Champions Boat League puts State’s tourism sector back in the race

Date: 8.11.2019 | Edition: Kochi | Page: 4 | Clip size (cm): W: 30 H: 11

It offers a source of income for cash-strapped boat clubs and hundreds of rowers

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Slate-shaped boats (nak莑a or Churud Valam) powered by over 100 mighty oarsmen, gliding through backwaters and rivers at tremendous speed to the harmonious strain of Vanchiappus and the cheering of people is a spectacle to behold.

Now, transforming the traditional snakeboat races to a global sporting event is the Champions Boat League (CBL), hosted by Kerala Tourism. With the completion of nine races and just three more to go in the inaugural edition of the CBL, the event is turning out to be a hit by drawing huge crowds and helping to reinvigorate the backwater tourism sector.

15 lakh spectators

According to the Tourism Department, the average attendance at the CBL races stood above one lakh. “Around 15 lakh spectators, including foreigners, have turned out to watch the first nine races in the CBL, held in different parts of the state,” it is helping to revive the flood-hit tourism sector in the state. Races are being broadcast live, which helps promote the event outside the state,” TG. Ashabah Rashid, deputy director, Tourism Department, told The Hindu.

The CBL is also proving to be a source of income for cash-strapped boat clubs and hundreds of rowers. Previously, only the Nehru Trophy Boat Race attracted enthusiasm. However, the CBL has changed the face of the snakeboat races. Apart from promoting the sport as a whole, it is benefiting boat clubs, rowers, and boat owners. The rowers are paid better,” said Maraj, the captain of the Palluruthy Boat Club. With a total prize money of Rs.0.5 crore, the CBL is ranked the fourth highest in all sports in India. The first three winners of each CBL match will get 10 lakh, 5 lakh, and 2.5 lakh respectively. All participants are entitled to a bonus prize of 0.5 lakh per match.

The Tourism Department plans to make the CBL a biennial event in five years. “Before the second edition, we hope to conduct another auction for franchise acquisition,” said a Tourism Department official. The 10th leg of the CBL will be held at Kollam on November 23 and the President’s Trophy Boat Race (November 25) in Kollam.