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Defeat and Glory: Social Media, Neoliberalism and the Transnational Tragedy of a Divinized *Baba*

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Abstract: This essay addresses the intersection between the Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik-Tok and Pinterest social media platforms and a contemporary religious leader/teacher who exploited them to rise from subalternity to the status of a deified celebrity. It examines his underprivileged disciples and followers and rival formal and informal levels, within Indian Sufi circles. Employing a combined perspective of ethnography, media studies and textual analysis, I discuss the transformations engendered by this social media celebrity and the impact of neo-liberalism on religious teacher–disciple (*peeri–mureedi*) relations. I show that this transformation involved a commodification of *peeri–mureedi* relations, leading to a neoliberal morphing of religious practices into marketable products. In so doing, I provide a critical reading of Mazzarella's social media as "re-enlightened" or "inclusive capitalism" that gives voice, agency and new economic possibilities to capitalism's most marginal subjects, who aspire to break the grip of what I term the "economies of despair".

Keywords: Sufism; stardom; India; Islam; *peeri–mureedi* relations; transmission lineages; neo-liberalism

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1. Introduction

This article addresses the intersection between social media, a contemporary religious leader/teacher, Syed Zarif Maudood Chishty, later known as Mansad Nasheen Qutb-e-Chishtiyya, Peer Baba Avatar Maudood Zarif Chishty (henceforth: Baba Zarif), who rose to the status of a deified celebrity, his disciples and followers (most of whom were from underprivileged socioeconomic strata in India) and rival formal and informal religious systems. In particular, I examine the transformation by a social media celebrity of religious teacher–disciple (*peeri–mureedi*) relations in today's neoliberal era. This transformation involved a commodification of these relations, where religious practices became marketable products on par with cosmetics.

The case study presented here tells an extraordinary story, with all the trappings of the classic tragic hero: a protagonist who was both human and superhuman, exalted but at the same time afflicted with fatal human flaws such as hubris and blindness that brought about his death. Similar to a star, he burst onto the horizon and was an idol who died young, just as rock stars Amy Winehouse or Kurt Cobain. Premature death frequently enhances a mythological framing of a celebrity's image, although more time is required to examine the retrospective impact of the murder on Zarif's image. Unlike them, however, he was a religious idol, a spiritual teacher (*peer*, *shaikh* and *baba*) and the heir to an established Sufi dynasty in Afghanistan.

Political circumstances, including the planned American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2017 and the Taliban's renewed takeover of the country, forced him to flee and live the rest of his life as a refugee in India. There, in exile, he gained celebrity status primarily through social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Tik Tok, and Pinterest.[1] These platforms enabled him to create an image of an Islamic Sufi teacher and a "divinized *guru*", a term that would attract Hindus and Sikhs (Boivin 2019; Snehi 2020). He was a star of informal, vernacular or lived religion, in spaces I term

the "economies of despair" (Parciack 2022, pp. 44–45), composed of concentric circles of unfavorable life circumstances that accommodate the destitute in a non-welfare state. The veneration of saints attracts huge crowds from the lower social classes. Devoid of concrete and symbolic capital in a non-welfare state, lacking agency, reluctant to seek medical help from physicians (or distrustful of Western medicine), unable to approach financial institutions and alienated from the state, they seek to remedy their health issues and life crises through what is believed to be the intercessory powers of the *peer*: whether an established Sufi authority in his shine complex or a hyper-local, informal one. Both are popularly regarded as capable of mediating with the divine on behalf of their supplicants, impact their lives and perform miracles (*karaamat*).

This notion encompasses both the idol and his disciples, who, when devoid of resources and agency and alienated from state institutions, turn to saint worship as their last and sole resort, in the belief that saints can perform miracles that will change their lives. Baba Zarif prospered in these spaces but could not escape their trap: on 5 July 2022, he was murdered by some of his closest disciples, who sought to take control of his financial assets.

This case study does not only relate to one individual. It involves key questions of authority and power relations on the religious map, intertwined with social media's ability to give voice and agency to underprivileged actors relegated to the margins of society. Through a combined perspective of ethnography, media studies and textual analysis, I analyze the dual dimension of social media as the "re-enlightened" or inclusive space of the neoliberal era (Mazzarella 2010) and the ways in which it intersects with "economies of despair" (Parciack 2022).

2. A New Kid on the Block

In late 2017, a new figure burst onto the Sufi scene of India's capital. A tall, shy, young man of about thirty emigrated from Chisht, Afghanistan. A lush mane of hair covered by a red Tarbush-like hat graced his handsome profile. This was Syed Zarif Maudood Chishty, later known as Mansad Nasheen Qutb-e-Chishtiyya, Peer Baba Avatar Maudood Zarif Chishty (Qutb denotes a hierarchically superior position in the Sufi orders. *Peer* and *Baba* mean religious teacher/saint, and *avatar* denotes an incarnation of a deity and draws on Hindu contexts). Syed Zarif, a destitute refugee, was endowed with a particularly significant asset: a direct affiliation, in the form of a blood tie, to a prestigious Sufi order established in Chisht by Sayed Maudood Chishty (d. 1139).

Zarif's getaway from his homeland and his choice of India were not accidental. US President Barack Obama declared 2017 as the new deadline for a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan.[2] In the aftermath of 11 September 2001—the media event and prime signifier of "global terrorism"—US and NATO forces entered the region to fight the Taliban that ruled Afghanistan and supported Al Qaeda and encourage the democratization of the region. The assassination of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 was followed by a gradual withdrawal in the involvement of Western forces in the region. The Taliban then made efforts to regain control over the domestic front by presenting itself as an anticolonial force. By 2016, it controlled over 60% of Afghanistan (Weigand 2017, p. 359; SIGAR 2017, p. 4).

