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Temple Bell / Ghanta or Ghanti / Bell Clapper

Tamil Nadu / South Indian temple - Dravidian Style

It is a ritual bell, known in Sanskrit as a "ghanta" or "ghanti," made of bronze and used in Hindu devotional and temple practice. A sculpture of Nandi, the sacred bull and the vahana of Lord Shiva, is placed on top of the bell, shown in a calm, reclining posture. Beneath the finial, a circular shaft is decorated with standing deities such as guardian figures, creating a highly symbolic vertical composition. The lower body of the bell is rather austere and smooth, enabling the object to preserve its major acoustic function.

This is part of a long ritual tradition from South India, where bronze objects are more than utilitarian implements; they are sacred manifestations of divine presence. In Hindu worship, sound is a vital means of spiritual transformation, and bells are essential for marking sacred time, purifying ritual space, and calling for divine attention[1].

This bronze bell appears to be part of South Indian metal traditions, possibly from Tamil Nadu, as such artifacts are commonly seen in Dravidian temple rituals. It is also called a bell clapper. South Indian ritual objects were traditionally produced by the lost-wax process (cire perdue), a technique flourished in the region during

[1] Stella Kramrisch, Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch, ed. and with a biographical essay by Barbara Stoler Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 22

the Chola period and carried out by hereditary bronze-casting communities[2]. In this process, wax model is carefully sculpted with all the desired details, including iconographic elements, ornaments, and decorative motifs. Layers of clay are then applied to the wax model and heated so that the wax melts away, leaving a negative space into which molten metal is poured. Once cooled, the clay is broken, and the object is cleaned, polished, chased, and refined by hand.

The bell illustrates a sophisticated combination of sculptural detail and functional craft. The representation of the Nandi has been especially well executed, as visible through surface ornamentation of saddlecloth, body ornaments, and incised decorative bands, shows good metal craftsmanship, which indicates bronze-casting tradition. The figures of guardians deities along with shaft, can be seen with remarkable clarity in spite of their size and contribute to the iconographic richness of the bell. The bell was made by the lost-wax method, which allowed for detailed figural work, while the bell chamber was hammered and polished into shape and balanced structural integrity with acoustic quality.

This bell can be divided into three main parts: the body of the bell, the shaft with its sculptural zone, and the Nandi finial. The resonating chamber is the lower part, broad and flaring at the rim, with incised concentric bands at the base and shoulder. In this section, compared to the upper sculptural section, there is relatively little decoration, which emphasizes the sonic quality and clarity of resonance. The smooth metallic surface causes the vibration to travel evenly when struck internally by the clapper. In the theory of ritual, the physical form of the bell body is often understood to symbolize cosmic fullness of primordial sound.

The main shaft is structural and iconographic. It rises vertically through a series of rounded mouldings and supports a circular sculptural zone with standing guardian figures in circumambulatory composition, probably Shaiva attendant deities or divine guardians. They portray the handle a sacred space of micro-architectural form, a living symbol of temple iconographic convention. Nandi sits at the top in a seated position facing outwards. His body is stylized with rounded limbs, a slightly raised head, alert ears, and rich body decorations. Nandi is not merely decorative but conceptually central to the identity of the bell.

[2] R. Nagaswamy, *Masterpieces of Early South Indian Bronzes* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1983),132

He is Shiva's vahana and foremost devotee, reflecting unwavering devotion, discipline, patience, and spiritual loyalty. His place at the top denotes a ritual ascent from material sound to divine consciousness. The presence of Nandi strongly identifies this bell as coming from a Shaivite ritual context. In Indian temple architecture, Nandi traditionally sits facing directly the sanctum of Shiva as guardian, witness, and intermediary. The adorned body of Nandi also communicates ceremonial culture, as the saddlecloth and ornamental harness indicate his status as a divine royal being rather than an ordinary bull. This bell indicates it was used for household shrines rather than a monumental public display.

The sculptural band beneath Nandi adds a further symbolic dimension, the standing figures forming a sacred encirclement indicating that the bell is a concentrated sacred cosmos. Rather than just a hand-held instrument, the object is a ceremonial axis of multiple levels of sacred presence: sound below, deities in the center, and Nandi on top. This sort of multi-level symbolism is typical of Hindu ritual aesthetics, where even the most everyday religious instruments are conceptually integrated into cosmological systems. This bell is designed as a symbolic sacred form, where each section carries spiritual meaning. The lower bell body relates to ritual sound and the physical world, the central figures represent divine presence, and Nandi at the top reflects devotion and Shaiva belief. Together, the object combines religious symbolism, ritual purpose, and artistic craftsmanship.

Hindu ritual practice involves the ringing of bells at the beginning of worship, during aarti, and at the peak moments of offering. The bell ringing performs several ritual functions: it marks the beginning of a sacred action, it calls upon the divine, it drives away negative energies, and it focuses the mind of the devotee. The sound of the bell as described in traditional Sanskrit texts is spiritually purifying. This sound is often linked to nada, or cosmic vibration, thought to bridge the material world and metaphysical reality. The resonance of the bell is also associated with the fundamental syllable AUM (OM), which in Hindu philosophy is regarded as the sound form of universal consciousness. So, this bell is not merely struck to produce sound but is invoked to produce sacred vibration[3].

[3] Manish Kumar Dwivedi and S. K. Singh, "Scientific Analysis of AUM Mantra in Knowing Self," *ResearchGate*, accessed May 6, 2026, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312153393

Compared to Buddhist ritual bells from places like Java(Indonesia), Nepal, Japan, and Pagan (Myanmar), which are often crowned with vajra finials symbolizing spiritual power, wisdom, and the union of method and knowledge, South Indian ritual bells follow a distinctly different visual and theological language. Sound is sacred and purificatory in both traditions, but

Buddhist bells are often more abstractly tantric in their symbolism, as expressed in forms such as the vajra, lotus, and mandala-inspired ornamentation, as in the Javanese Ghenṭa[4]. South Indian bells are more closely associated with temple worship and sectarian devotion, often having sculptural finials of sacred beings like Nandi and Garuda, which immediately indicate their ritual connection.

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