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Mapping Linguistic Diffusion in the 1930s: Sulaiman Nadvi and Hindustani

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Abstract:

In 1930, Syed Sulaiman Nadvi wrote and published a book titled Arab-o-Hind ke Ta'alluqat (further Arab-o-Hind). Its purpose was to make a case for why Indian Muslims were to be considered part of the subcontinent. In fact, he argued, it would be hard not to think of India as their home. In service of this argument, Nadvi conducted a philological study of Arabo-Indic contact primarily through Indian Ocean trading networks, from a pre-Islamic age to Arab travels after the advent of Islam up until the 19th century. In recent historiography on linguistic-regions, the region spanning India and present-day Iran have been highlighted as constituting a cultural-linguistic region, due to the prevalence, and study of clear genetic affiliations, traveller's records and the provenance of Perso-Arabic words within vernaculars. George Abraham Grierson highlights these in the 5th, 6th, and 10th volumes of his Linguistic Survey of India – completed around the same time as Nadvi's work. The Indo-Iranian linguistic and cultural region roughly spanning the length of the Iranian plateau to present day Patna and eventually down towards the Deccan in the subcontinent, represents a linguistic-cultural branch of Indo-Iranian languages; part of the larger Indo-European language family that has existed since the Aryan migration. The linguistic and cultural impact of what in current academic discourse has been titled 'The Persianate World' has thoroughly been studied in the early 20th century through various sources available in Braj, Awadhi, Kannauji, Hindavi, and Urdu. Further impetus in studying Indo-Iranian, and largely Indo-European connections has also come through a rediscovery more generally of works in Indo-Persian philology, and particularly, of writings of Sirajuddin Ali Khan-e-Arzu's writings (most famously, mu?mir), as well as William Jones' studies, and its ensuing colonial legacies. Nadvi's book then presents a bit of a puzzle. It challenges the idea that linguistic regions had to solely be defined through genetically related linguistic branches that were territorially bound. Rather, it opens up new and possible linguistic traces and contacts, in order to speak of the region of Arabo-Indica.

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