In this climate, Zarif had good reasons to be concerned, since the Taliban is identified with fundamentalist Islam, which strongly opposes the beliefs and practices prevalent in the Sufi order he belonged to. These included first and foremost the worship of lineages of saints believed to embody the charismatic authority of the order's founder (Weber 1947, pp. 363–73; Eaton 1978, p. 203), who are thus considered to be endowed with healing and soliciting powers enabling them both during their lifetime and after death to perform miracles. This superhuman status tends to be perceived by orthodox Islamic prisms as *shirk* (blasphemy of attributing God's singular nature to mortals). Being a direct descendant of a renowned Sufi saint was thus a double-edged sword associated with symbolic capital but which simultaneously made Zarif a target for religious persecution. The choice of India as a destination was based on the established position of the Chishtiyya order in the subcontinent. Paradoxically, while, in Afghanistan, the importance of the order had

receded over time to a mainly local level (Paul 2017, p. 73), the situation in India was remarkably different.

The Chishtiyya order was introduced to the subcontinent in the 13th century by Khwaja Mou'in-al-Deen Chishty and became one of, if not the most important, Sufi order in Central-North India. Mou'in-al-Deen himself is especially revered and since medieval times has been referred to as "Sultan-e-Hind", the spiritual (some say, also, the political) ruler of India. His shrine complex (*dargah*), in the Indian city of Ajmer, is considered a "little mecca", i.e., local beliefs have it that making the pilgrimage to Ajmer is equivalent to going on the Hajj (Aquil 2008, p. 30; Sanyal 2007, p. 198; Zarcone 2011). Mou'in-al-Deen's shrine in Ajmer, and those of his prominent successors headed by Nizamuddin Auliya (13th–14th centuries) in Delhi, are of the most prestigious, popular and prosperous Sufi hubs in the subcontinent and attract millions of pilgrims of various denominations every year. Zarif was thus endowed with an undeniable dynastic affiliation to a prestigious Sufi institution. However, none of the Chishti institutions would give him a formal position. These institutions are highly exclusive and hierarchical spaces that do not tend to accept outsiders and are already overcrowded with formal stakeholders. According to *The Business Standard*, the *baradari* system of collecting donations from pilgrims at the Delhi Nizamuddin shrine is made through the nearly 400 *peerzadas*—custodians of the Sufi mausoleum.[3] The fact that Zarif was a non-Indian made him a foreigner in local eyes, despite his blood tie to the lineage. Moreover, the fact that he called himself *Qutb* (a term denoting a hierarchically superior position in the Sufi orders), thereby placing himself above the local stakeholders, may have also contributed to the local resentment.

Furthermore, the longer he stayed in India, the more the stakeholders at the top of the spiritual hierarchies disassociated themselves from him, presumably due to his personal style and leadership, which integrated aspects of a personality cult. See, for example, a video in which Zarif's devotees shower him with rose petals[4]—a practice that is primarily reserved for saints' tombstones and not living *peers*—as well as his overt commodification of religious practices. Zarif's social media, and particularly the posts uploaded on his Facebook and Instagram pages, narrate this change visually. The months following his arrival were filled with photographs in which he was presented together with the custodians and stakeholders of renowned Sufi shrines, Chishti or otherwise. This is a well-known canonization strategy, in which the joint photo testifies to the granting of legitimacy. Zarif was pictured with such notables as Haji Syed Salman Chishti (26th generation heir in Ajmer's *dargah*), Peer Khwaja Syed Afzal Nizami and his son, Sufi Ajmal Nizami, who hold the parallel position in Delhi's Nizamuddin Auliya Dargah. In one of two shots with Syed Salman, the two had draped a shawl around their shoulders, a gesture denoting equanimity.[5] Zarif uploaded numerous photos such as these on his social media pages, but over time, the stakeholders disappeared from the two-shot photos, and the posts consisted of Zarif's portrait alone, taken in close up or medium shots that stressed his individuality but also hinted at his exclusion from formal Sufi hubs. The absence of other authoritative figures suggested that the young heir's legitimacy had been undermined. He was mainly photographed as a shrine visitor in spaces open to the general public (not the internal spaces reserved for formal stakeholders and VIPs), surrounded by men whose dress code indicated that they belonged to the lower classes.[6] They are often referred to as "*Baba Log*", individuals who flock to the self-appointed saints that are so common in Sufi shrines. Hence, despite his privileged starting point, Zarif was also subjected to the "economy of despair": he was uprooted from the economic and institutional significance of his asset and relegated to the highly popular but informal spheres of saint worship.

