Celebrating Heritage, Promoting Tourism, and Relocating Svāmī Vivekānanda: A Study of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial

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Abstract Svāmī Vivekānanda's (1863–1902) relationship with his *guru* Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa (*ca.* 1836–1886), and his role in the creation of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission in the final decade of the nineteenth century, has attracted far more scholarly attention than the meanings invested in Vivekānanda after his death by devotees and admirers beyond the Math and Mission and by the various organizations that have disseminated these meanings. To redress this imbalance, this article examines the message embodied in, and projected by, the Vivekananda Rock Memorial at Kanniyakumari. It explores the Memorial's contribution to Kanniyakumari's expanding role as a tourist destination and the problematic nature of the story that has provided the rationale for the Memorial's location. It shows how evolving versions of this story have fed the different understandings of Vivekānanda's mission now institutionalized respectively in the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission and the Vivekananda Kendra, which manages the Memorial. It argues that the creation of the Memorial has directed attention away from Kolkata (Calcutta), the scene of Vivekānanda's interaction with his *guru* Rāmakṛṣṇa, and thus away from that seminal relationship. The Memorial presents, instead, Vivekānanda's experience at Kanniyakumari as the defining moment in his evolving mission as a "spiritual nationalist." The article concludes by noting implications of this shift for the critical understanding of Vivekānanda, emphasizing the importance of the Rock Memorial's function as an increasingly popular portal to "Vivekānanda of Kanniyakumari."

Keywords Intangible heritage · Kanniyakumari/Kanyakumari · pilgrimage · Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission · Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) · Svāmī Vivekānanda · Svāmī Vivekananda Rock Memorial · tourism · Vivekananda Kendra

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Introduction: Relocating Svāmī Vivekānanda

Critical studies have defined Svāmī Vivekānanda's (1863–1902) mission largely in relation to his status as Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's (*ca.* 1836–1886) disciple.¹ Vivekānanda's influence, however, has steadily expanded since his death beyond the following of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission² (hereinafter, Ramakrishna Math and Mission), the movement he created in the name of his *guru*. Most notably, the increasing political influence of Hindu nationalism in India since the 1980s has drawn attention to Vivekānanda's representation as an icon of the Hindu nationalist cause, whether by supporters of that cause or by critics who have held Vivekānanda partly responsible for its popularity. From the mid-1990s, the contentious issue of the nature of Vivekānanda's influence on those who subscribe to the ideology of Hindutva ("Hindu-ness") has been a prominent item on the agenda of Vivekananda studies.

Scholarly studies have noted that Vivekānanda has been recognized in Hindutva circles as one who, together with other notable nineteenth-century Hindu personalities, galvanized Hindu society and contributed to the development of a nationalist discourse. More detailed arguments have cited examples of Hindutva ideologues' frequent invocations of Vivekānanda's name and use of quotations from his teaching, particularly by the supporters of "soft" Hindutva (Sharma 2003: 71), and have pointed to aspects of his teaching, for example, on spirituality, that have been congenial to Hindutva-inspired organizations.³

Such evidence does not in itself demonstrate the ways in which different Hindutva-inspired organizations have internalized and then deployed their understandings of Vivekānanda's teaching and significance. Hindutva ideologues' references to Vivekānanda, for example, have typically relied on brief quotations, often exhortatory in nature and devoid of their original context. This begs the questions of what Vivekānanda meant by these words at the time that he spoke them and what meaning has been attached to their use in a different time and social setting.⁴ In practice, key aspects of Vivekānanda's legacy have been significantly

¹ See Beckerlegge 2013a.

² When referring to Hindu organizations, the article follows the romanization/spelling adopted in these organizations' English-language publications.

³ For examples of scholars' reference to the use of Vivekānanda's name and quotations from his teaching, see McKean 1996: 107, 119–20 (on the VHP), 154–55 (on Svāmī Satyamritānanda), 172 (on Svāmī Śivānanda), 178 (on Svāmī Chinmayānanda); Puri 2005: 105–6, 141, 166, 184, 341, 409 (on Bharatiya Janata Party leaders). On Vivekānanda's teaching concerning spirituality, see, for example, Hansen 1999: 69; McKean 1996: 280–85. Reverential reference to Vivekānanda, of course, has not been confined to proponents of "soft" Hindutva, as McKean (cited above) makes plain.

⁴ In raising this caveat, my intention is not to offer an apologia for Vivekānanda, but rather to emphasize the importance of examining Hindutva movements' handling of his legacy, not least to arrive at a more informed appreciation of their positions. This is in accord with this article's concern to examine the importance that organizations such as the Vivekananda Kendra have acquired in recent decades as popular mediators of Vivekānanda's legacy, rather than to recoil from this (see, for example, Raychaudhuri 1998, cited in Beckerlegge 2013a: 449). In charting the way in which Hindutva ideologues have reinterpreted Vivekānanda's teaching, I have also explored elsewhere uncomfortable aspects of Vivekānanda's teaching when judged by more recent standards (for example, Beckerlegge 2006a), as have Hansen (1999: 70) and Sharma (2003: 79–84).

reshaped in the process of being put to work to serve the interests of Hindutva-inspired groups and their perceptions of India's needs,⁵ as indeed it has by others who have taken up the same hermeneutical challenge of seeking to apply his ideas in changing circumstances.

Without closer analysis of the dynamic and interactive nature of the transmission and reception of Vivekānanda's influence by, in this instance, Hindutva sympathizers, his teaching and example become, in effect, a hermetically sealed body of ideas and ideals inherited, and then simply (passively?) endorsed. This misleading impression is heightened in accounts of Vivekānanda's putative influence on the popular appeal of Hindutva that rely solely on the record we have of his teaching in isolation from any consideration of how this has been received and interpreted by *specific* Hindutva ideologues and organizations.

In this article, I shall explore how Vivekānanda's mission and his relationship to his *guru* and the movement he founded have been redrawn in his representations by two Hindutva-inspired groups. I shall do this by examining the growing importance of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial at Kanniyakumari as a gateway to Vivekānanda and the greater weight given to Vivekānanda's experience at Kanniyakumari by admirers (not just Hindu nationalists) since Indian Independence. I shall argue that the representation of Vivekānanda's mission popularized by the Rock Memorial is highly significant because of the way in which, in the terms of this article, it *relocates*, *reconfigures*, and *recasts* Vivekānanda's mission in relation to how it has been understood by the Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

The Vivekananda Rock Memorial: A Contested Celebration of National Heritage⁶

Vivekānanda (1989, 6: 254) recalled in a letter of 1894 that at Kanniyakumari (Kanyakumari) in late 1892 he "hit upon a plan" in which *saṃnyāsīns* would educate India's needy.⁷ On his return to India in 1897, having attended the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Vivekānanda established the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in Kolkata. Although honoring his *guru*'s name, it implemented the plan Vivekānanda had reported conceiving at Kanniyakumari some six years after Rāmākṣṇa's death. By the time of the centenary of his birth, Vivekānanda had come to be seen in India above all as the inspiration behind service to those who were in need and to the nation.

