

Introduction

Discovering Sabha Theater

SABHA SECRETARY SHANKAR: There's no need for you to *worry*, Doctor. Your daughter's dance *arangetram* will be in our sabha only.

DOCTOR: What, Shankar? You have been saying this same thing for three years. You won't give a *chance*.

SHANKAR: As soon as you return from your *foreign trip* the *arangetram* will happen. *Definite*. When you are coming back from *foreign* could you please bring me one small *radio*? Please try . . . (he exits)

DOCTOR (to Nurse Parvati): Listen. I'll tell you one thing. Don't let your daughter learn *dance*. If she learns, it's all over. Whether the *arangetram* happens or not, your prestige will sail away on a boat. You'll have to go begging to all the sabha people in town. Otherwise, your daughter . . .

PARVATI: I'm not even married.¹

—From *Cāttiram Connatillai* (*The Scriptures Don't Say So*) by Cho Ramasamy

This joke, from Cho Ramasamy's 1979 play *Cāttiram Connatillai*, demonstrates the amount of power wielded by cultural organizations called *sabhas* in the city of Chennai (formerly Madras), India. Doctor Kailasam has been trying to schedule a debut performance, or *arangetram*, for his young daughter for three years, with no success. He has put a lot of time and energy into cultivating a relationship with Shankar, the secretary of

one of these sabhas, in the hope that he will commit to a date. The play makes it clear that Shankar will never commit, because he enjoys exploiting the leverage he has over the doctor too much. As Nurse Parvati says to the doctor later in the scene, “you are giving that sabha secretary an awful lot of leeway . . . He is accomplishing everything in this *nursing home*.” As a cultural gatekeeper in the true sense of the word, Shankar helps determine which dancers are allowed a platform for performance and thereby sets the standards for dance in the city. Those decisions, this joke implies, may be based as much on personal networks, favors, and connections as they are on the skill and training of any individual dancer.

Defining Sabha

The word *sabha* simply means “association” or “organization,” and it was commonly used all over India in a manner similar to the words *majlis*, *mehfil*, and *jalsa* to convey the general sense of a public function, recital, or performance. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries another use of the word *sabha* became popular with reference to drama. Not only were the performances referred to as sabhas, but the plays themselves. The most famous of this genre was the *Indar Sabha*, a play designed to be a performance within a performance. The audience in the theater watched the character of Indra, king of the gods, enjoying musical performances at his court (“sabha”). The play, written entirely in verse, had no divisions of acts or scenes and was basically a collection of songs held together by a thread of a story. The *Indar Sabha*, as printed text, stage drama, set of recorded songs, and film, was popular for more than one hundred years in a number of different languages and inspired many other plays based on the same principle. This genre of plays was referred to as *sabhai nataka* (“sabha drama”) in Urdu literary history² and differs greatly from the sabha dramas I discuss in the context of post-Independence Tamilnadu, traces of which can be found in the historical narrative of Tamil drama as amateur theater, modern theater, and metro theater.

The word *sabha* was associated not just with particular plays, but also with Tamil drama *troupes* well before India’s independence and the beginning of the sabha theater. Troupes such as the Mangala Bala Gana Sabha, N. S. K. Nataka Sabha, Sakti Nataka Sabha, and the Devi Nataka Sabha³ would remain at a single theater and stage several plays over a fixed period of time. They took advantage of being in one place by using

elaborate sets. “Sabha theater,” in the sense that I (and M. Tangarasu) use it, refers to sabhas as private cultural organizations in Chennai that organize and sponsor classical music and dance performances along with some dramas and the occasional film, debate, or religious discourse. They have been the dominant patrons of the arts in the city since the 1928 founding of the Music Academy of Madras.

Sabhas organize entertainment for their members, whose fees vary based on the hall that they use for their performances,⁴ where the seats are in the theater, and how long a commitment the member makes (e.g., seasonal, one year, lifetime membership). Chennai’s sabhas have earned an international reputation for quality performance arts based on the annual music festival they organize, which typically involves well over 2,500 classical music and dance performances within a month-long period (see Fuller and Narasimhan 2014, 202). Less well known is that they have also dictated the style and content of the popular Tamil drama for the past seventy years. Each sabha has its own identity and focus based on the tastes of the founders and response of members to each year’s schedule. “At the beginning of the twenty-first century,” writes Amanda Weidman, “this idea has been carried to such an extreme that many concert-goers identify the type of music-lover they are by the sabhas whose concerts they attend; even though for the most part all the sabhas feature the same musicians, one makes a social statement by choosing where one goes to hear them” (Weidman 2006, 80–81). The same is true for theatrical productions.

