



**PIDE**  
*Conversation*

تہمکنت منطور

## A Conversation with

*Tamkeenat Manzoor*

### How would you define an elite?

One simple definition is that elites are the people who are privileged over the others, who don't deserve to acquire the status they have attained but by their ancestry, they acquire wealth and power. Also, Pakistan is a post-colonial society, we already have a lot of complexes that are linked to the British colonizers. So, I think we cannot just call people elites due to the money they possess. I even made a video on this that generational wealth no longer is the sole marker of an elite. People who have strong social capital, the ones who speak *sushta Urdu*, the ones who speak fluent English, all are included in the social elites. One video which got viral over the Eid was of a man who was selling goats and conversing in English in his transactional dealings with his customers. People were impressed and the video was widely shared. It doesn't matter if his English was grammatically correct or not, since he was speaking in a certain accent, people thought that he was superior to them. I consider people for whom the public has internalized that the former are superior based on their complexes and perceptions and in turn the public is willing to do anything for them, are also elites. My grandfather used to speak about what value people attribute to human beings. He used to say that people are happy with you if you have money, no matter if that money can be of any benefit for them or not. The family, friends, and strangers look up to you. Just because you have money. Additionally, elitism has to do with optics, which brands are you wearing, and who are you socializing with, in our field even there is a thing I call social media capital; how many followers you have on social media. Markers like these slot people in different categories of elites.

### Do you think the elites who dominated the political, business and military landscapes in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, are dominant today? Or, have they evolved, and has the core widened?

I believe that Pakistan was made for elites. There wasn't anyone who could top the British colonizers in the epitome of elitism. The ones closely knitted with the British elites had already made decisions about the division of land. This region is yours; this is for the elites in India. India, to some extent, has come out or at least trying to come out of this elitism. But, we are still stuck there. There are many reasons for this. No one is more elite than Pakistan's military wing. In my personal experience, belonging to an army background, we



always had a batman, a free telephone, and staff to pack for you when you shifted during transfers. My father was an army officer. I can write volumes on the opulence, you have a free telephone installed at home. I remember batman was always there to cook food, iron clothes, hang clothes on the hangers, and even place our schoolbags in the cars when we left for school. We have experienced such privileges and have lived lives in such bubbles. So, considering what the public goes through daily to earn daily wages, we were elites. So, people like these, in the army, are not ancestral elites, they are elites because of an affiliation with a country's institution. The institutions were designed in ways to facilitate elites only. All the resources were and are at their expense. Why? So that they can maintain their hegemony. I will add that many of the NGOs working for poverty alleviation are elites. What do they know about poverty? They haven't lived it, never experienced it. But they are vocal about the issues of the poor. Why? You are the biggest cause of their poverty? Your class is the biggest contributor and sustainer of poverty. So, I believe the definition of elites hasn't changed much. The same families dominate. Yes, a few more have infiltrated into these families by proxy or associations. But no such major inclusions have occurred. The so-called caretakers are the same, and the gatekeepers are the same, reaping the benefits singularly, as they have reaped in the past.

### Do you believe that elites are inevitable in any society?

In a capitalist society, the elites are inevitable. Because the system is built on the idea that a few will reign, and the majority will serve the few powerful. I have often heard such elites saying that the poor are poor because of their virtue, due to their fault or because they don't deserve any better. I have also heard audacious remarks that whenever the poor receives even a meagre amount, they spend lavishly. I just don't get it. Do we give them enough to spend lavishly? we were shooting in androon

(old) Lahore where drug addicts roam and ask for money. A person gave one of the addicts ten rupees and forbade him to spend on drugs. The addict replied, 'Oh! I was planning Umrah with this money!' They can barely purchase one bread with the money we give them. what amount do we offer to our domestic helpers? That amount can barely run the monthly expenditures of a household. And don't forget the money we offer is after one month of extremely strenuous and physically demanding work. We have systematically kept the poor, poor in our society. Since we don't pay them for the amount and type of work they do and deserve, we keep all the money to ourselves. Our households are the reflection of our institutions and country. Our system is running exactly like this. We have just given politically correct names to these systems, slavery has become house help now. The very thought is that we are the privileged ones, and they are created to serve us only. This is inevitable in this system. If there is an equitable system where everyone is equal, and there is equality in the distribution of economic and social resources, then these gatekeeping elites will not be inevitable.

## Elites are inevitable in the capitalist societies!

**Can you share some experiences dealing with social, political, business or any such elites?**

I live in Gujarat which is included in the big industrial cities of Pakistan, just like Faisalabad and Gujranwala. You will find multiple fan and furniture industries in Pakistan. and my parents have strong social capital built with these industrial elites. My father is friends with industrialists and their wives are friends with my mother who is a doctor. They all make up a big social elite group. There is a gymkhana in Gujarat too. Places like gymkhana are developed to make it a point that only one class is at the top and can never be superseded, that only one class can come here. Only those who can speak, eat, dress and spend a certain way can visit here. So, this is an enforced elitism through which we proclaim to society that we are different from you, better than you, we deserve more than you do. We come here and you just cannot. So, my parents' social circle is industrial, and I would also call them political elites because they both cannot survive without the support of each other. Industrial elites sponsor political elites and political elites facilitate industrial elites through preferential policies and tax exemptions. I often discuss with my parents why the poor are poor and it's the system maintained by people like us all that has structurally systematized poverty.