⁵ See, for example, Beckerlegge 2003, 2014.

⁶ Periods of research in Kanniyakumari between 2006 and 2018 (see Beckerlegge 2008, 2010, 2014) were funded by the British Academy, the Spalding Trust, and The Open University's Faculty of Arts and Social Science. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewer whose report led me to change the way in which this article sets out its critical agenda. The photographs and map in this article are my own. Figures 6 and 8 (the latter distributed freely to passers-by) have been scanned from images acquired in Kanniyakumari, which did not identify a copyright holder.

⁷ I have adopted the spelling "Kanniyakumari," the romanization officially favored by the state of Tamil Nadu since 2016.

Many religious movements have played a part in heritage celebration and conservation, some using this medium “to get their message across” (Stausberg 2011: 110). Since the late 1940s, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission has acted increasingly as curator of sites linked to the lives of Rāmākṛṣṇa and Vivekānanda, the landmarks of its sacred geography. Its intention of renovating Vivekānanda’s ancestral home in Kolkata to mark the centenary in 1963 of his birth, however, was thwarted by difficulties related to acquiring the land and the condition of the original buildings. Consequently, it was the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the standard-bearer of the Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) cause, which spearheaded a campaign to establish a memorial to mark Vivekānanda’s birth centenary, not in Kolkata but at Kanniyakumari. Other than locations associated with Vivekānanda’s early life and interaction with Rāmākṛṣṇa in and around Kolkata, there is no place in India now more closely bound up with Vivekānanda’s memory than Kanniyakumari.

Celebration and memorialization can be divisive when the “past” they evoke and its relationship to the present are contested.⁸ In 1962, a Kanniyakumari-based committee, involving the RSS and the Ramakrishna Mission in Chennai (Madras), undertook to raise a modest memorial in Vivekānanda’s honor on the Śrīpāda pārai (Śrīpāda rock), which lies off Kanniyakumari’s shore.⁹ A small indentation in this rock is believed to mark the footprint, the Śrīpāda, of Devī Kanyā Kumārī, the virgin goddess, long associated with Kanniyakumari as the town’s name testifies.¹⁰ Fearing escalating communal conflict after resistance from local Christians, who believed the rock had also been visited by Saint Francis Xavier, the Tamil Nadu state government prohibited the placing of any memorial on the rock.¹¹

From 1963, the RSS worked to overturn the ban under the auspices of the All India Swami Vivekananda Centenary Celebration and Vivekananda Rock Memorial Committee led by its organizing secretary, Eknath Ranade (1914–1982), a former general secretary of the RSS. That committee’s aim was to ensure the construction of a more elaborate, “national” memorial for which Ranade secured governmental and corporate contributions.¹² Ranade liaised closely with the Ramakrishna Math and Mission (2000: 15–16), which is said to have affirmed its support for the campaign while making plain it would not become involved in mobilizing political opinion (Bhide 2003: 80–81). The president of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission consecrated the Rock Memorial on its inauguration by the president of India in 1970.

On one of my many visits to the Rock Memorial, my companions in 2011 were two members of the RSS from Maharashtra. They were visibly moved by their first

⁸ See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 149–50; Timothy and Boyd 2006: 2–3.

⁹ Accounts differ of this plan’s source and elaborateness. Compare Andersen and Damle 1987: 138; Ranade 2000: 1–11; Bhide 2003: 76–78.

¹⁰ For evidence of the antiquity of Kanniyakumari’s association with Devī Kanyā Kumārī, see, for example, Mani 1975: 386; Shulman 1980: 148, 387nn23, 24; Paramasivanandam 1981: 1–8.

¹¹ See Kanungo 2012: 124–27; Mathew 1983; compare Ranade 2000.

¹² See Kanungo 2012: 126–27.

sight of the monument to whose construction they had donated (reportedly with approximately three million others) a few rupees as youths, using special folders issued by the RSS to gather such personal donations.

On the back of the momentum generated by the Rock Memorial campaign and with advice from the Ramakrishna Math, in 1972 Ranade launched the Vivekananda Kendra, a lay “spiritually oriented service mission,” which has subsequently managed the Memorial. Ranade’s aim was to create an organization that would be less likely than the RSS, because of the RSS’s history, to arouse suspicions of being communalist and divisive.¹³ Inspired by Vivekānanda, “not because he was divine and he descended upon earth but because he was an ordinary being like us, who suffered, who doubted but then by dint of his Tapas rose to the divine heights,” Ranade did not seek to develop a *guru-* or *saṃnyāsin-*led organization of “Vivekanandites” (Vivekananda Kendra 1999: 22).¹⁴ Consistent with this position, the Vivekananda Rock Memorial, as its name implies, is not a temple with a ritually installed *mūrti*, but a memorial centered on a statue of Vivekānanda.¹⁵

Prior to that, it was only after the creation of the Rock Memorial that Kanniyakumari began to take on greater significance for the Ramakrishna movement’s followers.¹⁶ Accounts of pilgrimages to Kanniyakumari by intimates of Rāmākṛṣṇa and Vivekānanda, including Sārādā Devī (1853–1920), Rāmākṛṣṇa’s consort, and Svāmī Brahmānanda (1863–1922), Vivekānanda’s successor as leader of the Ramakrishna movement, do not suggest that they had invested Kanniyakumari with a new meaning as a “salvific space” (Jacobsen 2013: 19) because it had been the setting for Vivekānanda’s vision of his (and thus their) future mission. Neither the Ramakrishna Math nor the Ramakrishna Mission have established a branch at Kanniyakumari.

The Vivekananda Rock Memorial: A “New Site of Sacrality” in Post-Independence Kanniyakumari

Kanniyakumari stands on mainland India’s southernmost tip where three oceans meet, a *trivenī saṅgam* (triple braid), or sacred confluence.¹⁷ Kanniyakumari’s status as a *tīrtha* (ford, pilgrimage location) and *śaktipīṭha* (seat of the Devī) dates back well before the turn of the first millennium CE.

¹³ See, for example, Ranade 2005: 221.

¹⁴ Compare Kendra Workers n.d.: xii–xiii. On Ranade’s attitude to Vivekānanda and the Kendra’s relationship to the RSS and the Ramakrishna movement, see Beckerlegge 2010. On the Kendra’s history and activities, see Beckerlegge 2013b; Vivekananda Kendra n.d.

¹⁵ In practice, the Rock Memorial is popularly regarded as a “sacred memorial” (for example, Tamilnadu Tourism Blog n.d.).

¹⁶ For example, Sinclair-Brull 1997: 155; Atmashraddhananda 2010: iii.

¹⁷ See Eck 2012: 280, compare 150. On popular beliefs about Kanniyakumari (from general to specialized studies), see Vivekananda Kendra 2010; Anonymous n.d.; Padmanabhan 1977; Ramaswamy (on Lemuria) 2004; Mani 1975: 386.

