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# A Clarion Call for Bridging the Educational Death Valley in Indian Higher Education

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*Education is not to be viewed as something like filling a vessel with water but, rather, assisting a flower to grow in its own way*  
*-Bertrand Russell*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the millennium India's Higher Education (HE) system is challenged by the compulsions of sudden and significant transformations spurred by globalization and information revolution. In line with the global trends the field of HE in India is constantly evolving and rapidly expanding making the country home to the largest number of HE institutions in the world with student enrolments at the third largest, next only to USA and China. Exponential expansion and diversification of the HE sector since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is unprecedented. And, the rapidly growing involvement of the private sector in HE sector in the recent decades is stark. This is driven by the need to succeed in the new knowledge economy and to gain economic competitiveness and higher productivity. Nearly 70 percent of the expanded HE institutions in India today are promoted by the private sector. This apart, the recent years also reveal a staggering enrolment in Indian universities and a steep climb in GER from 8.1 per cent in 2001-02 to 26.3 per cent (AISHE 2019-20).

The twin developments, though heartening on the surface, the tertiary education sector in India is currently confronting crisis and daunting challenges as encountered by the explorers of "Death Valley" in California for centuries. Bereft of the institutional capacities to manage the

unplanned and uneven expansion, a large number of our HE institutions are found to exist in a visibly crippled or moribund state. Quality deficit in HE lies at the heart of the predicament with only a handful of institutions having achieved global recognition for excellence. There is a multitude of interconnected issues concerning educated unemployment, commercialization of education, regional imbalances, infrastructural and resource gaps, yawning digital divide and the like which are posing serious threats to the health of HE sector in India. India enjoys demographic dividend like no other large economy. The country does present a vast and deep talent supply chain with richly diverse learner potentials akin only to those in the USA. Unlike USA, Indian HE system needs to deliver quality HE in a low resource setting. Natural endowments for HE sector in India are in plenty, but the manmade infrastructure challenges seem insurmountable. It, therefore, transpires that Indian HE scenario, combining within its fold a host of extremities, figuratively strikes a special chord with the uniquely beautiful and challenging landscape of the Death Valley national park in the US. The seemingly harsh stretch of land stands as a living witness to some of nature's intriguing secrets and wondrous possibilities which could be leveraged as an inspirational model for the shaping of Indian HE sector. The range of surreal and fascinating experiences that the otherwise unassuming park offers to its explorers in terms of its variegated terrain, historic sites, scenic settings and some of the rare species of flora and fauna is enough to leave them awestruck and thinking.

Given its hottest and driest climatic conditions coupled with lowest elevation, the Death Valley national park exists as one of the most dramatic geological landscapes on earth. The complex geological landform with its inherent set of contradictions, lends a befitting analogical expression for understanding and addressing the complexities of our HE system. Woven around this metaphorical representation the article, divided into three parts, attempts to critically revisit the state of Indian contemporary HE system shedding adequate light on the range of apparent ambivalences as also the unique potentials that makes it an apt depiction of educational 'death' valley of our times. Incidentally, the unique geologic and biologic realities of the national park, in the form of sights and sounds share interesting points of convergences and divergences Vis a Vis the realities of our HE system. The paper is structured as follows: Part I seeks to contextualize the formation of educational Death Valley in India. In doing so it traces the current trajectory of India's HE landscape besides offering deep insights into the critical gaps (quantitative limitations and qualitative deficits) and systemic deficiencies embedded therein that go on to curb its performance and growth. Taking cue from the valuable

lessons offered by the Death Valley experience Part II sets out to explicate the latent potentials and opportunities with particular reference to the new prospects and possibilities unleashed by the ambitious and recently adopted New Education Policy (NEP) framework in this direction. By way of conclusion Part III attempts to make a clarion call for an educational revolution urging the need for radical overhauling of the higher educational system with a view to nurturing human diversity, creativity and curiosity.

