# Symbol, Status and Statecraft: Reassessing Rank Convergence in India's Uniformed Services

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**Abstract**

*This article examines the gradual convergence of rank insignia between the Indian Armed Forces and the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs), and assesses its implications for constitutional clarity, institutional morale, and protocol coherence. While CAPFs have expanded and professionalised in response to evolving internal security demands, visible symbolic convergence without corresponding constitutional equivalence risks blurring distinctions embedded within India's federal structure. Drawing upon constitutional provisions, statutory mandates, the evolution of the warrant of precedence, and comparative democratic models, the article argues that visible differentiation between military and policing authority is a design principle of stable democracies. It proposes calibrated institutional reforms—including insignia differentiation, formalised rank-equivalence guidance, and doctrinal clarity in mixed formations—aimed at restoring symbolic coherence while preserving civilian supremacy and inter-service harmony. The objective is not institutional contestation but constitutional alignment.*

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## Introduction — Symbols and Constitutional Authority

In a constitutional republic, visible symbols of authority are not merely ornamental; they mediate public understanding of institutional roles, reflect legal mandates, and reinforce the delineation of power within the state. Uniforms, rank badges, and collar devices are part of this semiotic architecture. In the Indian context, the armed forces of the Union and the Central Armed Police Forces occupy distinct constitutional and statutory spaces, yet their visible rank identifiers have converged over time. This convergence, while administratively unintentional, has blurred public perception, complicated ceremonial protocol, and raised questions about institutional identity in high-stakes operational contexts.

The Constitution of India places 'Defence of India' in the Union List of subjects, affirming the national government's exclusive legislative competence over military authority. Article 53 vests the executive power of the Union in the President, exercised through various organs including the armed forces.[1] In contrast, 'Police' and 'Public Order' are listed in the State List, though the Union may intervene under Article 355 to protect states from internal disturbance.[2] The CAPFs, established under individual statutes and administered by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), are constitutionally structured as law enforcement and internal security instruments. Yet the CAPFs' expanding professional responsibilities—including border guarding and counter-insurgency operations— increasingly placed them in operational theatres traditionally associated with the military.

This article examines the evolution of rank symbolism in India's uniformed services, focusing on the convergence of insignia that has reduced visible distinctions. It also considers the implications for public perception, protocol, morale and constitutional coherence. It argues that symbolic convergence without corresponding constitutional equivalence can generate ambiguity that undermines both ceremonial clarity and institutional identity. Moreover, it proposes calibrated institutional reforms designed to restore visible differentiation aligned with constitutional roles while preserving operational synergy and civilian supremacy.

## The Constitutional Architecture of Security Forces

India's constitutional framework reflects a deliberate separation between military and police authority. The Armed Forces—comprising the Army, Navy, and Air Force—operate under statutes enacted by Parliament and defend the Republic against external aggression and internal threats beyond police capacity. Their mandate includes engagement in war, strategic deterrence, and deployment under conditions requiring the legitimate use of lethal force.

CAPFs, on the other hand, are statutory forces governed by individual Acts of Parliament and function under the MHA's administrative control for internal security, border guarding, specialised protection, and aid to civil authority. The CAPFs include the Border Security Force (BSF), Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Central Industrial Security Force, National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), Sashastra Seema Bal, and National Security Guard.[3] Although the Assam Rifles is administratively under the MHA, its operational control is exercised by the Indian Army, and its Director General is an Army Lieutenant General.[4]

The constitutional distinction between defence and policing functions signals the Republic's commitment to civilian primacy and democratic accountability. Where insurgency, terrorism, and cross-border incursions blur traditional boundaries, these constitutional distinctions remain critical to institutional clarity. Symbolic indicators—such as rank badges and insignia—can reinforce or confuse these distinctions, depending on their design and use.

## Evolution of Rank Structures and Insignia

Historically, the Indian Army inherited its rank structure and insignia from British military tradition, which emphasised distinct symbols of command and hierarchy. The Army's commissioned officer ranks—from Lieutenant to General—are denoted by increments of stars, crossed sword and baton, and the national emblem.[5] These symbols represent not just hierarchy but a lineage of combat leadership and doctrinal distinction anchored in military ethos.

CAPFs, established after independence to meet internal security and border needs, developed their own rank structures over time. The officer cadre typically begins with Assistant Commandant and advances through Deputy Commandant, Commandant, Deputy Inspector-General, Inspector-General, Additional Director-General, and Director-General. The rank of Assistant Commandant, broadly comparable in some respects to that of an Army Captain, carries responsibility for commanding companies and specialised units within the CAPFs.[6] As the CAPFs professionalised and assumed greater operational responsibilities, their insignia evolved, with stars increasingly used to indicate officer rank and seniority.

Over the decades, administrative reforms and expectations of career progression have helped standardise rank nomenclature and insignia across the services. In some cases, CAPF insignia—particularly at senior levels—display star groupings and shoulder badges that can resemble army rank insignia to the untrained eye. While not identical in design or heritage, the similarity is sufficient to create perceptual overlap in public and ceremonial contexts.

