



Republic Day of India



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सत्यमेव जयते

A shrine of hope

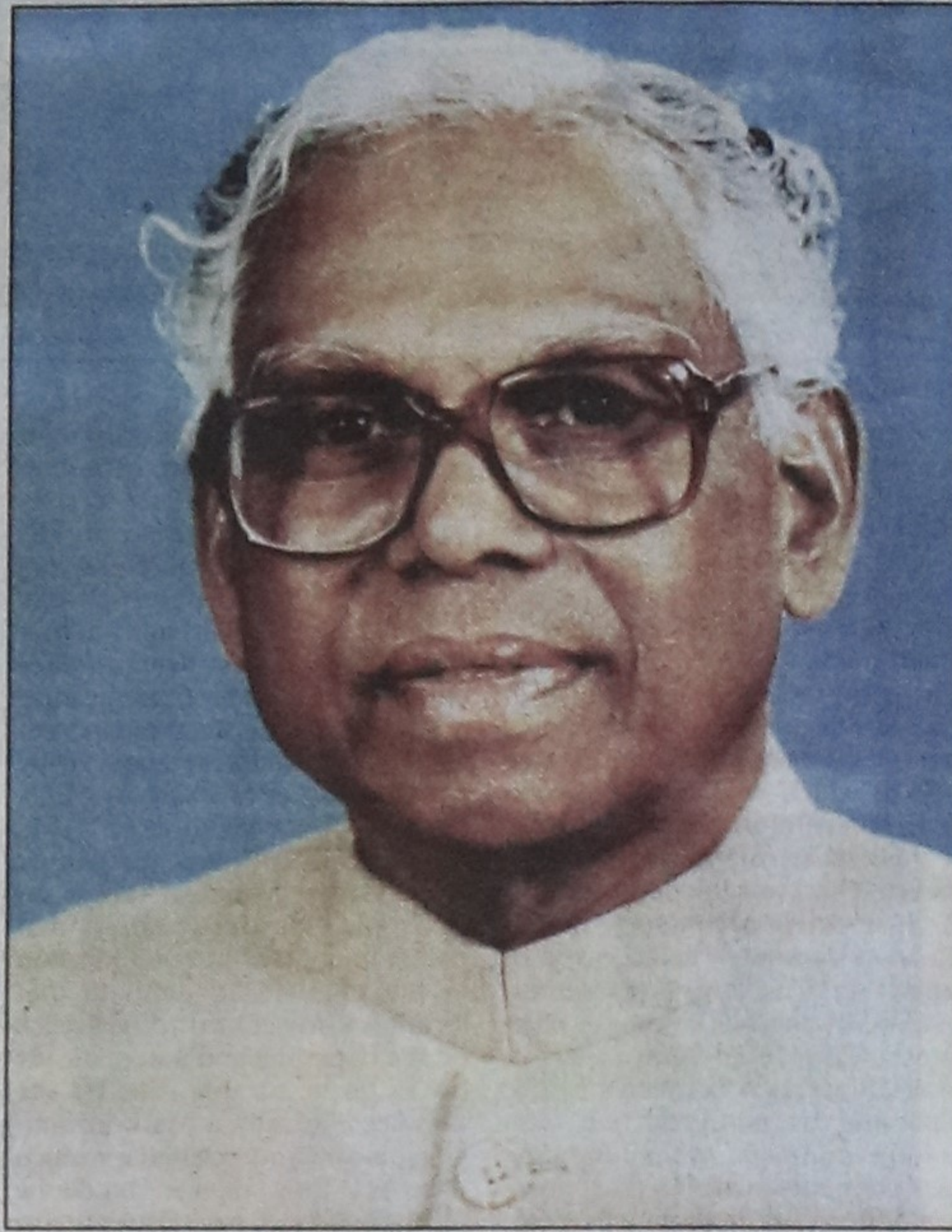
SUFI saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, the apostle of peace, occupies a special place in the pantheon of great tradition of saints in India. His shrine has come to be known as a point of melting of various cultures, religions, and classes.

