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“More than a sport”: A Critical Reading of Boat Races in Kerala as Popular Culture

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.5.2.11

Abstract

This paper primarily questions the general perception of boat race, the magnificent cultural tradition of Kerala, as a symbol of solidarity and brotherhood. It addresses the question— what it is that makes boat race a popular cultural text? Accordingly, the paper reads the boat race in the light of Bourdieu’s class cultural framework. It examines this age old cultural tradition in two angles, as both a participatory and a spectator sport. The main aim of this study is to shatter the common tendency to perceive the boat race as both a cultural and regional identity. For this it will mainly look at the class composition of the oarsmen, followed by the mythical and literary affiliations of the boat race.

Keywords- Popular Culture, boat race, sport, power play, identity

The magnificent cultural tradition of Kerala, the boat races, cover a four hundred years of history and continues to occupy a central position in Kerala’s popular culture. In more recent times boat races have become increasingly important in the circle of business and politics. Particularly, the interrelation between “sport and power in society” (Boyle and Haynes 4) becomes the most pertinent concern of this paper. My emphasis will be placed primarily on the socio-economic implications of this specific popular cultural text and tries to trace the inherent contradictions lying beneath the seemingly laudatory approaches that have hitherto studied regarding this topic. All the facts regarding the boat races have been taken from various websites and are duly included in the works cited.

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Customarily the boat races are held during the time of the harvest festival, Onam, from June to September and the dates are fixed according to the moon phases, with the exception of Nehru Trophy boat race, which is conducted on every second Saturday of August. In every year there will be around twenty boat races held in the backwaters of Alappuzha and nearby places, out of which there are four main and fifteen minor races. The most prominent boat races are the Nehru Trophy¹, the oldest Champakkulam Moolam², Aranmulla boat race and the Payippad Jalotsavam.

It is strikingly interesting to look at the different varieties of traditional racing boats as it is marked by the divergent social history associated with it. The most popular varieties of traditional racing boats are *Chundan*, *Churulan*, *Odi* and *Iruttukuthy*, with each having their own constructive specificities. Moreover, the names of the boats are also very significant since they also reveal their unique style and history related with them. The history of the *Chundan vallam* (boat), also known as snake boat, is interesting. During the fourteenth century provincial war between Kayamkulam and Chembakasseri, the provincial Rajah of Chembakasseri, Devanarayana, put in charge to the famous “Thachan”³, Koduppunna Venkitanarayanan, to make a suitable war boat. Later on *Chundan vallam* became the traditional battle vessels of Kerala. While the boat “Oadis” and “Iruttukuthies” were historically known for smuggling purposes and boats like “Veppu Vallam”, “Kochu Vallam” were used for ordinary purposes.

In my paper I will be focussing on the two popular boat races of Kerala, Aranmulla Uttratathi Boat race and Nehru Trophy Boat race. The former is commonly associated with religious and cultural practices while the latter is a more commercialised version of the traditional *boat race*. *Chundan vallam* is used in both the races. It is about 100 to 140 feet length and comprises of four helmsman, twenty five singers and “100 to 125 oarsmen, who row in unison to the fast rhythm of the *Vanchipattu*, (song of the boatman)”⁴. *Vanchipattu* are highly rhythmic songs which were traditionally composed to keep up the spirit of the oarsmen. These traditional boat songs are usually wrapped up with punctuated rhythms so as

¹ The Nehru Trophy boat race is held on Allappuzha’s Punnamada Lake.

² Held on Champakkulam River at Chagnassery.

³ Term used for the eldest carpenter of a particular region.

⁴ “Vallamkali (Boat Race) – More Than Just a Sport”. Welcome to Kerala. 2010. Paniyely Blogspot. 16 April 2014 <<http://paniyely.blogspot.in/>>.

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to keep the pace with the motion of the oars. Moreover, as quoted in the official website of the Nehru Trophy boat race, such songs are sung as a commemoration of their “devotional, mythological and rustic life styles”. In every snake boat *vanchipattu* is sung in concordance with their traditional percussion instruments, mainly *chanda*.

To begin with, I will analyse the most popular Aranmula boat race, a two day festival, which is primarily considered to be a religious occasion. It is held every year on the *uttratathi*⁵ day, the fourth day after *Thiruonam*. More than a contesting sport, it is commonly seen as religious tradition of recalling the age old customary offerings carried on the *Chundan* boats to the deity of Aranmula Parthasarthy Temple. *Palli oda seva sangam*, a well known organization of the boat owners, is in charge of the series of cultural events associated with the temple festival. Almost thirty to forty *Chundan* boats annually compete in the festival. Before the grand procession of the *Chundan* boats commences, they would arrange themselves in front of the Sri Parthasarathy Temple as veneration to the *Thiruaranmula Appan*, the deity of the temple.

