



# ELITE CAPTURE IN SPORTS

Fizzah Khalid Butt

Pakistan is a country with immense raw and unpolished talent; some of the talent gets a chance to get polished and bloom and the other goes to waste. One of the reasons for all this is the elite capture. Elite capture is the claim of a powerful few over the resources that could be used for the benefit of the masses. Elite capture is a visible phenomenon in developing countries and has impacted the performance of many sectors through corruption or nepotism; sadly, sports is one of them. Sports is something a nation's pride is associated with and sports are skill-based but nepotism in sports has finished the careers of many skillful players and ended Pakistan's representation at many sports events.

Over 15 sports are being played in Pakistan including both team games and individual games. Pakistan has produced big names in Cricket, Hockey, and squash internationally whereas many individual players come up in the limelight once in a while by achieving something huge. Over time the number of heroes is decreasing due to the low level of fitness and unavailability of facilities for the larger population. These are not mere words but we have examples around that show us this.

The national sport of Pakistan until today is hockey but where is it now? Pakistan hasn't played any major tournament world tournament since 2013. Pakistan used to be the direct entrant of World Cups and the Olympics but over time it miserably failed at the qualifiers and it needs to look at what is happening. Squash is another sport where Pakistan has reigned for years but currently the top Pakistani squash player stands at 75th rank in the world squash ranking. In athletics other than Arshad Nadeem (Javelin throw) none of the athletes have shown worthy performances. Most are just improving their national levels which is way beyond the international level. This is a sad state of affairs. Cricket is the most popular sport in Pakistan and in the past few years, cricket has been established and promoted so well that it has become an elite sport, and the country's passion for it has taken away from other sports.

Is there a problem in a sport becoming elite and driving people towards it? The answer is No until the powerful few take over and start introducing nepotism. The powerful few or the elites of cricket of Pakistan are indeed the ones who have given enough to the sport

and have earned respect but the future is in danger when the merit is ignored due to the harsh reality of group-ism. Lack of talent isn't an issue in any of the mentioned sports but the availability of facilities, coaches, and resources plays a part. Seldom players from humble backgrounds achieve anything without government support.

Let's see the cases where elite capture has impacted the progress of the overall growth of a sport. Only a few knew about Arshad Nadeem before his Commonwealth Gold medal, the reasons are known, the less importance associated with the sport. Most grounds in the country are not available for the practice of sports and the private grounds charge a huge sum of amount that is usually not bearable for humble backgrounds. In the case of hockey, the elites of the sport when came to selection started picking up their family and friends and rated them above the talent and the result was suffering of the sport.

I'll build a case on Cricket which has become the "elite sport" of the country, because of its popularity among people and the craze of the nation associated with it. Every single day children are seen playing cricket in the streets and parks. Cricket is also the most paying sport in the country as well. It has been successful in getting the best of the sponsors both for domestic and international level which isn't the case for other sports. All these factors have added more expectations regarding cricket in the people generally and youngsters specifically who aim to make this sport their career. But alas, the recent defeats in the ODI and T20 World Cups have shown how merit has been compromised and undeserving people were given a chance in the squad just because they were related or were friends with the elites of the sport. Those undeserving were defended by giving multiple excuses specifically that they were talented. They must be talented, but what about the more talented lot who may belong to humble backgrounds, or the ones who lack the right kind of contact, the ones whose talent needs polishing but are not given preference? Having few talented people won't help in achieving class. Pakistan Sports League has brought many talented people in limelight but very minimal and mediocrity is at its peak. Currently, mediocre players are training mediocre players, if there is a talented player he will start lagging when he sees undeserving people given chances. India is world-class in most sports because of their meritocracy, other neighbors Afghanistan and Bangladesh are doing great in sports just because they prefer merit. Pakistan can achieve that by making efforts to raise the standard of domestic sports and preferring merit over connections.

The elites of any sport in Pakistan won't teach the leadership to the chosen leaders (captains), they won't train the upcoming generations for excellence and management. The groupings have ruined the teams in the past and that will be continued in the future. The elites of the sports are always responsible for the future of the sports but in Pakistan, corruption has won and they have failed to give it back to the country. Like any

other sector, elite capture not only ignores merit but also contributes to corruption in sports as well, both monetary and moral. Compromising on merit has already made most of the sports hit rock-bottom and if it continues we'll be a state without sports.



*The author is a Lecturer at Pakistan Institute of Development Economics.*