



Theodore Beck as the Principal of MAO College: His Educational Vision at Aligarh

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the formative phase of the Aligarh Movement, a significant socio-educational reform initiative in late nineteenth-century British India led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. It highlights the crucial role played by Theodore Beck (1859–1899), a young British educationist and Cambridge graduate, in shaping the institutional and ideological development of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College. While Sir Syed envisioned a modern educational institution that would reconcile Western learning with Islamic intellectual traditions, he sought capable academic leadership to realise this goal. During his visit to England, efforts were made to identify a suitable candidate, resulting in the appointment of Beck as Principal of MAO College in 1883 at the age of twenty-four. Over the next sixteen years, Beck contributed significantly to the consolidation of the College, strengthening its academic standards, administrative structure, and intellectual environment. This paper explores how the collaboration between Sir Syed and Beck influenced the direction of the Aligarh Movement and its broader impact on Muslim educational reform in colonial India.

Introduction:

The history of the Aligarh Movement cannot be fully understood without examining the role of Theodore Beck (1859–1899), Principal of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental (M.A.O.) College from 1884 to 1899.



While Sir Syed Ahmad Khan provided the vision for Muslim educational reform, Beck played a pivotal role in the academic and administrative growth of the institution and its national standing. He worked tirelessly to expand student enrolment, improve infrastructure, and promote scholarships for poor Muslim students, viewing education as the foundation of social mobility and community advancement.

At the same time, Beck's political outlook remains controversial. His strong opposition to the Indian National Congress and his emphasis on loyalty to British rule influenced Sir Syed's later political stance. Critics such as Tufail Ahmad Manglori accused him of encouraging communal division and discouraging nationalist participation.

This paper reassesses Beck's complex legacy, arguing that his contribution to Aligarh lay in the intersection of educational reform, imperial ideology, and evolving Muslim political consciousness in late nineteenth-century India.

From January 28, 1884, to September 2, 1899, Theodore Beck was the principal of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College in Aligarh. He was instrumental in establishing the institution's academic and administrative structure. Beck actively participated in the larger Indian Muslim educational reform movement in addition to his duties at MAO College. From 1886 to 1899, he served as the Muhammadan Educational Conference's Founder Assistant Secretary, greatly advancing the organisation's growth and policy focus. Additionally, he reinforced institutional governance and record-keeping procedures when he was named MAO College's Founder Honorary Registrar on March 29, 1898, a role he held until 1899.

Sir Syed appreciated his commitment to the college and the cause. He once stated, "...and in this connection to none are we more indebted than to Mr. Theodore Beck, the Principal of our College, who, during five years of earnest labour and self-sacrifice, has made our cause his own and materially furthered it by acquiring that deep insight and intimate knowledge of the social, political, and financial needs and requirements of the Mohammedan community which could only be achieved by cosmopolitan sympathies, and by living with and among the community whose advancement he left the comfort and allure of a Cambridge University to live among an alien population, like the Mohammadens of India."

Theodore Beck, the second Principal of the M.A.O. College, occupies a prominent position in the history of the Aligarh Movement. Known for his dynamic leadership, he played a decisive role in shaping the academic and administrative culture of the college



Born in 1859, Theodore Beck was just twenty-five years old when he was appointed Principal of M.A.O. College. His stay in Cambridge crystallised his political views, which were deeply influenced by the thinking of Fitz James Stephen, often described as the chief ideologue of British imperialism.

Beck's meeting with Sir Sayyid's son, Sayyid Mahmud, inspired him to model M.A.O. College on the pattern of Cambridge University. According to K.A. Nizami:

“Beck was opposed to everything that could weaken British control over India, or had even a remote chance of adversely affecting the imperial interests of the British Government. He was, however, keenly interested in imparting Western education to the Muslims and saw the salvation of the Muslim community in opting for Western education.ⁱ

Beck assumed charge as principal of M.A.O. College, the institution became the focal point of his life. Of all the British professors, it was Theodore Beck who made the complete personal commitment to Aligarh and its students. Determined to devote his entire life to the college. In 1891, he brought out his parents and a sister, Jesse Beck, and they were all introduced to the student body in a formal assembly marked with the exchange of gifts and addresses No Englishman had ever, in his experience, behaved with such easy familiarity toward Indiansⁱⁱ

Mohammadan Educational Conference, Reform Initiatives and the Development of the College under Beck