Figure 1 Kanniyakumari¹⁸

Key

1. N47 to Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum)
2. N7 to Madurai
3. Vivekanandapuram, Vivekananda Kendra's Headquarters
4. Sunrise Beach
5. Railway Station
6. Wandering Monk Exhibition
7. Main Street
8. Ferry Jetty
9. Central Shopping Area
10. Śrī Bhagavatī Amman Temple
11. Mahatma Gandhi Memorial
12. Tsunami Memorial
13. Trivenī Saṅgam
14. Vivekananda Rock Memorial
15. Tiruvalluvar Statue

¹⁸ Not to scale: Vivekanandapuram is approximately 1 km from the town center.

Figure 2 Main Street to Śrī Bhagavatī Amman Temple

Kanniyakumari (Figure 1) today is a compact town with a population of approximately 30,000. Its historic Śrī Bhagavatī Amman Temple, dedicated to the Devī or Bhagavatī Amman, is the hub of a vibrant market at the end of the town's main street (Figure 2).

During the post-Independence era, Kanniyakumari's status as a *tīrtha* has been enhanced by a new role as a location for national and regional memorialization, "new sites of sacrality" to which travel might be termed "pilgrimage in its own right" (Olsen and Timothy 2006: 5). Such locations, to date more studied in Western Europe than elsewhere (Albera and Eade 2015: 11), include some that have nationalistic associations and some that have been the sites of disasters (Olsen and Timothy 2006: 5).¹⁹ Both nationalistic and disaster sites are to be found at Kanniyakumari, the Rock Memorial being an example of the former and a memorial to those killed in the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami being an example of the latter. The "newness" attributed to these sites reflects not simply their recent creation, but more profoundly, ever-more flexible notions of the sacred (Olsen and Timothy 2006: 5).

Kanniyakumari's "new sites of sacrality" include the Gandhi Memorial Maṇḍapam (Figure 3); the Vivekananda Rock Memorial; the statue of Tiruvalluvar, the legendary Tamil poet; and the Kamaraj Memorial, in honor of Kumaraswami Kamaraj (1903–1975), freedom fighter and former chief minister of the state. The majority were constructed/inaugurated around the time of the implementation of

¹⁹ Compare Rinschede 1992: 53.

Figure 3 Gandhi Memorial behind Śrī Bhagavatī Amman Temple, and the *maṇḍapam* leading to the *trivenī sangam* (taken from the Rock Memorial)

domestic policies to expand tourism in India,²⁰ which rapidly transformed Kanniyakumari from “a modest fishing village into a full-blown Indian-style resort” (Kusy 1989: 407). More recently, the memorial to the victims of the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami was erected. Apart from the Rock Memorial, these memorials were initiated by the state government. Kanniyakumari’s “new sites of sacrality” have come to figure increasingly as attractions in their own right, augmenting the appeal of their host location.

The wider range of attractions resulting from recent memorialization has shaped Kanniyakumari’s distinctive packaging as a destination for tourists. Tiruvalluvar’s statue and the Vivekananda Rock Memorial, standing on two adjacent, rocky outcrops (also referred to as *tīrthas*) approximately 500 meters from Kanniyakumari’s shore, have created a striking seascape (Figure 4). This defining image of Kanniyakumari is invariably featured in brochures, guidebooks, and postcards, indicating the important reciprocal relationship between the marketing of Kanniyakumari and the popularizing of the Rock Memorial.

In the remainder of this article, I shall explore the impact and implications of the dissemination—via the popularizing of the Rock Memorial and the marketing of Kanniyakumari as a tourist destination—of an understanding of Vivekānanda’s mission in which his experience at Kanniyakumari and his vision of India, rather than his relationship with Rāmakṛṣṇa, are placed in the foreground.

²⁰ On recent tourism in India and its prospects, see Lok Sabha Secretariat 2013; Smith 2014; ASA 2015.

Figure 4 The Vivekananda Rock Memorial (on the left) and Tiruvalluvar statue

The Vivekananda Rock Memorial's Importance to Kanyakumari as a Tourist Attraction

The Challenge of Promoting Kanyakumari as a Tourist Destination

Even though Tamil Nadu became the most visited Indian state by both domestic and foreign tourists in 2014, promoting Kanyakumari as a tourist destination has been beset with difficulties.²¹ Unlike neighboring Kerala's coastal resorts, Kanyakumari lacks a beach where it is safe to swim. Kanyakumari is located about three hours' traveling time from Thiruvananthapuram's international airport. Getting to Kanyakumari by road from the compact circuit of historic temples and other major sites close to Chennai has been described as a "tiresome" journey (Wikitravel n.d.). The daily overnight train from Chennai takes about thirteen hours. Potential visitors are said to be deterred from traveling to Kanyakumari by the cost and inconvenience of such additional road or rail journeys (what is still a single-track railway was only opened in 1979) and by inadequate information about what this

²¹ On recent tourism development plans for Tamil Nadu, see Ministry of Tourism and Culture 2003; Tamilnadu Tourism Development Corporation n.d.-b; Government of Tamil Nadu 2012. For Kanyakumari, see Ministry of Tourism and Culture 2003: iii–xx, 1–2; Chauhan (2010: 471–72) for pre-2007; Mahamad, Latha, Manikandan, and Chandrasekar (2014: 314, 316) for 2001–11; Ministry of Tourism (n.d.: xvii–xx) for domestic and foreign visitors in 2014.

less well-known region has to offer (Usha and Gnanadhas 2014: 6). Referring to the Rock Memorial as one of Kanniyakumari's major attractions, Wikitravel (n.d.) makes the point that Vivekānanda is largely unknown to most foreign tourists.²²

Kanniyakumari's "new sites of sacrality," falling within "global niche markets where cultural tourism overlaps with pilgrimage" (Eade 2015: 127),²³ might be thought to make a "distinctive pitch" in an age of mass tourism (Coleman and Crang 2002: 3). The focus of heritage tourism on the distant past, however, has left little room for the promotion of attractions relating to the recent past and to contemporary popular culture. Judgments on Kanniyakumari as a resort in English-language guidebooks have frequently been disparaging.²⁴ Tamil Nadu's "20 Years Perspective Tourism Plan" (Ministry of Tourism and Culture 2003: 3.2) does not acknowledge Kanniyakumari's role as a site for several memorials of regional and national significance and omits Kanniyakumari from the list of "significant" heritage locations and historic monuments.

