



SIFARISH CULTURE: A FORM OF ELITE CAPTURE

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The term “Elite Capture” is often voiced in Pakistan, from news channel studios, and newspaper articles to people discussing it on social media platforms such as X, formerly known as Twitter, as to how a tiny minority of the people, the rich and powerful have held the state resources occupied for their benefit, while the rest of the populous suffers at the hands of inequalities and this is said not just in terms of minting money but also holding on to power, prestige, and influence that benefits not only them but also their peers, which helps them maintain their sphere of influence. Therefore, nothing quite encapsulates the term Elite Capture quite like social capital does.

In the chapter "Social Capital" from "The Forms of Capital" by Pierre Bourdieu, the concept of social capital is meticulously explored and defined as the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to the possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. Bourdieu elucidates that social capital is essentially about the value derived from social networks and the inclinations that arise within these networks to provide mutual support and recognition.

Bourdieu discusses how social capital can be strategically leveraged to gain material and symbolic profits.

For instance, being part of a prestigious social network can provide access to exclusive resources and opportunities that are otherwise inaccessible. However, the accumulation and maintenance of social capital require significant investment in time and effort to build and nurture these social connections, which the landed elite has done so during the British colonial era.

Bourdieu also highlights the role of social capital in reproducing social inequalities. Those who already possess substantial social capital are better positioned to perpetuate their advantages and secure benefits for their network members. This dynamic can lead to a cycle where the elite class continues to reinforce and expand their social capital, often at the expense of those with lesser social resources.

This has historically been the case in Pakistan, Hassan Javid's thesis, "Class, Power, and Patronage: The Landed Elite and Politics in Punjab" highlights how the political landscape of Punjab, demonstrates the enduring legacy of British colonial rule in the region's power structures. The landed elite have adeptly used social capital, economic resources, and crony appointments to maintain their dominance, creating a self-sustaining system of elite capture, for example: Appointing their family members as President of the local municipality

or to the Public Works Department, such appointments ensure the political elite's control over local governance and administrative functions, reinforcing their power structures.

The landed elite in Punjab have effectively used social capital to maintain their dominance and control over the political and social systems. Social capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, involves the resources and benefits one can access through their network of relationships.

For example: As Hassan Javid highlights in his research during Ayub Khan's rule, several thousand acres of land were conferred to high-ranking civil servants, military personnel, and other influential groups to cultivate their support. For example, Ayub Khan provided over 200,000 acres of land to Punjabi landlords, bureaucrats, and their family members who had supported him in elections.

Having laid down the theoretical framework and the historical perspective as to how the elite use their social capital to maintain the status quo, now let's talk about the present, as it is no different from the past.

The elite that has ruled the country since its inception has made Pakistan a "Welfare State" but only for the rich as rightly pointed out by the historian and political worker Ammar Ali Jan. They have formed a system where the already privileged benefit from it, whereas the rest of the ninety-nine per cent are left with crumbs to eat and survive.

This is true because those with social connections have access to quality education, healthcare, better job opportunities, and career progress, as compared to the rest of the masses. For example: someone who studies at an elite institution such as Aitchison or has a membership of a Gymkhana club has a better chance at all the mentioned facilities than someone who has gotten their education from a government educational institution.

There's a connection to be drawn here, because how often do we see someone who received their education from a government institution or a low-income private school make their way to the top, as opposed to someone who got their education from an elite educational institution? The answer to that is in the latter part. We have seen many members of the cabinet coming from a handful of elite schools, forming or being part of governments, whether it's a dictatorship, a democratic setup, or even a hybrid one. This reinforces the theoretical framework mentioned earlier.

This elite capture in Pakistan has promoted a system of Nepotism. From applying for an internship, a house job, joining a law firm, or securing a job at a government or a private institution, it is preferred to have a "Sifarish" to secure a position. Those with social capital have it easy, as even if they don't have their immediate family members to help them secure a position, they have their uncles and aunties to look out for them. Whereas the masses are at a disadvantage because they hail from an underprivileged background. This phenomenon is clearly outlined in the British Council's "Next Generation Report 2023," which highlights how family connections and financial status play crucial roles in determining career opportunities for young Pakistanis. The job market remains heavily skewed in favour of those with the right networks and family support, perpetuating a cycle of inequality.

Nepotism in Pakistan's job market has deeply affected the youth, leading to widespread frustration. With limited job opportunities, the prevalence of nepotism and favoritism further exacerbates the issue, creating an environment where merit is often overlooked. Elite families and influential individuals leverage their networks to secure positions for their relatives, perpetuating a cycle of privilege and discrimination. This entrenched system of elite capture means that many qualified young people face systemic barriers, unable to compete due to the significant advantages held by those with connections. Consequently, this perpetuates inequality and limits social mobility, stifling the potential for broader economic and societal progress.

In the first seven months of 2023, around 450,110 Pakistanis left the country in search of better job opportunities. This exodus included 26,405 highly skilled workers, 164,155 skilled workers, and 198,000 unskilled labourers. In 2022, the number of emigrants exceeded 832,000, marking the highest rate of emigration since 2016. These figures, reported by Express Tribune, highlight the severe brain drain Pakistan is experiencing as its talented youth seek dignified lives abroad. This trend underscores the deep disappointment among the youth, who are disillusioned by the pervasive elite capture and nepotism that dominate the country's job market. The ruling elite's inability to look beyond their kith and kin perpetuates inequality and stifles the potential of many deserving young Pakistanis.

Keeping in mind the past and the present, hoping that the government performs on the economic front might be a bit of a stretch, same is the case on the diplomatic front but the least any government in power can do is formulate a system of that favors merit over nepotism

and crony appointments. This is the bare minimum they can give to their future generations, a system that will not bend to any pressure when advertising for employment opportunities.

Generation after generation has been let down, it is about time that instead of rhetorical slogans of youth empowerment, our ruling elite finally sits down with a serious focus to give some hope to the youth.

The author is a youth activist with a focus on climate politics

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