

The First Durga Puja at Belur Math

SWAMI SUMANASANANDA

‘O Divine Mother, source of the universe! By You, this entire universe is veiled in illusion. O Devi, if You bestow Your grace, You become the cause of our final emancipation in this very life.’

People of Bengal consider Mother Durga as the daughter of the Himalaya and celebrate Durga Puja as the beloved daughter’s visit to her parents’ home. Just as parents feel immense joy when their married daughter visits home for a few days, people in Bengal celebrate the occasion in the same spirit. Thus, Durga Puja has become a household affair in Bengal—a time of divine homecoming, joy, and spiritual reunion.

Swami Vivekananda initiated the celebration of Durga Puja at Belur Math in October 1901. But why did Swamiji, a monk who did not have anything to do with rituals, introduce Durga Puja, an elaborate ritualistic worship? Durga Puja is not an ordinary ritual. It is profound and transformative. Although certain forms of tantric worship may be done by monks, a Durga Puja, as such, was unprecedented in a monastic setting. There were multiple reasons behind Swamiji’s decision. But before we explore them, I would like to briefly explain the significance of Durga, and what Durga really represents.

Who is Durga?

Mother Durga, as the Hindu belief goes, is the deity who removes ‘Durgati’ which means suffering and misery. As ‘Durgati Nāshini’, she destroys whatever causes

suffering to her devotees. Durga also represents the word ‘Durgam’, meaning a fortress. This body of ours is like a fort. Trespassers may come, enter it and destroy our spiritual potential. Durga (the Goddess) is the one who protects our body. She is that Power which abides in everything and is behind all existence.

This Divine Mother is another form of Brahman which has two aspects: 1) Brahman, as inactive, doing nothing is *Nirguna Brahman*. 2) Brahman, as manifest in this world, is *Saguna Brahman*.

‘Shakti’ (the Divine Power) is expressed through the three *Gunas*, qualities that influence our behaviour—*Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. Through them, the universe is being created, preserved, and finally destroyed. So, this is the work of Shakti, the dynamic aspect of Brahman. Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly said that Brahman and Shakti are *abheda* or inseparable—one cannot separate them. The *Nirguna Nirākāra Brahman* (attributeless, formless Reality) becomes *Saguna Sākāra* (with qualities and form) to appear as Durga. She is ‘Danuja Dalani’ (destroyer of demons) and ‘Ashubha Nāshini’ (destroyer of evil).

Evil is not something belonging to ancient times. Demons and devils existed then, but they exist even now. They exist as human bombs, terrorists, political leaders

causing genocide, killing thousands without remorse. So, even in this modern age, demons are still around—both within and outside us. May Mother Durga, this Shakti, make us victorious over evil.

Durga Puja also represents *Vijaya*, meaning Victory. It is so called because the good and auspicious power of righteousness is bound to gain victory over the power of evil. Ravana and others like him represent the evil forces and Rama represents righteousness or ‘Dharma’. All that is good will ultimately become victorious over evil forces through the worship of Shakti.

As stated in the *Chandi*: ‘Whenever evil forces rise, whenever trouble arises due to the *asuras*, I shall incarnate myself to destroy them.’ So many demons had been destroyed by Her before. She would reincarnate again and again with the same mission in mind.

Swamiji said: ‘Do you know who Holy Mother is? She is not merely our Gurudev’s wife. She is Bhagavati herself—Durga incarnate. Do not think she is only the wife of Sri Ramakrishna. She is the Divine Mother Herself. She is the Protectress, the Presiding Deity of our Sangha.’

Sri Ramakrishna also said: ‘Do you know who she is? She is not an ordinary woman. She is the incarnation of Saraswati, the wisdom aspect of the Divine Mother. She is born to bestow knowledge on others. She is my Shakti, my very power.’

Swamiji had the firm conviction that Sri Ramakrishna’s divine consort, Holy Mother Sarada Devi, was an incarnation of Durga herself. In several letters written to his brother-disciples from America he proclaimed the divine status of the Holy Mother.

In a letter written to Swami Shivananda in 1894, Swamiji wrote: ‘You have not

understood what the Holy Mother is. She is Shakti embodied in this modern age.’ In another letter he wrote: ‘I will do *Jyanta Durga Puja*—worship of the living Durga! Otherwise, I am not worthy of my name!’

Swamiji had a firm conviction that without the power of Shakti, there can be no regeneration for the world. He said, ‘Our country is the weakest and most backward of all because Shakti is held in dishonour here.’ Durga represents that lost power.

Why Swamiji started Durga Puja

It was always in Swamiji’s mind that Shakti should be held in high esteem and worshipped. He believed that Holy Mother Sarada Devi was born to revive that divine Shakti in India, which had become dormant over time. He envisioned the future impact of this Divine Shakti not only on India but on the whole world, with Holy Mother Sarada Devi as the nucleus. He recognized her power and wanted her to be made part of that Shakti Puja, the worship of Divine Shakti at Belur Math.

Belur Math had been established a few years back in 1898. One day in 1901, Swamiji told Raja Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda), ‘I had a vision that Durga Puja is going on at Belur Math. Let us start Durga Puja!’ Raja Maharaj replied that he too had the same vision—Mother Durga was coming from Dakshineswar (on the eastern bank of the Ganges), crossing the Ganges, and being worshipped at Belur Math (on the western bank of the Ganges). They realized that this divine coincidence of spiritual vision was something ‘supernatural’. They decided to introduce Durga Puja at Belur Math in 1901.