Boosting tourism after the devastating impact of the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami in Kanniyakumari district, where tourism and fishing remain the major industries, was recognized as a priority (Krishnakumar 2005),²⁵ reiterated by Narendra Modi during his 2014 general election campaign.²⁶

In recent years, Kanniyakumari has attracted approximately a 6 percent share of tourist arrivals in Tamil Nadu, a share not that much smaller than Madurai's, compared to less than 4 percent in 2006 (Saumya 2017: 980–83). Greater ease of travel might be thought to have been a contributory factor, but the surrounding region's transport infrastructure had not been upgraded and nor had promised initiatives to boost tourism in the district been fully implemented. Given Vivekānanda's standing among Hindus in India, the tourism industry's constant use of arresting visual images of the Rock Memorial and the Tiruvalluvar statue, and the regional nature of other memorials erected subsequently in Kanniyakumari, it is reasonable to infer that the Rock Memorial's growing popularity has had some impact on the increasing appeal of Kanniyakumari as a destination. This in turn has highlighted Kanniyakumari's association with Vivekānanda's mission.²⁷

The Rock Memorial as a Place of Pilgrimage and a Tourist Attraction

Kanniyakumari, which had been regarded in the early 1970s as a "regionally-important" pilgrimage site (Bharati 1970: 97, 123),²⁸ came to be recognized by the early twenty-first century as "one of the most important pilgrimage places in India"

²² Only the dates of my most recent visits to the online tourism guides cited in this article, which were scrutinized regularly during its preparation, are given below in the References.

²³ Compare Shackley 2001: 5.

²⁴ For example, Crowther, Raj, and Wheeler 1987: 760; Kusy 1989: 407–8; Anonymous 2009: 386.

²⁵ See also Chauhan 2010: 477.

²⁶ Writing in 1965, Eknath Ranade (2005: 55) portrayed the region as underdeveloped, a view reinforced in my conversations with senior Kendra workers who knew Kanniyakumari in the early 1970s.

²⁷ See, for example, the Tamilnadu Tourism Development Corporation's (n.d.-a) website; the Lonely Planet (n.d.) website; Anonymous n.d.

²⁸ Compare Raghavan 1974: 72.

(Dallapiccola 2002: 111).²⁹ In a survey of tourists published in 2003, approximately 30 percent declared that they had come to Tamil Nadu for reasons relating to pilgrimage (Ministry of Tourism and Culture 2003: Tables 4.2–4.4). The majority, as one would expect, were domestic visitors.³⁰

The Ministry of Tourism's (n.d.: 16) 2014 survey identified the Śrī Bhagavatī Amman Temple as Kanniyakumari's most visited tourist destination. Online travel guides have identified the Rock Memorial as Kanniyakumari's premier attraction. The Tripadvisor (n.d.) travel website has ranked the Memorial the first of 42 things to do in Kanniyakumari. The Rock Memorial is given prominence on Wikitravel (n.d.). Unlike the earlier print edition of the Lonely Planet guide (Crowther, Raj, and Wheeler 1987: 760), the online Lonely Planet guide (n.d.) adopts a more positive tone in describing the town and its attractions, noting, as does Wikitravel, the large numbers of tourists the Rock Memorial attracts.³¹

In 2006, barely a year after the 2004 tsunami, 1,400,572 of Kanniyakumari's approximately 1.6 million tourists made the crossing to the Memorial. In 2016–17, the Memorial received 2,035,747 visits (VRMVK 2007: 3; VRMVK 2017: 13).³² N. Beula Celin's (2015: 136–37) trend analysis of visitors to the Memorial and the Tiruvalluvar statue (served by the same ferry) suggests that numbers will continue to increase.

Religious, spiritual, and touristic impulses and political and economic interests mingle in pilgrimage tourism activity (Albera and Eade 2015: 9–10). Distinguishing between pilgrimage and other kinds of traveling or "journeying,"³³ is, perhaps, even more difficult when dealing with a "new site of sacrality."³⁴ This becomes evident when spending time on the Rock Memorial (Figure 5).

Visitors are expected to follow barefoot a route that takes in the Vivekānanda Maṇḍapam (to the right in Figure 5), which houses Vivekānanda's statue (Figure 6) and the Śrīpāda Maṇḍapam, erected over the indentation held to be the Devī's footprint.³⁵ The Memorial's status as a monument is reinforced by wardens' liberal use of whistles to ensure the smooth progress of visitors, including those who

²⁹ Compare Atmashraddhananda 2010: iii, 3.

³⁰ See, for example, Ministry of Tourism n.d.: 11. This article acknowledges the preferences of those who have identified their traveling as "pilgrimage" (for example, Atmashraddhananda 2010: 3–4), but otherwise adopts the terms "tourist" and "visitor" (see Aukland 2017: 283–84; Olsen and Timothy 2006: 6–10; Stausberg 2011: 6–16). This terminology reflects the transformation of Indian pilgrimage by the development of domestic tourism (see, for example, Bhardwaj 1973: 5–6). It is consistent with the categories used by the tourism industry and Tamil Nadu state government.

³¹ Estimates of annual numbers of visitors to Kanniyakumari vary. The approximations in this article are based on the figures in Chauhan 2010; Gopalakrishnan and Kalyanasundaram 2016; and Mahamad, Latha, Manikandan, and Chandrasekar 2014.

³² In 2014, 4,083,327 tourists visited Kanniyakumari (Gopalakrishnan and Kalyanasundaram 2016: 135). The authors attribute this figure to the Department of Tourism, Government of Tamilnadu, but do not refer to a specific source published by the Department. Data relating to visits made to the Rock Memorial has been taken from the Kendra's audited annual reports.

³³ See Jacobsen 2013.

³⁴ See Shackley 2001: 5.

³⁵ For a 360 degree virtual tour of the Rock Memorial, visit: <http://www.vivekanandakendra.org/english/virtual-tour-vivekananda-rock-memorial> (accessed October 1, 2019).

Figure 5 The Vivekananda Rock Memorial

Figure 6 Vivekānanda's statue in the Vivekānanda Maṇḍapam

attempt to linger rapt before Vivekānanda's statue. (Some visitors have complained online about the limited time permitted in the Vivekānanda Maṇḍapam and Śrīpāda Maṇḍapam.) Eating is prohibited on the Rock, and there are often long queues for

the short sea crossing, which is, nevertheless, a novelty for many making the excursion. In addition to bookstalls selling the Kendra's publications and kindred publications, there is a meditation room below the Vivekānanda Maṇḍapam³⁶ (although Ranade [2000: 117] was skeptical of the value of "simply" meditating) and an observation point facing out to sea that draws many visitors. The Tiruvaḷḷuvar statue, in contrast, offers only a viewing platform.

Despite the limited amenities at the Rock Memorial, it is today very much a tourist attraction. In contrast, many of the sites maintained by the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in Kolkata and the adjacent city of Haora (Howrah), other than Belur Math and possibly the Svāmī Vivekānanda's Ancestral House and Cultural Centre, hardly constitute popular tourist attractions. Those located in Kolkata's hinterland are not easily accessible and are visited mainly by devotees. The Rock Memorial, which visually dominates Kanniyakumari, has provided many tourists, domestic and foreign alike, with a memorable experience.³⁷ Their video clips on YouTube confirm that tourism "is not just gazing and viewing," but also about capturing and sharing the experience (Coleman and Crang 2002: 8).

