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Sylheti Diaspora in the United Kingdom: Exceptionalism or Contested Nationalism?

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the Sylheti diaspora in the United Kingdom and examines whether their identity reflects a form of cultural exceptionalism or a contested nationalism. Originating from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh, the Sylheti community has a distinct dialect, customs and heritage that often sets them apart from other Bangladeshi communities. Through qualitative interviews and ethnographic research, we explore the complex narratives surrounding Sylheti identity. Participants revealed a sense of belonging to their Sylheti roots that sometimes contrasts with the broader Bangladeshi identity. This unique perspective can lead to a sense of cultural distinctiveness, even in the context of Bangladesh itself, where Sylheti identity may not always align with the mainstream national narrative. Our findings suggest that the Sylheti diaspora in the United Kingdom embodies a dual identity, with people often identifying as either Sylheti or British, or a combination of both, rather than having a broader Bangladeshi identity. This complex interplay between cultural heritage and national identity leads to an understanding of how diasporic communities manage their identity in a multicultural environment. This research contributes to the wider discourse on diaspora, cultural identity and nationalism and offers insights into the unique experiences of the Sylheti community in the United Kingdom.

1 | Introduction

The Sylheti community in Britain is a fascinating case study of identity formation in the diaspora and demonstrates the unique characteristics that distinguish them from other diasporic groups. This article explores how Sylhetis identify themselves across generations in Britain, focusing on the notion of exceptionalism and nationalism. The migration of Sylhetis from Bangladesh to Britain represents a pivotal moment in the shared history of both nations, with far-reaching implications for cultural identity, socioeconomic relations and transnational connections (Eade and Garbin 2006). The particular linguistic and cultural characteristics of the Sylheti, as well as their historical links to early waves of migration, make them a unique subgroup within the wider Bangladeshi diaspora.

Contested nationalism is crucial to understanding the ways in which the Sylheti diaspora deals with the challenges of a dual identity—retaining their Bangladeshi heritage while embracing British citizenship. This balancing act consists of integrating into British society while retaining their unique Sylheti traditions and customs, which raises the question of what characterises certain diasporic communities (Gardner 2005). Through these experiences, the Sylhetis contribute to the evolving history of multiculturalism in Britain, demonstrating that identity is a dynamic and contested process influenced by historical patterns of migration, cultural continuity and constant adaptation (Ballard and Ballard 1994). However, after the WWII, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, there were significant waves of migration associated with postwar reconstruction and the recruitment of labour from Commonwealth countries to fill

labour shortages in Britain (Gardner 2002). The colonial links between Britain and South Asia and the need for labour made it easier for the Sylhetis to immigrate to Britain. Since then, the Sylheti diaspora in Britain has grown in size and diversity with each new generation.

Sylheti migration to the United Kingdom has distinctive characteristics compared to traditional migration patterns, which are largely characterised by settlement and long-term residence in the UK (Gardner 2002). This tendency towards permanent resettlement has encouraged the growth of robust family and community networks and facilitated integration and assimilation into British society (Ballard 1994). Chain migration, where migrants are followed by their family members, has played a role in the expansion of the Sylheti diaspora over several generations (Vertovec 1999). Although rooted in colonial legacy and driven by economic necessity, the Sylheti diaspora has evolved into a vibrant community that makes an important contribution to the cultural, social and economic landscape of both Bangladesh and the United Kingdom (Karim 2003). The long-standing links between Sylhet and the British Empire, which began during the colonial period, created pathways for migration and established support networks for Sylheti migrants in Britain (Gardner 2002; Koser 2007).

The fact that Sylhet is the main place of origin of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the United Kingdom has led to a unique phenomenon within the Sylheti community, where Sylhet itself has become synonymous with Bangladesh. For many Sylhetis, claiming to be from Sylhet takes precedence over claiming to be from Bangladesh, setting them apart from other migrants worldwide. This shift in identification underscores the deep-rooted importance of Sylhet as a cultural and ancestral centre for the Sylheti diaspora. It reflects not only geographical origin but also the shared heritage, traditions and family ties that bind the Sylheti community together and affirm the integral role of Sylhet in forming their collective identity and sense of belonging.

Although the first generation of Sylheti migrants faced significant hurdles in adapting to the host society, later generations have managed to strike a better balance between cultural preservation and hybridisation (Kibria 1995). This intergenerational development is evident in the changing patterns of language use, cultural practices and identity formation that constitute an ongoing process of transnational belonging (Choudhury 2008). Although the tension between preserving cultural heritage and accepting the reality of diaspora is pervasive, Sylheti identity has remained strong and rooted in a collective sense of history, tradition and shared memories (Feldman 2003; Ballard 1994; Gardner 2002).

This article explores the interplay between historical contexts, Sylheti migration patterns, their everyday lives, occupational goals and generational identity development within the framework of nationalism and exceptionalism (Schiller 2005). This reveals how the Sylheti community uniquely embodies the tenets of exceptionalism and contested nationalism.

Contested nationalism addresses the tensions and ambiguities that arise when national identity is fluid or contested. This framework explains how the Sylheti diaspora deals with a dual identity—their Bangladeshi roots and their British citizenship implying—a complex negotiation between retaining a strong sense of Sylheti heritage and adapting to a multicultural British society (Flick 2014; Burr 2003; Marshall and Rossman 2014). This process can lead to a contested understanding of nationalism, where traditional concepts of national identity are redefined or reinterpreted in the context of the diaspora. Exceptionalism emphasises the unique characteristics and history of the Sylheti community, whereas contested nationalism explains the ongoing struggles for identity and belonging.

2 | Methodological Approach

The methodological approach for this study comprised a qualitative study design focussing on ethnography, in-depth interviews and a comprehensive literature review. Relevant current literature was selected to understand the context and establish the theoretical framework of the study. The literature review included academic journals, books and articles on diaspora studies, nationalism, identity and cultural integration. The criteria for inclusion in the literature review were based on relevance to the Sylheti diaspora, British multiculturalism and theories of nationalism. Exclusion criteria were literature that was out of date or not directly related to the topic. The selection process ensured a balanced consideration of both theoretical and practical perspectives on the Sylheti diaspora and its cultural dynamics.

To gather primary data, we interviewed 18 individuals representing all four generations of the Sylheti diaspora in the United Kingdom to ensure a broad range of experiences and perspectives. Interviewees were selected through both purposive sampling to target specific generational groups and snowballing to gain additional contacts through existing networks. Interviews were conducted in a semistructured format that allowed for guided but flexible discussions that encouraged interviewees to share their insights about identity, culture and their experiences in the United Kingdom and Sylhet. The findings from the interviews were integrated into the theoretical framework by comparing the interviewees' narratives with existing theories of nationalism and exceptionalism. This process highlighted how the experiences of the Sylheti diaspora matched or contradicted these theoretical constructs and provided a deeper understanding of the unique dynamics at play in this community.