### **1.1 Making of the ‘Death’ Valley of HE in India: Context and Concerns**

The Death Valley is known for the presence of extremes and so is our Indian HE arena. It hosts landscapes ranging from snow-covered high peaks, woodlands and dunes to wildflower-filled meadows and steep, rugged canyons. The extreme elevation range in the Death Valley allows for great diversity in the habitats of national park. The diversity of terrain also creates fascinating variances in patterns of rainfall received. In a somewhat similar fashion the Indian HE system, given its size and diversity, too represents a massive and incredibly complex terrain riddled with sets of startling contrasts. The system today is primarily caught in the vortex of threefold binary oppositions: quantity vs. quality, equity vs. excellence and creativity vs. conformity.

Just as the vast rolling wilderness of the Death Valley (spreading over 3 million acres) exhibits extraordinary diversity and vast changes in terms of landscape, wildlife species, climate and vegetation, the voluminous and variegated HE ecosystem too features a fairly rich blend of myriad universities and colleges with an expansive network comprising nearly 52000 institutions categorized as 993 universities, 10725 stand-alone institutions and 39931 colleges. The classification of universities into multiple categories viz. central universities, state universities, the Open University, private universities, deemed universities (institutions that are declared by Central Government under Section 3 of the University Grants Commission Act, 1956), and others that are also empowered to award degrees further adds to the heterogeneity, complexities and confusion.

The HE institutions are plagued by compounding crises of governance. The complexity is intensely felt in archaic, rigid and faulty regulations which result in red-tapism and unnecessary delays especially with respect to the processes and procedures pertaining to Approval, Affiliation, Academics and Accreditation. The systemic deficiencies make HE in India over-regulated and under-governed. The regulatory environment remains conflict-prone and full of

uncertainties due to the existence of multiple agencies having overlapping functions and cumbersome procedures (Srimathi and Krishnamoorthy: 2019). HE governance structure is marked by governmental dominance and control at all levels. Considerable degree of centralization is visible within the command structure of the universities too. Some of the major issues and problems in HE relating to inadequate infrastructures, uneven capacity across subjects, low public expenditure on HE, skewed public funding, absence of appropriate performance incentives, acute teacher scarcity, bureaucratic over-assertiveness, stifling governmental interference and intervention lie rooted in sub-optimal organization and significant overregulation. The complexities taken together create a dearth of both quality teachers and quality education institutes.

Death Valley is said to uphold a healthy and sustainable culture of ‘accessibility’, ‘co-existence’ and ‘adaptation’. The desert ecosystem of Death Valley, despite its extreme conditions, claims to host several endemic species and generously extends sustenance to some of the rare and endangered ones. It has taught humankind the value of tolerance and endurance of odds and the art of living peacefully with differences. The easy access and the degree of autonomy it offers has made it a habitat choice for certain life systems despite the tough environmental conditions. Contrarily, in the world of HE the hierarchical principle of unequal power relationships clearly manifest between and within educational institutions as also between different forms and domains of knowledge. Hence, the institutional ecosystem in Indian HE has, for decades, been resounding narratives of deepening inter-institutional divide, disparities and deprivations. Consequently, institutional biases and prejudices seem to be deeply embedded in our society conditioned by factors like socio-economic context, regional and spatial variations, institutional capacities, financial resources and funding, research competency, culture and outputs, commitment/competencies of faculty members, teacher-taught ratio, use of ICT in teaching–learning, public-private divide, and so on.

The long unattended issue of quality deficit in HE makes employability scenario in India a rising concern. Indian HE, on the whole, is out of tune with the skill and manpower needs of the market. The yawning skill gap among faculty and students alike reflects in the decreasing employability of the increasing number of graduates (British Council: 2014 , Deollite: 2012). Ironically, while the quantum of universities is on a big rise, the quality of talent generating out of them seems glaringly dropping. In this connection, the broadening the range of institutional opportunities may be seen as a panacea. Akin to the rich and diverse ecosystem of

the US Death Valley, our HE system needs to further diversify by way of setting up quality community colleges and vocational training institutions and integrating them with the mainstream HE system (one of the major reform initiatives adopted by the NEP, 2020).

