

Governors and Universities

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Governors and Universities: A Call for Academic Independence

Context : The **Governor's role as Chancellor of State universities** in India dates back to colonial times. It was introduced in **1857** when the British set up universities in **Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras**. This system aimed to ensure British control over education and maintain their interests.

After independence, India **continued this system** without considering its relevance in a **democratic and federal structure**. Over the years, Governors, as Chancellors, gained significant powers such as:

- **Appointing Vice-Chancellors** (the heads of universities)
- **Nominating members** of university syndicates and committees
- **Approving university laws and statutes**

This arrangement, however, has caused conflicts, particularly when state governments and Governors have different political alignments.

Challenges in the Current System

1. Politicization of the Role

- Over time, Governors have moved from being neutral figures to **politically influenced appointees**.
- **Data Insight:** Between **1950 and 2015**, around **52% of Governors** were active politicians, which reduced their credibility as impartial academic leaders.

2. Conflicting Authorities

- Universities face **dual accountability** to both the state government and the Governor. This often leads to:
 - **Delays** in appointing Vice-Chancellors
 - **Confusion and inefficiency** in university governance

3. Lack of Academic Expertise

- Many Governors do not have the required academic background to guide universities effectively.
- This lack of expertise often results in **poor decision-making** and increased **political**

interference in academic matters.

4. Erosion of Federal Principles

- Allowing centrally appointed Governors to control **state-funded universities** weakens India's federal structure.
 - Universities become less accountable to **state governments**, which fund and manage them.
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Insights from National Commissions

Two key commissions have studied the role of Governors and recommended reforms:

1. Sarkaria Commission (1983-88):

- Recognized the Governor's legal role in university matters.
- Suggested **consulting the Chief Minister** before making decisions to ensure better coordination with the state government.

2. M.M. Punchhi Commission (2007-10):

- Recommended separating the Governor's **constitutional duties** (as head of the state) from **statutory duties** (as Chancellor of universities).
 - Suggested appointing **eminent academicians** as Chancellors to reduce controversies and ensure academic leadership.
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Alternative Models for Reform

1. Ceremonial Role for Governors

- In states like **Gujarat, Karnataka, and Maharashtra**, the Governor's role has been limited to a **ceremonial one**. The Governor acts based on the **advice of the Council of Ministers**, minimizing their direct involvement in university matters.

2. State-Appointed Chancellors

- States like **Telangana and Kerala** propose appointing **distinguished academicians** or respected public figures as Chancellors instead of Governors. However, these reforms often face **delays in Presidential approval**.

3. University-Elected Chancellors

- Inspired by global examples (e.g., universities in **Oxford** and **Melbourne**), this model allows universities to **elect their own Chancellors**. This ensures:
 - Greater **autonomy**
 - Improved **accountability** to academic bodies

Powers of Governors in Universities

In State Universities:

- The Governor is usually the **ex-officio Chancellor**, meaning they hold the position by virtue of their office.
- As Chancellor, the Governor:
 - Makes decisions **independently of the state government**.
 - Appoints Vice-Chancellors and approves key policies of the universities.

In Central Universities:

- Under the **Central Universities Act, 2009**, the President of India acts as the **Visitor** of central universities.
- The Chancellor's role is **ceremonial**, while the **President appoints Vice-Chancellors** based on recommendations from search committees.

The Original Purpose of Governors as Chancellors

The original intent behind making Governors Chancellors was to **shield universities from political influence**. However, in practice, this has often resulted in the opposite.

Key Recommendations from Commissions:

1. Sarkaria Commission:

- Highlighted criticism of Governors' discretion in university appointments and advised consulting state governments.

2. M.M. Punchhi Commission:

- Recommended against giving Governors statutory powers that expose their office to **controversies or criticism**.

Role of the UGC (University Grants Commission)

- Education is a **Concurrent List** subject, but **entry 66 of the Union List** gives the central government the authority to set standards for higher education.
- The UGC ensures these standards and regulates appointments in universities.
- According to UGC rules, Chancellors (usually Governors in states) appoint Vice-Chancellors from a **panel recommended by search committees**.
- While central universities adhere to these regulations smoothly, **state universities often resist**, creating friction.

Way Forward

1. Reconsider the Role of Governors as Chancellors:

- States should explore new models for university leadership to ensure autonomy and better governance.

2. Promote Academic Leadership:

- Appoint **academicians** or allow universities to **elect their Chancellors**, reducing political influence.

3. Adopt Global Best Practices:

- Learn from international examples to align India's higher education governance with **modern, democratic principles**.

4. Ensure Timely Approval of Reforms:

- Reform Bills in states like **Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal** require **speedy Presidential assent** to implement much-needed changes.
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Conclusion

The role of Governors as Chancellors, a legacy of colonial times, needs urgent reform to suit India's **democratic and federal structure**. By focusing on academic autonomy, transparency, and accountability, India can modernize its higher education system.

Adopting globally accepted practices will ensure that universities are not only free from political interference but also capable of fostering **academic excellence** and contributing to the nation's progress.

