



"To the winners of the boat race which is a unique feature of community life in Travancore Cochin"

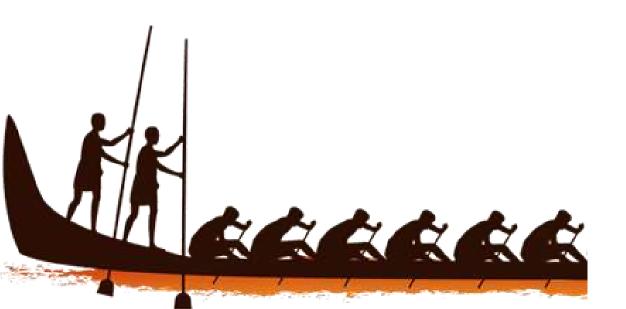
-Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

HISTORY

The history of the Nehru Trophy Boat Race is associated with the visit of late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India to Alappuzha. He chanced a trip from Kottayam to Alappuzha by boat, through water logged Kuttanad. A pageantry of boats accompanied him on the trip. The first race was an impromptu one conducted in 1952 in honour of Panditji who visited Alappuzha. In that race of snake boats, Nadubhagam Chundan stood first. Panditji, who was thrilled and excited in the performance of the oarsmen, jumped into the Nadubhagam Chundan, forgetting all security arrangements. The boat proceeded to the boat jetty carrying the Prime Minister. On his return to Delhi in December 1952, Nehru donated a Silver Trophy, which is a replica of a snake boat placed on a wooden abacus. The trophy bears the following inscription above his signature.

"To the winners of the boat race which is a unique feature of community life in Travancore Cochin."

This trophy later came to be known as Nehru Trophy, which is celebrated every year by the people of Alappuzha, in fond memory of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.



. REMINISCENCES

A beautiful golden 'Mandapom' under the Manro lamp at Aryad. It is exquisitely decorated. Artistically laid up seating arrangements and a temporary platform and pavilion are set up. The Vembanad Lake in front of the Mandapom. Eight tracks, each of 30 meters width marked in the lake. Bamboo poles laid in the one mile long distance for this. Special boats, motor launches and big county crafts in line. The sons of Kuttanad are in ecstasy.

Minutes give way to hours. Patient waiting by everyone. 01:40 Pm

"Here comes...., here comes."

Everyone glanced and every finger pointed to a distance." Dorothy", the special boat approaches majestically causing flutters in the lake. The atmosphere gets filled with loud cheers. The boat moves on and on aiming the 'Mandapom'. The esteemed Chief Guest, clad in Churidar Pyjama-Kurtha, Gandhi cap and wearing pathan shoes down near the Mandapom.

Panditji Ki Jai Deafening cheers from thousands. The architect of modern India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, and India's first Prime Minister raised his hands to receive salutations. The guns boomed 63 times to mark Nehru's age. The office-bearers garlanded the Prime Minister, who got seated in the Mandapom with his characteristic, charismatic smile. Panditji liked specially the garland made of Paddy grains. Indira Priyadarsini who was with her father was given a casket made of paddy grains. Her children were presented with bouquets in the shape of paddy bunches.

It is time for the race. A great boom is heard. Eight snake boats (Chundan Valloms) darted forward in lighting speed, marking the beginning of the race. Pandit Nehru watches the spectacular sight through the binoculars. Like a child who cannot control its ecstasy, he jumped up and down. He was greatly thrilled. As the race boats neared the pavilion, the esteemed guest got on his chair. "There... Comes..." said he, holding his grand-children Rajeev and Sanjay.

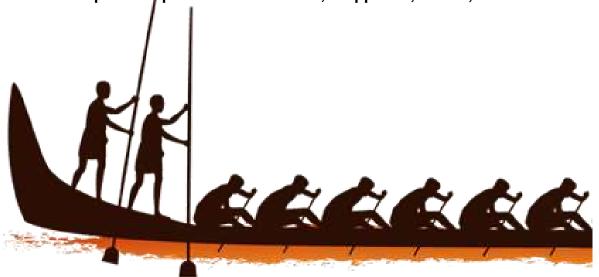


The boats were nearing the finishing point. The sight of equal forces vying for supremacy was a sight to be watched. The mind boggling affairs made Nehru forget himself. He began dancing to the rhythm of the paddlers. The banks of the lake were immersed in loud clapping. The rhyme and rhythm of Vanchipattu (Boat songs) filled the entire atmosphere.