Related Amenities in Kanniyakumari

The Vivekananda Kendra maintains permanent exhibitions at Vivekanandapuram, its headquarters, and in the center of Kanniyakumari, which celebrate the lives of Vivekānanda and Eknath Ranade and the Kendra's work. In a little over ten years after the tsunami, the annual number of visitors to these exhibitions almost doubled (70,515 in 2016–17).³⁸ This roughly coincided with Kanniyakumari's increased share (from 3.96 percent to 6.35 percent) of Tamil Nadu's tourist market over much the same period, which was noted above.

The dedication in January 2017 of the imposing Śrī Rāmāyaṇa Darśanam/Bhāratmātā Sadanam complex (Figure 7) (housing extensive exhibitions of paintings relating respectively to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and "Indian motherhood") is likely to boost considerably the future numbers of those visiting Vivekanandapuram. Between its dedication in January 2017 and March 2017, 20,075 people visited the new complex with its huge statue of Hānuman (VRMVK 2017: 13).

Easy access to Sunrise Beach, where crowds watch Kanniyakumari's renowned sunrise and seek the *darśana* of Bhārat Mātā, Mother India whose body stretches from Kanniyakumari (her feet) to the Himālayas (her head), virtually guarantees a constant, daily stream of visitors to Vivekanandapuram's one-hundred-acre campus with its refectory, auditoria, library, shops, and services and temple dedicated to Gaṇapati. The campus also offers a considerable amount and range of accommodation (one thousand beds). Referring again to approximately the decade after the tsunami, 169,075 "pilgrims" (the Kendra's preferred term for its visitors) took advantage of the accommodation offered at Vivekanandapuram in 2006–7 (VRMVK 2007: 3), a figure that rose to 205,406 in 2016–17 (VRMVK 2017: 13).

³⁶ See Raji 2012: 163–64.

³⁷ See Raji 2012: 163–64.

³⁸ Compare VRMVK 2007: 3; VRMVK 2017: 13.

Figure 7 Śrī Rāmāyaṇa Darśanam/Bhāratmātā Sadanam complex

The potential impact of pilgrims'/tourists' use of the Kendra's accommodation on the town and its economy becomes clearer when considered in relation to the extent of available accommodation in Kanniyakumari. This was calculated in 2014 to be 40 units providing 656 rooms (other than company guest houses, guest houses run by trusts, dormitories, tourist bungalows, and free accommodation) (Ministry of Tourism n.d.: xx). While I was staying at Vivekanandapuram in December 2010, convoys of coaches full of devotees of Ayyappaṇ, traveling to and from Sabarimalai in Kerala to undertake the annual pilgrimage between November and January, were constantly arriving to make use of Vivekanandapuram's accommodation.³⁹ The distinctive black clothing of Ayyappaṇ's devotees made them easy to spot among Kanniyakumari's shops and market stalls where they contributed to the town's economy. Consumer consumption and spending within the town are similarly boosted by short excursions (including visits to the Rock Memorial such as the one mentioned above), which have been incorporated in the programs of the training camps (residential courses) run by the Kendra for its members and others interested in the movement. It is evident that individuals attending these camps are also attracted by the prospect of the "Kanniyakumari experience" (Beckerlegge 2014: 337).

The numbers of those visiting the Rock Memorial and using the Vivekananda Kendra's facilities, as given in the Kendra's annual reports, inevitably contain overlaps as the same "pilgrims" complete, perhaps more than once, a circuit of

³⁹ It was reported that pilgrims from Sabarimalai who had traveled via Kanniyakumari were among the people stranded on the Rock Memorial when the tsunami hit. (Krishnakumar [2005] refers to 1300 people; Anonymous [2009: 386] gives 400.)

Vivekānanda-related sites and take advantage of accommodation at Vivekanandapuram. Even so, when compared to the annual numbers of tourists reported to have visited Kanniyakumari, these statistics are indicative of the Rock Memorial's substantial and growing contribution to Kanniyakumari's increasing appeal as a destination and the vitality of its economy.

Vivekānanda on “the Last Bit of Indian Rock”

Just as Kanniyakumari's reputation as a cultic center has been rooted in stories concerning Devī Kanyā Kumārī, so too a story has provided the rationale for siting the Rock Memorial on Kanniyakumari's Śrīpāda pārai. This story's evolution is bound up with what would become different understandings of Vivekānanda's mission.

Vivekānanda gave few details about the circumstances in which his “plan” came to him: “My brother, in view of all this, specially of the poverty and ignorance, I had no sleep. At Cape Comorin sitting in Mother Kumārī's temple, sitting on the last bit of Indian rock—I hit upon a plan” (Vivekananda 1989, 6: 254). He did not subsequently hark back to this life-changing experience, alluding only occasionally to Kanniyakumari as a geographical marker. Successive editions of the Ramakrishna movement's standard biography, *The Life of the Swami Vivekananda* by His Eastern and Western Disciples (henceforth *The Life*), however, have provided far more elaborate descriptions of the germination of Vivekānanda's “plan.” These were theological redactions from the outset, incorporating motifs commonly found in the Ramakrishna Math and Mission's literature, such as emphasis on Vivekānanda's physical prowess and parallels between Vivekānanda and the Buddha.⁴⁰

The most dramatic element added to the story in *The Life*'s first edition, which was compiled in the decade after Vivekānanda's death and published between 1912 and 1915, is the assertion that, lacking money for a ferry boat, Vivekānanda had to swim from the mainland through the shark-infested sea to reach, not the Śrīpāda pārai, but the Devī's, or the Mother's, “temple.” There he subsequently “passed into a deep meditation on the Present and the Future of his country” for “hours upon hours” (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1913: 201). This is puzzling because Vivekānanda stated that his “plan” came to him “sitting in Mother Kumārī's temple,” the Śrī Bhagavatī Amman Temple, which is on the mainland (see Figure 1). He appears to have made no reference to having made such a swim. Skeptical about much of the detail given in *The Life*, Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya (1999) has argued that its inconsistencies reveal the compilers' ignorance of the respective locations of the Mother's temple and the Śrīpāda pārai.⁴¹

⁴⁰ For example, His Eastern and Western Disciples 1913: 203.

⁴¹ Chattopadhyaya also questions whether Vivekānanda's poor state of health would have enabled him to make such a swim and to remain on the Rock in wet clothes and without shelter for three days during the cold season and the reliability of the testimony from “eye witnesses” cited in *The Life*'s later editions.