“Sabha Theater” (or “Metro Theatre” as S. Gopalie calls it) is a genre of Tamil-language commercial theater that started in Chennai in the period following India’s 1947 independence from British colonial rule. Its name comes from the fact that these amateur drama troupes rely on the sabha patronage system for survival, but the theater also has a very specific aesthetic and narrative style. The plays are part of a multilingual world of folk and experimental theater, classical music and dance, and Tamil-language television and film. The sabha theater crosses over with each of these, sharing writers, actors, and narratives in varying combinations.

I went to my first sabha play on July 24, 2001, the day of Tamil stage and film star Sivaji Ganesan’s funeral procession.⁵ It was one of S. Ve. Shekher’s, at the Narada Gana Sabha. Shekher talked about how he had been up since six that morning and had followed the funeral procession on foot all the way from Sivaji’s house in T. Nagar to the cremation grounds near my flat in Besant Nagar (approximately eight kilometers). I remember the hilarity, and how hard it was to catch any of the jokes,

when the audience was laughing so hard they drowned out the punch lines. But most of all, I remember the minute of silence for Sivaji, when I could have heard a pin drop in that theater.

Intrigued, I went to see Crazy Mohan's hit play *Jurassic Baby*, where the children and adults in the audience roared with laughter as the actor playing Cheenu (the late "Cheenu" Mohan) dressed in a diaper and acted like a baby on stage. I was fascinated by the sabha plays from the start; even though I didn't catch many of the jokes, I could see how much the audiences loved them. The experience was markedly different from other performances I'd attended in India. It wasn't the absorbed concentration of a classical performance; the casual, distracted attention of a folk performance; the shouting at the screen, singing along, and catcalls of a film; or the turn-off-the-mobile-phone polite focus of a modern (I use this in the sense of Aparna Dharwadker, 2019) or English-language drama.

I was hooked, and full of questions about everything. This book is the result of twenty years spent trying to answer those questions, to uncover the history, give a name, and sketch the generic boundaries for this type of theater as well as to analyze and interpret particular plays and to seriously consider what they mean for those who produce and consume them. I don't answer all these questions, and am oftentimes left with more, but I am also left an audience member and fan, happy to pay a few hundred rupees to enjoy the clever humor and insider camaraderie of a sabha play.

Development of Sabha Theater

The most numerous, visible, and popular plays staged in Tamilnadu's capital city of Chennai today bear little resemblance to the stereotypes of Indian performances that most people are familiar with from folk theater, classical dance, or commercial film. The costumes, make-up, stage settings, and language are actually quite quotidian, and there is little spectacle, song, or dance to draw in viewers. Additionally, individual tickets are relatively expensive, but few in the academic or modern drama worlds have any respect for these plays or consider them real "theater," as I learned when contact after contact suggested I change my research topic.

Sabha theater was one of the new dramatic traditions that started in the post-Independence period that favored dialogue over other aspects of production. It fits nicely into Susan Seizer's fourth stage in the "history

of the development of modern Tamil drama” that culminates “in the development of two distinct styles of drama, the elite amateur style of the sabhas, private social organizations that sponsor theatre and music concerts, spurred by ‘self-consciously modern elite sensibilities’ and the popular professional style of the commercial theatre companies who put on ‘company dramas’” (Seizer 2009, 78). Lawyer and judge Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar (1873–1964) is widely known as the “Founding Father of Tamil Theatre” (Muthiah 2003; Sundaram 2014). He started the Suguna Vilas Sabha in 1891 as a theater company to promote amateur Tamil-language drama in Madras.⁶ It continued through the Second World War and then transformed into a social club. The Suguna Vilas Sabha and the genre of theater it inspired borrowed more from the British theater than from the Parsi, which isn’t surprising given that sabha theater actors come from elite backgrounds and have western-style educations, steady incomes, and secure social statuses. They choose to take up participation in dramas as a hobby, rather than as a career. They take pride in being from “good families” and thus free from the commercial need to please the public and earn money, instead describing themselves as having the freedom to serve the art and create.