In recent times with the country journeying into the initial stage of ‘massification’, the social composition of the hitherto ‘elite’ educational campuses has notably transformed with the rising inflow of large number of students from disadvantaged and socially excluded groups, such as former “untouchables” and other lower castes from poor families and rural areas. While this certainly calls for celebration, some of the structurally diverse campuses with an increasingly differentiated student body still remain an overwhelmingly non-inclusive social milieu posing major challenges to realization of individual potential and achievement of inclusive excellence. Despite an impressive improvement in the overall GER, there is an ever-widening gap between policies for higher education expansion and institutional capacity to respond to increasing student diversity. Furthermore, the private institutions being the key players in the expansion process, the problem of unequal access only seem to accentuate. Many empirical studies have revealed the exclusionary character of campuses offering interesting insights into experiences of humiliation, stigmatization and exclusion by those at the social and economic margins (Thorat, 2015: 33, Ghosh: 2012). Research findings attribute this largely to relative lack of sensitivity on the part of faculty members and academic administrators to issues related to diversity and discrimination (Rathod, 2020, Sabharwal and Malish: 2018, 2017). Onus, therefore, lies on our institutional leaders and managers to understand the dynamics of growing student diversity and recognize diversity as an asset rather than a liability to develop socially inclusive campuses in India. Diversity in classrooms must be celebrated by valuing students’ background, interests, talents, aptitudes, learning needs and styles (UNESCO: 2017).

## **1.2 Re-inventing India’s HE System: Insights from ‘Death’ Valley Experience**

Tertiary education is critical for the construction of new knowledge economies. The very nature of modern economic activity has become so massively dependent on up-to-date knowledge of constantly increasing scope and complexity that the linkage between knowledge and both productivity and profitability has become virtually inescapable (Weiler: 2006). In a globally integrated world the rising intensity of knowledge use in the production process has led to a growth in the demand for performance-oriented, agile and quality workforce with higher

educational qualifications and specialized higher order skills in tune with the requirements of the labour market. (Malik: 2017). In alignment with the neoliberal policy perspective HE worldwide is being viewed not as an end in itself but as means to gain productive employment. Universities are thus re-orienting themselves as centers of knowledge production for economic development. The trend towards commercialization of knowledge has created a whole new set of power relationships directed by both the interests and the resources of the commercial users of knowledge (Weiler: 2011, 2006). There is an overwhelming incline towards “corporatization” of public universities wherein HE institutions are being encouraged to become more managerial in approach and entrepreneurial in nature. In the post globalization era the state in retreat from the social sector is giving way to deregulation and enhanced institutional autonomy vis a vis traditional individual autonomy enjoyed by the professors. The new culture of ‘managerialism’ by reducing the power of the professoriate on campus arms the university managers with a wide array of powers and a greater say in matters of institutional governance. In the current arrangement the traditional control mechanisms in the form of legal regulations are being replaced with indirect forms of control through performance-based evaluation and accountability, research funding mechanisms, quality assurance and various other administrative mechanisms which is believed to have a more intense and stronger influence on the university leading to what is often referred to as *decentralized centralization*. As a result of the increasing state involvement through indirect means the universities claim to be losing their institutional autonomy in their relationships and dealings with external entities (NUEPA: 2017). With academic capitalism making its headway, the academic staff of universities is expected to operate in an increasingly competitive environment using academic capital which comprises teaching, research, consultancy skills or other applications of forms of academic knowledge.