In the second (1933) and subsequent editions, which corrected several inconsistencies in the first edition of *The Life's* account of the Kanniyakumari episode,⁴² it is stated that Vivekānanda went directly to see the Mother, now residing correctly in “that seashore temple” (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 340). Vivekānanda’s wish then to meditate on the Śrīpāda pārai opens the narrative about the swim and a much longer meditation on the Rock (341–45). The specifics of Vivekānanda’s plan, which in the second edition are given through direct, extended quotation from his letter of 1894 (Vivekananda 1989, 6: 254), are presented as the substance of “Swami’s meditation *on the rock*” (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 340; emphasis added).⁴³

Despite Vivekānanda having made no mention of swimming through dangerous seas and the significant revision of the earliest account given in *The Life*, Vivekānanda’s swim to the Śrīpāda pārai and his meditation there have remained firmly part of the story.⁴⁴ As a result, it has come to be popularly assumed that “the last stone of India” was the Śrīpāda pārai (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 341), where Vivekānanda meditated after swimming there, and not “Mother Kumāri’s temple,” where Vivekānanda recalled in his letter “sitting on the last bit of Indian rock.” It was this story of Vivekānanda’s swim that the president of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission recounted when he consecrated the Rock Memorial at its inauguration (Vireswarananda 1970: 459). It is implicit in the inscription on the pedestal of Vivekānanda’s statue in the Vivekānanda Maṇḍapam, which declares that Vivekānanda meditated on the Rock “presumably” between December 25 to 27, 1892, and this version of the story is now related in some tourist guidebooks.⁴⁵

The first edition of *The Life's* version of Vivekānanda’s itinerary, which brought Vivekānanda to Kanniyakumari from Rameswaram, framed the Kanniyakumari episode. That this “frame” was present in all the editions of *The Life* prior to the fifth edition (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1979) is important because these were the versions of *The Life* that would have been circulating during the period of the Rock Memorial’s conception.

In the pre-1979 version, “Kanyakumari figures as the culminating and crowning act of his [Vivekānanda’s] pilgrimage of India” (Dhar 2012: 506). The revised version of Vivekānanda’s itinerary in *The Life's* fifth (1979) and subsequent editions states that he traveled to Kanniyakumari from Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram) via Nagercoil, not from Rameswaram, which he visited after Kanniyakumari.⁴⁶

⁴² See His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: vii–viii. Svāmī Virājānanda (1873–1951) was largely responsible for the compilation and publication of *The Life's* first edition (see Shraddhananda 2001: especially 123–24, 127, 130, 137, 141, 149). He was also the immediate source of new information gathered in Kanniyakumari (see Chattopadhyaya 1999: 100), which was included in *The Life's* later editions (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 344).

⁴³ Compare pages 339–46 for the full account of Vivekānanda’s visit to Kanniyakumari and the Rock.

⁴⁴ Eknath Ranade found it necessary to seek confirmation of the “authentic dates” of Vivekānanda’s stay at Kanniyakumari and the details of his visit to the Rock. See Kendra Workers n.d.: 66–67.

⁴⁵ For example, Anonymous 2009: 386.

⁴⁶ References in this article will be to the sixth edition (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993 [1979], which is still commonly in use.

Vivekānanda had spoken previously in 1892 of Rameswaram, one of the four great *dhāmas*, as the end of his pilgrimage where he would fulfill his *parivrājaka*'s (wandering ascetic) vow (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 304, cf. 317). This corrected itinerary somewhat diminishes the status accorded to Kanniyakumari in *The Life*'s earlier editions, although the powerful nature of Vivekānanda's experience there continues to be reinforced in the later editions.

The Life's first edition presented Vivekānanda approaching Kanniyakumari, burning to receive the *darśana* of the Devī. Vivekānanda's awareness, at the end of his lengthy journey, of the "oneness" of India and of India's spiritual outlook was said to have deepened on his arrival at Rameswaram into a protracted reflection on the unity of divinity. He carried the insights from this preparatory meditation with him to Kanniyakumari where "even as in the Himalayas, he thought again and again of the glory of Bharatavarsha" (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1913: 201). Intensified by his "ecstasy before the Image of the Goddess" and his prayers to the Mother (201), Vivekānanda's preoccupation with the cultural and spiritual unity of India segued into brooding over "the lot of India's poor" (203) as he meditated on the Rock. This version of his "plan" makes no mention of *saṁnyāsins* (referred to in his letter of 1894 and incorporated in later editions of *The Life*) and focuses more on his determination at that point to travel to "the West" to raise funds.⁴⁷

In Vivekānanda's letter of 1894, the location of Kanniyakumari appears to be incidental or coincidental. Vivekānanda traveled there already heavily preoccupied with India's poverty and did not indicate that his "plan" was prompted directly by an intense experience in the presence of the Mother. There was no hint that he resolved at that moment to travel to the United States to raise funds, and one reason for this letter was to explain why he was then writing from Chicago.

The Rock Memorial's "Intangible Heritage"

At the heart of the "intangible heritage" that envelops the Memorial, as it does every object of "tangible heritage,"⁴⁸ lies the story of the birth of Vivekānanda's "plan." This evolving story does not merely provide the rationale for the Rock Memorial's location.⁴⁹ It lies behind overlapping yet significantly different understandings of Vivekānanda's mission and contribution to India's course to nationhood, disseminated respectively by the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and the Vivekananda Kendra and RSS. The common ground between these representations, drawing as they do largely on the same source, enables them to be celebrated in, and projected by, one monument, the Rock Memorial, without apparent contradiction. This has

⁴⁷ Vivekānanda is reported in later editions of *The Life* to have resolved to attend the World's Parliament of Religions some months before he reached Kanniyakumari (for example, see His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 317).

⁴⁸ See Harrison 2010: 10; Ahmad 2006.

⁴⁹ For examples of this in the Vivekananda Kendra's literature, see Vivekananda Kendra 1996: 42; Ranade 2005: 70–71; A Kendra Worker 2010: 133. As in *The Life*, popular retellings published by the Kendra include details and claims that are hard to test in the light of the brevity of Vivekānanda's own account (for example, A Kendra Worker 2010: 29–32; Krishnamoorti 2003: 5).

overshadowed both the inconsistencies in the underlying narrative and the differences between the ways in which this narrative has been read.

The Life's first edition declares that Vivekānanda's thoughts during his meditation at Kannyakumari were those of a "great Master-builder of Nations" (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1913: 202). This and similar judgments recur in later publications from within the Ramakrishna movement.⁵⁰ *The Life's* reference to a "Master-builder of Nations," as in later editions, relates to Vivekānanda's attributed role as India's "nation-builder." This is the India on which Vivekānanda meditated, according to his biographers, as the "Cradle of the Nations and the Cradle of the Faith" (203).⁵¹

Vivekānanda's time in Kannyakumari is presented as marking the beginning of his distinctive mission. He was no longer the *parivrājaka* preoccupied with his own spiritual development. To capture this shift, his biographers declare that Vivekānanda was a "monk of a strange type" (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1913: 203) and report Vivekānanda saying to himself "Yes, I have found my Mission at last!" (207). From this moment, Vivekānanda's life would be "*consecrated* to the service of India, but particularly to the...millions of oppressed Narayanas of his land" (205; emphasis in the original).⁵² Here was born Vivekānanda, the "Patriot and the Prophet in one!" (207). *The Life's* first edition, however, emphatically reaffirms that, even though now set on a distinctive path, Vivekānanda continued to act faithfully under the inspiration of his Master, when it states that "in the heart of his [Vivekānanda] heart stood the Master [Rāmakṛṣṇa] in a luminous Revelation" (203).⁵³

The RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra, unlike the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, are not part of Vivekānanda's direct, institutional legacy, but they contain many ardent admirers and devotees of Vivekānanda. Both organizations draw heavily, in common with other Hindutva-influenced groups, on *The Life's* congenial imagery of Vivekānanda as India's "nation-builder" and "architect"⁵⁴ and as "prophet" or "patriot-prophet," as does the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. The "intangible heritage" wrapped around the Rock Memorial by the RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra, however, melds together these motifs from the Ramakrishna movement's literature, the significance long invested by Hindus in the evocative location of Kannyakumari and these movements' own cultural and political values. Tellingly, Vivekānanda's mission is not presented in the literature of these organizations, as it is in *The Life*, as one directed by the influence and priorities of

⁵⁰ See, for example, His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 341; Lakshmidharananda n.d.: 5, 11).