Aligarh memory cannot easily forget the role of Theodore Beck in the development of M.A O. College and the evolution of its cultural traditions. He applied himself with singular zeal to expand the M.A.O. College and increase the number of its students, thereby widening the area of its impact on the Muslim community. On January 18, 1891, he drew the attention of the Trustees to the urgent problem of accommodation in the College and said:

"To be satisfied with our present limited number of students would be to abandon our position as the National College of the Mahomedans"

His efforts to raise Aligarh to an all-India position bore fruit, and Aligarh came to symbolise the aspirations of the Community to make up for lost time and find a respectable position in Indian life. It was estimated that additional accommodation would cost about Rs. 10,000. Beck himself offered to contribute from his salary one-fourth of this amount, Rs. 2,500. He bought textbooks for students from his own money and put them in the library for the use of poor students.ⁱⁱⁱ



Theodore Beck reflects on the resolution passed at the Mahomedan Educational Congress advocating the creation of scholarship committees to support poor Muslim students. He emphasises that until then, the Congress had functioned primarily as a consultative body concerned with gathering educational data and encouraging intellectual exchange. Beck acknowledges the success of this consultative role in stimulating debate and spreading awareness about Muslim education. However, he views the new resolution as a decisive shift toward administrative and executive responsibility. According to Beck, this transition marked a higher institutional ambition and had the potential to strengthen the Congress's practical impact significantly. At the same time, he cautions that failure to implement the resolution would expose Congress to criticism and weaken its credibility. Thus, Beck presents this development as a critical turning point in the evolution of the institution.

Theodore Beck evaluates the outcomes of the scholarship initiative proposed by the Mahomedan Educational Congress, noting its success in Punjab but failure in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh. He attributes this contrast to differences in public spirit and collective initiative, urging North Indian Muslims to emulate the philanthropic efforts of their Punjabi counterparts. Beck highlights the growing number of Muslim students passing entrance examinations but warns that poverty prevents many from continuing higher education. He emphasises that financial hardship remains the main obstacle to academic advancement. By presenting statistical evidence and personal appeals from impoverished students, he illustrates the urgent need for scholarships. Beck argues that community support and self-help are essential for long-term progress. He further stresses that without expanding access to higher education, Muslims would remain underrepresented in government services and professional fields. Thus, he frames educational philanthropy as a crucial foundation for social mobility and political influence.

Turning to the Middle-Class Examination, Beck notes that out of 1,238 successful candidates, only 220 were Muslims, representing merely 17.8 percent, despite the Muslim population in the provinces numbering around six million. He views this disparity as a serious indication of educational underrepresentation. Beck further highlights the severe financial hardships faced by students, citing cases in which individuals from formerly respected scholarly families were forced to depend on relatives with very limited incomes. Some students, he observes, received little or no financial support from their families due to widespread poverty. These examples, according to Beck, reveal the alarming socio-economic condition of the Muslim community. Nevertheless, he expresses cautious optimism, arguing



that the problem is not irreversible and can be addressed through practical measures such as financial assistance and community support.^{iv}

There was complete mutual trust and confidence between Sir Syed and Beck. Beck's dedication to the cause of Muslim education greatly impressed Sir Syed, who appreciated his devotion to the M.A O. College and the ideals that it stood for. He gave him free hand in all matters and consulted him on even trivial matters, like fixing a clock in the Union.

If Sir Syed sought Beck's approval for very minor things, Beck also sought Sir Syed's permission for (a) the purchase of crockery for the Dining Hall, (b) remission of dues, (c) subscribing to journals and magazines, (d) uniforms, etc.^v

Beck was radical of Congress. He was of the view that the activities of the Congress would sooner or later cause a Mutiny. He thought that the cry of jihad', which was heard now and then in Muslim religious circles, was also fraught with dangers both for the British and for the Muslims. He wrote:

“First, because I have no desire to have my throat cut, and secondly because the cause I have given my life to would be hopelessly ruined and the Mahomedans would fall apart, perhaps never to rise again”.^{vi}

There is enough evidence to support the view that he no doubt played a crucial role in shaping Sir Sayyid's views towards the Indian National Congress. On May 7, 1888, in a letter addressed to Badruddin Tyabji, he wrote:

“Our chief objection to The National Congress is one more fundamental than any objections to any specific proposal. We believe that its methods - holding public meetings showing the ills of the people, circulating pamphlets like the one printed at the end of the Congress Report, etc. - will sooner or later cause a Mutiny among the inhabitants of these Provinces and the Punjab. If this is joined with a frontier war, it will be a disastrous affair. Firstly, the entire Muslim community of Upper India is distressingly impoverished. If they are led to believe (as they are already inclined to do) that this is due to the British Government, they will be ready to rise. They feel passionately about the loss of their glory - the old imperial buildings at Delhi and Agra are a living sign of their degradation. The older people of Delhi remember the last Emperor of the House of Timur. Add to this that religious fanaticism is not dead”.^{vii}



Maulana Tufail Ahmad Manglori blames Beck for misusing his position as Principal of the College and spreading discord between Hindus and Muslims.