Moving on to the next, the Nehru Trophy boat race is considered to be one of the most stupendous cultural events that enthrall a wide audience from all over the globe. The Nehru Trophy boat race has only a short span history of almost sixty eight years, beginning with the visit of Jawaharlal Nehru, who was then the Prime minister, to Alappuzha in 1952. The official website of the Nehru Trophy boat race also refers to this historical event, where it says:

In the year 1952, Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru visited the erstwhile Travancore - Cochin. On his way to Alappuzha from Kottayam the people of Alappuzha, escorted by the huge snake-boats, gave him a roaring reception. Having gone through the tremendous excitement of sailing in a snake-boat popularly known as Chundan, Jawaharlal Nehru donated a rolling trophy to be awarded to the winner. This trophy was later christened, 'Nehru Trophy'

The trophy resembled the shape of a snake boat. The race has continued on ever since and has become a huge commercial and tourist event.

⁵ According to the Malayalam yearly calendar based on the phases of the moon.

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Precisely, what it is that makes boat race a popular cultural text? It goes without saying that, popularization of the boat race to a large extent relies upon the “faith in the potential of people” (Weaver 31). The aspect of immediacy also plays a key role in defining it as a popular culture. This is mainly because the boat races have always been a part of the social history of Kerala. As a popular culture, it elevates the popular taste and heightens the emotions and feelings of the people mainly hailing from the backwater regions of the state, namely Kuttanad, Kottayam, Payippad, and Champakkulam. Despite these apparent issues, however, boat race as popular culture is of more significant concern since it “constitutes a meeting ground between popular common sense and organized political discourse, and for that reason alone, it is vital that we continue subjecting it to analysis and critique” (Whannel 8). Again, when analysed through the context of immediacy, the historical significance of boat race also marks it as a popular cultural text. Moreover, Mukerji and Schudson’s definition of popular culture as “the beliefs and practices, and the object through which they are organised, that are widely shared among a population” (Harrington and Bielby 2) essentially identifies it as a popular cultural text.

The communal amity of the cultural and traditional boat races has always been praised and generally endorsed. For instance, the official website of the Nehru Trophy boat race reads so,

Even at the height of the caste system, the peculiar feature of these regattas was that the caste Hindus, Scheduled Castes, Christians and Muslims all sat 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 even though the water festival there is associated with a temple legend.

Such generalisations made on cultural adulations often neglect the underlying stratifications built on various social factors.

Juxtaposed against the eulogising tendencies, the cultural critic John Storey provides us with compelling insights on the power play and conflicts underlying such cultural texts. He critically ridicules the general inclination to view culture as a harmonious and organic whole. He writes in his preface, “. . . cultures are both shared and conflicting networks of meanings. Cultures are arenas in which different ways of articulating the world come into

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conflict and alliance” (Storey x). It is in this context that we have to locate the boat race as a popular cultural text of deeply embedded conflicts. There has been extensive studies done regarding on the power structures latent in the sports. For instance, Boyle and Haynes in their critical work, *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture*, discusses about the role of capital and class underlying the sports and how they internalize social stratification based on the two. These studies further clarify the relationship of sports to culture and politics. Using the theoretical resources drawn from various critics, for instance, Boyles and Haynes, Garry Whannel, While Rojek and Harrington and Bielby, I will try to critically analyse the synergic relationship of the boat race, culture and politics and critically question the dominant representations of it.

Analysing the boat race in the light of Bourdieu’s class cultural framework, there are both converging and diverging points. For this we have to examine it in two angles, participatory and spectator sport. When we examine boat race as both a participatory and a spectator sport we could decipher the limitations of Bourdieu’s framework. The common tendency to perceive the boat race as both a cultural and regional identity, i.e. a unity in diversity, neglect the underlying socio-economic and class factors that needed to be seriously questioned. This gets more validated by Boyles and Haynes critical observation that “at certain moments in the political and cultural life of communities, sport does not offer an important forum for collective expression and identity” (Boyles and Haynes 16).

When one examines the boat race as a participatory sport, we could partly locate it within Bourdieu’s framework. Though there is not an overtly distinction of high and low class culture, to some extent the class factor becomes a determining factor. In order to prove such an argument, I will look at the class composition of the oarsmen, followed by the mythical and literary affiliations of the boat race. Firstly, when we look at the class composition of the oarsmen, we could find that they are mostly from the lower strata of the society, mainly hailing from the traditional and working class sectors like toddy tapping, inland fishing and also from lime shell mining. Even the diverse boat clubs which provide trained seasonal oarsmen comprises of people hailing from lower strata of the society.