⁵¹ Compare His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 341.

⁵² Compare His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 343. "Narayana" (Nārāyaṇa), a name given to Viṣṇu, was used by Vivekānanda to refer to those in need who should be served as divine.

⁵³ Compare His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 343–44. Also compare the conviction widely held by adherents to the Ramakrishna movement that Vivekānanda's promotion of the practice of *sevā* (service to humanity) was similarly inspired and validated by Rāmakṛṣṇa's words and example. See, for example, Beckerlegge 2006b.

⁵⁴ See, for example, A Kendra Worker 2010: 32.

Figure 8 S. M. Pandit's painting "Vivekānanda of Kanniyakumari"

Rāmakṛṣṇa, and nor is it deemed necessary to seek Rāmakṛṣṇa's endorsement of the post-Kanniyakumari direction taken by Vivekānanda's mission.⁵⁵

For Ranade, the RSS was "nothing but the extension of Swamiji's [Vivekānanda] work" (2000: 93).⁵⁶ The Kendra's publications frequently claim a close affinity

⁵⁵ Compare His Eastern and Western Disciples 1993: 343–44, cited above, which in contrast explicitly emphasizes Rāmakṛṣṇa's continuing influence over Vivekānanda at the point when the latter is said to have found his own mission.

⁵⁶ Compare Bhide 2003: 157.

between Vivekānanda's ideas and those of the RSS leader and ideologue M. S. Golwalkar (1906–1973).⁵⁷ The Kendra accordingly presents Vivekānanda as one whose “expressions were finest affirmation of Hindu nationalism in India” (Pattanaik n.d.: 34) and as a “staunch nationalist” and “one of the first and foremost exponents of Hindu nationalism” (Parameswaran 2008: 7, 12). Like Golwalkar, Vivekānanda was committed to promoting “positive *Hindutva* to eliminate all the ills confronting the society remaining within the confines of *Sanatana Dharma*” (Pachpore 2006: 22). P. Parameswaran, president of the Vivekananda Kendra at the time of writing, has referred to Vivekānanda as the inspiration behind Golwalkar's work and to how both espoused the cause of “spiritual nationalism,” synonymous with “Hindu nationalism” (2006: 12).

The “Vivekānanda of Kanniyakumari” represented iconographically in the literature and artefacts produced by the Vivekananda Kendra is an assertive, dynamic figure. This image is based, as is the statue of Vivekānanda in the Vivekānanda Maṇḍapam, on S. M. Pandit's painting of Vivekānanda as a simply dressed *parivrājaka* (Figure 8). It contrasts with the more familiar image of a far more regal Vivekānanda in the pose and dress he adopted in the “Chicago Pose,” which was designed to encapsulate his presence and impact at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions.⁵⁸ Pandit placed Vivekānanda unmistakably on the Śrīpāda pārai, separated by sea from the mainland on which the perimeter wall of the long-established Śrī Bhagavatī Amman Temple can be seen.⁵⁹ See also the pictorial exhibitions maintained by the Vivekananda Kendra; *The Wandering Monk* in the center of Kanniyakumari⁶⁰ and *Arise! Awake!*⁶¹ at Vivekanandapuram. It is revealing in the context of this discussion that the former exhibition, established in 1991, brings Vivekānanda to Kanniyakumari from Rameswaram, not Trivandrum,⁶² although this is not the case in all Kendra publications.

Conclusion: Relocation, Reconfiguration, and Recasting

The prominence given to the Vivekananda Rock Memorial in the marketing of Kanniyakumari, an increasingly popular tourist destination, suggests that the Memorial will become an ever-widening gateway to Vivekānanda, bringing the story of “Vivekānanda of Kanniyakumari” to the attention of a considerable number of people. The Rock Memorial's reach, extended still further by the tourism industry, is likely to touch a much more diverse audience than one made up largely of existing adherents to movements centered on Vivekānanda. Its reach has already far exceeded what the Vivekananda Kendra could probably have achieved using its

⁵⁷ Elements of the Ramakrishna movement's understanding of Vivekānanda assimilated by the RSS and Vivekananda Kendra were substantially mediated by Golwalkar (see Beckerlegge 2003).

⁵⁸ See Beckerlegge 2008: 14–17.

⁵⁹ See Kale 1989: 11; Beckerlegge 2008.

⁶⁰ Compare Vivekananda Kendra 2009: 62–65.

⁶¹ Compare Vivekananda Kendra 1996: 40–42.

⁶² See above and Vivekananda Kendra 2009: 60–61.

own resources. The imposing Rock Memorial in the striking setting of Kanniyakumari, as we have seen, has the potential to make a considerable impact on those who visit it and exposes them to all-pervasive representations of “Vivekānanda of Kanniyakumari” projected by the Rock Memorial itself and by iconography, artefacts, and publications available on the Rock Memorial and in Kanniyakumari.

Representations of Vivekānanda that allude to the Memorial as emblematic of his mission have not been confined to publishers sympathetic to the Vivekananda Kendra. On the cover of the issue devoted to Vivekānanda in the popular Amar Chitra Katha comic books series, *Vivekananda: He Kindled the Spirit of Modern India* (1977),⁶³ a cropped image of Vivekānanda, possibly derived from a photograph taken in London in 1896, is placed above the outline of the Rock Memorial and Kanniyakumari’s immediately recognizable seascape. The production of this comic’s first edition, barely seven years after the inauguration of the Rock Memorial, illustrates how rapidly the Memorial began to take root in the popular imagination as a symbol of Vivekānanda’s distinctive mission. As this article has noted, prior to the Memorial’s establishment, Kanniyakumari had not been accorded the degree of significance one would have expected in the Ramakrishna movement’s sacred geography, given Vivekānanda’s experience there. Works on Vivekānanda published long before the construction of the Rock Memorial have also drawn on the imagery of the Memorial in their post-1970 editions. For example, Romain Rolland (2006: 17) barely mentioned the incident at Kanniyakumari in his widely read biography of Vivekānanda, which was published in English in 1931 by Advaita Ashrama, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission’s main publishing house. Yet, the Rock Memorial is featured prominently on the cover of an edition published in 2006 by Advaita Ashrama (Rolland 2006). Arguably, the use made in popular publications of the complex of images surrounding the Memorial serves constantly to reinforce and implicitly, but powerfully, to endorse the impact of what took place at Kanniyakumari on the direction of Vivekānanda’s unfolding mission.