We have employed ethnographic research, which suggests a qualitative approach involving deep engagement with the diaspora community. The mode of ethnography included participant observation, in-depth interviews and engagement with community spaces (such as cultural organisations, religious institutions or social gatherings). Given the transnational nature of the Sylheti diaspora, ethnography was multisited and transnational, meaning that data collection occurred in both the United Kingdom and Sylhet, reflecting the interconnectedness of place in diasporic identity formation.

This approach acknowledges the fluidity of identity formation, migration histories and diasporic attachments that exist

between the homeland and the host country. Conducting interviews and observations in both locations allowed us to capture how Sylheti identity is maintained, transformed or contested within the UK diaspora; the role of connections to Sylhet in shaping generational identity, religious practices and nationalist discourses; and how narratives of migration, exceptionalism or contested nationalism differ depending on whether one is situated in Sylhet or in the United Kingdom.

In this research, sample sizes were typically determined by data saturation—the point at which new data no longer provide novel insights. The number of 18 interviews suggests that we reached a level of thematic saturation, meaning that after conducting these interviews, key themes and patterns in the experiences of Sylheti migrants and their perspectives on nationalism and exceptionalism had already emerged.

In this study, the categorisation of the four generations of the Sylheti diaspora was carefully structured to capture the evolving nature of identity formation, exceptionalism and contested nationalism over time. Each generation represents a distinct phase in the migration trajectory and adaptation process, shaped by historical moments, socioeconomic conditions and transnational experiences.

The decision to study four generations was driven by the need to explore: continuity and change in Sylheti identity over time; intergenerational differences in attitudes towards nationalism, Britishness and Bangladeshi identity; variations in socioeconomic integration and resilience mechanisms among different age cohorts; and the role of language, religion and cultural practices in shaping identity across generations.

The four generations were classified as follows: first generation (pre-1971 and early postindependence migrants)—born in Sylhet, migrated to the United Kingdom as adults, primarily for economic reasons; strong attachment to Sylhet and minimal identification with a broader Bangladeshi nationalism; more aligned with a Sylheti identity, often resisting assimilation into the larger British-Bangladeshi category; second generation (born or migrated as children in the 1970s–1990s)—raised in the United Kingdom but with strong familial ties to Sylhet; navigates a dual identity—British and Sylheti—often experiencing cultural negotiations at home and in society; more involved in British institutions (education and workforce) while maintaining social connections with Sylheti networks; third generation (born post-1990s, fully socialised in British society)—less fluent in Sylheti but retains cultural identity through community organisations, religious institutions and digital media; more engaged with British multiculturalism and less with Bangladeshi or Sylheti nationalism; identity is often a hybrid of British-Sylheti rather than solely nationalistic; and fourth generation (born post-2010s, fully British yet socially Sylheti-affiliated)—their identity formation is significantly influenced by digital globalisation, social media and multicultural Britain; engage with Sylheti heritage more through performative aspects (festivals and cultural events) rather than linguistic or political nationalism; increasing diversity in how they conceptualise their Sylheti origins—some may identify as British Asians rather than Sylheti or Bangladeshi.

Why four generations? In migration studies, identity shifts tend to become evident over multiple generations. Literature suggests that after the third or fourth generation, ethnic and linguistic markers often fade or take on new meanings (Sultana and Rayhan 2024). The findings align with this pattern—where Sylheti exceptionalism persists in the first two generations but starts to evolve into hybrid identities in the later ones.

The age structure of respondents was designed to capture perspectives from individuals aged 18–80 to reflect generational shifts; to ensure representation from both genders and class backgrounds to understand how socioeconomic mobility influences identity perception; and to include men and women from different socioeconomic strata to explore how class and gender intersect with diasporic identity. A critical missing component in many studies on Sylheti diaspora identity is how class and gender impact their lived experiences. Although earlier research (Gardner 2002) suggests that working-class Sylhetis tend to maintain stronger ethnic and religious affiliations, middle-class professionals may exhibit more hybrid identities.

Incorporating class, gender and status dynamics into this analysis can enrich our understanding of diasporic resilience mechanisms and the ways Sylhetis negotiate their identity within contested spaces. The intersection of class, gender and transnationalism deserves more emphasis to highlight the fluidity of identity formation across generations. The four-generation framework provides a comprehensive lens to understand how Sylheti diasporic identity evolves over time, particularly in relation to exceptionalism and contested nationalism.

Theories and concepts were synthesised through a reflexive and iterative process in which theoretical frameworks were applied to interpret empirical data; the resulting insights were used to refine and adapt theoretical constructs (Charmaz 2006). To understand the Sylheti diaspora in Britain, we utilise a theoretical framework that combines the concepts of exceptionalism and contested nationalism. Exceptionalism refers to the idea that a particular group, culture or identity is distinctly different from others, often emphasising unique historical or cultural factors. In the case of Sylhetis, this sense of exceptionalism can be traced back to the specific colonial and postcolonial history that links Sylhet to Britain, as well as the migration patterns that have developed over generations. The idea of exceptionalism encompasses both the unique ways in which Sylhetis have integrated into British society and the particular cultural elements that have persisted or changed in the context of the diaspora.

In the research, a greater focus on the interviewees' self-identification of exceptionalism could not be directly mentioned due to ethical and privacy concerns. The sensitive nature of identity politics and the potential for stigmatisation or unintended consequences within their communities necessitated the protection of interviewees' anonymity. Disclosure of their self-identification could compromise their privacy and lead to personal or social repercussions, particularly in a close-knit diaspora where perceptions of identity and nationalism are deeply intertwined. As a result, although the notion of exceptionalism

was explored through broader themes and patterns, individual identifications were deliberately anonymised to uphold ethical research standards and ensure the safety and comfort of participants in sharing their experiences.

3 | Sylhet–Britain Migration

The immigration of Sylhetis to the United Kingdom can be traced back to the late 19th century, a period that coincides with the incorporation of Sylhet into British India. Today, Sylhetis have become one of the most important South Asian diaspora groups in the United Kingdom (Rahman 2015b). The historical trajectory of migration from East Bengal, particularly from Sylhet to Britain, goes well beyond this temporal boundary (Ansari 2004; Bose 2006). The Sylheti Laskars, who were an integral part of the maritime activities promoted by the East India Company in the seventeenth century, played a crucial role in manning the merchant ships plying the routes between India, Burma, China, the Malay Archipelago, East Africa and occasionally Britain (Ansari 2004). Their indispensable contribution to the Empire's shipping lines, especially during the First World War, emphasised the central role that Indian seafarers played within the larger maritime enterprise (Khan 2010).

