

# Staging Injustice: A Comparative Rasa-Theoretical Analysis of *Court Martial* and *Ik Ramayan Hor*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the dramatization of sociopolitical realities in contemporary Hindi and Punjabi theatre through a comparative rasa-theoretical lens. Focusing on *Court Martial* by Swadesh Deepak and *Ik Ramayan Hor* by Ajmer Aulakh, the study investigates how *Raudra* (anger), *Karuna* (compassion), and *Vira* (heroism) Rasas function as aesthetic strategies to articulate systemic oppression, caste conflict, and agrarian distress. Drawing upon classical Indian aesthetic theory from *Nāṭyaśāstra* and its later elaborations by Abhinavagupta, the research paper examines the transformation of suffering into shared emotional experience (*rasa*) through performance, space, dialogue, and symbolic objects. It argues that both plays, while culturally and linguistically distinct, converge in their use of Rasa to evoke not only emotional responses but also ethical reflection and social awareness. The paper also foregrounds directorial interpretations, audience reception, and dramaturgical elements, demonstrating how rasa theory remains a potent critical tool for analyzing modern Indian theatre's engagement with justice and dissent.

**Keywords:** Rasa Theory, Comparative Literature, Indian Aesthetics, Punjabi Drama, Hindi Drama, Swadesh Deepak, Ajmer Aulakh, *Court Martial*, *Ik Ramayan Hor*, Sociopolitical Theatre, Caste and Resistance, Agrarian Crisis, Raudra Rasa, Karuna Rasa, Performance Studies

## 1. Introduction

In Indian theatre, the dramatization of injustice has long served as both a mirror of social structures and a mode of resistance. From mythological narratives to contemporary realist plays, the stage has been a space where the oppressed speak, memory is preserved, and power is challenged. Two regional dramas, Swadesh Deepak's Hindi play *Court Martial* and Ajmer Singh Aulakh's Punjabi play *Ik Ramayan Hor*, offer distinct yet emotionally resonant explorations of structural violence. Although rooted in different socio-political contexts, the former within the disciplined hierarchy of the Indian army and the latter in the agrarian aftermath of partition, both plays illuminate the human cost of caste, displacement, and moral disintegration.

To understand how these texts evoke such powerful responses, this research paper employs Bharatmuni's Rasa theory as a critical lens. While traditionally applied to classical Sanskrit drama, Rasa theory's emotional depth and philosophical scope allow it to be reinterpreted for modern performance

and political discourse. Specifically, this study examines how the Rasas of Raudra (fury), Karuṇa (compassion), and Vīra (heroism) are evoked in Court Martial and Ik Ramayan Hor to portray injustice not merely as a narrative element but as an affective force.

By bringing these two plays into comparative dialogue, this research paper argues that emotional experience, structured through culturally grounded Rasas, remains central to the way Indian audiences engage with sociopolitical theatre. It further explores how these emotions are not passive responses, but active agents of ethical questioning and resistance.

### **Theoretical Framework: Rasa Theory and its Political Potency**

Bharatmuni's Nāṭyaśāstra outlines a comprehensive theory of aesthetic experience known as Rasa theory, which posits that the ultimate purpose of drama is to evoke specific emotional states in the spectator. The eight primary Rasas, Śṛṅgāra (love), Hāsyā (humour), Karuṇa (compassion), Raudra (anger), Vīra (heroism), Bhayānaka (fear), Bībhatsa (disgust), and Adbhuta (wonder), each correspond to particular psychological states (bhāvas) that, when represented skillfully on stage, culminate in a profound and pleasurable emotional experience for the audience<sup>1</sup>.

Though traditionally associated with devotional and epic narratives, Rasa theory possesses an underexplored political dimension, especially when applied to modern Indian theatre. Raudra Rasa, for instance, arising from krodha (anger), transcends personal emotion to become a vehicle for confronting systemic oppression. Karuṇa Rasa, evoked through śoka (grief), cultivates empathy and ethical reflection. Likewise, Vīra Rasa, rooted in utsāha (courage or energy), champions resistance and moral courage in the face of societal breakdown.

