

[Conflict Simmers at India's Southernmost Holy Site](#)

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Sawmi Vivekananda (1863-1902), India famous modern-day patron saint, spent much of his life energy harmonizing Christianity and Hinduism. Ironically, he also suffered much abuse of Christian ill-will, especially during his visit to America in 1895. While he strove to show the validity of all religions, the saffron-robed monk strenuously opposed Christian claims to the "only way" and resented the work of their missionaries, insisting that Christians allow Hindus the same freedom to practice their faith as they themselves enjoy.

In 1962 a newly laid tablet commemorating Swamiji's meditation on a tiny offshore island at Kanyakumari (to which he swam to complete his pilgrimage of the Indian subcontinent) was destroyed by vandals who planted a cross in its place. Despite the opposition, the Rock Memorial was resolutely taken up. It was completed in 1970, and to date over 10 million pilgrims are said to have visited the magnificent black marble edifice.

A quaint and humble ferry has carried all of the pilgrims across the choppy waves to pay homage to the swami. But since 1976 that transport has been a point of heated conflict between the VRMC (Vivekananda Rock Memorial Commission) and the local Christian fishermen vying for shore and water access rights. In the sometimes violent communal flare-ups, Hindu temples suffered some damage and access to the Kanyakumari temple and the Rock Memorial was periodically hampered. In hopes of alleviating the tension in 1981, the ferry was taken over by the Tamil Nadu government and subcontracted to Poopuhar Shipping Corporation.

More drastically, the government resolved in April, 1984, to construct a 450-meter long bridge to the shrine. Most outspoken among opponents to the bridge, Swami Jyothirmayananda of Madras sees it only "as a means to evade the main issue [disharmony] rather than to solve it...It can endanger the Rock Memorial and lead to discord and dissension at the southern-most end of our land which is already infested by the virus of intolerance and fanaticism...Disharmony could well enter

the holy precincts of the Rock Memorial and there would be no stopping the vandals from making the sacred place their prime target of attack." The Swami and other Hindu activists see the bridge as but another government concession to unfair demands of the Christian community who form a large vote bank.

The VRMC is also totally opposed to the bridge, seeing it as unwarranted and preferring the ferry as providing "the thrill of riding on the waves and maintaining the beauty of the place."

While bridge construction is temporarily suspended, the cold war continues. The Hindu Munnani (Hindu Front), R.S.S. and other organizations are standing against what they see as steady Christian encroachment on the sanctity of the Kanyakumari holy area.

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