Born in April 1143 AD at village Sanjar in the Sistan province of Iran to a rich father Ghayasuddin Hassan, Khwaja Sahib disposed of all his properties, distributed the proceeds to the poor and indigent, renounced the world, went out to Bukhara and Samarkand in Central Asia and from there to Mecca and Madina in search of enlightenment. It was at Madina that Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti got the utmost spiritual attainment and envisioned through his uncanny intuition that he had to come down to east at Ajmer and finally make it one of the holiest seats of enlightenment, peace and unity of mankind. The Khwaja lived a deeply enriched, and spiritually heightened blissful life of 97 years.

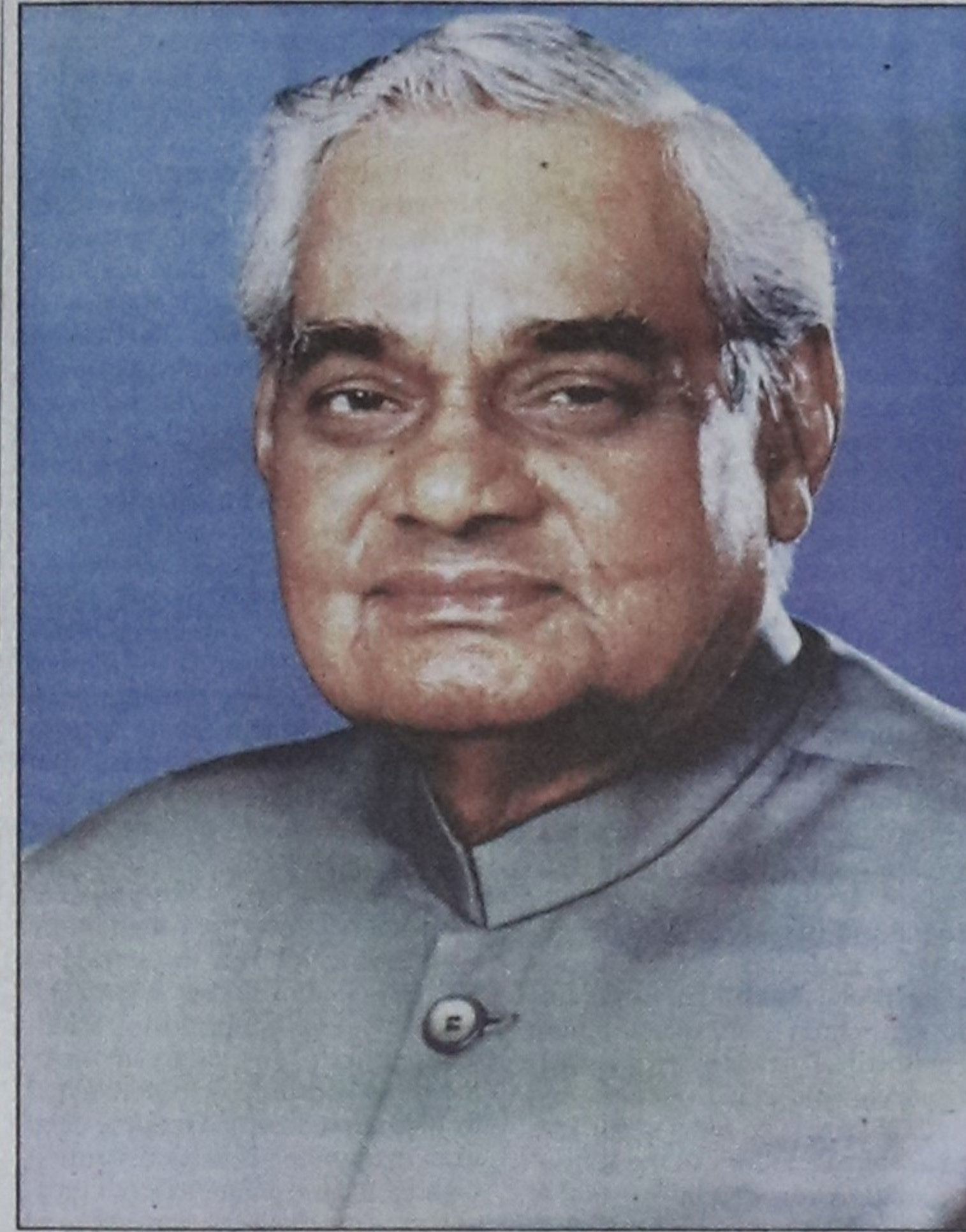
People of all walks of life belonging to different religions, castes and creeds both from India and abroad come here to pay their homage and in the process get the solace of fulfillment of their cherished desires and prayers. Barriers of castes, communities, races, religions and sexes melt away and vanish under the enlightened spiritual spell of the Khwaja. Despite myriad strides made by science and technology especially the information technology in breaking the barriers between peoples of the world and the world having been shrunk to a global village, divide between the rich and the poor, racial and communal barriers are persisting. But at the holy shrine of Ajmer, there is no distinction between a king and commoner. All are one and the same. For here, there is a meaningful feel of oneness of mankind (people) and oneness of God. It is in this context that Dargah Sharif has come to symbolise India's time tested secular ethos of unity amidst cultural diversity and religious plurality of our people postulating the message of harmony and peaceful coexistence.

