Political activities inside universities

What is the news?

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- The continued occurrence of violence inside Delhi University's (DU's) Ramjas College and in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) last year has created a debate about the relevance of political activities and political organisations inside educational institutions.
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- The intrusion by political parties has negated the essential concept of universities as autonomous spaces, where freedom of expression, exploration of ideas and advancement of knowledge are an integral part of the learning process.
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When did this political intrusion started?

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- It began almost five decades ago and has gathered momentum in the past 25 years, and has now reached a stage where it is difficult to disband it.
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- Starting in the late 1960s, state governments began to interfere in universities.
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- For one, it was about dispensing patronage and exercising power in appointments of vice-chancellors (VCs), faculty and non-teaching staff.
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- For another, it was about extending the political influence of ruling parties.
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- Unions of students, teachers and employees became instruments in political battles.
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- Campuses were turned into spheres of influence for political parties.

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- Provincial politics also played a role, with an implicit rejection of national elites and an explicit focus on regional identities.
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- The decline of public universities in India has been an inevitable consequence of this process. Their drop in quality is alarming.
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Is it necessary to have political activities inside universities?

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- It is a serious mistake to think of universities as campuses or classrooms that teach young people to pass examinations, and become employable, where research is subsidiary or does not matter.
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- Universities are about far more.
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- For students, there is so much learning outside the classroom that makes them good citizens of society.
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- For faculty, apart from commitment to their teaching and their research, there is a role in society as intellectuals who can provide an independent, credible, voice in evaluating governments, parliament, legislatures, or the judiciary, as guardians of society.
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- These roles are particularly important in a political democracy.
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What is the necessity for university's autonomy?

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- Academic freedom is primary because universities are places for raising doubts and asking questions about everything.
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- Exploring ideas, debating issues and thinking independently are essential in the quest for excellence.
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- It would enable universities to be the conscience-keepers of economy, polity and society.
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- Hence, the autonomy of this space is sacrosanct.
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- Of course, this cannot suffice where quality is poor or standards are low. That needs reform and change within universities.
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What is the ground scenario?

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- In India, there has been more and more intrusion with the passage of time. Micromanagement by governments is widespread. Interventions are purposive and partisan.
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- These can be direct, or indirect, through the University Grants Commission and pliant VCs. The motives are political.
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- Such interventions are characteristic of all governments, whether at the Centre or in the states, and every political party, irrespective of ideology.
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- It is essential for governments to recognize that the provision of resources to universities does not endow them with a right to exercise control.
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- The resources are public money for public universities, which are accountable to students and society through institutional mechanisms that exist or can be created.
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- Every government laments the absence of world-class universities, without realizing that it is attributable in part to their interventions and the growing intrusion of political processes.
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- Where politics is largely kept out—as in IIT, IIM or the IISc—institutions thrive.
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What is the solution?

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- Differences in views are natural, but these must be **addressed through discussion,** with open minds.
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- There must be respect, not contempt for the other.
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- Political organisations inside the universities have a right to disagree.
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- It should pose questions, engage in debate, or organize events to articulate its views, but it **cannot and must not seek to silence others.**
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- The best model to be followed in a university would be a board of governors, to which governments could nominate at the most one-third the total number.
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- The other members, two-thirds or more should be independent, of whom one-half should be distinguished academics while one-half should be drawn from industry, civil society or professions.
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- The chairman should be an eminent academic with administrative experience.
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- Members of the board should have a term of six years, with one-third retiring every two years.
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- The VC, to be appointed by the board with six-year tenure, would be an ex-officio member.
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- Except for nominees of governments, the board should decide on replacements for its retiring members.
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- Such institutional mechanisms are necessary but not sufficient.
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- Governments and political parties must stop playing politics in universities and stop turning them into arenas for political battles.
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Source: Live Mint

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