The popularly accepted story of Vivekānanda’s time in Kanniyakumari, including his swim, takes on many more layers when placed within the context of the respective, underlying convictions of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and the RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra. Vivekānanda is held within the Ramakrishna Math and Mission to have been transformed by his encounter with Rāmākṛṣṇa long before he visited Kanniyakumari. Vivekānanda’s experience at Kanniyakumari was but a step on the way to crystalizing his thoughts about how to transmit and so perpetuate Rāmākṛṣṇa’s teaching. Crucially, as we have noted, the Ramakrishna movement maintains that Vivekānanda’s subsequent actions were inspired and directed by Rāmākṛṣṇa. The RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra place far greater

⁶³ Sales of the Amar Chitra Katha series, aimed at children in India and the Hindu diaspora, are claimed to have exceeded one hundred million copies. Hawley (1995: 108) has referred to an unspecified edition of *Vivekananda*, which I have been unable to access, in which the original subtitle, “He Kindled the Spirit of Modern India,” had been changed to “The Patriot-Saint of Modern India,” a style of epithet discussed in the previous section of this article.

weight on the distinct, almost autonomous, nature of Vivekānanda's mission, moulded by his years as a *parivrājaka* and rooted in his insight at Kanniyakumari several years after Rāmakṛṣṇa's death.

I suggested earlier that the differences between the Ramakrishna Math and Mission's understanding of the significance of the Kanniyakumari episode and that of the RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra have been concealed by the common ground these organizations share; admiration for/devotion to Vivekānanda, dependence on the account given in *The Life*, support for the Rock Memorial, and the respect for the Ramakrishna Math shown by the RSS and the Kendra. Yet, as we have seen in this article, the differences between the "Vivekānanda of Kanniyakumari" presented by the RSS and the Kendra and the Vivekānanda understood within the Ramakrishna movement are far-reaching.

The *relocation* by the RSS and Kendra of Vivekānanda from Kolkata to Kanniyakumari goes beyond investing new meaning in his connection with Kanniyakumari and associating his name with the Hindutva cause. It signals a striking *reconfiguration* of the sacred geography that evolved under the curatorship of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and an ideological relocation and redefinition of the thrust of Vivekānanda's mission and the nature of its legacy. The Rock Memorial proclaims that Kanniyakumari was the scene of the turning point of Vivekānanda's mission, and not Kolkata where Vivekānanda experienced directly Rāmakṛṣṇa's influence, and not Chicago where Vivekānanda was fêted at the World's Parliament of Religions. The additional meaning given to Kanniyakumari as a result of its association with the relocated Vivekānanda could perhaps be compared to other ways in which Hindutva-influenced groups have associated themselves with long-established locations of particular significance to Hindus. L. K. Advani's "India Shining" *yātrā* (pilgrimage, procession) of 2004, for example, began at Kanniyakumari and provided Advani with an opportunity to eulogize Eknath Ranade.

Vivekānanda's relocation from Kolkata to Kanniyakumari has involved a *recasting* of the Vivekānanda celebrated at Kanniyakumari. It is not that the early part of Vivekānanda's career prior to the Kanniyakumari episode and his relationship with Rāmakṛṣṇa are not valued in the RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra. But it is primarily as the *parivrājaka* with a plan for India that Vivekānanda has become the focus for the admiration, and often devotion, of adherents to the RSS and the Kendra and many others, rather than as the disciple following in the path of his God-intoxicated master, Rāmakṛṣṇa. This was acknowledged by a senior leader of the Kendra when I questioned him about this during an interview at Vivekanandapuram in August 2018.

The recasting of Vivekānanda has the effect, whether intended or not, of detaching him from the Ramakrishna movement's familiar representation of him as a member of the "Spiritual Trinity," comprising also Rāmakṛṣṇa and Sārādā Devī. This is evident in the creation and layout of the Memorial itself and also in the emergence of the vibrant iconography centered on "Vivekānanda of Kanniyakumari." Although complementing the Ramakrishna movement's long-established, if

more staid, photo-iconographic tradition, the image of “Vivekānanda of Kanniyakumari” challenges it through its celebration of a mission linked to, but in crucial ways distinct from, that of Rāmakṛṣṇa, a mission that Vivekānanda is said to have only discovered once he reached Kanniyakumari.

It is not my contention that the understanding of the story of “Vivekānanda of Kanniyakumari” broadly shared by the RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra has now achieved greater acceptance than the Ramakrishna Math and Mission’s well-established representation of Vivekānanda. The Rock Memorial as a monument, moreover, makes no claim to the sanctity that many Hindus would associate with Belur Math where visitors are able to worship and to interact with Svāmīs of the Ramakrishna Math.

I would argue that the creation of the Rock Memorial has given the RSS, and especially the Vivekananda Kendra, elevated roles as transmitters and even guardians of Vivekānanda’s legacy, acquiring a measure of authority and legitimacy from the popularity of the Rock Memorial and the scale of the undertaking to create it (which the Ramakrishna Math and Mission supported). This is a significant development because these roles are being enacted outside the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, which has long functioned, in effect, as the custodian of traditions centered on Rāmakṛṣṇa and Vivekānanda.

Another, already evident, consequence of the creation of the Rock Memorial and its promotion by the tourism industry in the marketing of Kanniyakumari has been the popularizing of *The Life’s* account of Vivekānanda’s swim and his experience in Kanniyakumari as the beginning of his distinctive mission. Neither the town, struggling to compete with rival tourist destinations, nor the movements centered in their different ways on Vivekānanda have any incentive to bring into question the dramatic story of Vivekānanda’s heroic swim. The celebration in 2020 of the fiftieth anniversary of the Rock Memorial, including a year-long, nationwide contact program launched by the Vivekananda Kendra in September 2019, drew further attention to the link between Vivekānanda’s mission, Kanniyakumari, and the creation of the Rock Memorial.

The dissemination of the story of the “relocated” Vivekānanda by the RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra is more than just a conduit for their ideology of “spiritual nationalism.” It offers a representation of Vivekānanda as a far more autonomous agent than the Vivekānanda of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, and in a way that, whether intended or not, distances Vivekānanda both from his *guru* and the movement he established. This is a message whose accessibility does not depend on a fuller appreciation of the Memorial’s “intangible heritage” and its ideological subtext of “spiritual nationalism.” With less emphasis placed on Rāmakṛṣṇa role, it is also a simpler story, which is likely to make it easier to assimilate and not just by the millions who make the ferry crossing to the Rock Memorial. For these reasons, the creation of the Rock Memorial is likely to exercise a continuing, if not growing, influence on the popular receptions of Vivekānanda in India and beyond. This is why the study of the Rock Memorial and its guardians should be central to any attempt to understand Vivekānanda’s still evolving legacy in the period since the Memorial’s creation.

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