



A Race of Valor and Vigor...

Snake Boat Race at Alleppey

Text and Photographs by Hema Narayanan

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...not to forget the vibrancy and the vividness of the atmosphere and its colors around the Snake Boat Race that recently happened in Alleppey. India has many well-known celebrations, one of them being the Pandit Nehru Snake Boat race, yet reading about it is completely different from experiencing it. When I was there this August, it seemed as if India was revealing herself as the 'Venice of the East', showcasing a glorious practice in a beautiful manner to tons of people assembled there.

Albeit my decision to witness the race was taken merely twenty hours before, it was far more fascinating than a planned escapade. Till then, I had never realized that getting a seat on the bus to take me from Bangalore to Cochin can be harder than an uphill mountain trek. But finally, when I was on the boat on the Punnamada Lake, I sure thought about how some of the best things

happen when least anticipated.

This year's 63rd Independent India Celebrations coincided with the 58th Snake Boat Race, doubling the jubilations. It amplified the sense of pride and happiness at the backwaters making it a Water Carnival. Alleppey, a.k.a. Alappuzha, has always been in the limelight for its famous boat races, house boats, coir products, fishes and lakes. But in person, I realized that it still remains as addictive and magnetic, what with its backwater boat trips being a hit among visitors.

First Taste of the Carnival - There were two to three hop-on and hop-offs from the boats from main-shore Alleppey to the actual part of the lake where the race took place. My anxiety was building up and soon I neared a series of boats lined up beside each other. During this journey on the waters, I had seen two transformations: a sea of tranquil transforming to a sea of humanity and the silence on the main-shore

transforming into madness on this side. Jumping over & walking through few boats, finally took me to the boat that our group had rented. Talking to people on my boat, I got to know that this race happens on the second Saturday of every August, independent of anything.

Hundreds of boats line up beside each other on the backwaters, to witness the race. People found interesting ways to shout out loud and support their teams while some climbed the top of the static boats; others had binoculars, while others just used the power of their vocal chords to be at their best. I must not forget, the roles played by the toddy and arrack! In simple terms, People adopt some technique to have a foot on these boats a spot to sit, a corner to stand, a rope to hang onto. Luck favored me and I found myself, a spot, a corner and a rope.

Courtesy: Pandit Nehru
Behind the biggest boat race in the world

and its name, there is a story; so.... **How did the Snake Boat race happen?** In 1952, Pandit Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India was visiting Alappuzha. In honor of him, the people conducted the first impromptu boat race. The boat named Nadubhagam Chundan stood first. Thrilled by the performance of the oarsmen, Pt Nehru jumped into the winning boat, caring less about the security arrangements. This boat carried him and proceeded to the boat jetty. Pt Nehru upon his return to Delhi donated a silver trophy, a replica of a snake boat placed on a wooden abacus, to the winner. The trophy had his signature and also an inscription above saying, "To the winners of the boat race which is a unique feature of community life in Travancore Cochin" From then, this trophy is called the Nehru Rolling Trophy and the event is celebrated annually in his fond memory.

Why was it called as the Snake Boat Race? Ever tried speaking to local people on your travels? They give some of the interesting facts that are not always seen on the www. There were two things to it, one that the boats which competed first, were the Chundan Vallams, which were also called the Snake Boats. And two, it seems the former colonial rulers called them the Snake Boats - basing the name on a native

boat found in Norway, although Kerala's Chundans bear very little resemblance to their European counter parts. Either ways, the race came to be known as Snake Boat Race since then.

In Anticipation...as the race begins Colorful boat pageantry preceded the boat race - it was a marvelous treat. President of India had just arrived to inaugurate the festival. The color of her grand saree complemented the colors seen on the waters. The canoes were so carefully decked up with bright flowers, good amount of them, contrasting paintings on the boat making them look ravishing. Their statistics was no less they were a 100-120 feet long measuring over an impressive 100 feet plus in length, with a raised prow. It was made of a forest wood (called Aanjili Thadi) and carried 90-110 oar-men or oar-women at a single time on a single boat.

The roar of the canoes started. Oar-men sitting beside one another showed raw power and determination as they started to row down the 1400 meters track of waterway; as fast as they could row, with a single-minded aim of getting the Nehru's Trophy. Seeing the power that was needed to stir this gigantic sized snake boat, I wondered if the women would compete at all and I was pleasantly surprised to see

them do two rounds of battling. The shutterbug in me stood at the tip of my boat in awe with everything that could be witnessed on these blue backwaters of Alleppey. It was hard to figure which of them to capture and the canoes, were zooming past faster than my zoom lens. The splash emerging from the oars and the knives of the boat against the evening sunlight was a stunning sight. These Chundan Vallams hold the record of the biggest water vessel used for sports purpose, and I could see that these canoes actually move like a real snake through the channels.

To me it seemed like a wish-fulfilled experience of coming to Alleppey and seeing the boat race. I learnt that life here revolves around the waters, so much so, that children learn to swim before they walk, learn to row boats before they bicycle and learn their first lessons from the school of the fishes. Traders of those days from across the seven seas came here seeking souvenirs and black gold. Not only are its backwaters alluring, but also its man-made islands that can be spotted amidst the waters, with paddy fields at a distance. As the 58th boat race ended this year and my boat sailed towards the shore, I thought about both the pace of the race and the race that raised my heart's pace!