

EXPLAINED

Can police hide their identity during protests? What Indian law says about plainclothes officers

The presence of police in plainclothes during the CJP protest on Monday has raised questions over officer identification, legal authority, accountability and safeguards during crowd control.



Lathi charge and arson scenes from the Tolstoy Marg area, New Delhi on Monday, 200726. Express Photo by Tashi Tobgyal

Written by: **Deeptiman Tiwary**

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When tens of thousands of protesters attempted to march from New Delhi's Jantar Mantar to Parliament on Monday (July 20) as part of the "Sansad Chalo" protest, videos emerged showing Delhi Police and Rapid Action Force (RAF) personnel in civilian clothes or without visible nameplates. This raised questions over police identification and accountability.

Here's a look at what the law says.

What happened during the CJP protests on Monday?

The protests [organised by the Cockroach Janata Party \(CJP\)](#) over the NEET paper leak and demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan swelled beyond expectations on Monday. As the crowd marched towards Parliament, the police lathicharged it, leading to violent clashes between police and protestors. Both the police and members of the crowd sustained injuries. One protester is still in the ICU.

By evening, videos circulating on social media appeared to show unidentified men in civilian clothes wielding standard police lathis and assaulting demonstrators. The Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) questioned the Delhi Police on social media, asking, "Who are these lathi-armed goons in plainclothes? Who have you hired to beat us up?"

Other videos appeared to show uniformed Delhi Police and RAF personnel without visible nameplates. In the clips, protesters are seen filming officers and asking, "Where

is your nameplate? Please answer us,” while the personnel do not respond.

Delhi Police has not responded publicly to the allegations or the videos. But *The Indian Express* has learnt that the force has issued directions that all personnel deployed at Jantar Mantar must report in uniform and not in civilian clothing.

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Is it legal to hide identification?

While certain operations, such as those involving intelligence collection, genuinely require hiding identification or even impersonation, regular policing is guided by statutory procedure and judicial guidelines.

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The maintenance of public order and tranquillity is governed by Chapter XI of the BNSS (Sections 148 to 160, formerly Chapter X of the CrPC). While it does not specifically state whether policemen or armed forces personnel are required to identify themselves during a law and order situation, sources said, the very fact that the law allows only a magistrate or a “police officer” to disperse a crowd implies identification. The argument is that an unidentified crowd of armed men cannot legally demand a public gathering to disperse. “If a police officer is unidentifiable, his command to disperse cannot carry statutory weight,” said a criminal lawyer practising in Delhi.

In *DK Basu vs State of West Bengal* (1997), the Supreme Court laid down detailed safeguards for arrests and detention, including the requirement that the arresting officer bear clear and visible identification. Although the ruling addressed arrests rather than crowd control, lawyers say it reflects the broader judicial emphasis on the identifiability of police officers while exercising coercive powers.

In August 2025, the Andhra Pradesh High Court, while hearing a petition filed by YSRCP MLA Nallapareddy Prasanna Kumar Reddy, questioned how citizens were expected to recognise plainclothes personnel as police officers while they were performing official duties. Reddy, who was facing charges of obstructing a police officer in discharging his duty, had argued that the police officers were not in uniform.

Then why does the police avoid identification?

Police officers argue that visible identification can expose individual personnel to prolonged litigation, online harassment and even threats to their families.

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“This practice originated in conflict theatres such as Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and Chhattisgarh, where personnel often avoided displaying nameplates or rank insignia because they could make them easier targets for militants. Over time, it appears to have filtered into routine policing,” said a former Delhi Police officer.

He added that while the practice may be understandable in exceptional security situations, its extension to ordinary law-and-order duties remains contentious.

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