2.1. Sufism: From Popularity to Institutionalization

Historically, Sufism is the mystic path of Islam, which developed in the Arabian Peninsula in the eighth century CE to challenge the rigid establishment and growing politicization of Arab Islam and paved the way for more personal and emotive religious experiences through uplifting music, dance, ritualistic movement, poetry, etc. This constituted the

mass appeal of Sufism and its perception as "soft", as opposed to rigid orthodox sects (Knysh 2004, p. 4). However, Sufism also underwent significant institutionalizing processes and become an exclusive, rigid hierarchical system, centered around authoritative transmission lineages. In brief, after the death of key founders of Sufi orders or sub-orders, such as the one established by Zarif's forefather in the 13th century, his authority was handed down to an heir, thereby forming a transmission lineage of authorized teachers/leaders (*peer, Shaikh, khalifa, sajjada* or *gaddi nasheen*s, "the one sitting on the praying rug/throne"), positions that were habitually, but not exclusively, established through blood ties. The ability to present a genealogical tree (*Shajrah*, Figure 1) is a precondition to authority, and those lacking it are situated outside the spiritual hierarchy (Paul 2017, p. 72). "You are nothing without a *Shajrah*," concluded one of *mureed*s of an Ajmer shrine. "You may perform miracles, reach the moon, but without a lineage makes you just a nobody".

Figure 1. A *Shajrah* displayed publicly in a Sufi shrine. Delhi 2022. Photograph by the author.

Baba Zarif presented his *Shajrah* on most of the posts he uploaded on his social media pages. According to his detailed genealogy,[7] he was the 41st generation, and his followers could trace his genealogy back to the Prophet Muhammad.

Belonging to a formal lineage does not function as abstract or symbolic capital alone but is also a significant economic resource. From medieval times onwards, established Sufi dynasties have been part of the economic elite. During the lengthy eras of Muslim rule in India consisting of the Delhi Sultanate (13th–16th centuries) and the Mughal Empire (16th–18th centuries), quite a few prominent *peer*s became landowners of property granted to them by sultans and emperors, thereby making them "landed elites" (Eaton 1978, p. 203). This status can still be felt in that prestigious Sufi authorities often own or have custody over a "space" that, in most cases, is a shrine (*dargah*) complex. In the typical South Asian context, *dargah*s consist of a compound that includes the tomb of the founder and/or his prominent disciples. More prestigious extensive shrines also consist of mosques and open spaces where pilgrims can be received and public events can be held. These elaborate spaces put Sufi authority and economic power on display, which is further enriched by constant donations from devotees and pilgrims, who often pay the stakeholders for prayers and offerings on their behalf. These shrines (such as the Shrine of Khwaja Mou'in-al-Deen Chishti in Ajmer and Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi) also contain the space of informal Sufi teachers/leaders.

2.2. No-One's Land: Informal Spaces

These exclusive and formal Sufi institutions have an informal arena for what I term *jugaad* (Punjabi/Hindi/Urdu: impromptu or informal) authorities. Ravinder Kaur analyzed the sociopolitical context of the term and strategies embedded in it as follows:

> A Punjabi variation of the Hindi *jugat* derives from the Sanskrit word *yukti*, root *yug*, *yog* or union, joint . . . which carries multiple meanings ranging from skillful reasoning, argumentation, trick, cunning device, adaptability, adjustment, being inventive, dexterous and clever. In northern India, *jugaad* has long been a popular vernacular expression for improvisation, quick-fix, intermediate solutions that allow everyday life to somehow function even in the absence of permanent, durable infrastructures . . . the new *jugaad* innovation narrative offers an uplifting, potentially emancipatory discourse of mobility in a setting where even after two decades of economic reforms, the wealth gap and poverty stubbornly persist. (Kaur 2016, p. 314)

There are numerous charismatic figures who were raised in lower socioeconomic strata outside Sufi institutions but are knowledgeable in the Koran, *du'as* (nonmandatory prayers) and local medicine (Unani medicine and amulet healing are common in Indo-Islamic contexts, Schmidt Stiedenroth 2019, p. 186) operate in the vast domain of popular religion. These include religious leaders who have established a formally unrecognized yet authoritative position and have communities ranging from dozens to thousands of followers. Most belong to the lower strata of Indian society, where self-positioning as a religious authority is likely to be their sole asset.

It is noteworthy that most scholarly works on Indian religious teachers/leaders refer to high-profile Hindu and Muslim figures (Copeman and Ikegame 2012, p. 4), who enjoy public esteem, economic resources and political accessibility.[8] The bustling informal scene of self-appointed Sufi *peer*s, saints or *babas* operating within the micro-levels of Indian Islam, as well as in Hinduism (Erlich 2022, p. 2)[9], has been understudied. Based on Benjamin's initial distinction between South Asia's "local" and "corporate" economies (Benjamin 2000, pp. 35–51) as used by Copeman and Ikegame to classify the majority of Indian spiritual leaders as analogous to local economies (Copeman and Ikegame 2012, p. 5), these informal *peer*s are situated in hyperlocal spheres, where they have immense significance, although from a formal perspective, their authority is often challenged, undermined or considered fake.

Zarif integrated this arena and became a star shining in the spaces of the destitute. When *peers* interact with growing crowds of underprivileged disciples on the social and economic fringes, they are exposed to the extreme hardships their disciples experience in terms of their health and livelihood, as well as personal and interpersonal problems. Huge crowds with little or no concrete and symbolic capital, lacking agency, reluctant to seek medical help from physicians (or distrustful of Western medicine), unable to approach financial institutions and alienated from the state, seek to cure their health problems and life crises through what is believed to be the intercessory powers of religious leaders. The traditional institution of teacher–disciple relations in India, whether *peeri–mureedi* in Islam or *guru–shishya* for Hindus/Sikhs, has always been endowed with a comprehensive dimension that made the teacher responsible for all aspects of his disciples' lives. As Erlich notes, the Indic term of *Kalyāṇ*, denoting a desirable holistic state of well-being in which "everything is completely all right", is described as the purpose of religious endeavor (Erlich 2022, p. 2). The relative accessibility of informal leaders at the hyperlocal level, combined with socioeconomic circumstances, result in a relationship emphasizing dimensions far beyond the apparent "spiritual" meaning of religious life and the initial focus of early Sufism on devotion and yearning for the divine. Sufi leaders were sometimes paralleled to shamans (Kakar 1982; Sultanova 2011; Zarcone and Hobart 2013). However, in the neoliberal era, a strong consumer dimension has inflected the role of contemporary teachers, whose disciples do not necessarily wish to walk the spiritual path but are more

like clients seeking patronage, assistance and healing. Sometimes, as one of the *peer*s bitterly noted, disciples are simply looking for the free hot meals served after the weekly *dhikr* practices.

