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Ending campus violence

The issue of maintaining peace and an academic atmosphere on the campus was at the centre of a heated debate in Parliament on Sunday. Emotional outbursts from the Treasury Benches and the Opposition on the question is understandable. But the problem of campus violence has spread its roots rather deep and unity and prudence are now needed more than emotions to deal with the malaise. The silver lining in this gloomy campus situation is the fact that all quarters are convinced that measures have become essential to restore peace on campuses. The government, the Opposition parties, the teachers, the guardians and the great mass of student community are unanimous in their demand for an end to violence on the campus. But they differ on the details of how this can be achieved.

The causes of campus violence are certainly to be varied. But the immediate factors which draw attention are the availability of weapons on the campus, the presence of a large number of non-students within the university premises and a tendency by a section of students to do the bidding of political parties on issues which are not related to their universities or to their lives as students. With a bit of sincerity from all groups these factors can be tackled.

There is still a lot of confusion in the public mind as to what constitutes the autonomy of the universities. The independence of the highest seats of learning relates to their academic liberty. Such freedom is essential if the universities are to promote free thinking. But when it comes to the question of maintaining law and order and prevention of crime, all the ordinary regulations in the country should be equally applicable to the universities. Obviously, keeping of illegal weapons is a serious crime and if such arms are stashed anywhere, the government has a duty to recover those in the interest of public safety. The police and other law enforcing agencies cannot remain silent spectators only because the crime is being committed in a special place.

The universities will have to take the help of the police if they want to get rid of the illegal weapons which have found their way into the campuses and also to expel the "undesirable elements". The authority of the provosts will have to be reestablished over the student hostels. The teachers themselves will admit that they now exercise very little control over the allotment of seats in the dormitories which is predecided by one "power group" or the other on the campus. In fact, the autonomy of the universities is greatly curbed by these elements.

The time has come to recover the lost prestige of our universities. We must be able to restore an academic atmosphere promoting studies and research for which the universities are primarily meant. While students should always have an opinion on national issues, they must not relegate their studies to the background. After all what image does a university create where scholarship is secondary and politics becomes primary concern.