## Elites are the biggest contributors & sustainers of poverty.

**Do you find a connection between current elites and colonial elites?**

Yes, there is. The British elites transferred their power to the political, business and military elites of Pakistan. I always say that the biggest differentiating and uniting factor in any society is class. A billionaire from Saudi Arabia cannot relate to the working class there. He can always relate to the millionaire of the USA. Because their business, problems, social lives and daily routines are similar. Now, I cannot relate to the fact that I cannot identify an issue in my yacht, that my million rupees of equipment is stuck in customs, or that my private jet is refrained from flying in a certain zone. These are not my issues. I can relate to the issues of my class, not theirs. So, an elite of one country cannot relate to the culture and social conditions of the working class of that society. Therefore, all they are interested in is their self-driven interests and the transactions they make with one another.

**Under this landscape do you think that meritocracy exists?**

See, it does exist in certain industries. For instance, sports. To some extent in performing arts. In fields where privilege cannot be intergenerationally transferred. An industrial elite can transfer business to his children, but I cannot say this about the business acumen. It's not given that a child to an acclaimed actor will act well too. He can land good opportunities for him, but this is the field in which work is directly consumed by the viewers, and the audience explicitly rejects or accepts it. A good cricketer or a footballer can train his children and use sources to include in the team. But eventually, the performance will be out in the open for people to judge. How long such players can survive on nepotism or favoritism? In professions like these, there is a margin for meritocracy. Because you want people who do well in such fields. And there are examples where people have started with zero insider connections, they performed and delivered and now they are successful in their fields, purely on merit. So, there are industries and professions where merit can work. Also, I strongly believe that businessmen love their money. They won't let their money slip if their children aren't yielding financial surpluses. They must hire people on merit to sustain their businesses. That is another debate that they would hire capable and deserving people on merit, but their businesses will always go to their children.

**Is meritocracy an alternative system or is it an extension of elitism?**

To some extent, meritocracy is an extension of elitism. The ones who give chances are those who are powerful. Chance even or merit is given by the same powerful people. Who shouldn't be given a chance also comes from the powerful. Even meritocracy doesn't function on hundred per cent equality or justice. The gatekeeping elites, the movers and shakers, give a chance to those they like. There is a trained singer who sings exceptionally well. The other singer doesn't sing as well as the first one, but he has a face, personality, vibe, looks and overall package. He will be preferred. His voice will be corrected using auto-tuners. The producers who are the chance-givers need a complete package. Ideally, singing supposedly must be, should be solely based on how well somebody can sing. Just look through the singers in the 1950s, 60s and even the 90s. Not many of them were conventionally good-looking looking but they didn't use autotune. It wasn't necessary. These days all the singers are good-looking! Recently, I was thinking about why we don't have an average-looking singer, why all singers are so good-looking, and why all good-looking people can sing. They also act in films

and dramas. Eventually, everything boils down to capitalism in which everything is put on sale, where you must sell a package. In earlier days, a singer was a different person and an actor a different person. Now a singer is singing, appearing in music videos, has a screen presence, can sell concert tickets, can sell clothes, can collaborate with clothing brands, has good teeth so that brands can approach him/her for advertisements, and has good hair because he/she has to sell hair products, has good skin because beauty products will be sold through his/her face value, he has to sell body dysmorphia too. In all of it, voice is far from important. You cannot listen to many singers without the autotunes. Therefore, merit can be problematic when questions like who decides the merit, where the merit comes from and who will be among the beneficiaries of this merit, are addressed.



### So, can meritocracy be an alternative to elitism?

If there has to be an alternative system, then merit should be given a priority and must not be determined by the gatekeeping elites. Meritocracy will not bring about any change in the existing system if the same gatekeeping elites are the decisive figures. But as I said earlier that the ones who are already elites are not stupid. They have maintained their hegemony by placing these systems of oppression, manipulation and exploitation, in place. These systems cannot be sustained without hiring capable people who know their jobs. The system needs a complete overhaul so that it benefits everyone. We attribute human value to a person only when he/she can contribute monetarily. I don't believe in this. A person should have access to safety and security, food and education because he/she is a human being. It doesn't matter if he/she can mint money, churn out academic papers, sing, act or dance. If he is a daily wageer or a businessperson. If a person isn't any of them, he doesn't deserve to have rights? We can't look beyond transactions even in meritocracy. See I am a doctor, a content creator, and an actress. Why am I valued more than a person who isn't any of these? That person should have rights that are attributed to me by my profession. Unless we question our own privileges, we cannot think about an equitable system.