Adaptability holds the key to survival in a transient, uncertain and disruptive environment. And, stress is known to promote survival as it compels organisms to slowly familiarize and adapt themselves to the rapidly changing environmental conditions by strengthening their defense mechanisms and potentials. The Death Valley in the US, by ensuring a degree of flexibility and autonomy, has enabled different life forms to acquire and develop capacities over time to brave the unfriendly conditions and gradually adapt themselves to the adversities. Sadly, in the Indian HE environment, as the foregoing analyses reveal, there has been a steady and systematic erosion of institutional autonomy and accountability which has rendered the

institutions (barring a few of the elite institutions such as the IITs and the IIMs, etc) unfit and powerless in the face of change. Weak governance and poor management practices, have for decades, severely limited the scope/initiative for new experimentation, creativity and change. For India to make a smooth and successful transition to the knowledge economy the HE sector requires a thorough revamping, both procedural and substantive. Ideally, it calls for a happy and harmonious reconciliation of new managerial values with traditional academic ones. To meet the new and emerging needs of the market-driven economy, Indian HE needs to be reformed to augment its quality and relevance thereby making the system demand-driven, quality conscious and forward-looking. There is a crying need to decentralize authority and provide greater autonomy to HE institutions from state supervision and control without compromising on transparency and social accountability (Varghese and Malik: 2015). Evidently, as the future of HE institutions appears wound up with the development of ICT, the Indian universities will have to change their priorities to adapt to new technologies. Within the evolving 'entrepreneurial' university framework our universities need to be re crafted as living spaces of creative research and innovation. Indian universities ought to become fertile ground for the generation, repair and recycling of ideas (Marks: 2017). It is high time that universities as centers of research and knowledge production begin to critically reassess their role and pioneer reordering the knowledge systems (shift of balance from west-centric *unified scientifism* to a *locally-rooted differentiated knowledge* forms inclusive of normative and aesthetic categories) by way of recovering and transmitting knowledge that has been cornered, marginalized, suppressed or even defeated (Ball: 2010, Nandy: 2000). In this new frame of understanding universities are to reinvent themselves as emancipatory spaces to be driven primarily by the spirit of democratic pluralism than be dictated by market principles alone. Shiv Visvanathan (2001) gives a rallying cry to bring knowledge back into the democratic domain through celebration of the play of differences. Research and Development coupled with the capacity to innovate thus stand decisive in shaping the fate of HE institutions operating in a globally competitive environment. Accordingly, the study programmes, their modes of delivery and assessment methods must be adapted to suit the changing demands and expanding aspirations of various sets of stakeholders. In sum, institutional imagination needs to be guided by the vision of building more institutions having quality and excellence in their pursuit (Rajkumar: 2017).

In the light of the preceding analyses and understanding the India's New Education Policy (NEP 2020) initiative presents itself as a bold alternative. Radical and transformative in approach, the NEP reforms are strongly committed to revamping India's Higher Education (HE) system making it world class. The reforms package focusing on 'quality', 'excellence', 'relevance', 'equity' 'access' and 'inclusivity' and 'foundational learning' seeks to make the HE system outcome(s)-driven and 'learner-centric' lending it a liberal, broad-based and multidisciplinary character. Faculty being the principal agents of change, their range of competencies, depth of commitment and engagement is key to steering the initiative to new heights of success. Besides ensuring greater administrative autonomy for institutions, the NEP seeks to enhance faculty autonomy to make informed curricular choices, innovative pedagogic initiatives and to pursue independent and quality research which today stands critical to improving teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes of students. The NEP mandate to transform and expand HEIs into viable multidisciplinary universities creates expanded scope for a rigorous liberal arts and humanities education which today stands vital to nurturing curiosity and developing creative-critical thinking and analytical acumen among the learners thereby grooming them into enlightened, sensitive and responsible citizens.

### **1.3 Bridge Across the Educational Death Valley: A Walk of Hope**

Death Valley is geographically positioned as a down dropped block of land between two mountain ranges with near dryness of air and moisture. The manifold problems India is facing in the fields of higher education and research are real and serious and not amenable to cosmetic changes or routine solutions. The low resource setting of Indian HE coupled with other bottlenecks is analogous to the hostile environs of the Death Valley. Given the country's low per capita GDP, the rapidly rising GER of nearly 30% of the global population of young people and the limited indigenous absorption capacity in the employment sector are indeed non-trivial issues to reckon with. The precarious and perplexing conditions which go on to deepen the sense of disenchantment and alienation among the young adults are fast draining the best and the brightest out of the Indian academia. The multitude and the magnitude of the difficulties may thus lead one to the despair of braving the odds. However, every challenge, as the saying goes, contains within it seeds of opportunity and growth. And, bigger the challenge, greater is the opportunity.