During fieldwork conducted from 2017 to 2020, I accompanied some hyperlocal Sufi leaders and their disciples. When I asked a disciple of a respected informal *shaikh* how he got to his *peer*, he replied:

> I had problems in my business, and people suggested I should seek his help, that he is very powerful. I went to him, and slowly, slowly all my problems were solved. My business hardships disappeared, together with diseases of family members.

Thus, the *peer* provides protection, healing and an all-encompassing patronage covering all facets of the disciple's life. This makes some informal teachers extremely hesitant to take on disciples. One of them angrily confessed: "I do not agree to take *mureed*s because they will use me to solve their material needs and earthly problems in an instrumental way." On the other hand, most teachers accept this broad definition embedded in their authority, which is endorsed by their protégés–disciples. A female disciple described her relations with her (informal) *peer* as follows:

> I do not have to tell him my problems, he is my savior. I am a very bad *mureed* of him, I only text/call him when I am worried. A few hours ago, I wasn't feeling well and was crying and praying to Allah Ta'la for help and wanted to reach my *Peer O'Murshid*. I tried calling him but he was reciting the Maghrib [sunset] prayer that time and didn't pick up. I was about to text him but before typing anything about my condition, suddenly I started feeling light, and then I got a text from him, saying 'You will be fine insha allah you don't have to worry about whatever it is, you will be all right' and trust me, I started feeling better, and way better. Alhamdulillah I am so blessed and thankful to have my *peer* in my life. May Allah shower abundant mercy upon him.

Another disciple considered his *peer* to be a symbolic father figure:

> It all began in Delhi 32 years ago. Heaven's script doesn't miss a chance. The arrow is always planted in the center of the heart. I found my father. Thirty-two years of prayers was enough. Please let me meet my Peer! I searched for him every step of the way, every door I knocked on, I was hoping to find him, I turned every corner waiting to finally fall at his feet. Then two months ago someone told me about a *baba* I should meet. I had intended to go to the *dargah* three times, but it was postponed by a series of obstacles. Then finally one Sunday all the obstacles vanished. The *dargah* was deserted. The grave was in some kind of underground [location], small, clean, fresh . . . I was fine, I felt I was welcomed inside a womb. On my way out, I saw a *baba* sitting on the floor in front of his desk. He had a long beard and was wearing a nice white turban. He was talking to two women, and he made me wait. Soon after we were left alone, we spoke. He gave me an amulet and a *dhikr*, and accepted me as a *mureed*. Back home, with a heart in turmoil over all these events, I decided to note the date of such an important day. Take notebook and pen, I opened my agenda and suddenly realized it was the anniversary of my father's death . . . . Allah is Great!!!

In this type of atmosphere, both the position of a teacher and his legitimacy may sometimes depend on his ability to ensure the wellbeing of his protégés and testifies to a transformation in the status of *peers*/saints to something closer, in a sense, to the service sector. Disciples or clients are nevertheless not the only ones to experience distress: teachers on the informal level whose authority is constantly challenged may also suffer while yearning for legitimacy. One of them, a self-acclaimed *peer* aiming at legitimacy while simultaneously challenging that of others, thanked a *mureed* who acknowledged his authority by saying: *Jazak Allah . . . . Ameen . . . afsos hota hai aajkal tareeqat ko badnaam karne wale log hain . . . shayad wo ki naqli baba hain . . . sirt title use kar rahe hain and public ko dokha*

(Urdu: "May Allah reward you . . . Ameen . . . it is a pity that people today have given the order a bad name. They could be fake *babas* . . . just using the title and deceiving the public"). Zarif's case involved a more complicated dynamic: although his formal status was indisputable, his conduct was controversial, and in any case, the formal Sufi establishment, which could not ignore his dynastic filiation, did not embrace him. However, his emigration to India and this combination of circumstances was an extraordinary opportunity for some informal *peer*s to seek out his alliance in the hope that his prestigious dynastic affiliation would rub off on their authority as well.

Ahmad Faisal (pseudonym)[10], a well-known informal Delhiite *peer*, was among the first to welcome Zarif upon his arrival. He invited him to his home and then brought him as his personal guest to a death anniversary event (*Urs*) held in November 2017 at one of the well-known Chishti shrines on the rim of Old Delhi. It was not an accidental gesture: Zarif's presence had the potential to elevate the status of both the host and the event. Ahmed Faisal seated Zarif next to himself while receiving an audience that came for his blessing and passed the bank notes he received as an offering to Zarif in a gesture of respect and mutual recognition.