Elite amateur drama was not a new phenomenon in the post-Independence period; elites have been translating and adapting western dramas as early as the 1860s in Chennai, as Theodore Baskaran (1981) has discussed in detail, but it was new for sabhas, functioning as a patronage system, to support this type of drama in this period. Although sabha theater shares elite creators and audiences with modern and experimental theater traditions, most scholars of Tamil drama employ the common analytical strategy of contrasting them, always to the detriment of the popular plays. Ramanujam (2003a), Perumal (1981), and other like-minded scholars favor the work of Tamil playwrights such as N. Muthuswamy and Indira Parthasarathy, who spent time in Delhi and are concerned with theater and stagecraft theory. These playwrights are part of a national theatrical tradition that Aparna Dharwadker (2005, 2019) has described as “modern” Indian theater, as I discuss further in chapter 7.

Very few scholars, in either Tamil or English, have addressed the genre of sabha theater, even those who wrote at the time when sabha plays were at the peak of their popularity (1965–1985). I suggest that the lack of critical attention is due to the plays’ highly specific target audience, status as entertainment, and focus on humor. These plays do not fit the definition of “theater” that many intellectuals use and are thus

ignored in favor of the experimental theater with its leftist politics and potential for social reform. On October 4, 2003, *The Hindu*, Chennai's major English-language newspaper, did a spread called "On the Stage in Chennai" that discusses the history of theater in the post-colonial city from about the 1950s. It says very clearly that "[t]here was a time when the only theatre group in Chennai was the Madras Players." That troupe, known for their performances of Shakespeare, celebrated their fiftieth anniversary in 2005—shortly after sabha theater groups like the United Amateur Artists (2002; see figure I.1) and Viveka Fine Arts (2004; see figure I.2) celebrated theirs.⁷ The article completely ignores, and in its selective telling of history, erases, the most visible and popular theatrical tradition Chennai has seen in the post-Independence period.

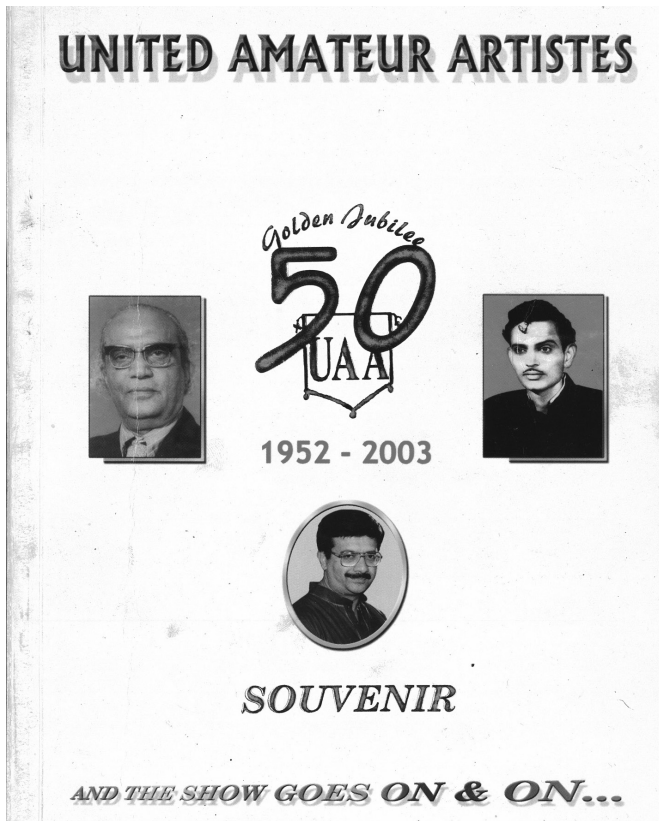


Figure I.1. Cover of United Amateur Artists Golden Jubilee souvenir. Source: Author's collection.