'Nadubhagom Chundan' in unbelievable speed crossed the finishing point and hoisted the winner, flag on the boat. The then District Collector Kerala Varma announced the results of the race over the microphone. The captain of "Nadubhagom", Mathu Chacko received the special prize from Panditji – the rolling trophy made in pure silver, in the shape of a snake boat. The trophy costing Rs.1000/-, then raised the prestige of 'Nadubhagom Chundan'. The Captain of all the boats received some prize or other from Jawaharlal Nehru.

After the race, all the Snake boats were going towards the Alappuzha boat jetty. While nearing the VIP pavilion, the oarsmen displayed their talents besides there immense joy. The sight of the long row of snake boats with the routers inside it enchanted Nehru. He tried to jump into the Nadubhagom Chundan as the boat reached very near to the pavilion. The then home Minister of Thiru-Kochi, T.M.Varghese tried to dissuade him saying, "It will be convenient to go in a mechanized special boat". "No, Mr. Varghese let me be in the snake boat for five minutes. You don't have to be afraid", said Panditji. Not wasting time, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru jumped into the Nadubhagom Snake boat. His grand children who wanted to follow suit, were dissuaded. "You may come with your mother in the special boat, he said. In spite of Nehru's protestations, the security officer jumped into the Snake boat. A pleasure trip was made by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru standing inside the Nadubhagom Chundan, in accompaniment of other snake boats. The waves of Punnamada rolled on her beams. Emotional deluge filled the atmosphere as India's Prime Minister, oblivious of everything else, enjoyed the trip.

This marked the beginning of the greatest water sport in the world. The colourful Boat Race was first for the "Prime Minister's Trophy". Later, it came to be known as "Nehru Trophy Boat Race". The Nehru Trophy Boat Race can rightly be called "Kuttanad's Olympics on water", the national festival of the people of Kuttanad. This is held every year on the second Saturday of August, at the palm-fringed, picturesque Punnamada Lake, Alappuzha, Kerala, 'God's own Country'.



2. LOOKING BACK

The 8 Snake boats participated in the procession were, Nadubhagom, Chambakkulam (Amichakari), ParthaSarathy, Kavalam, Valiya Diwanji, Neppolean, Nethaji, GearGoss (I.C.Vallam). The boat race was conducted at the west corner of Vembanadu lake from west of Mantro Light at North towards south. Starter was Sh.E.J. Luckose, Physical Director, CMS High School. Chief Judge was Sh.Kurien John, Thazhathangady.

In 1952, The Boat race was conducted by the District Collector, Kollam, since Alappuzha district was not there then. 1954, Boat race was conducted as Prime Minister's Trophy at Meenappally Vattakkayal, Kainakary. Since 1955, the Boat Race is conducted at Punnamada Kayal. The island pavilion was built in 1970.

PAGEANTRY AND EXCITEMENT

The race courser having a length of about 1370 meters is divided into various tracks for the conduct of the competition. When they are advancing through various tracks, it appears like the fast moving snakes. The oarsmen splash the oars in unison with the rhythmic chants and beats of drums. The movements of competing boats are so thrilling that the spectators get a tune with the excited mood of the surrounding uproars. The festival begins with a procession of the snake boats. The snake boats and the smaller varieties of Kerala race boats like the 'Churulan', 'Veppu' and 'oadi' move in a formation down the 1.4 KM stretch of the lake as the sturdy villagers, their biceps rippling in the sun, row with an elaborate flourish of the oars to the singing of couplets from "Kuchelavritham" Vanchipattu" the classic Malayalam poem written by Ramapurathu Warrier to regale King Marthanda Varma of Travancore in early 19th century during a boat journey from Vaikom to Thiruvananthapuram. The numerous beaded umbrellas held aloft in each boat, the gilded sterns of the ebony black snake boats and the changing patterns that the rowers weave with their oars transform the lake into a kaleidoscope. Floats giving glimpses of Kerala's rich cultural heritage follow the race boats, with artists performing "kathakali" "theyvam" "panchavadvam" and "padavani".



And then a quiet falls on the lake front, broken only by the sound of ripples lapping the embankment and the rustle of palm leaves in the wind. The snake boats line up at the starting point for the great race. As the starter's flag goes up, the scene freezes into a tableau the rowers tense with their paddles poised, the pace keepers alert and the steersmen straining against their long oars.

