CLASSIC IMAGING
THE ANNUAL SNAKE BOAT RACES; KERALA'S VERY OWN OLYMPICS ON WATER


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Text & Images: Susheela Nair

Come July and the placid backwaters of Kerala transforms into a sports arena when sleek boats, representing various small hamlets, are launched by the dozens, into the river to the accompaniment of drum beats and pipes. It is acclaimed to be the largest sporting event with each boat manned by 4 helmsmen, 25 singers and 100-125 oarsmen who row in unison to the fast rhythm of the ‘vanchipattu’ (boat songs). The place comes alive with the frenzied cheering of the

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Over the years the annual boat races are a significant part of the culture and tradition of the southern Indian state of Kerala. It is mainly conducted during the harvest festival of Onam. The races which were initiated only to inculcate the sporting spirit amongst its participants soon became the pride of the community, the state and the country! This is because the annual snake boat races will not only give you a glimpse of the age-old traditions of Kerala, but it will also enable you to experience the true glory of this place and its remarkable history and religious traditions. The races are accompanied by the rhythmic chants and frenzied beats of the drums of the oarsmen, which reverberates in your ears as you witness the majestic annual spectacle of the snake boat races.

enthusiastic fans thronging the river banks and reverberates with the chants of ‘thai thai thaka thaka thak thom’. It is fascinating to watch the helmsmen perch on the high sterns with paddles in their hands, when the awesome snake boats fly out over the water sending showers of silver spray into the air. The excitement builds up when the boats powered by a hundred perfectly coordinated oars, scythe through the waters at lightning speed to a spectacular finish at the end.

The genesis of the boat races goes back in time when the boats were initially used for post-harvest water-wars by the warring kings of the backwaters. Until the early 1950’s, the traditional boats were maintained primarily for ritual purposes, decorated and garlanded for ceremonial processions in the many religious pageants. From water wars to temple rituals to annual boat races, the boats have traversed a long way. Initially these water regattas were sans any fierce competition but now the participating groups compete with each other to lift the coveted trophy, including the prize money.

The Champakkulam Moolam Boat Race, the oldest boat race in Kerala, which is closely connected to the Sree Krishna Temple at Ambalappuzha, heralds the season of annual boat races in Kerala. Legend has it that the deity is brought in a snake boat from Kunichi, in Kottayam district. At night the weary oarsmen rested in a Christian household in Champakulam and thus every...
year, Champakulam became the venue for a commemorative boat race. Over the years, the boat race frenzy gripped Kerala and continues to rage even to this day. The races are held on the Champakulam Lake, on the day of the installation of the deity at the temple.

This is followed by popular Nehru Trophy Race, thereafter the Mannar, Kandassankadavu, Payyippad Jalsavam and so on. The 3-day annual fiesta on the Payippad Lake, 35km from Alappuzha, commemorates the installation of the deity at the Subramanya Swamy Temple in Haripad. Subsequently, several boat clubs and societies have floated the regular competitions.

The most famous of the boat races is the Nehru Trophy Boat Race held in the Purnamada Lake, off the town of Alappuzha on the second Saturday of August, when the monsoon rains have just retreated and the lake is at its fullest. The competitive fever started in 1952, when a race was organized for the visit of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. He was so enthralled by the races that he broke the security cordon, and jumped into the winning boat. On his return to Delhi, he sent a silver trophy, a replica of a snake boat which is inscribed with his words of congratulations and his signature. This trophy which bears the inscription, “To the winners of the boat race which is a unique feature of community life in Travancore-Cochin” has ever since been presented each year to the champion chundan boat.

Beginning in July, the villages throughout Kerala’s backwaters devote all their attention to preparation for the Nehru Trophy Race, arguably the biggest water regatta, wherein the number of participants is the most.
signifies the excellent team spirit, integration and amity of the people of this backwater country. Thousands of aspirants undergo vigorous training and practice, hoping to qualify for their village team. The life of the entire village revolves around the feeding, coaching, and preparations of these modern water-warriors.

The race begins with a colourful pageant of floats and mass drill. It is a treat to watch lady participants with their sari tucked at the waist, whizzing past the course manoeuvring the elegant swan boats. The Punnamada Lake comes alive when the long and graceful snake boats are launched into the river, amidst the lilting refrains of the classic boat-warriors’ ballad to the accompaniment of drum beats and pipes. Equally exciting are the thumping and whistling of the cheer leaders who synchronise the music and guide the precision rowing.

The 2-day Aranmula boat race which falls on the fourth day after Onam, is only a traditional and solemn religious affair. Although precision and speed, do not match the Nehru race, the Aranmula race is a colourful water carnival with caparisoned and parasol-decked elephants, gaily decorated floats, and the temple-related ritual activities. It recreates the legend involving a devout Brahmin, an ardent devotee of Krishna who used to go to Aranmula in a boat taking all the provision for the thiruvona sadhya (sumptuous Onam feast) with him to the
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Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple. Once the thiruvonachilaw thoni (the boat carrying the offerings) was intercepted by the rivals from another village, but the Brahmins own villagers came to the rescue on their snake boats.

From then the custom of snake boats, from all neighbouring villages, accompanying the sacred boat has come to stay. The event also commemorates the anniversary of the foundation day of the Parthasarathy Temple, located in the midst of the heritage village. What makes this water regatta truly fascinating is that it is a blend of sports, traditions and rich folklore transcending all religion, caste and creed, thereby promoting communal harmony and religious tolerance.