Over time, the Bangladeshi diaspora has expanded globally (Kundu 2016; Islam 2017) and today numbers approximately 10–12 million people (Ullah 2010; Ullah and Haque 2020; Ahmed 2013). In the United States, the Bangladeshi-American community is estimated to be around 700,000 people (Akhter and Yang 2023). In the United Kingdom, there are more than 600,000 British Bangladeshis (Begum et al. 2021), forming one of the largest South Asian communities in the country. In addition, there is a significant Bangladeshi population in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, where millions of Bangladeshi workers are employed in various industries (Rahman et al. 2023).

These early imperial connections laid the foundation for the later formation of the Bengali community in Britain (Gardner 2005; Mannan 2012). The establishment of migration routes linking specific regions in East Bengal to East London represents a crucial phase in the history of Sylheti migration (Kundu 2016). Kolkata emerged as an important hub where a network of agents and boarding houses facilitated work opportunities on international merchant ships and global mobility for aspiring migrants (Alam 2018; Rahman 2015a).

Early settlers found work primarily in the garment and hospitality industries in east London and contributed to the burgeoning restaurant scene (Ahmed 2013). Some took on roles such as 'serangs' or 'bariwallahs', mirroring the boarding house and shipping agent roles common in Calcutta (Hoque 2008). In addition, migration patterns expanded to the Midlands and northern England, where Bengalis were employed in the textile industry (Islam 2017). During this period, Bengali 'coffee shops' emerged, which eventually evolved into pioneering 'Indian' restaurants owned by Sylheti (Rahman 2011). At the same time, important milestones were set with the institutionalisation of religious and community infrastructures, such as the establishment of mosques and Muslim burial societies (Chowdhury 2007). The opening of the first halal butcher's shop by Taslim Ali in 1946 symbolised the growing presence and influence of the Sylhet diaspora in Britain (Karim 2014).

3.1 | Postwar Migration

The geographical separation of Sylhet and Calcutta as a result of Partition severely limited employment opportunities in the shipping industry and triggered a period of economic hardship for many former seafarers between 1952 and 1955 (Kundu 2012). In response, the seafarers' union facilitated the acquisition of passports for many individuals seeking work in the United Kingdom, although this was sometimes hindered by the government in West Pakistan (Hussain 2015). In 1956, a significant number of international passports were issued to seafarers, which were later supplemented by additional provisions. At the same time, alternative migration routes emerged, including sponsorship by private organisations or travel on 'medical passports' (Islam 2018).

Migrants, predominantly from Sylhet, utilised the established routes and often relied on family or social networks to secure accommodation and work opportunities (Gardner and Shakur 1994). By 1962, up to 5000 Bengalis were living in the British countryside, attracted by the demand for affordable unskilled labour in the postwar period. This period, which stretched from the 1950s to 1962, is commonly referred to as the 'golden age' of migration from the Indian subcontinent to Britain, characterised by comparatively lenient immigration rules. However, with the passing of the first Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962, which categorised primary immigration from the Commonwealth into three specific groups, there was a sea change. This legal development prompted Sylhetis already in the United Kingdom to seek vouchers for acquaintances and relatives and triggered a sustained 'chain migration'. By the 1980s, the Bengali community had grown to around 200,000 people, of whom an estimated 35,000 lived in East London (Adams 1987). Their presence has significantly enriched the cultural fabric of the nation, as evidenced by their culinary delights, artistic endeavours and proactive engagement in various community initiatives (Rahman 2011). The fusion of Sylhet traditions with British culture has added depth and dimension to the cultural landscape and fostered greater understanding and appreciation among the citizens (Chowdhury 2007). London is a central hub for Bangladeshi communities in the United Kingdom and is home to a large proportion of their members. Statistics show that 54% of the Bangladeshi population in the United Kingdom live in Greater London, with the remaining 46% scattered across other regions (Islam 2017). This concentration emphasises the role of London as a vibrant melting pot of cultures, where diversity thrives and communities flourish (Figure 1).

The Sylheti diaspora in the United Kingdom is not homogeneous; rather, it consists of multiple socioeconomic, generational and occupational groups that have shaped their experience of migration and identity formation differently. The interviews suggest that this exceptionalism manifests distinctly across class and migration waves.

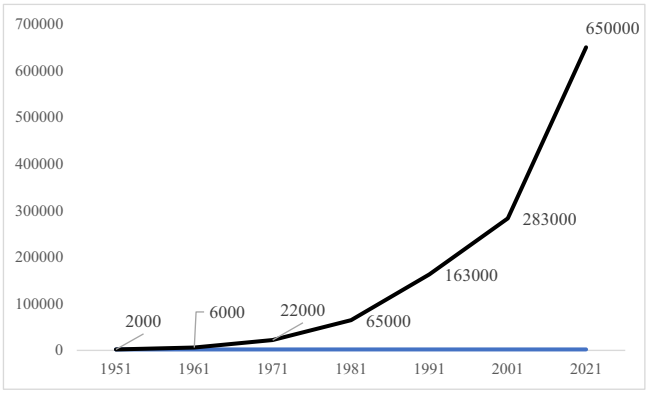

FIGURE 1 | Estimates of the Bangladeshi population in the United Kingdom 1951–2021. Year (census) total number of population. *Source:* Dickson et al. (2024).

3.2 | Early Working-Class Migrants (1950s–1970s)

Many of the first-generation Sylheti migrants were working-class men who arrived in Britain to fill postwar labour shortages, particularly in factories, restaurants and textiles. One interviewee from this generation explained: 'We came to the UK with almost nothing, often working long hours in difficult conditions, but we held onto our Sylheti culture because it gave us a sense of belonging in a foreign land'. This working-class experience cemented a strong communal identity, as Sylheti migrants relied on kinship networks to secure housing and jobs. Their attachment to Sylhet remained firm, as many initially saw their migration as temporary.

3.3 | Entrepreneurs and Business Owners (1980s–1990s)

Over time, some Sylhetis accumulated wealth through restaurant businesses, retail and property ownership. One successful entrepreneur noted: 'My father worked in a textile factory, but I opened my own catering business. Even now, we reinvest in Sylhet, building houses and supporting our family there'. This economic success reinforced their identification with Sylhet, as investments in land and real estate in the region became symbols of status within the diaspora.

3.4 | Second and Third Generations (2000s–Present)

Although younger generations are more integrated into British society, many continue to assert their Sylheti identity over a broader Bangladeshi one. A second-generation respondent explained: 'I feel more connected to Sylhet than Bangladesh as a whole. My grandparents spoke Sylheti at home, and we have family property there. Bangladesh seems distant, but Sylhet is personal'. This sentiment highlights a generational continuity of Sylheti attachment, even as British-born Sylhetis navigate hybrid identities.

3.5 | Homogeneity or Diversity?

Although Sylhetis in the United Kingdom often present a collective sense of exceptionalism, there are internal divisions based on class, gender and religious identity.