The flag falls in a blur and suddenly the thumping begins. The crowd erupts into a roar, birds flutter up from their perch on the trees and the snake boats hiss their way down the lake in a haze of spray, fighting a pitched battle in the dappled waters. "Ayyo-poyye... ayyo-poyye" – the cadence grows to a crescendo as the oars dip and flash 100 to 120 times a minute and the steersmen hurl their gigantic oars in a high arc.

COMMUNAL AMITY

Preparations for the big event begin several weeks in advance. The snake boat is smeared with sardine oil for smooth passage through water, the best oarsmen are selected and, under the supervision of the senior most oarsmen, the practice sessions begin. Around 150 oarsmen, who would represent the village, take the vow to observe strict abstinence and celibacy till the oars to each of them. Each ward in the village and at time rich individuals takes their turn in feeding the athletes on the days of the practice at mass feasts on the river banks.

Even in the days of untouchables, this was a feature of the regattas with caste Hindus, Scheduled Castes, Christians and Muslims sitting in the same row for the feast symbolising the communal amity in Kuttanad. In fact, the Church has a traditional role in the celebrations at Champakkulam though the water festival there is associated with a temple legend.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Tracks - • Track length – 1400 M.

4 tracks of 10 M, wide from East.

Chundan - • Amaram - 5 Persons

Nilakkar - 5 Persons

Total no. of team members – 111

VENICE OF THE EAST

1. HISTORY OF ALAPPUZHA

Alappuzha district forms part of the history of erstwhile state of Travancore. Considering the geographical position and physical features of the district, it may be assumed that the word 'Alappuzha' means the land between the sea and a network of rivers flowing into it. The master mind that worked in turning Alappuzha to a commercial centre was Raja Kesava Das, the illustrious Divan of Travancore. For the progress of Alappuzha, the Divan brought businessmen from all parts of the country. Canals were opened for the transportation of spices and forest goods. The 'Vadaicanal' and ' Commercial Canal ' are his Contributions. Roads were also constructed. Veluthambi Dalva also had done much for the development of Alappuzha. The light house at Alappuzha spreads light to a distance of about twenty kilometres. Alappuzha became the centre of trade for coir, copra, pepper, ginger, cardamom, rubber and tea. The port town of Alappuzha was the commercial metropolis of the erstwhile Travancore. The establishment of a modern port at Kochi was the beginning of Alappuzha's decline. However, the emerging trends in tourism lit a green light for resurgence. Visit the official site of Alappuzha at www.alappuzha.gov.in



2. RAJA KESAVA DAS

His all-time contribution is finding an ideal location and constructing a well-planned port city at Alappuzha. He found Alappuzha as the most suitable, because of the geographical and oceanic reasons. As a far sighted statesman he knew the importance of having a port town to trade with the western countries. Raja Kesavadas was unique in having such a splendid vision, much far ahead of his time. He became very successful in materialising his dream and a ship embarked for the first time in 1786 at Alappuzha.

Raja Kesavadas invited business magnets from Bombay, Gujarat, and Kutch etc. and encouraged them to settle here and start industrial enterprises. The infrastructural facilities were generously offered. Two parallel canals, commercial canal and Vadaicanal with the ramifying system of waterways were built for the easy transportation of goods to the port and from there to the western countries. Leading industrialists like Navaroji Khawaziji, Vallabha Das Kanchi and others found Alappuzha as their second native place. For improving foreign trade, Raja Kesavadas invited shipping companies like Syndhya Steam ship Navigation to start cargo centres here. Alappuzha attained legendary progress and became the financial capital of Travancore at the time of Raja Kesava Das, the Valiya Diwanji, Alappuzha was known throughout the West as the Venice of the East, Alappuzha was in those days a maritime centre and tourists paradise. The reign of Raja Kesavadas spread only for a very short span of ten years.

In the year 1798 Karthika Thirunal Dharmaraja demised and Balarama Varma, his successor aged fourteen became the crown prince. Bala Rama Varma was only a puppet in the hands of sycophants, misguided by Jayanthan Sankaran Nampoothiri. Raja Kesavadas was proclaimed as a traitor and kept under house arrest allowing Jayanthan Sankaran Nampoothiri to usurp the post of Dewan. Finally Raja Kesavadas was poisoned to death (on 21st April 1799). The death of Valiya Diwanji spread like wild fire in the capital and a riot followed in which Jayanthan Sankaran Nampoothiri was murdered and the crown prince was compelled to invite Velu Thampi and appoint him as Dalava who restored peace in the country.