Legend has it that the Mughal emperor Akbar came here to pray for a son. When he was blessed by a son, named Salim to be known as Emperor Jahangir, Akbar came all the way from Agra on bare foot to pay his obeisance. The Ajmer Shrine has been patronised by all kings, nawabs, princely states, rajas and zamindars. Several monuments for prayers and conveniences of pilgrims including langars (free food) have been built and provided by such philanthropic patrons from time to time. It was in 1955 that the Government of India took over the management of the holy shrine by an Act of Parliament called the Dargah Khwaja Sahib Act, 1955. An administrator appointed under the Act, looks after the upkeep of the shrine and various other monuments surrounding it. Besides, the administrator looks after the welfare of the pilgrims, provides education to the poor children in the vicinity, medicare of the indigent patients and other welfare measures. Yet, there are hundreds of Khadims (priests), privately mushrooming at the Dargah, who eke out their livelihood from the offerings made by the pilgrims.

The Khwaja is worldwide known as the messiah of the poor, the oppressed and the downtrodden. The Sufi saint postulated that "the true worship was grant of relief to the humble, the meek and the oppressed," "a true devotee was one gifted with attributes of river like charity, sunlight like affection extending indiscriminately to all and earth like hospitality, open to all and embracing everything." It is in this context, that the Khwaja's love and blessings for all are ever spanning all types of barriers including that of time and space. The Sufi saint continues to inspire confidence among all men and women of goodwill. That is why people of all sects and strata through the holy shrine for fulfillment of their desires. How good people could be, are noticeable at the altar of the Khwaja. Their nobility, the large heartedness, the care for the poor, innocence, generosity and above all, their sweetness and delight in terms of human excellence can be seen and felt here, thus making the pilgrims endeavour to emulate such virtues to enable them to inspire confidence among the people at large that life is worth living. All is not lost. And life can be lived with hope and inspiration in the innate good of the people, the nation and the world. That is the ever-inspiring message of the Khwaja of Ajmer.



K R Narayanan
President



Atal Behari Vajpayee
Prime Minister

A diplomatic feat

DINKAR SHUKLA

A recent diplomatic success of the External Affairs Minister, Shri Jaswant Singh, has virtually gone unnoticed. To him goes the distinction of having met four Heads of Government of key Western countries in a week's time. This happened recently when he had undertaken a rushed visit to Washington, London, Berlin and a little earlier to Paris. His mission was meant to explain to leaders in these important world capitals as to how had India been suffering on account of cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of the country. To be more precise, the mission was to drive home the point to them that what India had been facing in the last two decades is an equal threat to the civilised, democratic and free world as the one posed by the September 11 carnage in New York and Washington.

It is to be noted that Shri Jaswant Singh was able to meet President George W. Bush in Washington, Prime Minister Tony Blair in London, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder in Berlin and shortly before this trip, President Jacques Chirac in Paris. In addition, of course, he interacted with senior cabinet ministers, parliamentarians and his counterparts in the four capitals. Never before in India's diplomatic history, perhaps, such an occasion had arisen when its External Affairs Minister could manage meetings in a row with Heads of Government of these powerful Western countries.