3.6 | Class and Economic Stratification

Although early Sylheti migrants were primarily from rural, working-class backgrounds, later waves included middle-class professionals and students. This class distinction influences their connection to Sylhet. A wealthier interviewee noted: 'Those of us who are professionals don't necessarily feel the same way as those still tied to businesses back home. Our attachment to Sylhet is cultural, but we don't see it as our "real home."'

3.7 | Religious Identity and Nationalism

Although the Sylheti diaspora is predominantly Muslim, there is a small Hindu minority with different perspectives. Hindu Sylhetis sometimes feel doubly marginalised—both within the British Bangladeshi community and in the broader Bangladeshi national identity. Some interviewees referenced religious tensions: 'At times, we Sylheti Muslims reinforce our own insularity. In some cases, I've seen people frame their identity as "Sylheti Muslim" before considering Bangladesh or Britain'. This complicates the idea of a unified Sylheti nationalism, as different subgroups negotiate identity differently.

3.8 | Gender and Identity Formation

Women in the Sylheti diaspora have historically had less mobility due to conservative family structures. However, younger generations are redefining this. A female interviewee remarked: 'My mother barely left the house, but I'm a university graduate. I still feel Sylheti, but I also embrace a different, more independent identity'. This demonstrates a generational shift in how gender and identity intersect within the community.

3.9 | Connections With Calcutta-Based Bengali Community

One interesting historical connection between the Sylheti diaspora and the Calcutta-based Bengali community is the role of Sylhetis in maritime labour and migration through Calcutta. Before Partition (1947), many Sylhetis worked as seafarers (Laskars) and navigated through Calcutta en route to Britain. Some Sylheti migrants maintained business ties with Bengali traders in Calcutta, particularly in shipping and commerce. However, since Partition and the independence of Bangladesh (1971), the link between Sylhetis and the broader Bengali diaspora in India has weakened. Although some elite Bengali families in Calcutta view Sylhetis as a distinct regional group, Sylhetis in Britain have largely developed their own diaspora networks independent of Bengal-centric nationalism.

4 | Underlying Theoretical Consideration

Exceptionalism, whether applied to nations or cultures, has been extensively studied in various academic disciplines, reflecting its importance for understanding identity, power dynamics and social narratives (Hollander 2012). Two prominent forms of exceptionalism—American exceptionalism and cultural exceptionalism—have attracted particular attention in scholarly discourse (Smith 2016) when it comes to America. American exceptionalism, which originated in the 19th century, argues that the United States possesses unique characteristics (Lipset 1997), meaning that America is distinguished from other nations by its history, political system and values and is often portrayed as a beacon of freedom and democracy (Bellah 2011).

Cultural exceptionalism, on the other hand, claims that certain cultures or societies possess exceptional characteristics or values compared to others (Smith 2016; Berman 2010; Müller 2017). Both forms of exceptionalism are criticised because they can justify imperialism, colonialism and discriminatory policies (Said 1978; Huntington 1996). Exceptionalism has permeated various fields of study, including sociology, political science, history and migration studies (Smith 2016). The discourse on exceptionalism has evolved over time and has been influenced by various theoretical perspectives and empirical observations (Lipset 1997) that distinguish certain groups, nations or phenomena from others (Hollander 2012).

In this article, we attempt to identify how the Sylheti diaspora differs from other diasporic groups. If members of the Sylheti diaspora in Britain identify more strongly with their Sylheti heritage than with a broader Bangladeshi national identity, this can be seen as a form of contestation of traditional nationalism. This feeling arises from a complex interplay of historical, cultural and linguistic factors. Sylhet, a region in northeast Bangladesh with its own dialect and unique cultural practices, has often maintained a sense of regional identity that differs from the general Bangladeshi narrative. By emphasising their Sylheti roots, these diasporic communities are able to assert a local identity that resists assimilation into a unified Bangladeshi nationalism. This resistance could stem from a desire to preserve linguistic and cultural uniqueness, a sense of marginalisation within the broader Bangladeshi context, or as a reaction to diasporic experiences where cultural differentiation helps to maintain a sense of community (Alexander 2018).

Contested nationalism refers to a situation where different groups within a nation-state or between nation-states have opposing views on the definition of national identity, its symbols, history or even the political legitimacy of the nation (Ozkirimli 2010). This concept is based on the realisation that nations and national identities are often socially constructed and open to multiple interpretations. Contested nationalism can arise due to historical grievances, ethnic or religious divisions, colonial legacies or political power struggles. Contestation can be overt, manifesting itself in political or military conflict, or subtle, reflecting ongoing debates in civil society, education or culture (Elias 2024).

An important theory underpinning contested nationalism is the constructivist approach to nationalism, which assumes that national identities are not fixed but are constructed through historical narratives, social practices and political institutions (Anderson 2006). This perspective allows us to understand how different groups within a nation-state can develop different views of what constitutes the 'nation'. Such contestation can lead to a reevaluation of national narratives and result in calls for a more inclusive or diverse account of national identity (Smith 2009). Although some scholars are sceptical of exceptionalism and criticise it as an expression of ethnocentrism or nationalist mythmaking, others argue that it enables us to understand power dynamics, hegemonic structures and the construction of national identities (Lipset 1997; Berman 2010).

Long-Distance Nationalism (LDN) describes how diaspora communities maintain political, cultural and emotional ties to their home country while living abroad. In Bangladesh's case, millions of expatriates, especially in the United States, United Kingdom and the Middle East, engage in both direct and indirect political participation. Direct involvement includes funding political parties, voting absentee or returning to join campaigns (Anderson 1992). Indirect actions involve lobbying foreign governments, engaging in diaspora advocacy and influencing public opinion via social media (Adamson 2012).

The impact of LDN on Bangladeshi politics is significant. Diaspora communities often act as both economic and political resources for political parties in Bangladesh. Remittances from the diaspora not only bolster the national economy but can also be channelled into political activities, thus strengthening party structures and influencing electoral outcomes (Rahman 2014). The political narratives shaped by diaspora groups can contribute to the polarisation of domestic politics, as these groups may promote specific ideological stances that resonate with particular segments of the Bangladeshi population (Sheffer 2003). The dual nature of LDN—both as a support mechanism for the homeland and as a potential source of external pressure—shows the complex relationship between the Bangladeshi diaspora and domestic politics.

5 | Sylheti Diaspora and Contested Nationalism and Exceptionalism

The members of this diaspora manoeuvre through a complex cultural landscape and often encounter conflicting narratives of national and regional identity. The Sylheti community is often faced with the choice of either adopting a broader Bangladeshi identity or preserving its distinct Sylheti heritage. This reflects a fundamental tension within Bangladeshi nationalism, where the assertion of a regional identity simultaneously serves as a means of preserving cultural heritage. In the United Kingdom, Sylheti identity serves as a critical anchor for people seeking a sense of belonging while grappling with broader expectations of integration into British society (Gardner 2005; Lewis 2015). This constant negotiation of identity demonstrates the complex nature of diasporic communities and emphasises the way in which contested nationalism can affect not only cultural self-perception but also social cohesion in a multicultural context.

