated just as much as boys. Her goal is to transform each town and village into a place where every child is safe and cared for, where every adult is respected, and where love for animals and nature is woven into the fabric of society.

In a world where natural disaster seems to be on the increase, one of the most inspiring things about Acharya Shri is that she goes where the need is greatest. For example, in 2001 when a devastating earthquake struck the Indian city of Kutch, Acharya Shri and Veerayatan traveled there within days and quickly built a temporary school where the distraught children could go. She then realized that the only way to return normalcy to these children’s lives was to make sure their schooling did not stop. So the Veerayatan team took in more than 6,000 displaced children and have since transformed these makeshift schools into permanent educational institutions with 3,000 students currently enrolled. She then went on in 2010 and traveled to Nairobi where she teamed up with local volunteers and built a cerebral palsy unit that now treats over 100 patients. And just this year, in the wake of the detrimental earthquake in Nepal, Acharya Shri arrived there within 3 days of the disaster and immediately began rebuilding. She applied the same model and concept as used in Kutch and Nepal and at present has over 500 children.

There are many individuals and organizations who are doing truly remarkable, even heroic things to change the world but Acharya Shri Chandanaji stands out from the crowd because to her every child in need is her child. Every village is her hometown. Every natural disaster strikes a place in her heart. And with every eye surgery performed, she is bringing light into the lives of many. Her faith may drive her, but her belief in the potential of humanity is what sustains her.

## **Awards to name a few:**

- 1987 – Sangali Jan-Seva Award
- 1987 – SantBalaji Award
- 1987 – ‘Acharya Shri’ Post given by Pujya Rashtrasant Amar Muniji – She is the first-ever Jain Sadhvi to receive the prestigious title of “Acharya” in the Jain ascetic community since the time of Bhagwan Mahavir. (2600 years). She accepted it as a respect for all women. She wants to establish the thinking that any capable individual, Sadhu or Sadhvi could be a high priest.
- 8th November 1995 – Mahavir Foundation Award – For excellence in human endeavor in propagating Non-violence, Truth, Vegetarianism, Education, Medicine, Community, Social Service was presented to Chandana Shriji by K. R. Narayanan, VicePresident of India. This award comprised a purse of Rs. 5 Lakhs
- August 28 – 31, 2000 – At the Millennium World Peace Summit of religious and spiritual leaders held in UNO, Acharya Chandanaji represented the Jain delegation in the summit from different nations. The summit was attended by 1200 Dharma Gurus, but Chandanaji’s place held a special reference as her valuable ideas for the eradication of poverty on an international level became the subject of discussion.
- September 5, 2002 – Shri Devi Ahilya National Award – It was presented at Indore by Smt. Sumitra Mahajan, Central Minister, for the services to mankind in the field of health, education, population, pollution protection, natural calamities through Veerayatan.
- August 15, 2004 – Woman of the Year Award – Given by Jnr. Chamber, Marine Line, Mumbai. This honor was for the entire motherhood epitomized by Acharya Shriji.
- JAINA Convention 2007 – JAINA Presidential Award “We thank you for the exemplary work of ‘Veerayatan’ in spreading the work of Lord Mahavir to Jains and Non-Jains alike through compassion, education, non-violence, etc. Educating children in Mahavir’s land where his followers don’t even exist except for pilgrimage is a remarkable achievement, a very rare gift to the Land of Tirthankar. Looking after the sick and poor is very humanitarian work. Reaching out to earthquake victims in lightning speed and taking care of them is very compassionate of you.” Words in the letter announcing the Award.
- October 20, 2008 – NagariAbhinandan by Koshi Region People for the service of mankind in the flood-affected area.
- 18th August 2012 – Vishva Vibhuti Award by ParamPujyaShriJayanti Muniji Maharaj.
- 2014 Vibrant Kutch - Award for Revolution in Education

- 2015 Kutch Gaurav
- 2016 Acharya Hasthi “KarunaRatna” Award in recognition of her exemplary services to the cause of propagating karuna to all forms of life.
- 2017 “Surya Ratna”- The Saint of Modern India, Suryadatta National Life Time Achievement Award 2017” on Tuesday, February 7, 2017, at Bavdhan Campus, Pune for Excellence in the field of “Spirituality- Spreading Value-Based Education Across the Globe & for shaping youngsters through premier education.