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RAGHAVENDRA SWAMY

Bronze - 19th Century, South India

Weight: 182.4 g and Dimensions: Height 7 cm

This bronze figure depicts Sri Raghavendra Swamy (1595–1671), the celebrated philosopher-saint of the Dvaita Vedanta tradition and spiritual leader [guru] of the Uttaradi Matha. He is also known as Raghavendra Tirtha. Cast in South India during the nineteenth century, the sculpture is 7 cm in height and weight is 182.4 g and was made specifically for domestic worship. Sculptures of this kind occupied a central place in household shrines, giving devotees a means of sustaining a personal and daily connection with the saint through ritual practice by offering flowers, lighting incense, presenting diya— all within the familiar surroundings of the home[1].

This bronze figure was produced within an artistic culture in which posture, gesture, facial expression, and the ornamented structure of the throne work together to give the saint's spiritual authority and sacred standing. The sculpture belongs to the South Indian tradition of devotional bronze casting, a practice in which artistic skill and religious purpose were never treated as separate concerns but were understood to reinforce one another at every stage of creation. Bronze itself —

[1] Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, "Shiva," *Hindu Janajagruti Samiti*, accessed June 8, 2026, https://www.hindujagruti.org/articles/48.html

an alloy composed primarily of copper and tin, with small quantities of other metals — has been the defining material of South Indian sacred sculpture for well over a thousand years.

The Chola dynasty (c. 850–1279 CE) brought this tradition to a level of achievement that has rarely been approached since, producing figures of the dancing Shiva known as Nataraja, the serene Parvati, and numerous other forms whose technical mastery and expressive depth remain a reference point for everything that followed. These were not simply well-made objects. They were images in which the full resources of the craft — proportion, surface, gesture, ornament — were brought to bear in the service of devotion, and the results have never been surpassed within the medium. The tradition did not conclude with the Cholas. It carried forward through the centuries of Vijayanagara rule, through the Nayaka kingdoms of the southern peninsular, and into the post-medieval period, adapting in style and responding to the changing requirements of different communities and different forms of worship. The figure under consideration here is a product of that continuous, living tradition — a later chapter in a story that stretches back at least to the ninth century, shaped by new devotional needs while remaining grounded in the accumulated knowledge of earlier generations of craftsmen[2].

This bronze figure was created using the cire perdue process, known in English as lost-wax casting — a method that South Indian bronze smiths had refined and practiced across many centuries before this piece was made. The process began with the sculptor building up a detailed model in wax, working through every element of the composition with care: the precise angle of the seated posture, the particular set of the facial features, the arrangement of ornaments, the structure and decoration of the throne-back. Nothing in the final bronze that was not first resolved in wax.

Once the wax model was complete, it was encased in successive layers of clay, forming a mould that took the exact impression of the surface. The mould was then given to heat, which caused the wax to melt and drain away entirely, leaving behind a hollow space in the precise shape of the intended image. Into this space, molten bronze was poured. When the metal had cooled and

[2]Asia Society Museum, "Art for the Mughal and Rajput Courts," *The Collection in Context*, accessed June 8, 2026 https://www.asiasocietymuseum.com/region_results.asp?RegionID=1&CountryID=1&ChapterID=7

solidified, the clay mould was broken open — a process that destroyed it entirely, meaning that no two castings from the same mould were ever possible[3].

What emerged from the mould was then worked further by hand. The tilak mark on the forehead was engraved with a fine tool to produce clean, precise lines. The strands of prayer beads were defined and detailed. The decorative patterns across the surface of the throne-back were chased and refined, each motif brought to a greater degree of clarity and finish than the casting alone could achieve. This combination of casting and hand-finishing is characteristic of the South Indian devotional bronze tradition and reflects the understanding that the mould provided a beginning, not an end. The finest qualities of the surface — the engraved lines, the ornamental details, the careful rendering of textile and jewellery — were the result of sustained hand work applied after the bronze had cooled.

Sri Raghavendra Swamy is shown seated in dhyanasana — the cross-legged posture of meditation — upon a cushioned seat bearing an animal head. The body is composed and still, the weight evenly settled, the bearing neither tense nor slack. It is the posture of someone who has arrived at a place of inner stability and who teaches from that ground. The overall composition is arranged so that the eye is drawn naturally to the two focal points of the image: the face, which carries the expression of calm authority, and the raised right hand, which carries the primary iconographic message of the sculpture. His right hand is raised in abhaya mudra— one of the most widely recognised and significant gestures in the whole of Indian sacred art. The palm faces outward, the fingers extend upward, the arm is lifted in a gesture that has been understood across Hindu and Buddhist traditions for centuries to mean: be without fear, you are protected, the grace of this figure is extended toward you. In sculpture and painting alike, abhaya mudrā appears in representations of deities, saints, and guru wherever the intention is to communicate the accessibility of divine support[4].

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[3] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Lost-Wax Process," accessed June 9, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/technology/lost-wax-process

[4] John C. Huntington, *Mudra in Pan-Asian Buddhism, Part 1: Primary Mudras of the Major Buddhas* (Columbus: Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art, n.d.), accessed June 9, 2026, https://huntingtonarchive.org/resources/downloads/webPresentations/mudraInAsianBuddhism.pdf

Within the specific context of Raghavendra Swamy's devotional tradition, this gesture carries a meaning shaped by a very particular belief. According to the tradition maintained by his followers, the saint entered his brindavana at Mantralayam in 1671 not in death but in a state of living samadhi — a condition of absorbed spiritual presence from which he is understood to continue offering blessings and guidance to devotees who approach him[5]. The raised hand is therefore not a historical record of a gesture once made. It is an expression of something believed to be ongoing: the saint's continuing protective presence and his enduring willingness to receive the prayers of those who come to him.

Rising behind the seated figure is an elaborate throne-back whose surface is worked with medallions, beaded borders, floral motifs, hanging garlands, and architectural framing elements. The density and quality of this ornamentation are among the most visually striking aspects of the sculpture and reflect the richness of the decorative traditions associated with South Indian metalwork more broadly. The throne does not function solely as visual embellishment. Within the established conventions of Hindu religious art, the throne-back is a marker of elevated status — a setting reserved for deities, for saints of the highest regard, and for guru whose authority within their tradition places them in a position analogous to the divine. By framing Raghavendra Swamy within this ornate architectural backdrop, the sculptor makes a statement about how this figure is to be understood: not simply as a learned man remembered with affection, but as a guru of enduring spiritual authority, a source of guidance and grace whose presence remains active and whose position within the tradition commands the deepest reverence.

The Vaishnava identity of Sri Raghavendra Swamy is most visibly expressed through the vertical tilak marks worn on the forehead. These marks are the well-known sign of a Vishnu devotee, indicating that the wearer belongs to the Vaishnava tradition of worship and devotion. The strands of prayer beads worn around the neck further reinforce this identity, their presence connecting the guru visually and symbolically with a life organised around recitation and devotion. The beard and moustache, carefully rendered in the casting and refined in the finishing, form part of the

[5] Rajaraman Nagarajan and Namratha Joshi, *Guru Raghavendra for Novices: Life and Teachings of Guru Raghavendra Swamy*, ed. Veena (2009), 2–3, https://www.gururaghavendra.net/rayaruforyouthfinal.pdf

established visual portrait of this particular saint — features that had become standardised across representations of Raghavendra Swamy and that allowed devotees to recognise him immediately, distinguishing him from the many other teachers and ascetics who populate South Indian religious art. Sri Raghavendra Swamy is connected most strongly across Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu — the regions most directly shaped by the growth of the Dvaita Vedanta tradition founded by Madhvacharya.

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