After this divine coincidence, Swamiji sought Holy Mother’s permission, saying, ‘We are going to undertake this Puja.’ Holy

Mother gave her permission—‘Oh that will be very good. Naren has thought of a good programme. It is auspicious. You do it. My blessings will be always with you.’

Swamiji saw in the West that, even though people did not ‘worship’ women as divine, they still gave them respect, at least outwardly. He thought: ‘If Western people, by giving even this limited respect to women, have advanced so much materially, then imagine how great the advancement would be if we, in a pure and spiritual way, worship women as embodiments of the Divine Mother!’

In several letters, Swamiji clearly stated that ‘women must be given back their lost honour and the highest status’—in the family, in society, and in the nation. He felt that if the Durga Puja could be done properly, following scriptural injunction, the orthodox Brahmins would find no reason to raise objections. He called his disciple Sri Sarat Chandra Chakraborty, a learned scholar originally from East Bengal, and asked, ‘Can you bring the proper book on Durga Puja rituals for me?’ ‘Why, Swamiji?’ he asked. ‘I am thinking of doing Durga Puja. I will study it, so that nobody can raise a finger against us.’

In the *Chandi*, the Divine Mother says: ‘All women are my manifestations.’ Should this truth remain only in the scriptures? Should not ordinary people in society know and apply it in their lives? That is ‘Practical Vedanta’.

Swamiji started the Shakti worship to enhance the status of women who are manifestations of the Divine Mother, for this would have profound impact on society.

Thus many ideas—those of social reform, recognition of orthodox traditions, women’s upliftment, spiritual awakening, and the empowerment of youth—remained blended in Swamiji’s idea about Durga worship.

At Belur Math

After Holy Mother gave her consent to Swamiji for Durga Puja at Belur Math, a clay idol of the goddess had to be purchased. The idol made of clay had to be ordered in advance because it took several months to make them. In Calcutta’s Kumartuli (the Potters’ Lane), there was no *murti* (idol) readily available. Finally, they found one potter with a beautiful idol of the goddess which someone had ordered but did not take eventually. So, the monks happily brought the *murti* to Belur Math. You see, how divine coincidences worked!

Thus began the first Durga Puja at Belur Math on 18 October 1901. Brahmachari Krishnalal, who went and chose the *murti*, became the *Pujāri*, and the father of Shashi Maharaj (Swami Ramakrishnananda) was the *Tantradhāraka*.

Holy Mother’s Presence

Holy Mother was invited to be present during the Durga Puja. She came one day earlier and stayed in Nilambar Babu’s Garden House near Belur Math.

Swamiji said, ‘Mother, I will perform the *Homa*. I have read the *Raghunandan Smriti*. We will follow it to the letter. I will make the offering—the Ganga water from Belur will be used.’ Holy Mother said, ‘My son. You have taken the vow that you will not harm any living being. Don’t do animal sacrifice. Instead, give some cucumber, pumpkin, sugarcane—offer these.’ Swamiji accepted: ‘Yes, Mother, we will do that.’

During the Puja, Holy Mother was present. In our Order, as sadhus cannot do puja for personal benefit, all rituals were performed in the name of Holy Mother, the living embodiment of the Divine Mother.

Swamiji's Fever

Swamiji himself sang wonderful 'Agamani' songs about the goddess's advent for several days before the *Shashthi* (the day of *Bodhana*). *Bodhana* means 'awakening' through propitiation of the Divine Mother to get Her blessings.

Then he went to Holy Mother and said, 'These boys are busy with all arrangements, but you know me—if things are not done properly, I may scold or even slap them. Then they'll feel hurt, and I'll feel terrible, especially during Durga Puja. So, Mother, bless me with a fever—let me lie quietly during Puja, and let them do everything joyfully.'

Mother smiled and blessed him. And, lo and behold, Swamiji got fever! During *Saptami*, *Ashtami*, and *Navami*, he was down with fever.

During 'Sandhi Puja', he recovered and also attended the 'Kumāri Puja' (the worship of the virgin goddess). With his heart overflowing with devotion, Swamiji saw the Divine Mother in the little girl who was worshipped as 'Kumāri'. Thus, the first Durga Puja at Belur Math was filled with divine fervour. Then came *Vijayā Dashami*, the conclusion of Durga Puja.

Sri Ramachandra's victory over Ravana in the *Ramayana* and the Pandavas' victory in the *Mahabharata* both symbolize the same—the triumph of divine forces. In our own lives, too, there are good and evil tendencies. We must conquer the evil within by the strength of the good. For ordinary people, the symbolism is: Mother comes from 'Kailāsh' to her father's home, and returns after *Dashami*. But for the seeker, the Divine Mother is always in one's own heart—day and night, in wakefulness and in sleep. Every breath, inhalation and exhalation, is Her coming and going. ■

- * Swami Sumanasananda, is Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Baranagar, Kolkata. The article is based on a lecture delivered at the Vedanta Society of Southern California on 7 October 2022.

*Devīm prasannām prnatārthantrim
dyogindrapujyām yugadharmapātrim /
Tām sārādām bhaktivijnānadātrim
dayāsvapurām pranamāmi nityam //*

*Snehena badhnāsi mano'smadiyah
doshānasheshān sagunikaroshi /
Ahetunā no dayase sadoshān
svānke grihitvā yadidam vicitram //*

*Prasida mātārvinayena yāce
nityam bhava snehavati suteshu /
Premaikabindum ciradagdhacitte
vishinca cittam kuru nah sushāntam //*

*Jananim Sārādām devīm Rāmakrishnam jagadgurum /
pādapadme tayoh shritvā pranamāmi muhurmuhuh //*

—From 'Hymn to Holy Mother' by Swami Abhedananda