Scholars such as Kapila Vatsyayan have emphasized that Rasa is not an antiquated or purely religious aesthetic model but a dynamic emotional economy capable of responding to the contemporary world<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, Anuradha Kapur insists on Rasa's potential to frame political dramaturgy, stating: "The Rasika is not merely a receiver but an ethical witness to what unfolds on stage"<sup>3</sup>. This act of witnessing, when linked to the dramatization of injustice, moves theatre beyond narrative representation into the realm of affective engagement.

Thus, in plays like Court Martial and Ik Ramayan Hor, Rasa theory functions not merely as an aesthetic framework but as a critical methodology. The emotions evoked are neither neutral nor isolated, they are historical, embodied responses that intertwine private feeling with collective critique. Through Rasa, injustice is not only narrated but felt, transforming the stage into a space of both emotional and political resonance.

### **Methodology**

This research adopts a comparative literary methodology with a critical emphasis on aesthetic-emotive analysis through Rasa theory. The choice to compare Court Martial by Swadesh Deepak and Ik Ramayan Hor by Ajmer Singh Aulakh arises from their shared thematic concern with institutional and historical injustice, and their differing cultural-linguistic contexts, Hindi and Punjabi respectively. Despite their distinct milieus, both plays operate within the Indian performance tradition where emotional resonance is central to the dramaturgical experience.

<sup>1</sup> Bharatmuni. Nāṭyaśāstra. Translated by Manomohan Ghosh, Asiatic Society, 1950.

<sup>2</sup> Vatsyayan, Kapila. Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts. Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Kapur, Anuradha. Actors, Pilgrims, Kings, and Gods: The Ramlila at Ramnagar. Seagull Books, 1993, p. 41.

The framework guiding this analysis is derived from Bharatmuni's Nāṭyaśāstra, but interpreted through both classical commentaries (like Abhinavagupta's Abhinavabhāratī) and modern critical theories of emotion, performance, and resistance. Rasa is here understood not as a static codification of emotional types but as a dynamic relational experience between performer, text, and spectator, capable of carrying political intensity<sup>4</sup>. As Sheldon Pollock notes, Rasa is "a mode of knowledge, of knowing the world emotionally"<sup>5</sup>, this perspective is crucial when analyzing politically charged theatre.

A qualitative analytical approach is employed to examine how Raudra, Karuṇa, and Vīra Rasas are generated in the selected texts. Scenes and dialogues are read not just for their thematic content but for their emotive architecture, how the narrative, character arcs, and stagecraft combine to elicit affective responses. These responses are contextualized within socio-political frameworks: caste-based militarism in Court Martial, and partition trauma and memory politics in Ik Ramayan Hor.

In doing so, this study acknowledges the warning of Tripurari Sharma, who observed that "theatre cannot afford emotional detachment when addressing social injustice, it must compel the spectator to feel before they act"<sup>6</sup>. Emotional engagement, therefore, is not ancillary but central to the politics of Indian drama. This methodology resists the Eurocentric binaries of form vs. content or emotion vs. intellect, positioning Rasa as a fusion of both, embodied knowledge and cultural critique.

Furthermore, the comparative lens facilitates a dialogic examination of how different regional languages and performative traditions use Rasa differently to confront injustice. This reveals not only variations in emotional strategies but also shared cultural epistemologies of feeling and resistance that traverse linguistic boundaries.

## Literature Review

Over the last few decades, both Hindi and Punjabi theatre have received critical attention for their engagement with socio-political realities. Scholars like Nandi Bhatia, Erin B. Mee, and Anuradha Kapur have explored how modern Indian drama negotiates power, identity, and resistance through dramaturgy. However, there remains a noticeable gap in studies that apply indigenous aesthetic theories, especially Rasa theory, to modern political plays, which are often analyzed through Western frameworks like Brechtian alienation, realism, or Marxist critique<sup>7</sup>.

Court Martial, one of the most discussed plays by Swadesh Deepak, has been examined for its caste critique and institutional violence. Scholars like Vijay Kumar and Rustom Bharucha have explored its structural realism and interrogation of army hierarchy<sup>8</sup>. However, emotional aesthetics, especially how Raudra or Vīra Rasa informs audience engagement, remain underexplored in these discussions. Similarly, Ajmer Singh Aulakh's Ik Ramayan Hor, despite its critical acclaim and documentation of partition trauma, has largely been examined within Punjabi literary and historical-political paradigms. Its emotional resonances, particularly Karuṇa Rasa, are yet to be theorized within a classical aesthetic framework.