That evening, Zarif got to know some of the other figures active in the informal Sufi arena in India and was introduced to social media and the ways in which other leaders used it to build an image and recruit disciples, as well as produce and maintain legitimacy. One of these, Noor Hamid (pseudonym), operates closed Sufi WhatsApp and Facebook groups. Noor Hamid added Zarif to his groups and gave him his first glimpses of the vibrant world and growing pools of potential *mureed*s. Weeks after being added to the WhatsApp and Facebook groups, Zarif acquired lists of participants and began sending them messages to attract disciples and start his own virtual and tangible communities. By the beginning of 2018, he had already made use of every possible platform, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Tik-Tok and Pinterest, to which he uploaded similar messages, short videos and photos that were soon to make him a social media star.

2.3. A King of Social Media

Zarif's use of social media was designed to achieve a number of goals. The first was to create an image of himself as a saint, an idol and, ultimately, a god. This was reinforced by the consumerist dimension he established in his teacher–disciple relationships. This included small-scale business entrepreneurship (the selling of "lucky stones", jewelry and amulets)[11] but culminated in an extraordinary commodification of the religious practice of *wazeefah* (spiritual work, mostly through the uttering of nonmandatory prayers), which was presented alongside consumer and cosmetic products whose benefits were modeled by Zarif's portraits on his social media pages.

In the last 40 years, India has become a multi-media superpower. The state television and radio of the nation-building era paved the way for the cassette culture of the 1980s (Manuel 1993). Commercial and satellite television channels offered hundreds of channels in an abundance of languages and domains as of the 1990s. Audiovisual content was made gradually accessible through VHSs (Brosius 2005) and DVDs, although the digital turn dramatically transformed the media market by introducing extremely low-cost technologies, which required little or no training that enabled new, underprivileged participants to stake a claim in the Indian mediascape by producing and consuming low-cost audiovisual (and printed) products. The expansion of the mediascape was interpreted as enhanced democratization, endowed with an "immediate potential . . . to address a multiplicity of communities, diversified interest groups and cultures, and lead to enhanced sociopolitical participation" (Manuel 1993, p. 4). Growing numbers of entrepreneurs, for whom mainstream media was never accessible, were given voice, agency and control over the representation system.

The internet further fueled what Mazzarella termed "technological charisma" (Mazzarella 2010) and its emancipatory message. He noted that "As a medium the Internet appeared to combine universality with infinite particularity, broadcasting with interactivity". In that sense,

information and communication technology in India promised to bridge the "digital divide" between the "wired and unwired" (Mazzarella 2010, p. 783) and bring about a "reconciliation between neoliberal capitalism and the interests of the poorest people in the world . . . [located at the] bottom of the pyramid . . . This reconciliation was conceptualized 'inclusive capitalism' . . . or 're-enlightened capitalism'" (Mazzarella 2010, p. 785).

Zarif's rise to stardom took place on internet platforms that prospered after the digital turn, which made it possible to create immediate low-cost contents with a cellphone camera, whose use does not require specific training, sophisticated technical devices or expensive development processes. Since the internet network in India is extremely comprehensive and accessible through cell phones starting from 2G and 3G, he could reach a potentially huge user volume. By 2012, as Doron and Jaffrey noted:

> Mobile-phone subscribers in India exceeded 900 million out of a total population of 1220 million (1.22 billion). Of those numbers, three out of every four Indians, from kids to octogenarians, had a mobile phone . . . and even when we recognize that phones are much less common among rural poor people than urban rich ones, it means that close to half of Indians almost certainly owned a phone. (Doron and Jeffrey 2013, p. x)

Spiritual leaders, whether those who enjoyed high status and legitimacy or those who, such as Zarif, aspired to forge authority, could no longer ignore the power of social media. Although most leaders employed these platforms to broadcast prayers and rituals they led live, or for documenting their visits to sacred spaces throughout India (after which they uploaded photos with local stakeholders to solidify their religiopolitical network) or charity enterprises (e.g., food distribution for the needy), Zarif took an unusual step in this ultra-conservative religious Indian milieu by making deliberate use of his physical assets—especially his white skin and abundant, wavy hair—to shape himself as an idol for the masses.

2.4. Corporality and Virtuality

The first message Zarif sent to the recipients he reached through Noor Hamid's WhatsApp groups was nonverbal: it featured him as a whirling dervish[12], a practice associated with the Mevlevi order in Konya, Turkey. Whirling is not habitually practiced in the subcontinent but became better known in the wake of the Bollywood hit *Jodhaa Akbar*, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker in 2008. The film, a musical focusing on 16th century Mughal Emperor Akbar, also known as a devotee of Khwaja Mou'in al-Deen Chishti, and his Rajput wife Jodha, included a song number entitled "Khwaja Mere Khwaja" (Hindi/Urdu: "My Saint").[13] The lyrics expressed the emperor's admiration for the saint while dancers performed the Mevlevi whirling. By performing the dance, Zarif was associating himself with the Chishti lineage and its revered Indian founder while simultaneously placing himself on a par with the film dancers/stars. Zarif's social media debut was thus based on a Sufi allusion but no less on popular cinema, which became the vehicle that shaped his public image as both a star and a religious leader. The combination was strengthened when he claimed that Bollywood star Shah-Rukh Khan was one of his disciples.

