

**Name of the Element:** Aranmula Metal Mirror, Aranmula Vallasadya, and Aranmula Vallamkali, Kerala.

**Community/ies:** Vishwakarma families, general population of Aranmula, local devotees.

**Region:** Kerala

**Brief Description:** Aranmula is a unique heritage town in Kerala, located about 128 km from Trivandrum, the capital city of Kerala. Situated on the banks of the holy river Pamba, Aranmula has been a pilgrimage center since time immemorial and was once a prestigious trade post when the river served as the chief mode of transport.

Known for its unique and exquisite traditions, cultural diversity, traditional village life, and picturesque scenery, Aranmula has been declared an international tourism destination by the Union Government. It has also been included in the Cultural Tourism Programme, a joint initiative of the Union Ministry of Tourism and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The centuries-old Aranmula Parthasarathi Temple is located in this village. Major spiritual gatherings, such as the largest Christian convention called the 'Maramon Convention' and the 'Ayiroor-Cherukolpuzha Hindu Matha Maha Sammelanam,' are held on the sandbanks of the Pamba River near Aranmula.

Today, Aranmula is one of the model tourism villages declared by Kerala Tourism. It has become a major center for cultural tourism in Kerala, attracting visitors from across India and abroad. Aranmula is renowned for its metal mirrors (Aranmula Kannadi), the centuries-old Sree Krishna temple, the unique ritualistic feast of Vallasadya, and the famous snake boat regatta (Vallamkali), earning a special place on the world tourism map.

### **Aranmula Kannadi**

Aranmula is famous for its metal mirrors made of bell metal, known as "Aranmula Kannadi." In Malayalam, "Kannadi" means "mirror." The unique 300-year-old metal mirrors from the village of Aranmula are crafted from a tin and copper alloy. Unlike ordinary mirrors, which create a gap between the object and its reflection, the Aranmula Metal Mirror has no such gap. Completely handmade, these mirrors reflect images with zero distortion. Only a few Vishwakarma families in Aranmula know the secret of crafting these 250–300-year-old metal mirrors.

This is a unique art form that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Exclusive to Aranmula, these mirrors are made entirely of metal, not glass. The techniques used to create them remain a closely guarded secret, passed down from generation to generation within a few families in the village.

Unlike silicon-based glass mirrors, Aranmula Kannadi is made of metal alloys polished to perfection to produce an undistorted image. This heritage craft was granted a Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2005, recognizing its cultural significance. The extraordinary craftsmanship and intricate

decorations ensure that visitors to Kerala often leave with one of these exotic mirrors. Renowned for their outstanding beauty and shrouded in secrecy, the Aranmula Kannadi is considered a medieval marvel in the annals of metallurgy.

The origins of the Aranmula Kannadi are linked to the Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple. According to legend, centuries ago, eight families of experts in temple arts and crafts were brought to Aranmula from Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu to work on the Parthasarathy Temple. While crafting a bronze crown for the temple's presiding deity, Lord Parthasarathy, they accidentally discovered the unique reflective property of an alloy made from copper and tin. Through experimentation, they refined the composition, eventually establishing the standards for making the metal mirror, which are still guarded secrets.

A special alloy is used to manufacture the Aranmula Kannadi. This front-surface reflection mirror eliminates secondary reflections and aberrations typical of back-surface mirrors. The exact composition of the alloy, believed to be a combination of copper and tin, is a closely guarded secret. Beyond creating the alloy, the process involves intensive polishing sessions lasting several days to achieve the desired reflective surface. Even today, craftsmen rely on traditional and indigenous methods to produce the Aranmula Kannadi. The creation of each mirror requires immense practice, focus, and patience to achieve perfection.

### **Aranmula Valla Sadhya (The Feast of Many Feasts)**

Kerala has always been rich in variety when it comes to ritualistic celebrations. The colorful and sumptuous "Aranmula Valla Sadhya," hosted by the heritage village of Aranmula, is one such unique tradition and a rare treat for the taste buds. This ritualistic feast follows the largest and oldest traditional river festival, the Aranmula Water Regatta, and is considered one of the largest ritual vegetarian feasts in India—and even the world—with over 70 dishes.

The Valla Sadhya is considered an offering to Lord Parthasarathy, the temple's presiding deity. As part of the ritual, the oarsmen of the snake boats, or *palliyodams*, are offered a grand feast by devotees. It is believed that the oarsmen represent the deity himself. The uniqueness of the event lies in its combination of ritual offerings, boat races, music, and an elaborate feast. This annual festival begins on July 15 and concludes on October 2.

The Aranmula Valla Sadhya is a two-month-long event featuring a series of daily feasts, known as *sadhya*s, conducted as offerings by devotees of Lord Krishna. This feast is particularly special as it is made lively and entertaining by the oarsmen, who sing special songs during the meal. The songs start with praises to Lord Parthasarathy of Aranmula, and as the feast progresses, the oarsmen's songs become playful, including poetic demands for specific dishes they wish to be served.

An intriguing aspect of the Valla Sadhya is how guests poetically request various dishes during the feast. The food is traditionally served on banana or plantain leaves. In 2016, it was estimated that

nearly 500,000 people participated in the Aranmula Valla Sadhya, a testament to the event's grandeur and significance.

### **Aranmula Vallamkali**

Aranmula Vallamkali, as it is known in the local language, is a river boat festival of Kerala. The Aranmula Uthrittathi Vallamkali, or Aranmula Boat Race, is one of the most ancient and revered boat races in Kerala. It is held on the day of the Uthrittathi asterism in the Malayalam month of Chingam (corresponding to dates between August 15 and September 20). The tranquil village of Aranmula, located in Kerala's Pathanamthitta district, hosts this post-harvest boat race.

The Aranmula race is a traditional and colorful carnival featuring caparisoned elephants, elaborately decorated floats, and temple-related rituals, with villagers singing boat songs in praise of Lord Krishna. The boats, known as *palliyodams*, belong to the villages along the banks of the Pampa River. Each boat, named after a local village, is 100 feet long and accommodates four helmsmen, 100 oarsmen, and 25 singers.

More of a ritual than a competitive race, the Aranmula Uthrittathi Boat Race is staged annually in the picturesque village of Aranmula in the Kozhencherry taluk of Pathanamthitta district. It is held on the Pamba River during the Uthrittathi asterism in the Malayalam month of Chingam, coinciding with the day of the installation of the presiding deity of the Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple.

The majestic snake boats, dedicated to Lord Parthasarathy (an incarnation of Lord Krishna), are adorned with intricate decorations. Men on the boats hold sequined parasols, and the boats arrive at the racecourse accompanied by traditional songs sung by the oarsmen. This event is often referred to as the *Pooram* festival among boat races due to its grandeur and festive atmosphere.

Each boat is a visual delight, featuring golden lace at the bow, flags, and ornamental umbrellas at the center. Before the race begins, the snake boats participate in a grand procession. Devotees hold these boats in great reverence, considering them divine vessels of the temple's presiding deity.