This convergence did not occur through a single policy directive but evolved incrementally. As the CAPFs took on responsibilities such as counterinsurgency support, border management and high-risk internal deployments, their officer structures expanded and became more formalised. Their insignia grew more elaborate and made greater use of stars. The Army retained its traditional insignia, but the symbolic gap narrowed.

## Warrant of Precedence: Ceremonial Symbolism and Its Evolution

India's Warrant (Order) of Precedence is an official protocol list used during ceremonial occasions and state functions to determine seating, greetings, and formal interactions. It carries no legal authority or operational command implications, but it reflects institutional prestige and public perceptions of hierarchy. The President establishes the list, and the MHA maintains it; it includes constitutional functionaries, officials, and dignitaries in hierarchical order.[7]

The first consolidated Warrant of Precedence was issued in the 1950s and has been revised periodically to accommodate new offices, constitutional changes, and administrative developments. The President of India's 1979 notification—which superseded earlier lists—illustrates the formal nature of the protocol hierarchy.[8] While the apex positions (President, Vice-President, Prime Minister) are stable, the placement of senior bureaucrats, service chiefs, and police leadership has shifted over time due to evolving government structures.

Service Chiefs and senior military officers occupy specific places in the warrant, reflecting their constitutional role. Likewise, the broader hierarchy includes senior police and CAPF leadership positions. In some cases, converging insignia have created public confusion when ceremonial precedence and visible symbols do not clearly distinguish constitutional authority from administrative seniority.

For example, when CAPF officers of high rank participate in joint ceremonial functions alongside army officers, their proximity in the protocol list—compounded by similar star insignia—may convey a sense of equivalence that does not align with their constitutional mandates. The army's role in national defence and CAPFs' internal security functions are distinct; the protocol list should highlight, not obscure, these differences.

**Operational Implications of Visible Convergence**

In operational theatres—whether counterinsurgency, border management, disaster response, or aid to civil authority—visible insignia function as immediate signals of authority. Civilians, local administrators, media personnel, and even junior functionaries often rely on shoulder badges and star configurations to infer command hierarchy. In such environments, clarity reduces confusion and strengthens legitimacy.

The Army and CAPFs frequently operate in proximity. For example, during internal security operations or natural disasters, army units may be deployed alongside CRPF or BSF contingents. While command structures are formally defined through written

orders and inter-agency coordination, the optics of visible insignia can shape public understanding of who is exercising primary authority.

When a Colonel of the Army and a Commandant of a CAPF appear with similar patterns of stars on their shoulders, public perception may conflate their roles. This does not imply operational dysfunction; cooperation between the service is often highly effective. Yet, perceptual ambiguity can lead to misattribution in media reporting, confusion during ceremonial briefings, and uncertainty among civil administrators unfamiliar with the nuances of rank equivalence.

In democratic governance, clarity of command authority is essential. Symbols reinforce institutional differentiation that the Constitution has already established. Where insignia converge without deliberate review, the risk is not legal overlap but symbolic compression—a narrowing of visible distinction that may dilute public understanding of constitutional roles.

**Institutional Psychology, Morale, and Public Sensitivity**

The armed forces operate under conditions distinct from civil services and police forces. Article 33 of the Constitution empowers the Parliament to modify the application of fundamental rights to members of the armed forces in the interest of discipline and national security.[9] This provision underscores the unique character of military service.

Military morale is closely tied to institutional identity. Regimental tradition, combat history, and the ethos of unlimited liability form the psychological foundation of service. Symbols—rank badges, insignia, ceremonial honours—are integral to that identity.

In recent years, isolated but widely reported incidents involving friction between police personnel and serving or retired military officers have heightened sensitivity within segments of the armed forces community.[10] Although such incidents do not represent systemic antagonism, they acquire symbolic weight in public discourse. When visible insignia between institutions appear similar,

symbolic boundaries can feel blurred, amplifying emotional interpretation.

Institutional respect in democracies is reinforced not only through law but through visible differentiation. Restoring clarity in insignia design would not diminish CAPF professionalism; rather, it would reinforce mutual recognition of distinct mandates.

**Comparative Democracies: Differentiation as Institutional Safeguard**

Modern democracies maintain deliberate visual differentiation between military and police forces.

- **United Kingdom**. The British Army uses crown-and-pip insignia rooted in centuries of military tradition, whereas the Metropolitan Police employs badge-based epaulettes and unique rank symbols. Even in joint counter-terrorism operations, they maintain clear visual distinctions.

- **United States**. Military insignia consist of bars, oak leaves, eagles, and stars. Federal law enforcement agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, use shield badges and distinct insignia unconnected to military symbolism. When deployed domestically, the National Guard retains its military insignia, preserving clear differentiation from police agencies.

- **France**. France presents a hybrid example. The *Gendarmerie Nationale* (France's national military police force), though possessing military status, maintains insignia patterns distinct from the regular army. This preserves clarity even where missions overlap.