But even now Raja Kesavadas lives as a martyr in the minds of the people in and around Alappuzha.



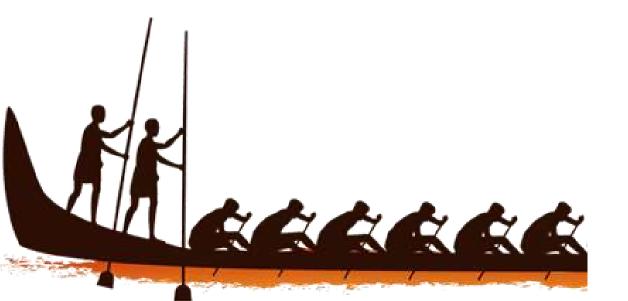
BOAT RACE

1. BACKGROUND

Kuttanadu is a vast expanse of water at certain seasons. This part consisting of water-logged area of central Travancore is a region extending to 34,443 acres of agricultural land. It is traversed by different rivers, namely Pamba, Achankovil and Manimala. These rivers wash into Vembanadu Lake. Some Years ago, the present Kuttanadu was part of the Vembanadu Lake. The adventurous and illustrious people of this particular part of the country were engaged in the process of reclamation of water immersed land for the last one thousand and four hundred years. The reclamation of land still continues.

The inhabitants of Kuttanadu are by occupation agriculturists. They engage themselves in the cultivation of paddy and coconut trees on reclaimed land. As natural conditions allow raising only one crop of paddy, the rest of the time the people get immersed in festivities.

As country boats are sheer necessities in the life of the people of Kuttanadu and a large area of garden land is prohibitively luxurious to organize other sports, it is no wonder that they found out boats as their means of enjoyments. The origin of the present boat races is very recent. Formerly people used to assemble in boats like Chundan, Oadi, Veppu, etc., to perform a colourful and musical procession. Later only to create enthusiasm and to inculcate the sporting spirits among the people of the area, the race systems were introduced. The snake boats festival in Aranmula is still a religious procession. The present boat races in Kuttanad have their own history connected to the rulers of the time. Chambakulam Moolam Boat Race is considered to be the most ancient.



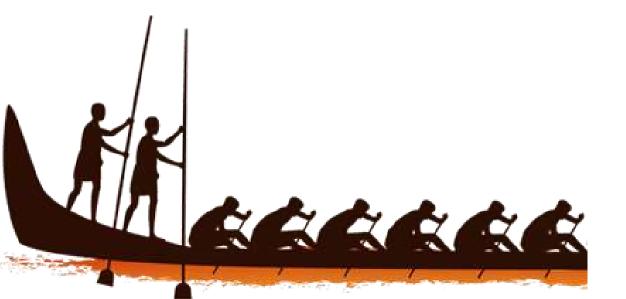
2. THE RAJAS OF YORE

The story of these battling boats goes back 400 years in history when the rajas of the erstwhile principalities of Chempakasseri (Ambalappuzha), Kayamkulam Thekkumkoor (Changanacherry) and Vadakkumkoor (Kottayam) in the old Travancore area, which are part of the present Alappuzha district and Kottayam district, frequently crossed swords on the backwaters of Kuttanad. The Chempakasserry troops suffered heavy casualties at the hands of the superior navy their rivals commanded. It soon dawned on the Chempakasserry Raja that the real defect was with his war boats, which were sluggish and cumber.

He called all the boat architects in the land to his court and told them of his desire to have better, faster boats for the troops. After days of hard labor, a man who was reputed to be the best boat architect in Chempakasserry, Koduppunna Venkitanarayanan Asari, came up with a specimen which satisfied the raja's requirements. It had speed, manoeuvrability and capacity to carry 100 able-bodied warriors on board and its eel-like construction was most ideal for launching an ambush since it could be easily kept concealed behind the overhanging bushes on the river banks. The Asari was generously rewarded and in the subsequent battles, the Chempakasseri Raja emerged victorious.

. THE DECEIT

The story goes on to tell how the defeated Kayamkulam Raja sent a spy to Chempakasserri to learn the secret of the new war boat. The spy, a handsome youth, succeeded in seducing Asari's daughter. The girl's mother was overjoyed by the prospect of getting him as her daughter's bridegroom and persuaded her husband to teach him the construction of the boat.



