

# From Labourer to Mayor

Mohammed Ajeeb, the Mayor of Bradford, is the first Muslim to attain this status in the UK. **Mohammed Riaz** talks to the new Mayor about his background, his aspirations and his plans for the citizens of Bradford

THE first non-white Lord Mayor of the British city of Bradford, Mohammed Ajeeb, has a conviction born of political faith which he believes the ethnic minorities should follow to build their future in Britain. "We must try and take more active and fuller participation in the political life of this country for without political power we shall become the dregs of British society."

The 47 year-old, Pakistan born first citizen of Bradford city and Labour Party's card-carrying member, represents a new class of Britons. And with 28 years of active participation in his adopted home's political life, he holds today the highest elective office ever occupied by a non-white in recent British history.

The achievement of the three rich Indian Parsis - Dadabhai Narowjee, Setalavad and Bhowndagree, all members of British parliament at the turn of the century - pales into insignificance before the working class Ajeeb's. Theirs was a transitory phenomenon, Lord Mayor Ajeeb's contribution to British politics would be solid and permanent.

He is certainly going to change the face of British politics and would lead the way forward for Britain's three million non-whites and among them the 400,000-strong Pakistani community here.

Already, in the 1984 general elections, the arts graduate immigrant from Chattro village in Azad Kashmir's Mirpur district was shortlisted, losing the constituency selection by a mere five votes to a white Labour colleague. And, after a year's term as Bradford Lord Mayor, he plans to stand for the next parliament from a safe Labour seat and hopes to lay a pioneering trail for Britain's non-whites to the 'mother of parliaments.'

Bradford's new Lord Mayor is conscious of his roots, for the problems he had to face in Britain on arrival from Pakistan in 1957 have become, as these have for every non-white immigrant here, part of his memory. And when Mohammad Ajeeb took his new office, he reminded the inaugural

audience (May 21):

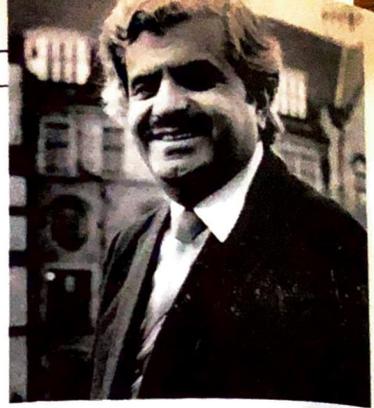
"Having a black Lord Mayor will make not the least difference if it does not make some people wake up to the fact that one should have...black faces at all levels and in all parts of society."

Mr Ajeeb told me in a recent interview that he had attained his present status after years of active participation in British local politics and by way of working as a labourer, a railway shunter, a bus conductor, never forgetting his ethnic background but also always having unbounded faith in representative politics.

Mr Ajeeb has a busy programme for his term of office which runs till May 20, 1986. His top priority is to make Bradford more prosperous and united. He also wants to improve his city's image both in the country as well as abroad. He would like Bradford to really be a multiracial city successfully combating poverty for its white and non-white population. For this his first efforts would be to attack the scourge of unemployment currently running at 25% among the whites and as high as 50% among the non-whites.

Mr Ajeeb has already begun searching for ways and means to attack his city's main problem. Attracting outside investment both from within and without the country with a package of incentives is one possibility and is high on the new Lord Mayor's plan of action. He would very much like Arabs to invest in Bradford. He is also interested in joint ventures in Bradford and for its entrepreneurs to set up joint projects abroad.

Pointing out that he is Lord Mayor for all Bradfordians irrespective of their religious or ethnic background, he thinks he had already become distinct by being the first Muslim to occupy the high office. Reckoning that "to become Lord Mayor of my adopted home of Bradford is an honour beyond all my dreams," Mohammad Ajeeb told his inaugural audience it ought not to surprise anyone that he would "continue to be a practising Muslim" during the course of his office.



He added: "My religion is part of me, as indeed it is now part of Bradford." Then telling the distinguished gathering that he had appointed Mohammad Ashraf Sikder, a fellow Bradfordian, as his religious aide and guide, Lord Mayor Ajeeb said: "My first civic service will be held in a mosque and subsequent civic services will be held in the cathedral, synagogue, Hindu and Sikh temples."

Bradford, only a three-hour train journey north from central London, has 56,000 (of its 500,000 population) non-whites of Asian and West Indian origin. Of them as many as 42,000, an overwhelming majority, consist of Pakistanis, mostly from Azad Kashmir, making Bradford their single largest concentration in Britain. No wonder, for the country's three million non-whites, Bradford is known as 'Little Pakistan.'

To the questions agitating the minds of many a Pakistani settled in Britain about their integration/assimilation into British way of life, Bradford's first citizen has an unequivocal reply. "I say, 'unity, yes, uniformity, no'". Elaborating it, Mayor Ajeeb quoting from his inauguration speech said: "Religion is an important part of me. My religion and my culture are inextricably bound together. I shall never become completely Anglicised or a carbon copy of British society."

"But that should not do any harm to me or the British society. We can continue to live together. More importantly, my children should have the right to choose the lifestyle and culture of their parents without fear that by doing so they will be denied opportunities to work or live where they want."

"However," he said, "it will be very difficult for our children and their children to adhere to the values of our grandparents and they cannot but be influenced by western values."

"Yet while all of us - Pakistanis and other ethnic communities - must try to preserve our identity as Muslims or Pakistanis or as Asians or whatever, we must take active part in British politics."