The fact that Sylhetis juggle both their Sylhet and Bangladeshi identities (Alexander 2011) points to questions about what it

means to be part of a nation and where one truly belongs to challenge the notion that national identity is straightforward (Brubaker 2004). Alam and Husband (2006) point out that Sylheti communities in the United Kingdom often construct their identity based on both Bangladeshi and British influences, creating a unique sense of exceptionality that sets them apart from other Bangladeshi groups.

One of the first-generation interviewees said,

> I think one of the reasons we are exceptional is our deep-rooted sense of community. When we came to the UK, we brought with us not only our language and customs, but also a whole way of life based on strong family ties and support networks. Although we are thousands of kilometres away from Sylhet, our people have a remarkable way of making a home away from home. We build mosques, community centres and even bring our traditional food and cultural customs with us. I think this sense of belonging sets us apart from other diaspora groups who have perhaps assimilated more into British society.

Another first-generation interviewee said that their strong sense of identity in Britain can be seen as a form of resistance to the pressure to fully assimilate into British culture. It is not that they do not assimilate or contribute to British society—they do. But they also retain their unique traditions and language, which help them to keep their roots alive. This can challenge the idea of a homogenous national identity in Britain, as it shows that a multicultural society is not only possible, but also vibrant.

In an era characterised by globalisation and transnational flows, exceptionalism takes on new dimensions as diasporic communities or global movements navigate interconnected networks and negotiate hybrid identities (Vertovec 2009; Müller 2017). Socioeconomic factors contribute significantly to this exceptional status (Ballard 2003). Sylhetis have achieved remarkable success in various sectors in the United Kingdom, particularly in entrepreneurship, catering and restaurants (Ballard 2003). This economic prosperity has not only increased their visibility and influence within the Bangladeshi diaspora but has also been recognised in wider British society, further enhancing their sense of exceptionality.

Back in Sylhet, our way of life can challenge the idea of a static national identity. We bring with us stories and experiences from Britain that can influence local culture and politics in Sylhet. Sometimes, people there see us as more progressive or forward-thinking because of our exposure to other cultures and ideas. This flow of ideas back and forth can create a dynamic sense of what it means to be Sylheti and challenge the more traditional, perhaps rigid, notions of nationalism.

We came to the United Kingdom with almost nothing and often worked in harsh conditions to build a better life for ourselves. Yet we kept our faith, our language and our culture in a foreign land. Over the years, we have managed to not only survive but thrive, creating businesses, community organisations and cultural events. This resilience is extraordinary, in my opinion, because it is a testament to our ability to navigate between two very different worlds.

Our community in the United Kingdom has had to assert its identity in the face of sometimes hostile or indifferent attitudes towards immigrants. By retaining our cultural practices and language, we challenge the notion that integration means the erasure of one's heritage. Instead, we show that you can be both British and Sylheti, creating a broader sense of national identity.

In Sylhet, our diaspora is making an impact by challenging traditional expectations and norms. Many of us return and invest in local projects, share different views and even contribute ideas on equality and education. This can be at odds with more conservative elements in Sylhet who favour a more insular or nationalist approach. So our way of life can challenge nationalism by opening up new possibilities and promoting a broader, more inclusive understanding of what it means to be Sylheti.

One of our interviewees shared an interesting perspective on the idea of challenging nationalism. He explained that he himself in Sylhet does not feel entirely part of Bangladesh but sees his identity as connected to Sylhet itself. This may seem unusual, but it is not about rejecting their country—it is about recognising who they are. When they grow up in Britain, they tend to identify as either Sylhetis or British. It is not about rejecting or challenging nationalism; it is simply about accepting their unique sense of identity.

Although the sense of exceptionalism provides a sense of pride and identity, it can also lead to feelings of isolation and fragmentation within the larger diasporic community (Berman 2010). The delicate balance between regional identity and broader cultural affiliation is a particular challenge for younger generations grappling with multiple cultural identities. The Sylheti diaspora in the United Kingdom is characterised by its unique migration patterns, cultural distinctiveness and the palpable sense of exceptionality that permeates the community (Chowdhury 2007).

One prominent perspective is cultural exceptionalism, which assumes that unique cultural, religious or historical factors shape the migration paths and integration processes of particular migrant groups (Sandell 2012). ‘I think our ability to bridge cultures makes us exceptional. We grew up in the UK and therefore understand British culture and norms, but we also have a deep connection to our Sylheti heritage. This dual identity gives us a unique perspective. We can switch back and forth between English and Sylheti without thinking twice. We are as comfortable in British pop culture as we are in Sylheti traditions. This flexibility helps us embrace complex social spaces with ease’.

> In the UK, our way of life contradicts nationalism by showing that Britishness is not a monolith. We can be fully integrated into British society, excelling in

> education and professional success while celebrating our unique cultural heritage. Our accent can contain traces of both British and Sylhet tones, our food can be a mixture of fish and crisps and traditional Sylhet dishes, and our professional successes span a variety of fields. This goes against the narrow, marginalising views of nationalism, which expects people to conform to a single identity.

Economic exceptionalism emphasises the role of economic inequalities, labour market dynamics and structural inequalities in the emergence of particular migration patterns and outcomes (Hatton and Williamson 1998). Economic exceptionalism is evident in the occupational profiles and economic contribution of Sylheti migrants in the United Kingdom. Although many early migrants worked in low-skilled sectors such as textiles and manufacturing, subsequent generations have specialised in professions such as healthcare, law and entrepreneurship (Koser 2007). The remittances sent by Sylheti migrants to their families in Bangladesh have a significant socioeconomic impact and contribute to poverty alleviation and investment in education and infrastructure in the Sylhet region (Ballard and Ballard 1994). Political exceptionalism emphasises the influence of geopolitical factors, colonial legacies and diaspora politics on the migration experiences of certain groups (Brubaker 1992).

When we visit or meet with our relatives in Sylhet, our way of life can also challenge nationalism. We bring different experiences and ideas to Sylhet and sometimes challenge traditional roles and expectations. For example, the second generation often has more opportunities to pursue education and careers. Our success in these areas can inspire others in Sylhet to think beyond the traditional ways. It promotes a broader understanding of what it means to be Sylheti that is more inclusive and open to other ideas.

We have grown up in a different culture to our parents and yet have managed to maintain a strong sense of identity and integrate into British society. We are successful in our education and careers and are involved in both the Syrian and British communities. This balance is exceptional because it shows that you can have multiple identities without jeopardising any of them.