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Needless to say, the deceitful youth disappeared the moment the thought he had learnt the secret. Asari was imprisoned by Chempakasserri Raja for treason. But he was released and showered with many honors when the snake boats built by the Kayamkulam Raja proved to be no match for the war boats of Chempakasserry in the next battle. The subtleties of the snake boat's design are hard to pick and even today it requires years of apprenticeship under a master boat architect before one could independently undertake the construction of this ancient boat.

When a village decides to have a new snake boat, a committee is formed to raise the Rs.6 lakhs it requires now to build the boat. The boat architect is summoned and the search for the "anjili" tree of the required size often takes the villagers to the high ranges of Kerala. As the snake boat takes shape out of the huge trunk, the 'asari' relies mainly on his instinctive estimates.

Of late, the boat builders' prime concern is to make the snake boat as long as possible so as to seat more and more rowers for speed. The Nedumbhagom snake boat recently entered the Guinness Book of Records as the longest rowing boat in the world. But its 135 feet length has since been overtaken by Vellankulangara snake boat, which is 140 feet long.

BOATS (VALLANGAL)

Kuttanadu is a place of boats. Different kinds of boats are seen always roaming over the waters of this part of the Kerala State. The boats of Kuttanadu are of various types, according to their purpose.

Kochuvallams are Small boats used to cross rivers and lakes. They also range in their sizes.

Kettuvallams are largely cargo movers.

Churulans are pleasure boats and they are considered to be the conveyance of rich people in olden days. The Churulan Boats vary in length from 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ Kolesand their crew ranges from 10 to 36.



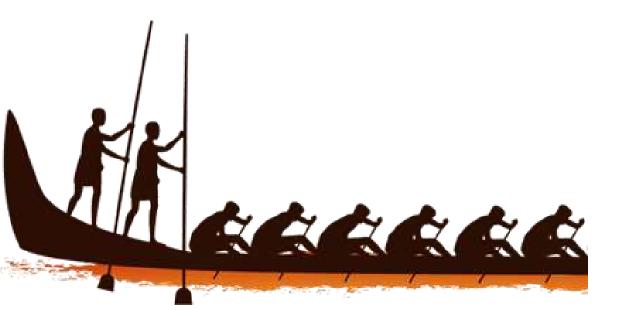
Chundans are supposed to be Navy boats of Chempakasserry rulers. It has got a length of more than a hundred feet and usually more than a hundred people are on board. Both the ends of the boats are raised from water level. The rear end has a height of about twenty feet from the surface of water. Nearly eighty six persons are rowers, ten to fifteen are to give the rhythm, four are to steer the vessel. It is to be specially noted that the Chundans have the maximum manoeuvrability among all sorts of race boats.

The Chundan (SnakeBoat) variety of Race Boats is usually 38 ½ to 48 ½ koles (One koles being equivalent to 24 inches) long and accommodates 100 to 150 persons.

Veppu Vallams (Parunthuvalans) are said to be boats that were used to carry stores for the soldiers on board the Chundans. "Vaipu" became Veppu" by usage. Vaipu in Malayalam means cooking. The design and appearance of these vehicles differ from all other race boats. The length of Parunthuvalan varies from 28 ½ to 32 ½ Koles and it accommodates 28 to 36 rowers.

Oadis or **Iruttukuthieshave** a different origin. They were used for smuggling. It is to be noted, they are seen in plenty in the coastal areas near Cochin and suburbs. Their very design is for speed. Both the ends are alike. Manoeuvrability is little, practically nil. They are never turned and rowed up only in shuttle between, by turning round the rowers. The Odi, also called Cheru Chudan has a length of 28 ½ to 32 ½ Koles and has 40 to 60 rowers.

Various types of boats, all home-made out of indigenous materials are used for the boat races, ranging from the magnificent Snake Boat (Chundan) nearly a hundred feet long and with 150rowers, to the smallest one which measures 18 feet and accommodates a dozen crew. The boats are scooped out of single tree trunks, usually Kadampu and Anjili (ArtocarpusHirsuta). A lot of skill, labour, time and money, go into the making of these boats which are objects of envy and wonder from ages past. The most popular varieties of Racing Boats are called Chundan, Churulan, Odi (Iruttukuthi) and Parunthuvalan (Veppu) and each differs from the other in the shape of the helm and prow, and capacity to accommodate the crew. The differences in the construction of the remaining parts of the Boats are not, however, very pronounced though the build naturally varies with the boats intended for the placid waters of rivers and lakes, and the vessels which have to ply over the open backwaters, where waves and currents have to be encountered.



