



IF THE world is a book and one who does not travel reads just a page; then India is a significant chapter of this book and the traveller in me has read a few of its pages. My journey through this book has been on for a long time, yet the pace at which India has revealed herself has left me asking for more hours in a day! One of its recent revelations is the Indian Carnival on Water.

The 58th Snake Boat Race coincided with the 63rd Independent India celebrations, amplifying the jubilation at the backwaters. The race, apparently, is held on the second Saturday of August, every year, independent of anything else. Alleppey, a.k.a. Alappuzha, has always been in the limelight for its famous boat races, house

boats, coir products, fish and lakes. It still remains as magnetic with its backwater boat trips, even as I learnt that life here revolves around the waters. No surprise then that Alleppey is referred to as the 'Venice of the East'. 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.

The boats which competed first were the Chundan Vallams, also called Snake Boats, and hence the name of the race. It seems the former colonial rulers called them the Snake Boats, based on the name of a native boat found in Norway, although Kerala's Chundans bear very little resemblance to their European counterparts.

I had by now seen two transformations enroute: a sea of tranquil to a sea of humanity. Jumping over and walking through the few boats finally took me to the boat that would take me to the scene of action, so to speak. Hundreds of boats line up beside each other on the backwaters to witness the race. People somehow manage to find a spot to sit, a corner to stand or a rope to hang on to. Luckily, I found myself and my camera, a spot, a corner and a rope!

The Snake Boat Race's story began in 1952, when Pandit Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, was visiting Alappuzha. In his honour, 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 that



took him to the boat jetty. Upon his return to Delhi, he 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.

And what a treat it was! The canoes, all colourful and decked up, were starting to roar and looked ravishing. Their statistics were no less – they were 100-120 feet long, made of a forest wood called Aanjili Thadi, they measured over an impressive 100 feet in length with a raised prow and carried 90-110 oar-men or women on a single boat.

Sitting beside one another, the raw power and determination could be seen. They rowed down the 1,400 meters track of waterway as fast as they possibly could row – the power exuded was unmistakable. Witnessing the Chundan Vallam (holding the record of the biggest water vessel used for sports), I could see these canoes actually move like a real snake through the channels. My camera, unfortunately, could barely keep up, but to me it seemed like a wish-fulfilled experience which was all about the pace and the race!



SPEED BREAKERS