In India's inherently stratified and pluralistic social milieu the HE institutions are of paramount importance in so far as the identity formation of young adults is concerned. An increasingly diverse and challenging campus environment can serve as a 'psychological moratorium' wherein the young minds can confront a range of complexities and they feel adequately encouraged to freely explore, intellectually engage and experiment with new ideas, perspectives, possibilities, attitudes, roles and relationships. Complex and diverse learning environments become especially significant in enriching the educational experience and fostering cognitive growth. Heterogeneous campuses being discrepant and discontinuous from the familiar home environments of students expose them to a whole range of uncertainties where they learn to make sense of new and unpredictable life situations through diverse peer interactions (Gurin:2002). Indian colleges and universities must seek to promote campus diversity and in the process integrate their inclusion goals with the core institutional vision and mission statements and strategic plans. A firmly committed leadership including a diverse faculty plays a proactive role in creating and nurturing a general climate of campus inclusivity through appropriate curricular decisions and pedagogic practices on one hand and cherishing bonds of mutual respect, trust and confidence through their individual interactions with students on the other (UNESCO: 2017). Campus and classroom diversity may be viewed as an opportunity to tap and nurture natural talents among youngsters besides sufficiently motivating them to make meaningful academic contributions. And, teachers, in practice, need to identify and leverage these differences for the unified good.

There have been occasions in the recent past when the Death Valley Park took the world to astonishment with its ephemeral make over into an inviting bed of vibrant wildflowers. Such infrequent natural occurrences, often referred to as, '*Wildflower Super bloom*' unravel the secret presence of life in the form of tiny seeds lying in dormancy beneath the desert's extreme conditions. Underneath the hard barren surface lie the seeds of possibility eagerly waiting for the right conditions to come about- for just enough rain to make them quickly sprout, grow and bloom. The desert floral display signals the fact that the Death Valley is certainly not without life. Similarly, our HE system, beset with extreme challenges, is not devoid of its share of potentials and possibilities either. The richly diverse young talent pool in India may be seen as a valuable asset capable of fetching the country rich demographic dividends. The unsaturated demand for quality HE in India awakens new hopes, expectations and possibilities. Education system is a human system and like all organic systems requires the necessary and conducive

conditions for thriving. In his highly inspiring and stirring 2006 Ted talk, world renowned educationist and creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson had championed radical re-orientation of the world educational systems towards cultivating natural human diversity, curiosity and creativity which count as fundamental to the blossoming of human minds. His was a powerful urge to revive the waning spirit and culture of educational institutions by way of recreating them into open and creative learning spaces meant to feed the individual's passion, energy, spirit and dynamism. William Butler Yeats, in his literary style had beautifully summed up the purpose of education as: 'education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire'. That fire has to be lighted by the informed and inspiring teacher. The teacher's role is thus envisaged as catalytic agents simply to mentor, stimulate, provoke and engage- in essence, to initiate students into the 'art and habit of learning' (Peter Drucker's expression). Ken Robinson's voice and vision of transforming world education also embrace the alarming necessity of a paradigm shift in Indian HE system with loudness and clarity- a clarion call for bridging the educational Death Valley in India. Furthermore, the onset of the pandemic and its disruptive implications on the HE ecosystem has provided greater impetus for rethinking the traditional educational system.