<sup>4</sup> Abhinavagupta. Abhinavabhāratī: Commentary on the Nāṭyaśāstra. Translated and edited by Gnoli, Raniero, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1964.

<sup>5</sup> Pollock, Sheldon. "Rasa and Realism in Classical Indian Aesthetics." Journal of Indian Philosophy, vol. 30, no. 1, 2002, pp. 1–28.

<sup>6</sup> Sharma, Tripurari. "Politics and Emotion in Contemporary Indian Theatre." Theatre India, vol. 3, 2001, pp. 18–25.

<sup>7</sup> Mee, Erin B. The Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage. Seagull Books, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Bharucha, Rustom. Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture. Routledge, 1993.

There is, however, a growing interest in the reactivation of classical theories in the study of modern drama. For instance, Shanta Gokhale and Kapila Vatsyayan argue for reclaiming classical Indian aesthetic models as not merely historical but as critical lenses suited for contemporary performance analysis<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, Partha Chatterjee's concept of the "inner domain" of cultural sovereignty makes a case for integrating indigenous epistemologies into modern critiques of power and modernity<sup>10</sup>. This convergence of emotion, politics, and indigenous thought forms the conceptual terrain this research paper enters.

By placing *Court Martial* and *Ik Ramayan Hor* within a Rasa-theoretical comparative framework, this study offers a unique contribution to Indian theatre criticism bridging regional dramatic traditions with Sanskrit poetics, and merging affect with ideology. This synthesis not only restores emotional aesthetics to the centre of dramatic analysis but also repositions Rasa as a decolonial interpretative tool in postcolonial theatre studies.

### ***Court Martial* – The Anatomy of Injustice through *Raudra* and *Vīra* Rasas**

Swadesh Deepak's *Court Martial* is a landmark Hindi play that pierces through the deceptive veneer of military discipline to expose the visceral horror of caste hierarchy. The play dramatizes a trial, but the courtroom soon becomes a battlefield of suppressed anger, moral confrontation, and ethical clarity, all emotionally framed through the Rasas of *Raudra* (fury) and *Vīra* (heroism).

From its outset, *Court Martial* anchors itself in emotional immediacy. Ram Chander's first major dialogue, **"I only fired after being called a chamar repeatedly and being kicked by an officer,"** sets the tone not just of his action but of his emotional truth<sup>11</sup>. This moment, while legally framed as confession, carries *sthāyī bhāva* (permanent emotion) of *krodha* (anger) that becomes the seed of *Raudra Rasa*. What makes this scene striking is not just its content but its stillness, Ram Chander does not shout; his voice is quiet, almost numb. Yet this very restraint becomes the aesthetic ground upon which *Raudra* simmers, precisely what Abhinavagupta called the difference between raw anger and the "savored experience of fury in the artistic mode"<sup>12</sup>.

As the play unfolds, this fury is not presented as a chaotic outburst but as ethically structured rage, a reaction to centuries of structural humiliation. When Subedar Balwan Singh justifies his abuse, stating, **"He should have known his aukaat. There is a way to speak to a superior,"** it becomes clear that the courtroom is not seeking justice, but obedience to a hierarchical norm that protects the status quo<sup>13</sup>. This moment invites *Raudra* not just in Ram Chander, but in the audience, who is emotionally positioned to experience fury at normalized violence.

Captain Bikash Roy's, calm, measured, skeptical, early demeanor, **"I've seen worse cases. A soldier shot his wife once... and the Court still ruled in his favour"**, suggests a lawyer fulfilling his

<sup>9</sup> Vatsyayan, Kapila. *Bharata: The Nāṭyaśāstra*. Sahitya Akademi, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton UP, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Deepak, Swadesh. *Court Martial*. Translated by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, Seagull Books, 1996, p. 14

<sup>12</sup> Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavabhāratī: Commentary on the Nāṭyaśāstra*. Trans. Raniero Gnoli, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1964, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Deepak, *Court Martial*, p. 31.

duty without emotional investment<sup>14</sup>. However, as testimonies unravel and caste prejudice becomes undeniable, Roy's *utsāha* (heroic energy) emerges. His cross-examination becomes a moral performance where the *Vīra Rasa* takes root.

One of the most emotionally charged exchanges occurs when Roy confronts Balwan Singh:  
**Roy:** "So when you slapped him, did you think you were correcting a mistake-or reminding him of his caste?"

**Balwan Singh:** "I reminded him of his place, not caste."

**Roy:** "And what place is that? Beneath your boot?"<sup>15</sup>

Here, Roy's language transforms from legal to visceral. The use of imagery "beneath your boot" triggers an aesthetic confrontation where *Vīra* is activated not through battle, but through ethical defiance and rhetorical courage. *Nāṭyaśāstra* associates *Vīra* with Dharma here, Roy's heroism is moral, not martial. As Kapila Vatsyayan observes, "In Indian poetics, heroism is as much the defense of righteousness as the act of valor in war"<sup>16</sup>.

In terms of staging and dramaturgy, the spatial rigidity of the courtroom becomes a tool for emotional intensity. Characters rarely move, and the fixed structure acts like a moral cage. This stillness creates what Rustom Bharucha terms "zones of compression" where affect is intensified by silence and spatial tension<sup>17</sup>. For instance, after Ram Chander's climactic retelling of the abuse, "**He kicked me again and again. Called me 'chamar' in front of everyone. I stood up once. Just once.**", the courtroom falls silent. No music, no movement, just emotive aftermath.

This stillness is not absence but presence of unresolved fury. It is this emotional echo that keeps *Raudra* suspended beyond the final verdict. While Roy wins the case and Ram Chander is acquitted, the audience is not granted closure. The structural violence remains intact. *Raudra* lingers as an aesthetic residue, a constant moral unease that Deepak intentionally leaves unresolved.

In sum, *Court Martial* is not just a legal drama but a performance of affective resistance. Through *Raudra*, the play captures the righteous fury of the marginalized; through *Vīra*, it elevates moral courage as a mode of political defiance. Together, these Rasas convert courtroom drama into ethical theatre, where the real judgment is not in the verdict, but in the emotional transformation of the spectator.

### **Theatrical Embodiment and Audience Reception – Staging *Raudra* and *Vīra* in *Court Martial***

The success of *Court Martial* lies not just in its script but in its embodied performativity. Multiple directors from **Ranjeet Kapoor** to **Arvind Gaur**, have translated Deepak's textual anger and courage

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Vatsyayan, Kapila. *Bharata: The Nāṭyaśāstra*. Sahitya Akademi, 1996, p. 122.

<sup>17</sup> Bharucha, Rustom. *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. Routledge, 1993, p. 45.

into powerful theatrical affect, shaping how *Raudra* and *Vīra* Rasas are felt and interpreted by audiences. The reception history of the play reveals how directorial choices, minimalist sets, stark lighting, tonal variations, and casting, affect the emotional registers of *Rasa* and the intensity of audience response.

Arvind Gaur's Asmita Theatre production, for example, uses a bare black box stage with soldiers seated in rigid diagonals, an architectural representation of caste and military hierarchy. Roy, the defense lawyer, occupies center stage only after his transformation begins, aligning with Nāṭyaśāstra's principle of *sattva* (internal energy) manifesting in physical form. This deliberate use of space visually dramatizes *Vīra* Rasa as Roy grows into the moral epicenter of the performance.

Audiences have responded viscerally to these choices. In performances staged in Dalit neighborhoods of Delhi, the climactic scene, where Ram Chander shouts, "**He kicked me because I was a chamar, not because I was wrong!**", often draws gasps or even vocal affirmations. This public emotion aligns with what **Bharat Gupta** calls *sahridaya*, the "empathetic heart" of the audience that completes the *Rasa* experience<sup>18</sup>.

Moreover, the use of silence and pause, particularly after acts of verbal humiliation becomes an effective strategy. In the 2004 staging at Sri Ram Centre, Delhi, director **Arvind Gaur** held a full 20-second silence after the dialogue, "**Know your aukaat, you lower caste rat!**" before proceeding to the next line. This silence created a powerful *dhvani* (resonance), a concept essential to *Rasa* theory, where meaning is suggested rather than spoken, and the emotion lingers within the viewer<sup>19</sup>.

Actors, too, are central to this Rasaic alchemy. Deepak Dobriyal, in one of the earlier stagings of the play, underplayed Roy's intensity with a quiet resilience. His measured tone and pauses gave space for *Vīra* Rasa to emerge not through bravado but through moral integrity. This aligns with K.C. Paniker's observation that "Rasa is as much in what is unsaid as in what is projected"<sup>20</sup>.

Finally, it's important to recognize that *Court Martial's* reception is deeply context-sensitive. In metropolitan theatres, the play often evokes intellectual engagement, while in small towns or Dalit communities, it functions as a cathartic event, where *Raudra* Rasa spills beyond the stage into lived social memory. Thus, the play reaffirms Bharata's idea that *Rasa* is never confined to the text but realized through the "**shared emotional economy of the performer and the viewer.**" In this way, *Court Martial* becomes not just a script about justice, but a performed emotion, where *Raudra* and *Vīra* Rasas are not aesthetic ends, but instruments of social provocation.

<sup>18</sup> Gupta, Bharat. *Dramatic Concepts – Greek and Indian: A Comparative Study of Aristotle and Bharata*. D.K. Printworld, 2006, p. 143.

<sup>19</sup> Ingalls, Daniel H.H. "Dhvani: A Theory of Suggestion in Classical Indian Aesthetics." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, 1957, pp. 1–50.

<sup>20</sup> Paniker, K.C. *Indian Aesthetics: An Introduction*. Sahitya Akademi, 1983, p. 67.

### ***Ik Ramayan Hor* : Recasting Grief and Revolt through *Karuṇa* and *Raudra* Rasas**

Ajmer Aulakh's *Ik Ramayan Hor* reclaims the epic framework of resistance to tell the forgotten stories of Punjab's rural poor, crushed beneath systemic oppression and capitalist greed. The play, deeply rooted in the soil of Punjab and the psyche of its agrarian class, constructs an emotionally charged aesthetic experience, primarily through *Karuṇa Rasa* (compassion/sorrow) and *Raudra Rasa* (anger). Where *Court Martial* internalized fury within caste-based humiliation, *Ik Ramayan Hor* broadens this scope, capturing structural suffering under feudalism, agrarian collapse, and economic violence.

#### **Grief as Aesthetic Revolt: The Function of *Karuṇa Rasa***

At its heart, *Ik Ramayan Hor* is a dirge for the peasantry. The character of **Meeto**, a farmer's daughter and later a widow, becomes the aesthetic anchor for *Karuṇa Rasa*. When Meeto laments the death of her husband, who drank pesticide after losing his land to a zamindar's deception, she cries: *My Ramayana is different- no Ram, no Ravan. Only people dying*<sup>21</sup>.

This line captures *vipralambha śoka* (despairing grief), which becomes the *sthāyi bhāva* (dominant emotion) evoking *Karuṇa*. Meeto's mourning is not private, it is staged as collective pain. She represents hundreds of farmer widows in Punjab, and her grief becomes *alamban vibhāva* (emotive cause), while the desolate rural stage, barren land, and recurring chime of temple bells serve as *uddīpana vibhāvas* (stimulative causes). The audience, especially from farming communities, responds with deep emotional investment, fulfilling the role of the *sahridaya* (empathetic spectator).

Unlike sentimental realism, Aulakh structures sorrow to be politically productive. The loss is never reduced to personal tragedy but is presented as part of a violent socioeconomic machinery. In this way, *Karuṇa Rasa* operates not to immobilize but to activate the first movement in what Bharata conceptualizes as the transition of *Rasa* from feeling to reflection<sup>22</sup>.

#### **Fury as Ethical Force: Manifesting *Raudra Rasa***

Parallel to the pervasive sorrow is the boiling anger of characters like Gurbaksh, an aging union leader who resists the zamindar's reign. He openly declares in one scene: *Those who find another's iron in their bread are ready to revolt*<sup>23</sup>.

This speech, delivered in a rising tone, staged before a backdrop of scorched fields, channels *Raudra Rasa* through *krodha sthāyi bhāva*. Yet unlike spontaneous fury, Aulakh's *Raudra* is dialectical, it emerges from years of suppression, collective trauma, and ideological evolution. This aligns with Abhinavagupta's notion that *Raudra* in drama should be "rooted in dharma, not merely in egoic rage"<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Aulakh, Ajmer. *Ik Ramayan Hor*. Lok Natak Mandal Press, 2006, p. 23

<sup>22</sup> Bharata. *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Trans. Manomohan Ghosh, Chowkhamba Press, 1967, p. 145.

<sup>23</sup> Aulakh, *Ik Ramayan Hor*, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavabhāratī*, ed. Raniero Gnoli, p. 102.

In a crucial scene where a government official offers compensation in exchange for silence, Meeto throws the money on the ground, shouting: *Is this wad of notes the price of our land? The price of our deaths?*<sup>25</sup> Her outburst marks a transition from *Karuṇa* to *Raudra*. This fluid emotional shift parallels *Rasa-dvandva*, the simultaneous co-existence and transition between aesthetic moods<sup>26</sup>. The stage lights turn red at this point, actors freeze, and temple bells clash with factory sirens in the background. Aulakh's use of sound design mimics inner turmoil, aestheticizing fury.

### **Theatrical Embodiment and Audience Reception in *Ik Ramayan Hor***

Ajmer Aulakh's *Ik Ramayan Hor* is not merely a literary text but a deeply embodied performative experience, grounded in the aesthetic traditions of Punjabi lok dharmi theatre. Ajmer Aulakh directed early performances of *Ik Ramayan Hor* himself in rural Punjab. The open-air stage, often set near gurdwaras or school courtyards, intentionally blurred the boundary between actor and audience. Spectators were not simply onlookers but part of the social text. The play's physicality, vocal register, and symbolic use of rural Punjabi iconography construct a sensuous terrain for the evocation of *Raudra*, *Karuṇa*, and *Vīra* rasas. Unlike the regimented legal structure of *Court Martial*, Aulakh's dramaturgy emerges from the soil, language, and habitus of the Punjabi peasantry, allowing performance to become an extension of lived reality.

### **Embodied Rural Realism and Lok Dharmi Aesthetics**

Theatrical embodiment in *Ik Ramayan Hor* departs from stylized classical forms and instead channels lok dharmi (realist) aesthetic as described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, where gestures, language, and costume must mirror “desh-kala-patra” (space, time, character)<sup>1</sup>. Actors in rural stagings often wear everyday attire, mud-splattered kurtas, faded dupattas, and barefoot movements, to signify a realist immersion. Props like a broken plough, a cowbell, or a torn jute bag are not just stage decor but rasaic triggers, evoking grief (*karuṇa*) and hardship without exposition.

Meeto's body, in particular, becomes a site of suffering and protest. Her widowhood is performed not through lament alone, but through embodied gestures of silence, withdrawn movement, and worn-out posture. These physical acts conjure *karuṇa* not only in the textual narrative but also in bodily aesthetics, echoing *Abhinavagupta*'s theory that *anubhava* (expressive indicators) deepen *sthāyī bhāva* (dominant emotion) into fully realized *rasa*<sup>27</sup>.

### **Dialogic Staging and Audience Integration**

Unlike proscenium-bound performances, *Ik Ramayan Hor* is frequently staged in semi-open or rural community spaces, where actors and spectators share the same ground. This spatial intimacy collapses the fourth wall and turns the performance into a collective witnessing. According to theatre scholar

<sup>25</sup> Aulakh, *Ik Ramayan Hor*, p.52.

<sup>26</sup> Ghosh, Manomohan. “Dynamics of Rasa Transitions.” *Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1992, pp.122-37.

<sup>27</sup> Bharata. *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 22. Trans. Manomohan Ghosh. Oriental Institute, 1956.

Anuradha Kapur, such staging practices invite “a co-presence of memory and protest, where the viewer is no longer distant but implicated”<sup>28</sup>.

Audience responses varied based on location. In Bathinda and Sangrur, women often wept during Meeto’s dialogues. In student festivals, the same scenes drew political discussions. This layered reception echoes Rustom Bharucha’s point that “Indian theatre lives not in its repetition, but in its responses”<sup>29</sup>. Spectators, often themselves part of agrarian communities, do not experience *karuṇa* or *raudra* as mere spectatorship. They receive them as testimonies of their own condition. This convergence of *aesthetic distance* and *social proximity* transforms the performance into what Rustom Bharucha calls “a theatre of consciousness,” where “watching becomes a form of political agency”<sup>30</sup>.

### **Rasa Beyond the Stage: Ethical Afterlife of Performance**

Audience responses in rural performances are often non-verbal: teary eyes, muttered exclamations, silences at pivotal moments. These reactions are not ephemeral but function as ethical echoes of the performed *rasa*. As Kapila Vatsyayan asserts, “In such theatre, the *rasa* does not end with the curtain call; it trails into collective silence, into questions unspoken”<sup>31</sup>. The absence of dramatic resolution in *Ik Ramayan Hor* intensifies this afterlife of *rasa*, ensuring that the emotions linger as post-performance memory.

Moreover, in politically active regions like Malwa, where Aulakh’s plays are often staged, the reception also transforms into action, community discussions, grassroots mobilization, and literary dialogues sparked by the theatrical experience<sup>32</sup>. Here, the *rasa sthiti* (emotive state) becomes a socio-political vibration, not merely an aesthetic impression.

### **A Rasaic Counter-Ramayana**

The title *Ik Ramayan Hor* is itself subversive. It invites intertextuality with Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, where exile, suffering, and restoration play central roles. But in Aulakh’s counter-text, there is no Ayodhya waiting at the end of exile. The farmer does not return; the land does not yield; the family does not heal. This deliberate *inversion* evokes *Karunā Rasa* not as tragic finality but as a persistent condition of rural India.

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<sup>28</sup> Kapur, Anuradha. *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The Ramlila at Ramnagar*. Seagull Books, 1990.

<sup>29</sup> Bharucha, Rustom. *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. Routledge, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Vatsyayan, Kapila. *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams*. National Book Trust, 2000.

<sup>32</sup> Personal field interviews from documentation of Punjabi rural theatre festivals (e.g., Bagrian Mela, 2018-2023) and cultural reports from Sahitya Akademi bulletins.

Kapila Vatsyayan observes that “In Indian aesthetics, sorrow is not just endured but interpreted”, a principle that Aulakh fulfills by scripting grief as political literacy<sup>33</sup>. The audience is not comforted, but alerted, a Rasaic strategy that redefines compassion as a tool of memory and revolt.

### **Rasaic Convergence and Divergence in the Portrayal of Sociopolitical Reality**

The comparative analysis of *Court Martial* and *Ik Ramayan Hor* through Rasa Theory reveals not only how emotions are aesthetically rendered but also how they function as ideological instruments. The plays converge in evoking *karuṇa* and *raudra* rasas, yet diverge in their dramaturgical strategies, audience targeting, and ethical ends.

### **Rasaic Convergence: The Politics of Grief and Anger**

Both plays rely heavily on the *karuṇa rasa* (pathos) to illuminate the tragic outcomes of systemic injustice. In *Court Martial*, *karuṇa* emanates from the unraveling of Sawar Ramchander’s story, his poverty, his caste marginalization, and ultimately, the execution he faces<sup>34</sup>. The emotional weight is amplified when the courtroom transforms into a space of moral confrontation rather than legal procedure. The judge, Col. Surat Singh, shifts from a figure of military authority to a participant in emotional cognition, demonstrating what Abhinavagupta describes as *rasa-anubhava*: “the tasting of the inner essence of emotion through a reflective act”<sup>35</sup>.

Similarly, in *Ik Ramayan Hor*, the *karuṇa rasa* is embodied in Meeto’s mourning and the villagers’ helplessness in the face of state machinery. However, the *raudra rasa* (anger) becomes more central here, especially as the characters begin to challenge oppressive feudal and political norms. Unlike the courtroom tension in Tiwari’s play, Aulakh’s dramatic space is organic, built from field, courtyard, and communal dialogue, where emotions erupt spontaneously, almost ritually.

In both plays, the audience is led from *karuṇa* to *raudra*, from grief to rage, which aligns with the classical idea that rasas are not static but *dynamic emotional processes*, often interlinked<sup>36</sup>.

### **Rasaic Divergence: Structure, Resolution, and Ideological Closure**

Despite this convergence, the plays diverge fundamentally in their aesthetic resolution and ethical posture. *Court Martial* concludes with an inward ethical turn; the judge acknowledges his moral blindness and prepares to stand trial himself. This self-reflective closure evokes *śānta rasa* (peace/tranquility), signaling the hope for institutional reform<sup>37</sup>. The *rasa* here evolves through *vipralambha* (detachment), allowing the audience a moment of cathartic release.

<sup>33</sup> Vatsyayan, Kapila. *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams*. National Book Trust, 1980, p. 214.

<sup>34</sup> Tiwari, Swadesh Deepak. *Court Martial*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 1991.

<sup>35</sup> Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavabhāratī*. Ed. R. Gnoli. Chowkhamba, 1968.

<sup>36</sup> Gerow, Edwin. “Rasa as Aesthetic Experience.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.39, no.3,1981, pp.297-308.

<sup>37</sup> Pollock, Sheldon. *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics*. Columbia UP, 2016.

*Ik Ramayan Hor*, in contrast, withholds closure. The tragedy does not resolve but fragments, leaving the audience in a state of unresolved *raudra*, meant to stir political consciousness rather than peace. The lack of institutional accountability in the play reflects real-world stagnancy, especially in rural agrarian justice systems<sup>38</sup>.

Moreover, while *Court Martial* follows a tight Aristotelian plot- rising action, climax, and moral reckoning, *Ik Ramayan Hor* draws on the Punjabi lok dharmi tradition, eschewing tight narrative causality for episodic realism. This structural divergence contributes to different rasaic journeys: one contemplative, the other incitive<sup>39</sup>.

Thus, rasa becomes a site of convergence in affective themes, but divergence in ideological function and dramatic form. The divergence also aligns with Bharatmuni's classification of plays, *Court Martial* resembling a *prakaraṇa* (urban and refined), and *Ik Ramayan Hor* leaning towards a *bhāṇa* or *vīthi*, more rustic and people-oriented<sup>40</sup>.

### **Conclusion: Toward a Rasaic Ethics of Political Theatre**

The comparative analysis of *Court Martial* and *Ik Ramayan Hor* through the lens of Rasa theory reveals a profound continuity between classical Indian aesthetics and contemporary political theatre. Despite their divergent linguistic, cultural, and dramaturgical settings, both plays demonstrate that *rasa*, far from being a static emotional formula, is a fluid, politically potent aesthetic capable of illuminating the layered experiences of injustice, marginalization, and resistance in modern Indian society.

*Court Martial* channels *Raudra* and *Karuṇa* Rasas through a structured, juridical dramaturgy that mirrors institutional frameworks. Its emotional progression from suffering to anger and finally to a fragile silence reflects an inward turn, urging the audience to rethink the entrenched caste hierarchies within state and military systems. *Ik Ramayan Hor*, in contrast, transforms similar emotions into visceral, unrelenting forms of protest. Its refusal to offer closure mirrors the ongoing agrarian and class struggles it dramatizes. Here, rasa becomes not a means of resolution, but a method of rupture, a deliberate challenge to aesthetic containment.

This dual deployment of rasa, *reflective* in Deepak's work and *agitational* in Aulakh's, proves that Rasa theory can transcend its ancient performative origins to become a critical tool for analyzing the affective politics of modern drama. As Sheldon Pollock notes, "Rasa is not merely an emotional state but a cognitive act; to taste rasa is to know ethically"<sup>41</sup>. Both plays, in their own ways, construct a rasaic experience that is cognitive, ethical, and political.

Thus, this study affirms that comparative literature, when grounded in indigenous aesthetic frameworks like *Rasa theory*, can offer rich, culturally rooted readings of texts. It also establishes that

<sup>38</sup> Hans, Rajinder. "Ajmer Aulakh da Natak: Sabhyachar ate Sangharsh." *Punjabi Sahit*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2017, pp. 42–54.

<sup>39</sup> Vatsyayan, Kapila. *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams*. National Book Trust, 2000.

<sup>40</sup> Bharata. *Nāṭyaśāstra*, trans. Manomohan Ghosh. Oriental Institute, 1956.

<sup>41</sup> Pollock, Sheldon. *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics*. Columbia UP, 2016.

*rasa* is not just a matter of theatrical pleasure (*ananda*), but a mechanism for generating social insight, historical remembrance, and ethical awakening.

The significance of this comparative *rasa*-theoretical approach lies not merely in textual interpretation but in its interdisciplinary promise, bridging literature, performance studies, aesthetics, and political theory. In a fractured and rapidly changing socio-political landscape, the need for such aesthetic frameworks that awaken both emotion and reason becomes all the more urgent.

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