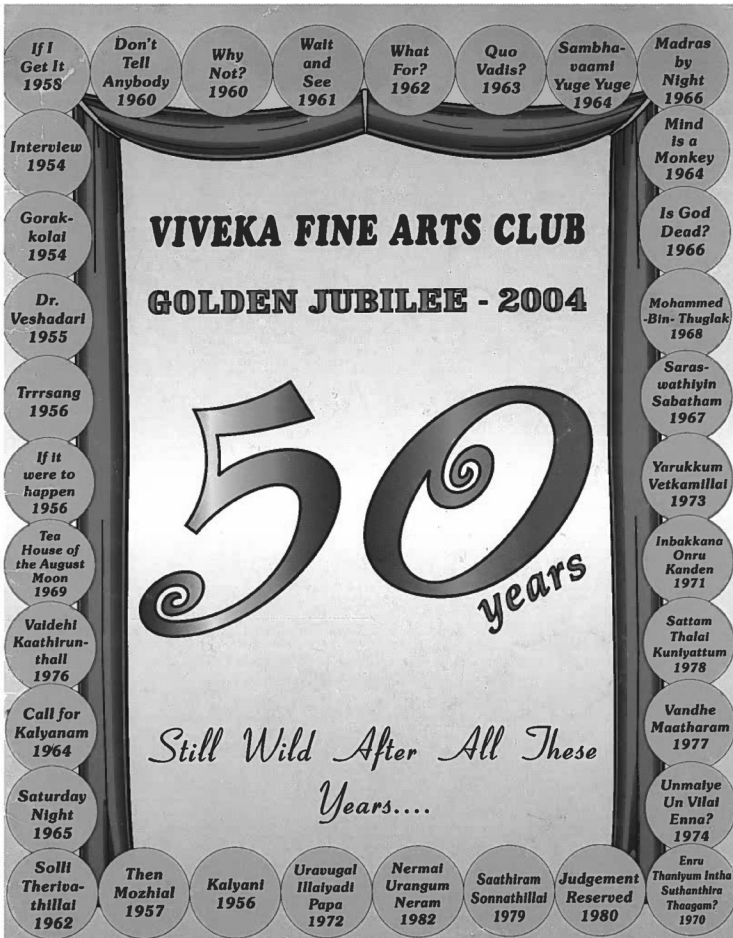


Figure I.2. Cover of Viveka Fine Arts Golden Jubilee souvenir. Source: Author's collection.

Sabha plays tend to focus on light-hearted entertainment, and they have a recognizable formula, like all popular culture genres, that continues to draw audiences to the theater. Audience members are individuals who each bring different experiences and interests to their viewings. However, the viewers of a particular genre such as this do represent a community whose interests and values form distinct clusters. Seeing a number of sabha plays and recognizing the structural, aesthetic, and thematic similarities, audience members come to hold certain expectations when they

go to the theater. Farley Richmond and S. Shankar have both argued that the homogenization of the plays is an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the sabha patronage system. Richmond, for example, writes that “[i]n the late 1960s and early 1970s it became apparent that a theatre group needed the Sabhas in order to survive . . . The theatre groups were forced to cater to the whims and tastes of the Sabha office bearers and their membership. Plays with controversial themes or productions with unique or unusual themes or staging techniques were out of the question because they did not appeal to the tastes of the Sabhas” (1990, 431). In the first chapter, I explain in more detail how the sabha system works and why the plays are so dependent on them.

When I arrived in Chennai for fieldwork in June 2003, I started attending as many plays sponsored by sabhas as I could in order to develop a sense of what sabha theater is all about. I estimate that I have now seen around 150 such performances. I would go backstage and meet the artists, which in the sabha world often translated into an invitation to attend any future plays as a guest of the troupe with automatic backstage access. I checked *The Hindu's* event listings (see figure I.3) every day for a year and showed up at some hall or other three or four nights a week for performances. I bought every audiocassette, published play, and DVD I could find and borrowed some that were out of print or unpublished, spending hours on my own and with Pritham Chakravarthy or S. Radhakrishnan listening and reading. I read through years of issues of *The Hindu* newspaper and searched through artists' scrapbooks for published criticism in both English and Tamil. I talked to audience members and visited artists at their homes, backstage, and on tour in India and in the US (see figure I.4 for a poster advertising a performance of S. Ve. Shekher's in Dubai).