“...Mr. Beck used to warn them not to join the Congress in demanding simultaneous ICS examinations, the authorities would be angry and stop appointing them to the posts of deputy collectors and ‘munsifs’. Avoid competitive examinations and run after subordinate services. And to maintain the right to cow slaughter, oppose the demand for self-government; oppose the remission of salt duty; by increasing the strength of the army in the country, render assistance in killing the frontier people. Your ancestors were ruined because they opposed the government during the mutiny; thanks to this, you are still disdained and rejected. That fury is no more. But you are still a suspect. Therefore, adopt loyalty as your creed. You are in a weak position like a pumpkin. You should therefore beware of the government’s knife. Your life depends on the special concessions granted by the authorities. Therefore, you should always request them to safeguard your rights”.^{viii}

Manglori’s criticism of Beck’s policy does not end here, and he blames him for deliberately spreading discord between Hindus and Muslims at M.A.O. College. Manglori writes:

“But the strategy adopted by Mr Beck brought about, within a span of only fifteen years, a change in the mentality not only of the students of Aligarh but all the supporters of the Aligarh movement. And more than God, the fear of the authorities and of the Hindus overcame them. They came to believe that if the government were weakened, their Hindu compatriots would swallow up the seven crore Muslims and cause them to disappear.

“In periods of disorder and insecurity, Muslims would protect their Hindu neighbours from dacoits and guard them. Now, those same mild and affable Hindus, because of their wealth and numerical majority, appeared to them to be fearful like lions^{ix}

Theodore Beck’s role in promoting British interests at Aligarh and influencing Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s political outlook. While Sir Sayyid initially hoped to unite Hindus and Muslims and maintain friendly relations with the British, rising communal tensions and the growth of Hindu revivalist movements weakened this vision. The Indian National Congress and its perceived support for Hindu revivalism further deepened Muslim concerns. Beck used this political climate to expand his influence at Aligarh and intensify his activities. Although some scholars argue that Sir Sayyid’s break with the Congress cannot be attributed solely to Beck, it is evident that Beck significantly shaped Sir Sayyid’s political thinking in his final years.^x



Beck breathed his last on September 2, 1899, at Simla, at the age of forty only. His death was mourned in Aligarh, and a Beck Memorial Fund was instituted to commemorate his memory. A large room in the Quadrangle was named Beck Manzil, and a road was also named after him. The most durable impact of Theodore Beck was, however, on the early generation of the M.A.O. College.^{xi}

In his address to the students and staff of the M.A.O. College, Lord Curzon remarked on April 23, 1901: "The services of the late Mr Beck can never be forgotten or repaid..... He gave up a life and a career in England and devoted himself to making this place his own. As I followed his body to its grave among the Himalayan deodars, I felt that I was paying such small tribute of respect as lay in my powers, to one who had both been a faithful friend to the Muhammadan of India and a benefactor of the Common Weal".^{xii}

During the sixteen years of Beck's leadership, Marjorie Sykes observes that a distinct "Aligarh image" developed. An Aligarh man came to be seen as dependable and practical, someone who placed the broader public good above personal, family, or regional interests. Although Beck's political role continues to be debated, his lasting contribution lies in strengthening the M.A.O. College and in his deep concern for the moral and intellectual development of its students. Hali's tribute to Beck is as follows;

تصویریں کی طاعت و شفقت نے جنہوں ہوں دیکھی نہ

دیکھیں ہمسخن باہم کو شاگردوں کے اس اور بک وہ^{xiii}

Conclusion;

Theodore Beck played a pivotal yet debated role in the development of the Aligarh Movement. As Principal of the M.A.O. College, he strengthened its academic and administrative foundations and promoted educational opportunities for poor Muslim students. At the same time, his strong loyalty to British rule and opposition to nationalist politics significantly influenced the movement's political direction. Beck's legacy lies in both institutional consolidation and the shaping of Muslim political consciousness in late nineteenth-century India.

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