

Kumari Puja

The Timeless Tale of Worshipping Woman-Power

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ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICANCE: On autumn mornings the dhak begins to beat and the air fills with the scent of shiuli flowers. On the morning of Ashtami, amid the fragrance of incense and resin in the pandal, the deep rhythm of the drums and the call of the conch, every gaze comes to rest on one little girl. Dressed in a red-bordered sari, sandal-paste tilak on her forehead and flowers in her hands, she sits while the priest chants and devotees offer anjali at her feet. In that moment she is no longer the familiar little girl from the neighbourhood; in the eyes of the devotees she is the Mother of the Universe herself. One of the most important parts of Durga Puja, Kumari Puja remains a deeply moving chapter of Bengal's festival even today.

What is Kumari Puja?

According to the Tantra shastras, Kumari Puja is the worship, as the Goddess herself, of a maiden not more than six-

teen years old who has not yet reached puberty. In ancient times sages and seers worshipped Prakriti, Nature, through the kumari. In their vision Nature and woman are one, and the kumari is Nature in its seed state, its pure and unblemished form. The seers believed that the presence of God lies within the conscious human mind, and that God is most manifest in those whose minds are truthful and free of impurity. Young girls carry no guile and none of the world's complications. It is for this simplicity and purity that they are chosen to represent the Goddess.

The Legend from the Puranas

According to scripture, Kumari Puja has its origin in the story of the slaying of Kolasura (in some versions, Banasura). It is said that when the demon Kolasura seized heaven and earth, the imperilled gods sought refuge with Mahakali. Answering their anguished prayers, the Goddess took birth as a

human girl and, while still a maiden, slew Kolasura. The heart of the story is that woman-power is mightier than any force of evil.

Into the Depths of the Philosophy

The core philosophical idea of Kumari Puja is the seeing and the attaining of the Supreme in woman. The threefold power that drives the ceaseless work of creation, preservation and dissolution in the universe is believed to lie, in seed form, within the kumari. Just as a vast tree lies hidden inside a tiny seed, so the infinite possibilities of creation lie dormant within her. Hence the spiritual practice of seeing the divine in the kumari, and in woman.

A celebrated example of this vision is Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. According to the traditional account, he worshipped his own wife, Sarada Devi, as Shodashi. In Sri Ramakrishna's view every woman is a form of Bhagavati, but the Divine Mother is most fully revealed in a pure-hearted kumari.

In Bengal's Durga Puja, Kumari Puja is usually performed on Ashtami or Navami, with a girl of five to seven seated beside the image of the Goddess. The Kumari Puja of Belur Math and the Ramakrishna Mission is especially renowned, drawing large numbers of devotees every year. Beyond Bengal, the worship is also practised in various forms in Nepal and North-East India.



The Durga image · Ramakrishna Mission, Dhaleswar

God as Mother

The famous hymn of the Chandi says:

*yā devī sarvabhūteṣu
mātrrūpeṇa saṁsthitā |
namastasyai namastasyai
namastasyai namo namaḥ ||*

“To the Goddess who dwells in all beings in the form of the Mother, salutations to Her, again and again.”

Kumari Puja exists so that the all-pervading God may be worshipped as Mother. Here God is not some distant, unreachable being, but as close and as loving as one's own mother.

Human Self-Respect

Another meaning of Kumari Puja is that through it the human being, the finest of creation, pays reverence to itself. For God dwells within the human being, and that divine presence shines most purely in womanhood.

In Today's Context

At a time when questions about the safety and dignity of women are raised again and again, the message of Kumari Puja is more relevant than ever. The true fulfilment of this worship lies in honouring and protecting, on every other day of the year, the one we bow to as the Goddess once a year. During the puja, organisers must also stay attentive to the girl's consent, comfort and safety, for the welfare of the child is the very foundation of this worship.

Agas change and society changes, but the experience of bowing one's head before that little girl in the pandal does not. In that moment we bow before the glory of life, of Nature and of motherhood. Kumari Puja, then, is not merely a religious rite; it is a timeless lesson in seeing woman with the dignity of the Goddess.