The more performances I saw, the deeper my questions became. I began to notice the striking similarities that connected the artists and audiences in terms of education, caste, class, region, and religion, and started studying patronage patterns. I learned that this is, above all, an insider theater.⁸ I went into the field asking questions about globalization and the purpose of regional-language theater for this elite group of Chennai-ites, most of whom are educated in English. But as time went by, I slowly realized that the audiences and performers were bound not only by their language, religion, and class, but also by their high-caste status as Brahmins. This book is about a particular genre of theater and

www.dharmaparam.org

Bharat Kalachar
 In association with Vision Care, 21st Feb. 6-30 p.m. at Dr. Rama Rao Kala Mandap (A/c), Habibullah Road, T.Nagar, inauguration of U.A.A.'s new drama "UBHADESAM SEIVATHU UAA" — written by Venkat; dramatized and directed by Y. Gee. Mahendra; A Five in one Comedy rich with purposeful humour through unique stories told by Sri Sathya Sai Baba, Osho, The Gita and Zen Buddhism; Hon'ble Justice Sri K. S. Bakthavatsalam lights the Kuthuvilakku; website: www.ygeem.com

Brahma Gana Sabha (Ph:56106425)
 At Rani Seethai Hall. 13th Feb. NALLATHORE VEENAI SATHIY. 21st Feb. Rail Priyas Anniversary — Two fully hilarious Comedy Skits. 28th Feb. Kathadi's New Play ORU KODI ASAIGAL. Limited membership available.

Esther Fine Arts, 32857997
 Today 6-50 p.m. at Rajaannamalai Mandram A/c, Nanjil Nee Manimaran in PUTHIYA BHOOMI, Cine Dance Programme. Bkg. 10 a.m.

Hamsadhvani (Regd.), 24915555
 14th Annual February, March, April mega festival of 80 concerts commences on Wednesday, February 18 (Mahasivarathiri day). Watch out for details. New members enrolled.

Hums and Drums, Phone: 26600985
 To-day 2-30 p.m. SAINT THYAGARAJA SWAMIGAL ARADHANA PANCHARATNA KRITIS followed individual performances by Musicians at Maharishi Vidya Mandir, 28, Dr. Guruswamy Road, Off. Poonamalle High Road. Musicians Rasikas welcome.

Kalarasana
 On 7th: Gitanjali's PENN BIMBANGAL by Augusto.

Kartik Fine Arts (Regd.), Ph: 24997788
 Performance for Feb. 2004. 2nd PURANDARADASAR DAY — Music by CHARULATHA MANI — Tiruvavur Balam, Papanasam Kumar-Nanganallur Swaminathan. Talent promotion programme dances with financial aid from Tamilnadu Eyal

Music Dance Drama

Abbas/ Prabhat, 9840051463
 Today 7-00 p.m., Narada Ghana Sabha Hall A/c, The Great Comedy Thinker Crazy Mohan's Record created, Masterpiece, Decent Comedy, Crazy Mohan, Balaji in MARRIAGE MADE IN SALOON. Gather to laugh together. Bkg. 9-00 a.m. at Hall: 24990850. Spons: MY TVS QUALITY USED CARS, MARS — MIOT ACCIDENT RESCUE SERVICES.

Abinaya/ IVK, 9840354779
 Today 7 p.m. Narada Gana Sabha (Mini Hall) A/c, Comedy King S. V. Shekher's superhit hilarious non-stop comedy "YAMIRUKKA BAYAM YEAN". Bkg. 9-01 a.m. Ph: 24993201.

Arasu Arts/ Priya
 Today at 7 p.m. at Rani Seethai Hall, Comedy King Basky in "OHO" By: T. D. Balu. Booking at the hall 5 p.m. onwards.

Bharat Kalachar
 Prog. for Feb. 04. 8th Feb. 9 a.m. sharp under the Endowment of Sri P. OBUL REDDY & Smt. P. GNANAMBA — THIAGARAJA ARADHANA CELEBRATION and Group singing of PANCHARATHNA KRITHIS lead by Senior musicians; As a homage and in memory of former Chairman, Advisory Council, Bharat Kalachar awards Dr. SEMMANGUDI SRINIVASA IYER VET-

Handwritten: Hindu Feb 1, 2004

Figure I.3. "Music Dance Drama" events listing from *The Hindu*, February 1, 2004. Source: Author's collection.