These performances also emphasized his physical assets: his white skin, his height, his long hair. Almost overnight, he became a star, ticking all the boxes defined by Levinson in "The Myth of Success": "A lowborn young man with a burning ambition . . . becomes a successful entrepreneur. A fresh-off-the-boat immigrant seizes the promise of the new world and reinvents himself . . . " (Levinson 2012, p. 1). These clichés, commonly associated with the American Dream (highly present in neoliberal India; Brosius 2010, p. 3), can be interpreted in this context as an aspiration to break out of the circle of the "economy of despair". How could the physical features usually attributed to film stars connote and enhance religious authority? In the Indian context, as pointed out by Viswamohan and Wilkinson, stardom, corporeality and the religious domain can be closely related. Drawing on Eck (1996) and Lutgendorf (2006, p. 232), they argued that Indian film stars seem to overflow the boundaries of Western celebrity through the particular nature of their

relationship to their audience. Several scholars have pointed to the applicability of *darśan* to Indian film, the transposition, in effect, of the experience of worship in devotional Hinduism from the temple to the cinema hall. (Viswamohan and Wilkinson 2020, p. 4; Parciack 2016, pp. 30–35).

Darśan—a core term of Hindu ritualism—denotes the reciprocal exchange of gazes in which the devotee looks at the deity and receives its blessing gaze in return. This ritualism involves a premise and an enactment of corporeality of body to body, face to face and eye to eye for both the deity and the devotee. In the third millennium, this has been expanded to virtual platforms enabling *darśan* that are considered ontologically valid (Helland 2010; Karapanagiotis 2010). Corporeality thus underpins popular religious practices but not only in the Hindu context. The Sufi/Islamic notions of *deedar* (a blessed vision of a holy man or his signifier) and *ruu-ba-ruu* (the intimate and frontal communication with the sacred) make this visual encounter a pivotal part of lived religion. Zarif employed these concepts overtly to direct his followers to the way they should approach him. In one of the posts he uploaded on his Facebook page, he wrote: *"Deedar ke liye aak'on ki zarurat nahi; Isq agar saccha ho toh rubaru har waqt yaar hota ha*i" [sic] (there is no need for eyes to produce the *deedar*, true love [brings] the beloved in front of you [*ruu-ba-ruu*] at any time).[14] This statement contributed to shaping Zarif's deified image as a revered object of gaze while helping him to recruit new disciples online.[15]

Zarif exploited his corporeal assets even further to attract disciples. His height was an advantage, since prophets are imagined in popular consciousness to be tall (symbolically elevated above mortals). His white skin and long hair were displayed in dozens of close-up and medium shots that came to dominate his Facebook and Instagram pages and were actively employed to stress Zarif's spiritual virtues and attract followers wishing to be endowed with such assets and white skin in particular, as Raj et al. (2022, p. 526) summed up.

In India, fairness has cultural, mythological and sociological associations. Karnani (2007) suggested that fair skin is associated with class, wealth and social status. Past scholars have opined that the superiority of fair skin lies in the Indian caste system, reinforcing the notion that higher caste individuals are fairer and lower caste individuals are darker (Shankar and Subish 2016).

In the religious context in which Zarif operated, white skin became a signifier of spiritual virtue, and so was his long, wavy hair. It is noteworthy that, by contrast to orthodox Islamic customs, which see short hair and a trimmed beard as symbols of submission and restraint, Sufi spaces are tolerant of long hair, which can connote Indic ideas of ascetism and the search for ultimate truth (Griffith 1991, p. 636).[16] These assets were further employed to shape the image of Zarif as a spiritual model, promote his healing talents and to commodify religious practices, namely *wazeefah* (nonmandatory prayers often uttered to plead for a desired aim), by adding treatment for hair problems and facial complexion within teacher–disciple relations.

2.5. Wazeefah as Commodity

"What do you think about treating dandruff, hair loss and skin whitening as part of a religious teacher's endeavors?" I asked some of the *peer*s operating on informal Sufi planes in India. They—and their counterparts on formal levels—often receive requests for cures for daily hardships, mostly related to financial, health or personal issues. How far can the treatment stretch? They giggled at first. Their disapproval of the overt commercial entrepreneurship, as well as treatments related to physical visibility that enabled Zarif to achieve popularity that easily surpassed their own, were controversial issues. They weighed their words and only referred to Zarif indirectly, in the plural and without specifying any name: "Some *peer*s only run after for money . . . some hypnotize others [by] using family names in wrong way, but people in love are blind," said one of the *peers*. Another noted: "Some people can be highly respected despite acting like complete fools. Not because people are backward, but because of their immense respect for the lineage." A third informal *peer*

stated with complete seriousness that: "Truly everything has a cure in Islam." This reaction is indicative of the gap between the common range of ailments religious teachers see as part of their responsibilities and the potential ones they are forced to treat within the consumer/capitalist turn in *peeri–mureedi* relations. This gap can be read similarly to what Srivastava terms the "split self" typical of service sector workers, who become estranged from their real feelings (Srivastava 2022, p. 3).

Billboards and ads promoting local healers, which are abundant in the vicinity of Sufi shrines, strengthen both poles. "Spiritual treatment by a spiritual master" proposes one of them, offering cures through amulets for an unindicated spectrum of miseries. "Spiritual treatment for the solution of any kind of problem" states another billboard that lists the common scope of hardships: "business and marriage propose effect or bad air, jadu tona childrens (children affected by magic—R.P.), success, love, education, journey, court case, etc." (Figure 2):

Figure 2. Spiritual treatment billboard in the Nizamuddin Dargah Bazaar, Delhi 2022. Photograph by the author.