Across these democracies, differentiation is intentional. It reinforces constitutional design, supports civilian oversight, and clarifies operational roles.

**Mixed Command Doctrine: Assam Rifles and National Security Guard**

India already possesses a functional mixed-cadre model in the Assam Rifles. Administratively under the MHA, the Assam Rifles is operationally controlled by the Army, and its Director General is traditionally a Lieutenant General from the Army.[11] The force has long operated in the Northeast against insurgent groups, blending policing and military responsibilities.

The Assam Rifles model demonstrates that:

- Civilian administrative control can coexist with military operational command.
- Hybrid structures need not erode constitutional balance.
- Institutional clarity enhances operational effectiveness.

In contrast, the National Security Guard—a counter-terrorism force with military and police components—is headed by an IPS officer.[12] While civilian control is paramount, the doctrinal question remains whether organisations whose primary function involves kinetic combat operations might benefit from military command leadership, as seen in the Assam Rifles precedent.

This is not an argument for diminishing civilian supremacy. Rather, it is a doctrinal inquiry into aligning operational command with combat expertise where appropriate, while preserving constitutional oversight.

**Reform Framework: Calibrated Institutional Measures**

Reform in matters of institutional symbolism must be deliberate, consultative, and anchored in constitutional coherence. The objective is not institutional recalibration of hierarchy, but restoration of visible clarity consistent with statutory mandates. The following measures are recommended:

- **National Insignia Review Commission**. A joint Ministry of Defence–MHA body comprising representatives from the Armed Forces, CAPFs, protocol authorities, design experts, and constitutional scholars. The Commission should review

insignia convergence and propose differentiation principles that preserve professional dignity while reinforcing institutional distinctiveness.

- **Structured Design Differentiation**. Introduce distinctive visual markers for CAPF officer insignia—such as differentiated star geometry, collar device backgrounds, shoulder patch colour bands, or emblem framing—ensuring unmistakable but respectful differentiation from military rank symbolism.

- **Official Rank-Equivalence Charter**. Publish a Government-notified rank-equivalence matrix clarifying Army–CAPF correspondence for protocol, media reporting, and civil administration. This will eliminate ambiguity during joint deployments and ceremonial events.

- **Joint Protocol Standard Operating Procedures**. Codify procedures for joint operational briefings, VIP visits, and ceremonial representation to clarify the visible command hierarchy.

- **Doctrinal Clarification for Mixed-Cadre Formations**. Where the primary mandate involves kinetic combat or counter-insurgency operations, command principles may draw on the Assam Rifles model, aligning operational command expertise with the mission profile while preserving civilian oversight.

- **Periodic Parliamentary Review**. A limited parliamentary oversight review to ensure symbolic structures remain aligned with constitutional architecture over time.

These measures are corrective, preventive, and collaborative. They seek clarity—not competition.

**Conclusion: Constitutional Alignment Through Symbolic Clarity**

India's Armed Forces and CAPFs have together safeguarded the Republic through war, insurgency, internal disturbance, and disaster. Their operational cooperation remains strong and indispensable. Yet democratic resilience depends not only on capability, but on clarity.

Visible insignia are instruments of statecraft. They communicate authority, mandate, and accountability to the citizen. When symbolic convergence outpaces constitutional equivalence, perceptual ambiguity can arise—however unintended. Institutional dignity, morale stability, and public trust benefit when visible markers accurately reflect statutory roles.

This article does not seek hierarchy contestation; it advocates constitutional coherence. Differentiation strengthens unity. Clarity enhances respect. Symbolic alignment reinforces democratic transparency. Through calibrated reform—measured, consultative, and forward-looking—India can ensure its security architecture remains both operationally integrated and constitutionally distinct. In mature democracies, symbols matter. In India's constitutional republic, they must align with structure.

## Endnotes

1. *Constitution of India, Seventh Schedule*, List I (Union List), Entry 1 ("Defence of India").

2. *Constitution of India, Article 53*.

3. Constitution of India, Article 355.

4. *Central Reserve Police Force Act, 1949; Border Security Force Act, 1968; Indo-Tibetan Border Police Force Act, 1992; Central Industrial Security Force Act, 1968*.

5. Ministry of Home Affairs, *Annual Report* (New Delhi: Government of India, various years), section on Central Armed Police Forces restructuring.

6. Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, "Table of Precedence", *Presidential Secretariat Notification, 1979* (as amended).

7. Government of India Gazette, *Presidential Order regarding the Table of Precedence* (1979 revision and subsequent amendments).

8. Indian Army, "Ranks and Insignia", *Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Army), official publication.*

9. *Constitution of India, Article 33.*

10. *National media archives* reporting police–military altercations involving serving or retired personnel (see, e.g., national English-language dailies, 2015–2023 coverage).

11. Assam Rifles, “Organisation and Leadership”, *official website of the Assam Rifles, Government of India.*

12. National Security Guard, “Organisation and Leadership (Who’s Who)”, *official website, Government of India.*