

## ARANMULA METAL MIRROR

ABOUT ninety-two miles to the north of Trivandrum is the ancient village of Aranmula idyllically situated in the Thiruvalla taluk on the left bank of the river Pamba. Famous for its old temple consecrated to God Parthasarathi, and the spectacular Annual snake boat regattas, Aranmula is the home of the unique bell metal industry carried on by a select band of hereditary master craftsmen who alone know the secret of casting bell metal mirrors from an alloy of copper and tin.



WEIGHING THE METALS TO FORM THE PROPER ALLOY

*Aranmula Kannadi* (Aranmula Mirror) which has gathered around it a tradition and sanctity and has been hailed as the finest and rarest example of bell metal casting is considered to be one of the most treasured curios of the world. Inspired art and impeccable craftsmanship combine to render the manufacture of this mirror one

of the most wonderful achievements of indigenous art-crafts, as remarkable as the mummification in ancient Egypt. The history of the origin of the industry is lost in obscurity. Tradition and legend aver that nearly four centuries ago, the Chief of the principality of Aranmula, a patron of arts and crafts, brought down a few families of *Kannans*, professional casters in bronze, to settle down in his principality and make the ceremonial utensils, decorative lamps, bells and such other articles required for daily use in the temple. He endowed the artisans with liberal grants of lands and special privileges. For some reason the craftsmen proved unsuccessful in their efforts to turn out the required articles to the satisfaction of the connoisseur Chief. The indignant Chief threatened the *Kannans* with eviction. The craftsmen who were at their wits' ends offered special sacrifices and prayers to the deity in the temple and decided to make a unique crown for the image in the shrine. The womenfolk of the *Kannans* threw into the melting pot all their tin ornaments accompanied by prayers and entreaties to the God to save their husbands from disgrace. The crown made out of the combination of copper and tin the exact proportion of which was at that time unknown to the

casters, was a marvel of art and craft. Silverlike in colour, and brittle like glass, it shone with rare brilliance, and when cleaned acquired the quality of reflection. The *makudam* or crown known as "*Kannadi Bimboni*" (Mirror Image) is even now preserved in the Aranmula temple and worshipped.

This startling and fortuitous discovery was immediately put to use by the intrepid Chief and the talented craftsmen. The casters worked out the proper proportion of the different metals and manufactured mirrors. The Chief liberally patronised the craftsmen in developing the industry. He proclaimed that the metal mirror was a gift of God and laid down that it should form one of the eight auspicious articles used in all Hindu religious rites. By observing this rule himself, he gave the lead, and the prominent people in the village



CRAFTSMEN ENGAGED IN POLISHING METAL MIRRORS

followed suit. The *Aranmula Kannadi* thus became an article of every day use in the Hindu household and was invested with a halo of sanctity.



A MASTER CRAFTSMAN WITH THE FINISHED PRODUCT,

The metal mirror is cast from an alloy of copper and tin, the exact proportion of which is a closely guarded secret of only two surviving families of *Kannans* at Aranmula. The metal mirror is usually oval in shape, six inches by four inches, and about one fifth of an inch thick and has a bright and polished surface as that of cut glass mirrors. The polishing of the surface of the mirror is a difficult and delicate job demanding consummate technical skill and utmost patience. A paste of rice bran and laurel or *maroti* (*Hydnocarpus Wightiana*) oils used for this purpose. The polished plate is



#### MANUFACTURING METAL MIRRORS

fixed with a mixture of lac and wax on an artistically engraved brass frame. Scientific skill and mastery of craftsmanship of the most advanced type, are required for casting these mirrors. The mirror elicits both the envy and admiration of modern metallurgists. The cost of materials required for casting these mirrors is small compared with the extent of highly skilled labour which the complicated process of manufacture demands. The different processes in the making of mirrors are attended to by the entire family of *Kannans*. The master craftsmen prepare the mould, the alloy and the

wax, and attend to casting and polishing. The making of a mirror involves the strenuous efforts of a whole family for four days. The price of a mirror is about Rs. 15. Although Aranmula Metal Mirrors may not be able to compete with cheap glass mirrors, they are prized very much by collectors of curios, especially connoisseurs hailing from foreign countries. There is every scope for the manufacture of metal mirrors flourishing as a cottage craft in which inspired art and accomplished craftsmanship combine to produce one of the marvels of metallurgy attempted nowhere else in the world. (K. P. P. T.)