The Death Valley national park has, for over centuries, offered itself to the world as an outdoor classroom for geologic study/adventure/experimentation/research inviting diverse intellectual engagements and explorations. It has stood as an open laboratory where organisms demonstrate ingenious adaptations to physically extreme conditions. Likewise, the challenging realm of Indian HE too induces systematic inquiry and formation of a stimulating and critical discourse on the possible developmental pace and future direction of Indian system of HE. The well-informed discourse has continued to offer a rich source of fresh ideas, perspectives and proposals for change, a portion of which have recently found its way into the NEP reforms (Weiler: 2005). The ambitious and futuristic policy document, if executed as proposed, has the potential to revolutionize higher education in India. The emphasis on pedagogical innovations and curriculum reforms, online learning, multidisciplinary education and research, internationalization, digitization, professional and vocational education, diversity, regulatory and governance reforms can go a long way to strike a balance between quality and equitable access (Rajkumar: 2017).

#### **1.4 Wrapping Up**

The treasured Death Valley National Park is at grave risk from the unprecedented threat of global warming. The climate disruptions caused by human activities are posing threats to the scenery, natural resources and wildlife of the park (Wang: 2016). Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic which has hit the world economy really hard is also having a devastating impact on the global education sector as well. At a when the HE was already on the decline, the educational institutions worldwide received multiple hard blows on account of dips in admissions/enrolments, uncertain budgets/revenues, growing operation and technology costs. A huge disruptor of the functions of HE institutions has been the temporary cessation of face-to-face activities. The instabilities caused due to physical distancing and abrupt campus closures have moved teaching-learning away from the in-person classroom sessions into the virtual environment facilitated through online distance and blended learning modes, pedagogic and assessment adaptations and so on. The 'new' normal could prompt major reform in fee structures and creation of more cost-effective programmes (UNESCO: 2020). In the post-pandemic times, it is anticipated by edutech enthusiasts, that digital learning could be the mainstay to be succeeded by multidisciplinary and modular pedagogy that afford transferrable skills and customized learning (The Hindu, April 14, 2020). Development of robust online platforms stands as an essential prerequisite to ensure continuity in learning. Success of digital learning will depend on students' equitable access to online libraries, books and journals. The facilitators must be oriented to becoming efficient disseminators of knowledge on digital platforms (Bania and Banerjee: 2020). In addition to technological accessibility, remote learning must accommodate and encourage social connectedness among teachers, students and peers by promoting genuine interactions. Learning being a social process, social presence must be created during online programme design and online course (Bania and Banerjee: 2020). There must be scaling up of digitization, hybridization and ubiquitous learning. Clearly, for a country like ours the shift has been sudden and rather uneasy. The information asymmetries and unequal access to the technical infrastructure have intensified elitism by deepening the existing divides. Intensifying digital divide has led to exclusion of students from poor and marginalized backgrounds (The Hindu, June 11, 2020).

Climate change being a great challenge in sustaining the Death Valley park resources, mitigating the complexities calls for enhanced flexibility in legal protections for reducing greenhouse emissions. Meeting the challenge of climate change also demands massive human interventions, collaboration and cooperation. This necessitates multiple stakeholders'

engagement- a concerted effort of national and state legislations in unison with local communities (Wang: 2016). On a similar vein, it may be said that navigating the altered and disaggregated educational environment of today also calls for unshaken commitment on part of the HE ecosystem to build trust between different sets of stakeholders. The massified educational structures today are required to increase flexibility, develop resilience and expand emergency preparedness and response plans. This underscores the need for greater reliance on institutional integrity and internal accountability mechanisms. To ensure transparency and speedy decision-making, HE institutions need academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and operational independence. Hence, the supervisory and regulatory agencies should empower the HE institutions and grant greater academic freedom to them to improve their global standing. Moreover, government agencies and regulatory bodies should consider engaging HE institutions in participative consultation, especially when creating or modifying regulations impacting them.

The future of HE in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will depend upon how effectively we are able to impart knowledge, skills and perspectives that will help promote analytical inventiveness and versatility and will be able to empower the learners in a variety of professional endeavours. The institutions need to develop alternative pathways in the form of internships, exchange programmes, participation in webinars/conferences for offering practical educational experiences to students to make them life-ready. Innovative forms of collaborations and alternative paradigms are urgently felt needed to drive the tech-mediated teaching-learning and research.

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