Easy and swift manoeuvrability is the principal concern with the making of boats, which race over rivers and lakes. The cut water is reduced to the minimum in these Boats. Their prows and helms are raised considerably high and the streamlining is equally horizontal as well as vertical. The Chundan and Odi are such racing boats. In the construction of Boats in tended to negotiate open backwaters, care is taken to see that the cut water descends almost to the keel and top heaviness is avoided by keeping the helm and prow quite low. At either end, the gunwale is curved up to prevent waves dashing in, as in the Churulan type of boats. The prow and helm of these boats are of identical build to facilitate easy manoeuvring.

Of all the Race Boats, the most imposing picturesque and coasty is the Chundan, Snake Boat. The stern of the Snake Boat rises about 15 feet from the water level, and is embellished with exquisite ornamental designs in burnished brass and wood. The extent of elaborate and expensive ornamentation, characteristic of the local craftsman's skill, indicate the wealth and eminence of the owner of the Boat, Long and narrow, the Snake Boats cut across the water with majesty and grace.

The Race Boats, in use in Kerala, have much a common with the war canoes of the old American Indian, the Maoris of New Zealand and some of the aboriginal tribes of the Tropical countries, especially in regard to the shape and build, and the manner and contrivances of propulsion.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Many of the race boats belong to the joint ownership of the people of the locality. Further, even the single owner boats are often hired out by a group of people belonging to a particular locality for the purpose of participating in a boat race. In fact, they spend money in the order of lakhs of rupees for participating various boat races in a season. The money required is often raised through public contribution. In fact they consider it as a matter of pride to participate and win a boat race under the label and jercy of their locality (Kara). As such boat race season brings out an occasion for enriching the warmth of friendliness and brotherhood in the locality, which is deteriorating in these days due too various reason. Each boat race is being celebrated as the festival of the locality. It often enables a get together of family members and others of the locality.



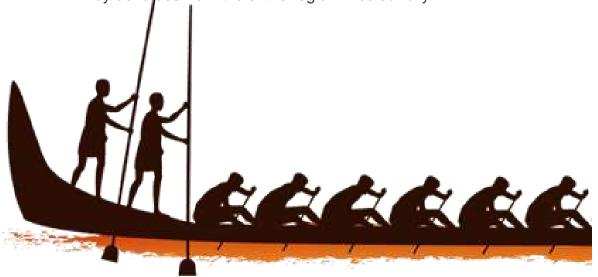
Festivals have that effect of making the individuals settled at distant places to return to their native place at least once in a year. The boat race being celebrated as the festival of the 'Kara', the sons of the village will experience an irresistible temptation to be the part of the festivities. The nostalgic feeling that these boat races create, makes everybody settled far and near to return to their home village to participate in the boat race festivities. The social impact of the boat race is very high. In the Regattas, the different Karas owning Race Boats enter, and with determination, inspired by local patriotism, strive their best to knock off the prize. The competition is austere and keen, in spite of the mirth and rivalry enveloping it.

6. CHAMPAKKULAM MOOLAM VALLAMKALI

During the fifteenth century A.D., a part of the Travancore State, including Kuttanadu, was ruled by Chembakassery Devanarayana Dynasty. The rulers of this dynasty were highly religious. The origin of Chambakulam Moolam water festival is connected to the installation of the famous idol of Lord Krishna in the Ambalappuzha Sree KrishnaswamyTemple. It is considered that the Moolam Boat festival is celebrated in commemoration of the bringing of the idol of Lord Krishna from "Karinkulam" temple, Kurichi near Kottayam. It is conducted every year on the Moolam day of the Mithunam month of the Malayalam era.

. PAYIPPAD JALOTSAVAM

Payippad Jalotsavam is held on the Payippad Lake, which is 35 Km from Alappuzha, to commemorate the installation of deity at the Subrahmanya Swamy Temple, Harippad. Legend says that the villagers decided to build a temple with Sree Ayyappa as the presiding deity after the temple was built, they had a vision directing them to a whirlpool in Kayamkulam Lake where they would find the idol of Sree Subramanya which was to be installed at the temple. Accordingly, the elders of the village with divers and swimmers rowed to the spot and found the idol which was escorted back ceremoniously by devotees from the entire region in colourfully.



8. OTHER BOAT RACES

Neerettupuram Boat Race.

Rajiv Gandhi Boat Race.

Pulimkunnu Boat Race.

Karuvatta Boat Race.

Haripad Boat Race.

Mannar Boat Race.