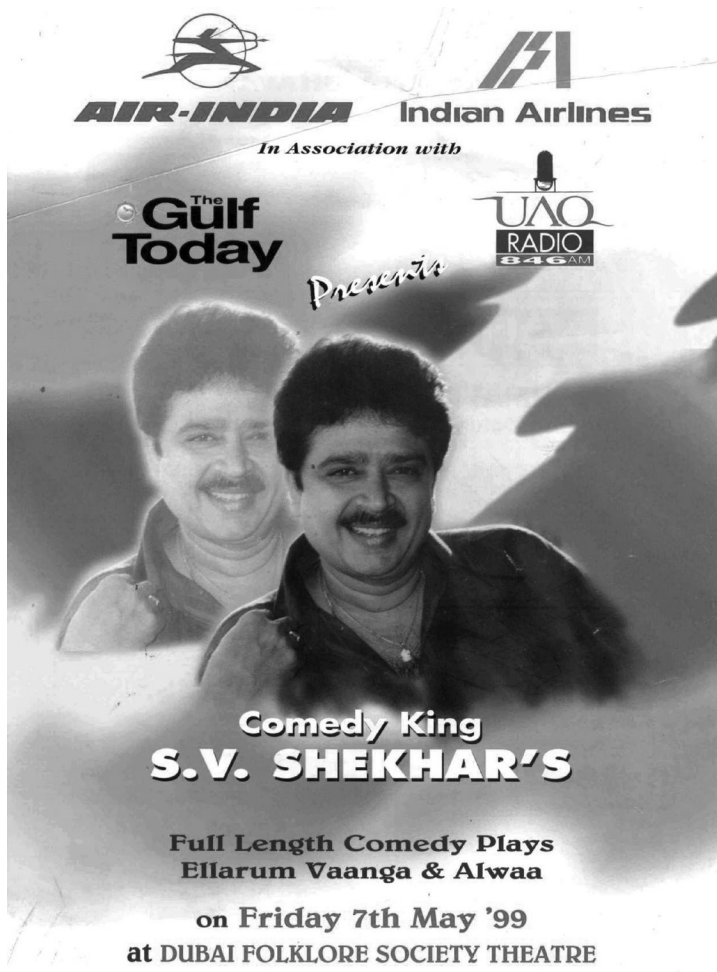


Figure I.4. Poster for S. Ve. Shekher's plays *Ellarum Vānga* (*Everyone Is Welcome*) and *Alwaa* (*Halwa*) held at the Dubai Folklore Society Theater on May 7, 1999. Source: Courtesy of S. Ve. Shekher.

the specific, urban, elite Brahmin community that has used it to construct and project its own superior identity.

Part I provides a general analytical framework for the discussion of sabha theater in context. In it, I describe sabha theater as a genre, contextualizing it historically, politically, and aesthetically so as place it within the wider history of the Tamil stage. In this section, I discuss the way that this

theater expresses a Tamil Brahmin identity that struggles with being simultaneously traditional and modern, counteracts the negative public image of Brahmins that is projected by the Dravidian movement, and distinguishes these plays and their viewers from the so-called vulgar arts of film and professional theater while connecting them to the respected classical performing arts. I also detail the critiques of the theater, which include lackluster aesthetics, repetitive formula, undemanding content, and the fact that it is socially exclusive. Part II then offers examples in the form of case studies of particular plays that illustrate and elaborate upon the key arguments set out in Part I. These chapters analyze sabha theater as an expression of a complex Brahmin identity, using the humor displayed in the genre's plays as a tool to access and reveal this identity. I also point to specific examples within the plays that are meant to serve as markers of a superior Brahmin identity such as the absence of song and dance, the use of Brahmin dialect, and the limited participation of women. The area studies approach combines ethnography with performance studies as well as historical and literary analytical methodologies in order to view these arts and communities from a multidimensional position. Ethnographic information obtained through questionnaires, interviews with performers, writers, and audience members as well as the observation of rehearsals, performances, and television and film shootings helps present a complex view of a theatrical genre that is simultaneously patronized and dismissed by its viewers.

Brahmins became the most powerful taste-makers (in Pierre Bourdieu's sense) in Chennai through a combination of factors involving long-standing privilege, colonialism, law, and nepotism.⁹ These structural advantages have made them disproportionately influential in shaping middle-class culture in the city. They dominate not only the sabhas, but also the press and the universities, which means that it has been difficult to find perspectives on sabha theater from outside this insider group's feedback loop. As an outsider myself, with no caste affiliation, I have tried to be cognizant of this fact and to not only introduce and nuance critiques where I find them, but also to consider from whom they are coming. In contrast to other scholars (Singer 1972; Hancock 1999), I argue that Brahmin identity is not best visible in tradition and ritual, because performances of the classical arts and the response of connoisseur audiences to them reveal an ideal that is frozen in time. Unlike classical music and dance, which are valued because of their adherence to "tradition," sabha theater is a relatively recent development that reflects shifts in the political and social identity of the elite Tamil Brahmin community in Chennai.

