1. Temples of Critical Thinking and Debate

Context:

- In the recent subject-wise ranking of world universities by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), not even a single Indian university features in the QS ranking of the world's top 150 in overall parameters.

Brief Background:

- QS's top 10 in overall terms including five American universities, four British universities and one Swiss university.
- The Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) of Bombay and Delhi are at the 152nd and 182nd places in the overall rankings, while IISc Bangalore appears at the 184th position.

Common Factor Behind the Success of Top Universities:

- One common factor behind the success of the topmost universities is the **freedom with which they operate.**
- They have been major centres of innovation in teaching and research due to **independence from bureaucratic or corporate meddling and political Intervention.** They could remain centres of extraordinary excellence in a sustained way by according primacy to matters of the mind, i.e. intellectual ideas and solutions to problems, and avoiding becoming hostage to dogmatic thought.
- All the great universities of the world are **ideologically pluralistic, with a mix of right, left and centre** among their faculty and students.
- There is **no institutional line or official position on any issue.** No one is penalised for holding a pro- or anti- view on social, economic, political, cultural or scientific matters.
- They are also excellent at attracting and retaining talent. They hire professors very selectively, based on outstanding scholarly abilities.
- Top universities **incentivise publication and citation of research in an unforgivingly rigrous way.** If an Assistant Professor does not produce brilliant publications in the most reputed journals of her field, she may lose her job
- By insisting on tough standards which are never lowered or relaxed, these universities promote a meritocratic culture as a habit.
- Big universities also inculcate critical thinking, debating and writing abilities in their students. They encourage students to look at issues through interdisciplinary lenses and to challenge their own professors.

- They are also **involving their own alumni in governance and reforms.**
- They are **also super-smart financial managers.** For example, the U.S. universities have sophisticated alumni offices through which they raise funding, which can exceed the revenue from student tuition fees.

Issues in the Indian system:

- Avoiding politicisation, ideological rigidity and nepotism, and freeing our universities from excessive interference and over-regulation, are prerequisites for success
- Our universities must have the drive to excel and compete with Chinese or Western universities**. Insularity and self-congratulatory attitudes** have held us back for long.
- **Ingrained mediocrity and laid-back culture which result in inadequate training of students in theories** and methodologies have to be overcome.

Government Initiatives to Address the Issue:

- The government's decision to identify 20 Institutes of Eminence (IOEs) which will get maximum autonomy from bureaucracy in order to climb up the world rankings is a step in the right direction.

About Institute of Eminence Scheme:

- Implemented under the Union human resource development (HRD) ministry, the scheme aims to project Indian institutes to global recognition.
- The **selected institutes will enjoy complete academic and administrative autonomy.** They will also receive special funding.
- Only higher education institutions currently placed in the top 500 of global rankings or top 50 of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) are eligible to apply for the eminence tag.
- Under the scheme, Public Institutions of Eminence are eligible for a grant of ₹1,000 crore from the government and no funds will be given to Private Institutions of Eminence.

Conclusion:

- India has miles to go in higher education. The selected IOEs must innovate with new degree programmes, expanded variety of faculty members and digital learning platforms to make our university in the top 100 of the world.

Source: The Hindu