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Secondly, the myth related to the Aranmula boat race, to some extent, echoes its lower class origin. In the book *Festivals of India Society*, the critic K.P. Padmanabhan Tampy writes:

Tradition says that the boat regatta at Aranmula is held every year in commemoration of the crossing of the Pampa river by Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers. The story goes that following a long period of penance and austerity, Arjuna was on his way back to his native city with the image of Sri Krishna. When he reached the northern bank of the river Pampa, he found it in high floods. The great warrior stood. A low-caste, poverty-stricken Hindu offered to ferry Arjuna across the swelling river in a fragile canoe. Arjuna was all joy and thankfulness. On crossing the river Arjuna installed the image of Sri Krishna (Sri Parthasarathi) he was carrying, at the spot where the present temple stands. To honour the timely service rendered to Arjuna by the lowly boatman, boat races have ever since been conducted on the river in front of the temple.

Evidently, with the passing of time and the huge intervention of capitalistic projects a deliberate attempt of the evasion the class factor has taken place. The above passage is extremely suggestive of the innate connection of sports and class and its underlying politics.

Lastly, moving on to the literature, namely boat songs or *vanchipattu*, sung during the race to attribute the musical charm, also echoes its historical lower class origins. Accordingly, writer Usha Sharma, in her work delineates about the origins of many medieval boat songs as an allegory of the indigent lives of the people belonging to the lower strata of the society. She discusses about the circumstances under which “majority of the songs were composed by the poverty stricken poets for a sovereign” (Sharma 127). One such instance is the old anecdote which narrates the origin of the popular *vanchipattu*, *Kuchele Virtham* by Ramapurathu Variar. The song was composed early in the tenth century. According to the story, the poet was summoned by the Maharaja, after paying his visit to the Vaikkam temple, to sing a suitable boat song to the accompaniment of which oarsmen could paddle without fatigue. Even the title of the song, referring to the mythical character, “Kuchelan” also poignantly invokes the impoverished condition of the community. Having said so, it should be noted that

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unlike Bourdieu's framework, the lower class origin of the boat race, does not essentially categorise or demean it as a low cultural sport.

Moreover, the general perception of boat race, as a symbol of solidarity and brotherhood shatters away when one analyses the process of huge commercialisation taking place at recent times. Boat clubs such as Kumarakom Boat Club, Vembanad Boat club, Thiruvapur Boat Club, to name few, are increasingly becoming capitalist businesses and producing legal and illicit profits. Apart from this, if we look at the social effect of mediatisation, we find diverse boat club industry managers indulge in mass profiting from the huge commercialisation of boat race as television or media spectacle. They gain control of television and sponsoring rights, the managers of television channels competing for national or regional broadcasting rights and as well as the owners of industrial companies. For instance, in 2009 Nehru Trophy boat race, organisers, for the first time, had appointed an international sports marketing firm Total Sports Asia (TSA) to handle marketing and sponsorship duties of the event. According to the *Indian Television News* website the "sponsors for that year were Maruti Suzuki, Musli Power, Bajaj Allianz, Kannan Devan Tea, Berger Paints, Horlicks and Western Union. TV rights were sold to Amrita TV".

It is crucial to understand the role of media in the power play of social structures eternalizing ruptures in the society based on the class factors. Media and advertisements apparently project out the democratising enterprise of the boat race by deliberately obscuring the class factors that led to the inconspicuous stratification of the society. Central to this is John A. Weaver's critical observation that "Advertising . . . and every commercial is a big lie. . ." (Weaver 27). Here it should suffice for us to note the compelling ploy of the media being the bland propagandists of social stratification on the basis of class. There have been extensive studies done on media "in shaping patterns of consumption and 'normalizing' the consumer society" (Boyles and Haynes 5). For instance, the famous media sport scholar, Garry Whannel, in his works explores heavily on the working of media in promoting a specific line of thinking about society and sport, more particularly obscuring the relationship of politics and sports. Moreover, the studies also reveal the ideological undercurrents at play on such cultural and traditional sports like the boat races. Even more important, is to see how economic, political and cultural factors set the criterion for shaping the relationship of sport

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and identity. In this regard, when critically analysed the boat races set the demarcation along the lines of class factor. Throughout the social history of sport there has always been a social framework where the economically superior class controlling and exploiting the impoverished class. Sponsors, sports organizations and media comprise the former group, while the latter group comprises of the participants, in this context the oarsmen often hailing from the lower strata of the society. Thus boat race as a spectacle sport presupposes a system of competitions. Cultural critics like While Rojek undoubtedly sees sports as social structures that are certainly concerned with class and capital. Prominent within these explorations is the “social mobility function” (Zauhar 10) of the boat races. It goes without saying that both the power structures, ‘class’ and ‘capital’, regulates and controls various socio-culturally defined categories and thereby restricting the social mobility of the oarsmen. As a consequence the political underplay of the boat races often goes unnoticed.