I look to something fluid, spontaneous, and contested: humor. Jokes are cued, but it is common for them to fall flat, lose relevance over time, and appeal to limited groups. Marx and Sienkiewicz point out that “[c]omedy . . . has a powerful capacity to create in-groups and out-groups. It ruthlessly sorts individuals by whether or not they have the requisite background experience to understand and enjoy that which is making everyone else laugh. This is particularly important at the level of nation. Nations, regardless of how natural and eternal they may feel, are products of social convention and require constant upkeep” (2018, 239). Caste has been around in some form or another for several thousand years, so feels even more natural and eternal than the nation, in spite of the work that has been done to dismantle the system. Comedy creates inside jokes that help to keep these societal divisions current, and those who find it funny, belong; those who either don’t get it or don’t think it’s funny can be excluded and “be argued to not ‘properly’ belong to that community” (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 268). So, when audiences actually laugh and find intended jokes funny, they are signaling their belonging to what they consider to be a desirable, exclusive, and elite group. These performances and jokes can thus offer insights into the non-idealized self-conceptions of the community of observers who are responsible for the creation of taste in Chennai.

Chapter 1 takes an in-depth look at the community of patrons through the sabhas themselves. It considers what they are, how they became popular, the kinds of entertainment they promote, and the effect these organizations have on the form and content of the theatrical genre that bears their name. Using Bourdieu’s theories of distinction, I look at the sabhas as a space in which the classical arts are promoted alongside often-disparaged comedy plays and how the entertainment schedules distinguish these viewers from, particularly, film audiences. Chapter 2 situates sabha theater and its Brahmin patrons in the political context of Tamilnadu during the period when it emerged and examines the importance of caste identity to this particular genre. Chapter 3 is designed to give a closer look at the quantifiable characteristics of the genre. It answers questions such as the following: What does sabha theater look like? What are the conventions of the genre and where is there room for invention and play? What can you expect to see and hear when you attend a play in terms of performers, aesthetics, style, content, language, and humor?

The individual plays in part II serve as case studies for detailed analyses that examine the way Brahmin identity is constructed and how the

exclusion or negative treatment of female characters as well as members of lower-class communities reassert Brahmin male superiority. Chapter 4 analyzes the play *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* (*Wedding in Washington*) from the early 1960s. This play offers a very detailed description of a perfect Brahmin marriage . . . in Washington, DC. It clearly delineates the role of good Brahmins in society and the proper way for family relations to work by describing every item of food, clothing, and ritual in detail for the characters of the clueless Americans. Chapter 5 moves from marriage to two other life-cycle rituals: going on a honeymoon and having a baby. Kathadi Ramamurthy's *Honeymoon Couple* (1979) and Crazy Mohan's *Jurassic Baby* (2001) express cultural values and expectations through circumstances designed to be funny as well as include individual jokes, which reveal instances of belonging and inclusion. Chapter 6 looks at two plays from very different time periods where the heroes masquerade as servants in order to think about issues of class relations and purity/vulgarity, both of which are central to the self-construction of this Tamil Brahmin community, which Fuller and Narasimhan argue can be described as a "middle-class caste" (2014). Purnam Viswanathan's *Undersecretary* from the 1950s and S. Ve. Shekher's 1993 *Cinna Māṭṭē, Periya Māṭṭē* (*Younger Son-in-Law, Elder Son-in-Law*) reveal differences in the ways that Tamils thought about these issues in the post-colonial as opposed to the post-economic liberalization periods. Chapter 7's analysis of Cho Ramasamy's 1968 political satire *Mohammed bin Tughlaq* looks closely at the divide within the Tamil Brahmin community as it projects itself as both regional and pan-Indian, both traditional and modern. Here, I probe the blurred boundaries between the sabha theater genre and the pan-Indian modern theater genre, which appeals to many Tamil Brahmins as cosmopolitan urban intellectuals. This chapter thus encourages the development of a more fluid and modern understanding of a multi-faceted Tamil Brahmin culture, which is heavily influential both in India and abroad.