> In the UK, we are challenging nationalism by proving that British identity is multi-layered. We speak English with a British accent but can switch to Sylheti at home or in the community. We are lawyers, doctors, teachers and entrepreneurs and contribute to the British economy, but we also keep our cultural traditions alive. This challenges the idea that to be British you have to look or sound a certain way.

> In Sylhet, our presence can also challenge traditional nationalist ideas. Many of us are more open-minded about social issues such as gender equality or career choices because we have grown up in a different environment. When we return to Sylhet or meet our family there, we bring these ideas with us. This can lead to conversations that might not otherwise happen and foster a broader, more inclusive perspective on what it means to be Sylheti. By showing that success and inclusion in Britain does not mean we have to give up our heritage, we challenge nationalist narratives that might push for a rigid, narrow understanding of identity.

Beyond individual subjectivities captured in the interviews, institutional mechanisms play a significant role in sustaining Sylheti identity. The flourishing of Sylheti-specific language schools, which teach the Sylheti dialect alongside Bangla, community newspapers that circulate within diasporic networks and formal and informal community organisations are pivotal in reinforcing cultural distinctiveness. Social clubs and civil society groups, often built around cultural, religious or regional affiliations, serve as key spaces where the Sylheti diaspora actively engages in preserving its unique linguistic, culinary and social traditions. These institutions transmit culture across generations and shape collective identity, reinforcing notions of exceptionalism. Political exceptionalism is evident in the role of Sylheti diaspora organisations and networks in advocating for the rights and interests of the community in both the United Kingdom and Bangladesh (Gardner 2002). They have been actively involved in British politics; several individuals have been elected to local councils and even to the British Parliament.

6 | Identity, Culture, Everyday Life and Contested Nationalism

Identity and contested nationalism engage in a complex interplay in which a group's self-image is constantly shaped by broader national narratives and the political landscape. Contested nationalism arises when competing interpretations of national identity exist within a nation-state, leading to divisions based on ethnic, cultural or linguistic differences (Smith 2009). These divisions can influence how individuals and groups perceive their place within the national framework. For example, people from minority regions may face pressure to conform to a dominant national identity while simultaneously striving to preserve their unique cultural heritage (Anderson 2006). As a result, the interaction between identity and contested nationalism can lead to tensions and encourage the formation of subnational identities, which may manifest themselves in social, political or even separatist movements.

The generational experiences of the Sylheti diaspora in the United Kingdom are shaped by historical and political factors, particularly the legacy of colonial partition in 1947 and the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. The first generation of Sylheti migrants, many of whom migrated before or shortly after independence, often viewed the war through the lens of their regional identity, which was already distinct from the broader Bengali nationalist movement. Although some actively supported the liberation struggle, others remained distant, seeing their identity as Sylheti rather than tied to the new nation-state. The second generation, born and raised in the United Kingdom, inherited a more hybrid identity, with many adopting British multicultural values while still navigating

their Sylheti heritage. They were more likely to internalise narratives of Bangladeshi nationalism through family stories, yet their connection to Sylhet remained strong, leading some to question or challenge the dominant national narrative. By the third and fourth generations, engagement with the history of 1971 has become more fragmented—although some maintain a strong interest in the liberation war and Bangladeshi politics, others, particularly those more integrated into British society, may view it as a distant historical event, relevant mainly to their family's migration history rather than their personal identity.

The Sylheti diaspora in the United Kingdom has had to navigate successive waves of anti-immigration policies, from the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 to the tightening of border controls in later decades. In response, Sylhetis engaged in strategic forms of resistance, including chain migration tactics—bringing over family members before restrictive laws took effect—and forming strong community networks to counter the impacts of exclusionary policies. In facing racism, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, when racial violence and discrimination were widespread, Sylhetis developed both defensive and proactive strategies. Many concentrated in specific areas, such as East London, where they built self-sustaining communities with mosques, businesses and political organisations to assert their presence. Younger generations played a key role in grassroots activism, aligning with broader antiracist movements in Britain. Although racism remains a challenge, particularly in the post-Brexit era, Sylhetis today are more politically engaged, with some achieving representation in British politics. As for integration, preferences vary—many younger Sylhetis see themselves as fully British while maintaining cultural ties to Sylhet, whereas older generations often maintain a transnational identity, balancing life between the United Kingdom and Bangladesh.

Over the generations, the diaspora and their descendants have created unique identities shaped by historical legacies, transnational networks and experiences. The first-generation migrants who embarked on the arduous journey of leaving their homeland and settling in a foreign land faced numerous challenges and adversities. Yet amidst these difficulties, they demonstrated remarkable resilience and a deep sense of cultural pride (Kabeer 2002). Due to their strong attachment to their Sylhet roots, they diligently preserved their language, customs and kinship networks within diasporic communities (Ballard 1994).

> I think what's special about our generation is that we have the opportunity to choose our identity in a way that feels authentic to us. Unlike the first generation, who perhaps had to work hard to establish themselves in a new country, or the second generation who were caught between two cultures, we can integrate aspects of both British and Sylheti identity into our everyday lives without much friction. We have grown up with a sense of belonging to Britain whilst having a connection to our Sylhet heritage. This freedom to shape our own identities is what makes us unique.

> In Britain, we are breaking through the stereotypes of what it means to be British. We are part of the multicultural fabric of this country, but we do not have to favour one identity over another. Our culture, which contains both British and Sylheti elements, challenges the idea that nationalism requires uniformity. When we meet up with friends, you might hear a mixture of English and Sylheti, see a mix of Western and traditional dress and eat a variety of foods. This versatility contradicts any narrow idea of what Britishness must be.

> When we visit or meet with our family in Sylhet, our presence challenges traditional nationalism in a different way. We bring a sense of multiculturalism and acceptance and show that a Sylheti can live in the UK, embrace different customs and still be part of the community. We could bring new ideas about careers, education and even relationships and promote a broader perspective on what it means to be Sylheti.

> I think we are exceptional because we have managed to strike a balance between preserving our heritage and being fully integrated into British society. We are the product of our environment, which is increasingly multicultural, but we also carry on our Sylheti culture. This duality gives us a unique lens through which we view the world. We appreciate both Bollywood and Hollywood, listen to both Bhangra and British pop music and feel equally at home at traditional Sylheti events and in British society.

> Here in the UK, our way of life contradicts nationalism by showing that you do not have to give up your culture to be part of British society. We do not fit into the stereotypes; we are more diverse than that. Our ability to adapt and blend different aspects of our identity while maintaining a sense of community challenges the idea that you can only be British in one way.

> In Sylhet, our influence can also challenge nationalism. When we visit or communicate with our family, we bring in new perspectives that are often more progressive than traditional norms. This can take the form of campaigning for women's rights, campaigning for better education or even challenging traditional marriage practices. By showing that we can be successful in the UK without denying our roots, we encourage a broader and more flexible view of what it means to be Sylheti.