Zarif extended the scope of these treatments while becoming a spiritual model whose assets testified to his virtues, thus enhancing his status as a celebrity. This can be seen in one of his videos, in which he offered antidandruff treatment. Sitting in front of the camera, his hair washed and shiny, he states in his broken Urdu:

> Those who are worried about dandruff, or whose hair is thinning due to dandruff, and have already gone to many doctors, received medicines . . . but no shampoo or medicine brought them any benefit (. . .) I will tell you something that will eliminate your dandruff . . . [What you need is] only garlic, onion, and pineapple. Mash them with lemon and apply to your head for three days . . . then you can wash it off. Like my Facebook page, it's where you can watch new videos. If you

> want to meet me, my phone number is found on the screen, send me a message and I'll send you my address. May God make everyone happy; God is one. The prayer of Zarif Baba, Khawaja Syed Zarif Chishty is always with you".[17]

The stardom allusion was further stressed in this video when a voiceover explaining how to make Zarif's potion also featured a photo of Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan. Khan, perhaps the best-known star of Hindi cinema for the last three decades, was often referred to by Zarif as his disciple. The Bollywood star indeed confessed, through mainstream media platforms, to have made a pilgrimage to Ajmer to pray for the cure of his mother but never stated he was Zarif's disciple, nor did he appear in snapshots together with Zarif. Nevertheless, his frequent mentions gave added luster to Zarif's media-oriented stardom.

However, Zarif was not satisfied with human stardom alone; he was aiming higher by claiming to be an *avatar* (Hindu term denoting a divine incarnation) of Allah, as well as Shirdi Sai baba, a 19th century divinized *guru* (McLain 2016). While claiming to have powers to dramatically change the lives of disciples who love him as passionately as they love Allah, appealing to their devotionalism and consumerism, he promised: 'Money will flow like water . . . wash the house like rains of blessing and divine light (*paani ke jaisa . . . barsat ke jaise aap ke ghar, barkat, khuda ke noor barsega*)'.[18]

This was combined with the marketing of religious practices as cosmetic commodities. In some of his other videos, he offered *wazeefah* for skin whitening. A fair complexion is an obsession in India, and skin-whitening products are amongst the most popular on both low-brow and high-brow cosmetic shelves. Employing the prodigious model of Bibi Fatimah, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad and one of the few women who enjoy such a position in Islam, Zarif narrated the story of a woman who came asking for her help:

> Oh, daughter of the Prophet [. . .] I am not beautiful. My face has no radiance and no light [*noor*, divine light]. This is the reason why my husband does not love me; he does not make love to me and turns away from me. Tell me, how can I be beautified?[19]

Bibi Fatimah, he continued to narrate, instructed the woman to blow on Surat Yousuf from the Koran. Blowing practices are prevalent in Islamic magic and are perceived as transmitting the potency of the verses onto the objects on which they are blown. The choice of Yousuf is based on his popular image as blessed with fair skin and blue eyes. After blowing on the Surah, the woman was instructed to blow on fresh water, rinse her face and drink it. By the divine grace, he assured, her complexion would change, and the problem would be solved. As he told this tale that hints at his mastery of hidden knowledge, photographs of fair-skinned, European-looking children were presented alongside Zarif's own image, paralleling their complexions and emphasizing Zarif's whiteness while framing them in terms of spiritual virtue and divine grace.

3. Conclusions

Four and a half years after his arrival in India, Zarif became a relatively wealthy celebrity, the owner of a house and a luxury car, with thousands of followers and disciples. According to *The Indian Express*, he had "2.27 lakh (227,000) followers and received over 6 crore (million) views in five years" (Naidu 2022). Quite a few of the informal teachers who sought to associate with him were dissuaded, and the title of *avatar* was suspected as *shirk*. However, the status he acquired in informal spaces through the success story of a destitute refugee who broke the "economy of despair" through stardom in the religious field is unquestioned. Yet, in a retrospective reading, Zarif never extricated himself from this circle but rather became its victim when murdered by his closest disciples. As *The Indian Express* details (Naidu 2022), they took him to the lot they intended to purchase under the pretext that he would perform a rite to bless the deal—a common practice. When they went back to his car, they shot him dead and fled. The motive is believed to be financial: since Zarif was not an Indian citizen, he could not register his assets under his name, and they were registered under the names of his disciples/murderers, who sought to take control of them.

This tale of rise and fall does not only call for a critical reading of the capacity to break the "economy of despair" but also challenges the emancipatory ethos of social media in the

sense that it endows anyone with a voice and agency to stand out and build a powerful image that extends beyond the virtual platform to manufacture new narratives, new power and new lives. This is what Mazzarella termed 're-enlightened capitalism'.

The failure of the emancipatory ethos can also be traced to the polemic that erupted on social media platforms after Zarif's murder. A multitude of posts wondered how his disciples could trust a person who had been unable to protect himself. They also queried why Zarif, who claimed to be an incarnation of Allah—thereby undermining Allah's singular nature—deserved to be prayed to for forgiveness (i.e., was he a Muslim or an infidel?). Interestingly, this polemic flourished in the same arenas where Zarif attained power: on social media. However, social media became a platform that revealed its unreliability when fake videos claiming to document his funeral flooded YouTube. Most depicted huge crowds, but none provided any evidence it was really Zarif's funeral.[20] I was sent the link to a video of the real funeral through one of the *peer*s who was highly critical of him. It took place secretly on July 24 in a small cemetery in Ajmer, far from the *dargah*, in the presence of only a few police officers and representatives from the Afghan embassy.[21] Ironically or not, this video had fewer views (about 10,000 on the day the article was withdrawn) than the fake ones.