The meaning of boat race as a popular culture varies from one to another. It is tempting to portray here another significant dimension of the two boat races dealt in this paper. As already mentioned Aranmulla boat race is essentially seen and practiced as a religious custom and tradition. The oarsmen participating in the boat race therefore generally belong to a specific community. And moreover it is conducted by the temple authority. From the standpoint of a participatory sport, I would argue that the Nehru Trophy boat race can be seen as a carnivalesque festival that indirectly questions the dominant Hindu culture. For the latter draws attention to the principle of equality by becoming more inclusive and mass participatory. It draws oarsmen from all communities and castes. Moreover, opposed to the Aranmulla boat race, Nerhu Trophy boat race distinctly addresses the gender issue by providing an adequate platform for women to participate in the spectacular cultural display. Again, opposing to the previous formalizations of the boat race as an indigenous cultural tradition, Nehru Trophy boat race effectively outstrips it by promoting foreign delegate participations and thereby transcending not only communal but also cultural boundaries. Therefore, within this framework of the carnivalesque one can veritably perceive the Nehru Trophy boat race as a prominent popular cultural text that efficaciously undermines dominant Hindu cultural ideologies. As a capitalistic enterprise, the carnivalesque nature of the Nehru Trophy boat race disclaims and appropriates the ritualistic and religious festival practices of

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the Aranmula boat race. In a much extended sense the traditional and religious festivities and performances associated with the latter were incorporated into the “classic body of the state” (Stallybrass and White 386).

Adding another layer of complexity, it seems that further investigation on the parameters namely performance and articulation associated with the boat races will be more pertinent. One needs to look further into the text of the boat races in order to decipher the inherent contradictions in the seemingly common practices associated with it. For this I will try to discern the differences in the performances and articulations related with both Aranmula boat race and Nehru Trophy boat race. The chief component of any boat race is the *vanchipattu* or boat song. It is very evident that *vanchipattu* as a performance text differs in the two boat races of our concern. It is primarily considered as religious and ritual performance in Aranmula boat race. This gets more substantiated by its association with another ceremonial temple ritual, namely Ashtami Rohini Vallasadhya, where the oarsmen are given a grand feast. While the dishes are offered to the oarsmen the *vanchipattu* is sung in the background and is once again chanted when the oarsmen offers the religious offerings to the presiding deity of the temple. Evidently, every performances and articulations related to the Aranmula boat race have religious significances. By the same token, one can understand the religious undertones associated with other performances related to the boat race, namely, the *chendamelam*, the traditional percussion music. On the contrary, the *vanchipattu* and *chendamelam*, sung and performed in the Nehru Trophy boat race are only the commercialised version, primarily intended as a cultural spectacle devoid of any religious and ritual connotations. Therefore, every such attempt to appropriate indigenous cultural production has always been hindered by dissociation of various degrees of perception.

Against the general approach to perceive boat race as a symbol of cultural and regional identity, commonly appealing for moving beyond all class boundaries, there is indeed an underground complex system of institutions and agents working on the model of cultural consumption and production. In the light of these arguments the recent studies on culture that transcend Bourdieu’s distinction of high and low culture and effectually problematizes the class factor in a more relevant context gain utmost significance. Furthermore, it is along this line of thought that Harrington and Bielby observes,

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Scholars from all perspectives now agree there is considerable fluidity between elite and mass culture. In other words, culture is a dynamic process rather than a static entity, and high/low distinctions can change over time, as can the social groups that engage them (Harrington and Bielby 7).

Unlike Bourdieu's framework, the boat race shows how class factors works in a different angle. Though the boat race cannot be differentiated as high or low cultural sport, the class factor appears to be an important component of it. The upper class and upper middle class take material and social advantage by indirectly identifying and participating in the particular cultural symbols and practices. Thus we see how class as a means of social stratification inhibit the general democratisation project of this magnificent cultural event. Moreover, the cultural critic du Gay's effective proposal to analyse and critically understand the popular cultural text seems pervading. According to him, there are five cultural processes namely "representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation" (Harrington and Bielby 11) that have to be seriously engaged in the analysis of any cultural text. Consequently, to "study an object or text culturally, 'one should at least explore how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use'" (Harrington and Bielby 11). This paper therefore thus attempted to facilitate this perspective of the cultural meaning making of the boat race by critically looking at the various above mentioned aspects of the popular text. I conclude my paper by thus exposing the pertinence of this particular approach for analysing and explaining the overarching concern and significance given to the boat races in late modern Kerala.

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