> I think what sets us apart is our ability to deal with multiple identities without losing our sense of self.

> We have grown up in a Britain that is becoming more diverse and accepting, and we have used that as an opportunity to redefine what it means to be British and Sylheti. Our generation feels comfortable being part of different cultural circles without feeling that we have to sacrifice one for the other. We are confident in who we are, whether it's embracing our heritage at family gatherings or being fully integrated into British society.

> We are taking a stand against nationalism here by showing that there is no one size fits all British people. You can have different cultural backgrounds, speak multiple languages and still be British. Our integration into society—be it through education, work or social activities—and holding on to our Sylheti roots shows that you can be both. We do not have to conform to rigid nationalist ideals to be accepted.

> In Sylhet, our influence is evident in the new ideas and perspectives we bring with us when we visit or interact with our family back home. We often have a more liberal mindset, promoting equality and challenging traditional roles. This can challenge more conservative views and show that Sylhetis can be successful in the UK without denying their heritage. By showing that success and acceptance does not necessarily mean assimilation, we challenge traditional nationalist narratives that push for a rigid, static identity.

The engagement of the diaspora with transnationalism reveals its complex role in influencing the evolving shades of national identity in Bangladesh, which is split into Bengali, Bangladeshi and Islamic strands. On one hand, the Sylheti diaspora often acts as a forerunner of modernity and cosmopolitanism by introducing liberal values, promoting education and contributing to economic development through remittances, which foster progressive discourses within the homeland. Many Sylheti expatriates champion pluralistic and multicultural perspectives, drawing from their diasporic experiences in the United Kingdom, where they search for multiple identities. On the other hand, certain segments of the diaspora may inadvertently contribute to exclusivist tendencies, especially through religious or cultural conservatism, which can reinforce ethnic or religious divisions in Bangladeshi society.

Second-generation Sylhetis, born and raised in the United Kingdom, have mastered the complex terrain of dual identity (Song 2003). Caught between their Sylheti heritage and their British upbringing, they struggled with questions of belonging and authenticity. Caught between culture, religion and ethnicity, they attempted to reconcile their two identities while creating a space that honoured their unique cultural heritage (Fenton 2003). Their experiences reflect the complicated process of identity formation in diasporic contexts, which is characterised by a constant negotiation between tradition and modernity.

The influence of modernity, including exposure to globalised media, education and a diverse social environment, also plays an important role in shaping their identity. This can manifest itself in their attitudes, lifestyle choices and perspectives, which are influenced by contemporary trends and values. They embrace the cultural heritage that has been passed down through generations and also incorporate elements of British values and lifestyles into their identity formation. This blending of cultural influences results in hybrid identities that reflect the diverse experiences and aspirations of today's Sylheti diaspora in Britain. Their ability to navigate between different cultural frameworks while forging their own path is testament to the resilience and adaptability of the Sylhet diaspora community. Second-generation Sylhetis identify with both Sylhet and British culture and participate in traditional ceremonies while engaging with mainstream British culture. Third- and fourth-generation Sylhetis, who have grown up in the United Kingdom and have had more contact with British society, show even greater diversity in their identity. They represent a multicultural ethos that crosses traditional boundaries, but they celebrate their Sylheti heritage while embracing global influences and hybrid cultural expressions (Brah 1996; Fenton 2003).

The identity formation is rarely a one-way ticket and hardly ever linear and nonconflictual. This is crucial in the complex dynamics of the Sylheti diaspora in the United Kingdom. British nationalism, with its evolving shades and manifestations, plays a significant role in shaping the identity formation of immigrant groups, including the Sylhetis. British nationalism has historically oscillated between inclusive and exclusive tendencies, impacting how immigrant groups perceive and express their identities. For the Sylheti diaspora, maintaining cultural distinctiveness is a form of resistance against assimilation, while simultaneously negotiating a place within the broader British national narrative. This balancing act is evident in the way Sylheti communities participate in British civic life while preserving their linguistic and cultural heritage.

However, incidents of racist attacks, the rise of right-wing majoritarian populism and the growing prominence of anti-immigrant rhetoric pose significant challenges to this process of integration. These factors impair the multicultural ethos that has traditionally allowed for the coexistence and prospering of dual identities. The rise of populism and xenophobia in the UK, particularly post-Brexit, has heightened the sense of vulnerability among immigrant communities, including the Sylhetis. These developments not only challenge the ideals of multiculturalism but also create an environment where the maintenance of dual identities is fraught with tension and conflict. The fear of discrimination and marginalisation often leads to a more defensive and insular approach to identity among immigrant groups, further complicating the integration process. Therefore, although the quest for cultural distinctiveness and accommodation within British nationalism continues, it is increasingly challenged by external pressures that undermine the potential for harmonious identity formation.

7 | Everyday Life Across Generations

The Sylheti diaspora in the United Kingdom has evolved over generations, with each generation bringing its own cultural practices, educational aspirations, religious affiliations, language preferences, social connections and links to the homeland (Rahman 2015a). The daily lives of the Sylheti diaspora in the United Kingdom reflect a dynamic mix of cultural heritage and integration into British society across the generations (Ballard 1994). In the first generation, there is often a strong desire to maintain a connection with their country of origin, which manifests itself in frequent visits to Bangladesh and active participation in cultural events within the diaspora community (Kabeer 2002). In their households, they predominantly use the Sylheti language and preserve traditional language practices (Vertovec 2004). They identify primarily with their Sylheti heritage, although they also have a sense of their Bangladeshi identity.

In contrast, second-generation Sylhetis retain their cultural roots but tend to favour English in their daily interactions, having grown up in a predominantly English-speaking environment (Fenton 2003). Their identity tends to be fluid, encompassing both their Sylheti and British identities, with an understanding of their heritage and British culture in general. Although they may still participate in traditional Sylheti cuisine and religious practices, their engagement with political issues is centred on British rather than exclusively Bangladeshi issues. The third and fourth generations often show even greater integration into British society, with English being their main language of communication. Their cultural identity may be more diluted compared to previous generations as they move in an increasingly multicultural and globalised environment (Brah 1996). Although they may still retain elements of their Sylheti heritage, such as occasional participation in religious practices and festivals, their daily lifestyle is more akin to that of their British peers.

Eating habits also change from generation to generation. Earlier generations adhere more strictly to traditional Sylheti cuisine, whereas younger generations incorporate a mixture of British and Sylheti flavours into their meals. Dressing styles also vary, with younger generations favouring a mix of Western and traditional dress. In terms of political awareness and participation, the older generations may have a stronger connection to political developments in Bangladesh, whereas the younger generations tend to favour issues relevant to their lives in the United Kingdom.