### Do meritocratic elites exist in Pakistan? If yes, then what examples would you quote?

Yes, they do, but I doubt they can sustain it without support from the financial, political or business elites. There are but one cannot claim that they have achieved everything on 100 per cent merit. Sports, performing arts, movie and music industries, painting, and visual arts...people in these fields must have attained status and power based on their talent. But eventually, we all are part of a capitalist society. And in this system money comes after being circulated from political and financial elites. Even the meritocratic elites such as those I have mentioned have to survive by putting a price on their hair, skin, and colours, in advertisements.

**Meritocracy, to some extent, exists in sports, visual arts & performing arts.**

### Do you think that acting is a level playing field?

A level playing field doesn't exist in any profession. And it cannot exist in any society. A system which thrives on exploitation can never have a level playing field. The acting profession is no different. We are often told that in the golden age of drama in Pakistan, sponsors didn't have much say. Now the sponsors are very influential. The issue for sponsors is how many advertisements he/she will secure. The channel owners look out for ratings based on which advertisements would be secured. And ratings are so random and false. Where are ratings coming from? Even a road accident can create curiosity, generate clout and become a source of excitement for the entertainment-deprived Pakistani people. It doesn't mean that people like to see accidents. It means that people have time to spend, and they will run to witness the live-accident for the supposed excitement and entertainment it would generate. I can also see the trend of hiring social media influencers having millions of followers for acting roles. They are hired because production houses think that their followers will bring high viewership, bringing in more ratings and more sponsors. There are many good content creators out there. They keep on churning out good content. But they are not good actors. Acting is a different field altogether. Those who act well on their phone screens do not always perform well in front of the professional camera, may not learn lines well, and may not emote well. Groupism is also common. A few directors and TV channels don't work with diverse groups of people. The next one is nepotism. I honestly don't find it a big issue. A TV/film producer may give his son a first, second or even third chance which I agree is not available to an outsider, but if he is not performing well, why would he spend on the fourth film/TV? This is a reality which isn't just limited to the drama or TV industry. Yes, some people are offered work despite not delivering. Many people from the industry while meeting tell me how much they like my work, my videos are shared with their friends and family circles. But they would never cast me in any role. They would always cast A-listers or stars or those who are established. Or, those who are in groups or friends with them. so, this level playing field doesn't exist anywhere.

### Are there gatekeeping elites in Pakistan's media industry?

There surely are. the ones who just don't guide people, don't teach people, and want to keep whatever resources and knowledge they have to themselves. They also don't let talent come forward. Even in medical profession, there are many professors who don't teach new doctors about techniques fearing that if they pass on

knowledge, who would come to seek for their assistance.

**How has been the journey for you as a content creator and an actor because you have made that journey on your own and your terms?**

The journey was long. I was one of the earlier YouTubers who started in 2017. The journey since then has been fun and I have never felt tired of this work. When I started, production houses were not hiring people from social media into the mainstream media. Now, this trend is common. A lot of my work was and still is acting-based. I played different characters in my videos...grandmother, granddaughter, mother, man or woman, irrespective of gender age or class, I have played it all in my videos. All my characters gave me a lot of margins to perform. My work registered me as a performer but my acting job on mainstream media was on-aired much later in 2022 or 2023. After 5 years of producing content on social media. I never felt desperate that other content creators were offered work in mainstream media, and I wasn't at that time. My 2nd or 3rd video had gone viral which was widely circulated. Even today, it has more views on other channels than mine. In mainstream media, you get work, but you don't always get the work you want to do as an artist. Since I don't say yes to every work that comes my way, which is run off the mill, sometimes I feel that the good work offered is not much. This is my biggest struggle. Where are the good writers, where are the good directors? The few who exist work with selective actors and teams.

**Does Pakistan's media industry provide an ecosystem for talent to flourish and for talented people to become meritocratic elites eventually?**

Good mentors are missing. Eventually, it's an industry. People must complete 6 shifts in a day, sometimes three dramas are contemporaneously shot. Directors and actors all are busy. Most of the content on mainstream media is not about social change. All that is in focus is the scenes churned out in a day. There are a few people who are producing socially relevant work. There are artists within the industry who extend helping hands despite their demanding acting schedules. Nadia Afghani has taught me how to pose in front of a camera, what is the right side, and left side, what is over a shoulder shot, what is two shots, what is a closeup shot, master shot, etc., she has taught me all these technical terminologies by writing down on a copy with a pencil. Usman Khalid Butt was also so appreciative. I was lucky enough to have my second drama with Kashif Nisar. He was also very collaborative and participatory. Samina Ahmed Sahiba taught me about positioning in a scene. She was also instrumental in

teaching me how not to block light for any actor and to find a place in a scene where light is on my face, too. Faseeh Bari Khan also taught me to be true to the character and feel uninhibited in front of the camera.

**Meritocracy will not bring any change in the existing system if the same old gatekeeping elites are the decisive figures!**