Also to be noted is the fact that his meetings with Heads of Government and other leaders took place at a time when these Western capitals were hotbed of activity in the wake of the September 11 terrorist assaults in New York and Washington. In fact, the US President met Shri Singh when he was literally involved neck-deep in the strategic planning for the US-led operation against global terrorism. Senior journalist and member of the Rajya Sabha, Shri Kuldeep Nayar, has described these meetings in the four capitals as a remarkable achievement of an Indian External Affairs Minister.

Shri Jaswant Singh made it clear to the world leaders that he was not visiting them to ask for any military or material aid so as to counter terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. All that India was seeking, he stressed, was sympathy and understanding as regards its unenviable plight. After all, it has been a victim of terrorist violence for the last two decades. During this time the militants and mercenaries infiltrating from across the border have killed several thousand innocent people in India. Today India accounts for about 53,000 families which have suffered on account of terrorist violence.

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Boat races of Kerala

SUDHA S NAMBOOTHIRY

CLOUDED sky, gusty wind, pitter-patter rain rushing to meet the thirsty mother earth accompanied by the flashes of lightning and thunder -- yes, the stage is set for monsoon boat races in Kerala. As every living being tries to find shelter to hide from the nature's splash, the participants of the boat races armed with their oars invade the waters to sweat it out. The cloths worn by them become second skin dripping with a mixture of sweat and rain. It seems the Mother Nature witnessing the tireless practice of the racing crew encourages them with thunderclaps and wipes their sweat with rain. For the people of Kerala, Karkidakam (July-August) is natively called Panja Masom or the month of famine and dullness. But to the folks of Kuttanadu in Alleppey district, it is full of excitement. Every year on the second Saturday of August the most exciting regatta, the Nehru Cup Snakeboat Race, takes place. Though most of the people there find their homes half submerged during the season, their spirit is never dampened. Otherwise routine and uneventful, life in Kuttanadu area comes alive months before the event. Racing crews tirelessly practise fired by the competitive spirit that motivates them on the great day.

In the past Kerala had only two major boat races -- the Aranmula Uthrittathi boat race and the Champakulam Moolam boat race. These two have traditional and religious background. A fete in Aranmula is conducted in connection with Aranmula temple and Champakulam boat race is in commemoration of the consecration of the deity at Ambalappuzha Sri Krishna Temple. Despite their religious backgrounds, the fetes witness communal amity.

Kerala today witnesses a large number of boat races all across its rives and waters. The water carnival begins with the Champakulam Moolam boat race followed by big and small boat races conducted throughout the Onam festival season when people there are in high spirits to welcome their mythical king Mahabali who is universally loved by all Keralites. According to a legend, the king visits them once a year from the netherworld. The backwaters which were often the battle ground of warring rulers of Kerala and the Chundan Valloms or the snake boats which were the battleships, now race to a different bugle.

The Nehru Trophy Boat Race held on the Punnamad Lake in Alappuzha (Alleppey) is a highly competitive event. The first race held in 1952 in honour of the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's visit was an impromptu one. About 10 snake boats were present on that occasion. The winner was Nadubhagam Chundan. Nehru was so fascinated and excited that he jumped into the winning boat ignoring all security arrangements. On his return to Delhi he instituted a trophy for the winners of the boat race. In 1953 the boat race was not held. But afterwards it became a regular feature. Every year around 40 boats participate in the regatta. Though boats like Veppu, Irruutikuthi, Ody, Swan and Churulan also participate in the fete, the magnificent Chundan Valloms which are 60-65 metres in length are the star attraction with highly decorated sterns where the coxswains stand, leaning on their large steering cars, the pace-setters thumping staves and hundreds of men handling a single paddle oar on each side churning the still waters in fascinating rhythm and dip showering spray of water.

Every year the boat race is made more attractive with auxiliary events. This year, the 49th Nehru Trophy Boat Race will be held on August 11. Colourful cultural processions and programmes are being organised on the eve of the race. The best part of the boat race is an opportunity for women to show their mettle. There is a separate competition for them.

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You are what you do.



Avoid using cell phones while driving. You not only endanger your own life but the lives of innocent pedestrians. Switch to safer driving practices.

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