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Notes

1 See https://www.facebook.com/QutbeChishtiya (accessed on 1 December 2022), https://twitter.com/ZarifChishty (accessed on 1 December 2022), https://www.instagram.com/khwaja_syed_zarif_chishti (accessed on 1 December 2022), https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLShXBrVhlQBcfpFeI6oj7A (accessed on 1 December 2022), https://in.pinterest.com/BabaZarif/avatar-baba-syed-zarif-chishti (accessed on 1 December 2022) and https://www.tiktok.com/@zarif_baba.official?lang=he-IL (accessed on 1 December 2022).

2 See https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/defense/afghanistan (accessed on 1 December 2022), https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/06/obama-delays-us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan-al-qaida (accessed on 1 December 2022) and https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-obama-idUSKBN0E71WQ20140527 (accessed on 1 December 2022).

3 See, for example, the data indicated here: https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/delhi-waqf-board-steps-in-after-mismanagement-complaints-at-nizamuddin-dargah-118121600262_1.html (accessed on 1 December 2022).

4 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoWKWjW-3WE&list=RDCMUCLShXBrVhlQBcfpFeI6oj7A&index=5 (accessed on 1 December 2022).

5 See photos with Salman at https://www.facebook.com/QutbeChishtiya/photos/pb.100067699004897.-2207520000../652665701783655/?type=3 (accessed on 1 December 2022) and https://www.facebook.com/QutbeChishtiya/photos/pb.100067699004897.-2207520000../403558240027737/?type=3 (accessed on 1 December 2022), with Syed Afzal Nizami and Sufi Ajmal Nizami at https://www.facebook.com/QutbeChishtiya/photos/pb.100067699004897.-2207520000../405083836541844/?type=3 (accessed on 1 December 2022). The transformation can be traced mainly thorough his Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/QutbeChishtiya/photos (accessed on 1 December 2022). See, for example, a video documenting Zarif's visit to Ajmer at https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1082270315465284 (accessed on 1 December 2022).

6 See, for example, a video documenting Zarif's visit to Ajmer https://www.facebook.com/QutbeChishtiya/videos/1082270315465284 (accessed on 1 December 2022).

7 See Baba Zarif's genealogy as detailed here, https://www.facebook.com/QutbeChishtiya/videos/272312191684632 (accessed on 6 December 2022).

8 Most studies have addressed topics such as the relationship between influential gurus and political settings, such as gurus who played significant roles in religious–political reforms and politics such as Dayananda Saraswati and the Arya Samaj, Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar—'Guruji'—and the evolution of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Baba Ramdev and the 2011 Lokpal Bill protests. Alternatively, they have examined Indian political leaders and their sarkari (state) gurus (Jaffrelot 1996, 2012, pp. 80–96). Other studies have dealt with the 'sacred alliances' between the state, corporations, temples and/or gurus' *maṭhas* (Nanda 2009; Carrette and King 2005) or looked at how accelerated urbanization processes relate to local gurus. One good example is Shirdi Sai Baba (Shinde and Pinkney 2013; Shinde 2017). Frøystad (2012, 2009) examined the interrelations between economy, globalization and spiritual trends; Indian middle-class gurus; guru devotion in consumerist middle-class spirituality and American meditation and yoga teachers in India. Other scholars have explored the surging popularity of teacher–preachers

who employ the growing digital platform that has popularized the 'guru as media', as coined by Meyer (2009, p. 11), whether they are Hindu 'televangelists' (Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Satya Sai Baba, Baba Ramdev (Swapan Dasgupta 2005) or Muslim (such as Zakir Naik (Blom-Hansen 2001, pp. 176–77)). Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger's in-depth study of Amma discusses religious–cultural crossroads that appeal to diversified populations (Flueckiger 2006). Gurus have been equated to psychoanalysts in Western societies (Kakar 1982), or the 'CEOs of huge business empires' (Nanda 2009, p. 92).

9 As Erlich notes, Hindu hyperlocal gurus are also underresearched (Erlich 2022, p. 2).

10 Pseudonyms are used for all the participants. I employed the real name of Baba Zarif as the materials discussed in this paper are openly accessible on social media.

11 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lepvZY0YbR4, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--M_4yWgJrA (accessed on 31 October 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWA_YLpRweY (accessed on 31 October 2022) and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qs754hGzwmQm (accessed on 31 October 2022).

12 See, for example, https://www.instagram.com/p/Bg6dVZJngSC/, https://www.instagram.com/p/BjEjf2xFLI6 (accessed on 31 October 2022) and https://www.instagram.com/p/BkaxB5Glsht (accessed on 31 October 2022).

13 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YbAaRFk70o (accessed on 31 October 2022).

14 See https://www.facebook.com/QutbeChishtiya/photos/pb.100067699004897.-2207520000../918734078510148/?type=3 (accessed on 31 October 2022).

15 Zarif inviting viewers to become his disciples online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w417ebnKSs&t=652s (accessed on 26 October 2022).

16 See, for example, the first verse of the Keśin Hymn in the Rg-Veda: "He with the Long loose look supports, the mooisture, heaven and earth" (Rg-Veda 10: 136:1, in Griffith 1991).

17 See https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=885235919019836 (accessed on 1 December 2022).

18 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2dlCs9nzfI (accessed on 1 December 2022).

19 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E214oKtKBz4 (accessed on 15 July 2021).

20 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqSRVNpwiBM (accessed on 30 August 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJOMGYbYBLE (accessed on 30 August 2022) and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Feiu_9KAeg (accessed on 30 August 2022).

21 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtPWmp17q2Q&t=4s (accessed on 30 August 2022).

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