First-generation Sylheti migrants maintained close social networks within the diaspora community, attended local mosques for religious gatherings and made a point of teaching their children the Sylheti language. Many first-generation migrants had limited access to formal schooling in Bangladesh but valued education as a means of social mobility for their offspring and encouraged them to achieve academic success in the United Kingdom. Second-generation Sylhetis, although still influenced by the cultural norms and religious beliefs of their parents, have also adopted aspects of British culture and lifestyle. Many second-generation Sylhetis pursued higher educational opportunities in various fields and endeavoured to balance family expectations with their personal aspirations. They often spoke a mixture of English and Sylheti at home and socialised with peers from different ethnic backgrounds, which contributed to their multicultural upbringing (Gardner 2002).

The third generation represents a further departure from traditional cultural practices as they become more integrated into British society and exposed to global influences. While still maintaining some links to Sylheti culture, including language and cuisine, third-generation Sylhetis often favour English as their main language and may have a limited command of Sylheti. In education, they benefit from improved access to higher education and pursue diverse career paths that reflect broader societal trends. Socially, third-generation Sylhetis form friendships and relationships with people from different ethnic backgrounds, which contributes to their multicultural attitudes (Koser 2007).

The fourth generation represents the pinnacle of assimilation and integration into British society, with diminishing links to Sylheti cultural heritage. Many fourth-generation Sylhetis have little or no command of the Sylheti language and have little contact with traditional customs and rituals. In terms of education, they benefit from the educational opportunities offered by British institutions and pursue different career paths to suit their individual interests and talents. Socially, fourth-generation Sylheti form diverse social networks that reflect the multicultural fabric of British society and offer a global perspective.

Despite changing cultural practices and identities over the generations, Sylhetis in the diaspora maintain a connection to their country of origin in various ways across all generations. These include communicating with family members back home, attending family reunions or religious events in Bangladesh and participating in transnational community organisations and initiatives. These connections serve to strengthen the sense of belonging and cultural identity of diaspora members while facilitating the exchange of ideas, resources and experiences between the home country and the diaspora (Rahman 2015a). In the context of LDN, as categorised by Schiller's four types—namely, economic, political, cultural and social—different generations of the Bangladeshi diaspora have exhibited varying predominant forms. Among the first generation of Bangladeshi migrants, economic and political forms of LDN were most prominent. These early migrants often sent remittances back home and actively engaged in political movements, such as supporting the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and later contributing to political parties through financial donations and direct involvement (Schiller 2005a). The second generation, however, has shown a stronger inclination towards cultural and social forms of LDN. This generation tends to engage more in preserving Bangladeshi cultural heritage through community organisations, cultural festivals and social media, while also maintaining a connection to the homeland through social networks that reinforce their Bangladeshi identity (Schiller 2005a).

Sylheti identity is far from monolithic; it is shaped by various intersecting factors, including socioeconomic class, which can dictate access to resources, education and mobility within both the diaspora and the homeland. Status groups, often linked to

historical divisions such as landownership or professional affiliations, also play a significant role in shaping intracommunity dynamics and how individuals relate to broader notions of national identity. Furthermore, religious affiliations—particularly among Sylheti Muslims and the minority Hindu population—introduce additional layers of complexity, as these groups may navigate their identities differently within the diasporic space. The variables of class, status groups and religion are critical in understanding the complexity of national identity formation among the Sylhetis, as these factors influence individual and collective experiences within the diaspora. Class structures determine access to resources and opportunities, whereas status groups and religious affiliations further shape social interactions, cultural practices and the ways in which Sylhetis negotiate their identities both within the diaspora and in relation to the broader British national context.

8 | Conclusions and Discussions

The Sylheti diaspora in Britain is a compelling example of how nationalism and transnationalism can intersect and create a complex social dynamic. This article unfolds the complex dynamics between exceptionalism, contested nationalism and the reproduction of national identity in a transnational framework. The migration history of Sylheti immigrants, closely intertwined with colonial and postcolonial history, reveals a complex historical context that resists reductive interpretations of national identity. Sylheti, their unique language, proves to be a powerful symbol of cultural resilience and a bulwark against assimilation, whereas their daily practices and cultural traditions, anchored in a strong sense of community, serve to promote a collective identity that transcends conventional national boundaries. This delicate balance between preserving distinctiveness and adapting to the host environment illustrates the ability of diasporic communities to challenge rigid national narratives while contributing to a fluid and evolving conceptualisation of national identity. Through this study, it becomes clear that the Sylheti diaspora operates in a liminal space where exceptionalism and nationalism are constantly negotiated. This enriches the understanding of diasporic identity and its broader implications for multicultural societies. The theoretical insights from this research emphasise the dual capacity of diasporic communities to both challenge and affirm traditional constructions of nationalism.

The contestation between British (GB) nationalism and the Bangladeshi diaspora reveals complex dynamics where diasporic identities challenge traditional notions of Britishness. These spaces of contestation are often most visible in areas such as multicultural policy debates, the representation of diasporic communities in media and the political discourse surrounding immigration and integration (Kundnani 2007). Similar to other diasporas, such as the Indian or Caribbean communities in the United Kingdom, the Bangladeshi diaspora navigates these contested spaces by asserting a dual identity—both British and Bangladeshi—while challenging the exclusionary tendencies of GB nationalism that often fail to fully embrace multiculturalism. Comparatively, these spaces of contestation share similarities with the experiences of the Indian diaspora, which also engages in cultural and political activism to assert its identity within the British national framework. However, the experience of the Bangladeshi diaspora is uniquely shaped by its historical ties to the British colonial past and the specific socioeconomic challenges faced by this community in Britain (Alexander 2013).

Transnationalism has played an important role in maintaining links between the Sylheti diaspora in Britain and their relatives in Bangladesh. The regular exchange of information, remittances and visits across borders demonstrates a form of transnationalism that transcends national boundaries. This transnational network enables Sylheti immigrants to preserve their cultural heritage while navigating their new identity in the United Kingdom.

By examining migration patterns, cultural identity, everyday life and socioeconomic factors, this article has revealed several insights into how sylhetis are exceptional and how their existence challenges nationalism. The distinct linguistic and cultural identity of the Sylhet diaspora, combined with their considerable socioeconomic success and exercise of identity and community dynamics, has created a deep sense of exceptionality in the wider Bangladeshi diaspora and challenged nationalism. It looks into the interplay between regional, national and transnational affiliations and enriches our understanding of migration, belonging and cultural pluralism in the diasporic context. The Sylheti diaspora in Britain is significant in numbers, has a long history, is exceptional and is distinct in its cultural practices in the sense that the second generation seems to identify as Sylheti rather than Bangladeshi.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on diasporic studies by emphasising the importance of exceptionalism as a defining aspect of diasporic identity. By analysing the factors that contribute to exceptionalism in the Sylheti diaspora, this study broadens the theoretical framework and provides an understanding of the complex processes of identity formation and community cohesion in diasporic contexts.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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