



## INTERVIEW

# Celebrating Kumari Shakti

Every year, as Hindus join in to celebrate and commemorate the Goddess Durga's victory over Mahishashur, Bangladeshi Hindus flock towards Ram Krishna Mission to observe the largest Kumari Puja organised. This year, it happens to fall on Ashtami, 8 October, 2019.

This is Swami Purnatmananda Maharaj's first time observing the ritual in Dhaka as the new principal of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.

Preparations have already begun as we enter the premises. It's a typical late autumn afternoon, as labourers are busy constructing a stage, and what looks to be an outline of the canopy.

It is hard to imagine that weeks from now, the roads in front of the mission will be blocked off, as people make their way to offer Anjali prayers. Masses will gather, eagerly waiting for the Kumari to arrive.

The Maharaj sits in his official chamber, ever so calm with the warmest of smiles, discussing about how the establishment gears for the day. We have caught him on a busy afternoon, as people are coming and going — some are here to discuss about the upkeep of the missionary, while others are just here to see him and ask for blessings. No man or woman is unturned or made to feel lesser.

"They start the construction of the

stage and the canopy a month or two in advance," he says. As the discussion continues, Maharaj explains that tradition dictates that the young girl chosen for the Kumari Puja must come from a Brahmin family, between the ages of 1 to 16 years old, and has not crossed puberty yet. "We usually select 3-4 months in advance, from a close set of Brahmin families that the mission has been acquainted with for a while," he says. This instruction comes from the shasthro, but history does say that exceptions can be and have been made by Saints only. "In 1898, Swami Vivekananda performed the Kumari Puja ritual by worshipping a Muslim boatman's daughter in Kashmir; he saw the divine power of Durga within her," he says.

Sthvana Nandu joins in on the conversation. He has been a part of Ram Krishna Mission for the last 9 years, and is the head pujari this year.

According to Sthvana, "Every girl who is chosen as the Kumari is assigned a name, based on a form of Durga, and the age of the girl. The given name is important, as that is the name by which she is addressed during the rituals of the Kumari Puja."

This year, the Kumari's name is Subhaga; Maharaj explains that the prefix "Su" is used to define positivity, auspicious, love — anything good; "Bhaga" means to possess



**Swami Purnatmananda Maharaj**

the six opulences' of god. In accordance with Hinduism, these opulences' are not materialistic, but a spiritual concept. Thus, Subhaga is the one who not only embodies them, but uses them to spread prosperity and welfare amongst everyone.

The night before the Kumari Puja is a sleepless one for the monks and priests. Special pujas are performed inside the temple, while prasada is prepared and flowers from the garden are picked for the Kumari Puja, to be shared amongst worshippers as prayers to Durga herself. This is also the day when the reflection of Durga is bathed, known as the "Maha Snan" (Holy Bath) ritual.

In the early hours, preparations for the bhog starts. Volunteers, who are generally

students residing in the quarters of the missionary, are given one final brief and told who needs to handle media, assist with the puja, crowd control, and many more.

The young girl, alongside her family, arrives early in the morning too, where she is dressed; assisted by female members of the missionary and her own family. Although she is required to fast from dawn, the monks do provide her with fruits to consume, never forgetful that she is also a growing young girl.

The Kumari Puja is only an hour long, but Sthavana takes to the stage hours before, performing all necessary religious rituals preceding the main puja itself.

While spectators and devotees impatiently wait for the reveal of the kumari, both Maharaj and Sthavana agree that the moment the prayers start, their only concentration lies in trying to visualise Maa Durga within the kumari.

The end result is quite mesmerising to watch, as a sudden silence sweeps through the crowds, replacing the impatience in the air, once the kumari is revealed. For a mere hour of Ashtami, Durga is envisioned in flesh; Kumari Shakti — the basis of all creations.

**By Supriti Sarkar**

**Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed**