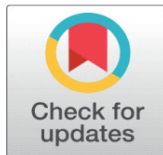


BETWEEN ON SCREEN AND OFF SCREEN: READING PRAKASH RAJ'S PUBLIC PERSONA

Apsara B B ¹  

¹ Assistant Professor, University of Kerala, Kerala, India



Received 21 October 2025
Accepted 25 November 2025
Published 31 December 2025

Corresponding Author

Apsara B B,
apsara.academics@gmail.com

DOI
[10.29121/ShodhSamajik.v2.i2.2025.183](https://doi.org/10.29121/ShodhSamajik.v2.i2.2025.183)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the dual identity of Prakash Raj, who is among the most versatile actors of Indian cinema, through a juxtaposition of his much-acclaimed film acting performances against his activism outside the film industry. Starting with his career in theatre in Kannada, it moves on to his debut film, the Tamil movie 'Duet' (1994), in order to analyse how his antagonists in movies like 'Ghilli', 'Singham' and 'Anthahpuram' break away from the stereotype through menace along with a good sense of emotions and how his roles in movies such as 'Bommarillu', 'Mozhi' and 'Kanchivaram' – a National Award winner – give him a variety which keeps him from being pigeonholed. It further delves into his identity outside the movies, starting with his political activities following the murder of journalist Gauri Lankesh in 2017 under #JustAsking, moving on to various controversies to arrive at his advocacy for political prisoners, farmers' rights and Gaza.

Keywords: Prakash Raj, Indian Cinema, On-Screen and Off-Screen Identity, Celebrity activism, Social Justice, Media and Society

1. INTRODUCTION

Prakash Raj is one of the versatile actors in Indian cinema. He is known for his powerful performance contribution across Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam and Hindi film industries. Other than his acting actor, he is also a filmmaker and activist. His prominent career is bagged by a notable array of awards, includes five National Film Awards, eight Nandi Awards, eight Tamil Nadu State Film Awards, six Filmfare Awards South, four SIIMA Awards, three CineMAA Awards, and three Vijay Awards, emphasized his versatility and impact across various cinematic traditions. Some of

the notable early years of Prakash Raj movies are; Duet, Bombay, Iruvar, Padayappa, Ghilli, Puttakhana Highway etc.



(htt12)

Prakash Raj was born in Bengaluru on March 26, 1965. He had a strong foundation in Kannada theatre and television, which includes performing in more than 2,000 street theatre shows. His breakthrough in Tamil cinema was with the 1994 film "Duet", which later he decides name his production house Duet Movies in its honour. The villains of Prakash Raj are eccentric in Indian cinema in a way that those roles go beyond the conventional thinking on villains. He gives his negative roles a mix of feelings, reasons, and eccentricities and creates memorable scenes for the movie, instead of projecting immorality as just a character trait. His performance of villain in the Tamil film Singham opened him Bollywood doors for him and he was cast by Rohit Shetty in the Hindi Singham. Prakash Raj has since bagged the villain's role in Salman Khan's sequel to his megahit Dabang, tentatively titled Dabang II [Aravind \(2012\)](#).



(htt13)

Prakash Raj's career chart reflects his versatility and the sheer emotion and intensity he infuses in every character he portrays. He embodied the villain in early years in Telugu and Tamil films. He provided unforgettable acting experience in movies such as the Telugu movie *Okkadu*, released in 2003 and its Tamil remake *Ghilli*, released in 2004. He plays a no-holds-barred evil guy, only respite to his villainy is the seemingly genuine soft spot he has for the heroine [Mohan \(2020\)](#). The latter roles branded him as the embodiment of menace, with his characters being ruthless, cunning, and larger than life. The acting out savagery and his skill and tendency to inject a human aspect into his villain roles distinguished him from other actors. The authoritative dialogue delivery, pointed pauses, and impeccable body language transformed stereotypical villains into memorable personas that audiences made him not only hated and but also admired at the same time. As his career evolved, he started to explore more roles more than villains, as fatherly and mentor personas that revealed a different aspect of his mastery. He also portrayed as fathers who were dictatorial, also intensely affectionate in films like [Bommarillu \(2006\)](#) and [Naanum \(2008\)](#). He stood for inter-generational confrontation within Indian families. His turn in *Bommarillu* as a possessive father who fails to allow his daughter to lead her independent life struck home with audiences. It reflects real life confrontations between tradition and modernity. In *Abhiyum Naanum*, he has portrayed as a father who has to get accustomed to accepting his daughter's decisions. He displays his skill at scattering humour, emotion, and concern in a character with his performance. Switching from a negative character to a benevolent father did not confine him; instead, it proved that he is a multifaceted and versatile performer who doesn't want to be classified in a particular category. Apart from his villain roles, he also handled comedies with similar talent in [Mozhi \(2007\)](#). In this film, his perfect timing, sophistication, and cordial personality opened up a jovial and cheerful side which is often muted by his more serious and villain roles. One of his most celebrated role in [Kanchivaram \(2008\)](#), a movie that won him the National Award, revealed his skill in expressing emotion and tragedy and proved that his craft was beyond a particular genre. Prakash Raj also ventured into direction and production, an indication to his enthusiasm for story development and the film making as a craft, not just a profession. The span and on-screen presence have gained him and builded a pan-Indian respected figure across industries and linguistic divisions. Both the viewers and directors admire him for his skill, professionalism, and ability to adapt to any character in the movie he works.

In films such as "*Dil*" and "*Singham*," the villains exhibit massive reactions, laugh frequently, and beg for mercy during crucial scenes. The combination of fear and enjoyment strikes a connection with the audience. Some of his antagonist roles evoke empathy in audiences or, at the very least, understanding. Characters like Narasimha in "*Anthahpuram*" and Janakiraman in "*Oor Iravu*" (Netflix's "*Paava Kadhaigal*") are driven by nuanced and complex conditions like, family honour, caste, lost love, or identity crises. The depth, humanity that he brings to the characters make the audiences support them despite their imperfections. It's portrayed in a way that, they are not just cliché disturbing and bad guys; each character has their own complexities.

More than his achievements in Indian cinema, Prakash Raj's off-screen persona is characterised by humility, honesty, and self-reflection. He embraces a down-to-earth and thoughtful approach to life. He highlights the significance of art, literature, and personal growth, and he is very much aware of being a responsible social individual and artist. He has also made a remarkable impact in social activism and politics. He initiated his active political engagement through the #JustAsking social

media campaign, spurred by the assassination of his friend and journalist Gauri Lankesh in 2017. His involvement in various social causes and his decision to contest in the 2019 Indian general election stresses his commitment to creating positive change beyond the silver screen.

Along with his strong and well-known performances in films, actor Prakash Raj is also distinguished for his straightforward opinions, which often lead to many controversies. There are some significant instances exists like this.

One of a controversy was that, the dispute between Andhra Pradesh deputy chief minister Pavan Kalyan and Prakash Raj, the allegations of adulteration of the famous Tirupati laddus. Kalyan accused the previous state government of using ghee containing animal fat in the laddus. In this case, Prakash Raj responded, urging Kalyan to focus on investigating the matter rather than inflaming communal tensions.

In August 2023, during Chandrayaan-3's landing, Prakash Raj shared a cartoon of a man pouring tea, which many interpreted as a dig at Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He later clarified the post, stating it referenced an old joke about a Kerala chaiwala not aimed at Modi.



He wrote a quote: "hate sees only hate. I was referring to a joke of Armstrong times celebrating a Kerala Chaiwala, which chaiwala did the troll see? If you do not get a joke, then the joke is on you. GROW UP #JustAsking".

At an India Today conclave, Prakash Raj openly declared that while some label him as anti-Hindu, he clarified that he is anti-Modi and anti-Amit Shah, which sparked further controversy among his critics.

Supporting Deepika Padukone during the controversy over her outfit in the Patan song, Ban rang, Prakash Raj condemned the hypocrisy of those objecting to an address in a film while staying silent on larger issues like hate speech and sexual crimes. He shared a news article and wrote a quote: "#Besharam BIGOTS... So it is okay when Saffron clad men garland rapists. give hate speech, broker MLAs, a Saffron clad swamiji rapes Minors, but not a Dress in a film?? #justasking)."



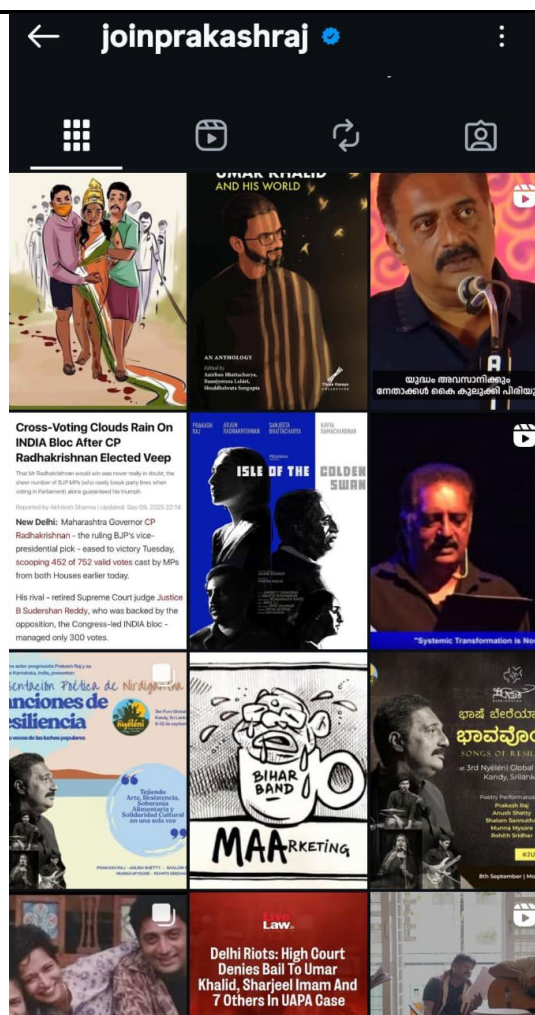
(htt14)

During the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters, he harshly criticised The Kashmir Files, calling it a nonsense film. He remarked that international juries had rejected the film, which led to heated exchanges between him and the film's supporters. He said, "The Kashmir Files is one of the nonsense films, but we know who produced it. Shameless. International jury spit on them. They are still shameless. The other fellow, the director is still telling, 'why I am not getting Oscar?' He will not even get a Bhaskar."

He also expressed disappointment that the film Jai Bhim did not receive a national award, hinting at political interference in such decisions. He said on the news, "Jai Bhim was not given the national award for a reason. The Enforcement Directorate, Election Commission, and Film Censor board are all under the control of the central government".

During Wayanad Literature festival, he said; "we have a useless prime minister. See, he is a useless, shameless, heartless visionless man we have as a Prime Minister of this country." Also, he added, "Manipur is, probably, if Manipur was in some other country he would have visited. Because it is in my country he doesn't want to visit. Let us be very clear, we have a fellow without vision." (<https://youtube.com/shorts/UCZTt61qcvU?si=hKlIfb7G1PFAML7j>)

Despite the backlash, he continues to be vocal on issues close to him, unafraid of sparking debates. His statements have made him a polarizing figure in the entertainment and political arenas. Prakash Raj is not afraid to speak or stand firm in his views, especially regarding the BJP. He's vocal about his concerns over their policies and governance and questioned the political party's approach to religion and democracy. According to him, the agenda BJP in India is to make divisions rather than unity in the country. He was not just criticising or be vocal or outspoken against only one party. He also called out the Indian National Congress, he opined that they haven't done anything enough to offer or provide the people of India a genuine choice or alternative. His message and stand are clear: he's not waiting for any political party but for accountability and transparency. It's not about just thoughtlessly following one side or the other; it's about holding those and make them accountable for their actions in power.



2. CONCLUSION

In recent years, through his social media platform #justasking, Prakash Raj has focussed on activism and raising public awareness which encourages questioning authority. In August 2025, he demonstrated solidarity with student activist Umar Khalid, calling for justice for political prisoners and criticizing the judiciary's attitude in handling of such cases. He said, "Umar Khalid did not fight for himself but he fought for our freedom, our dignity and our constitutional rights. Punishing him for upholding the constitution and keeping him in jail is the greatest injustice of our time." He also worked, supported and raised his voice for the issues of farmers. In July 2025, he publicly accused the Karnataka government of prioritizing a lucrative real estate deal over the welfare of farmers in Devanahalli. His participation in the Nyéléni Global Forum in Sri Lanka in August 2025 underlines his dedication to global social justice. He also advocated for food sovereignty and resistance against corporate control, marks his awareness of interconnected struggles beyond the borders of India.

Prakash Raj expressed his solidarity with the people of Gaza, and stood against the genocide that is happening for more than a year now. His recently posted a video in social media quoting; "The war will end and the leaders will shake hands and part. That old woman will wait for her son. That girl will wait for my beloved. Those children will wait for their brave father. I don't know who sold my land, but I know who paid the price for it."

(https://www.instagram.com/reel/DOh6FAOki_H/?igsh=dzAzMmYyamd2MHdx)
 “Israel is not the only one responsible for what is happening in Gaza, but those who remain silent in the face of genocide are also guilty.”

Prakash Raj has a sharp contrast between his on-screen image and his off-screen reality. On screen, he is inscribed into the audiences as the violent, corrupt, and greedy villain, a person whose presence heightens tension and fear at same time among audience. In off-screen, he becomes the exact opposite; an outspoken advocate for equality, truth, and democratic values, using his voice and public dignitary to challenge injustice. This dual identity deepens his interest and reminds us that cinema and celebrity persons are not separate from society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Aravind, C. V. (2012). Not Just a Bad Man. Deccan Herald. <https://www.deccanherald.com/features/not-just-bad-man-2321519>
- HT Entertainment Desk. (2025, May 5). Prakash Raj slams Hindi Film Industry for Not Speaking on political issues: ‘Half of Them are Sold, my Own Colleagues’. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/prakash-raj-slams-hindi-film-industry-for-not-speaking-on-political-issues-half-of-them-are-sold-my-own-colleagues-101746428932701.html>
- Image. (n.d.). Google. https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=76973f22492deeaddandsxrf=APpeQntDuF1eVoBqqI2lWJfKKEWZnwAePAandudm=2
- Kumar, M. R. (2021, March 26). Prakash Raj: The Greatest Movie Villain, Comedian, Character Artist and Storyteller. The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/opinion-entertainment/prakash-raj-the-greatest-movie-villain-comedian-character-artist-storyteller-7245395/>
- Mohan, A. (2020, March 26). 20 Roles that Prove Prakash Raj can make Anything Work. Film Companion. <https://www.filmcompanion.in/features/20-roles-that-prove-prakash-raj-can-make-anything-work>
- NDTV Movies News Desk. (2021, August 25). Everything you Want to Know About Prakash Raj, Cinema’s Most Wanted Baddie. NDTV. <https://www.ndtv.com/entertainment/everything-you-want-to-know-about-prakash-raj-cinemas-most-wanted-baddie-2518249>
- Prakash Raj in Ghilli. (n.d.). Google. <https://www.google.com/search?q=prakash+raj+GILLI>
- Prakash Raj’s tweet on Besharam. (n.d.). Google. <https://www.google.com/search?q=prakash+raj+tweet+on+BESHARAM>