Chapter 3

Multilingual Metropolis: The Politics of Language and Belonging in Guwahati Through Sheelabhadra's Fiction

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Abstract
This chapter focuses on the work of Sheelabhadra (Rebati Mohan Dutta Choudhury, 1924-2008), whose writing gives us a critical look at the politics of language and belonging in Guwahati, Assam's principal urban centre. Guwahati, like many other postcolonial Indian cities, is shaped by the merging of migration, language diversity and social hierarchy. The regional language literature of Sheelabhadra portrays these multilingual urban experiences. His Assamese fiction shows us how language becomes a marker of belonging or exclusion. Drawing on his background in Goalpara, a linguistically distinct region on Assam's western borders, Sheelabhadra brings the speech of a marginalised dialect community into his representations of urban life. His short story "*Apon Manuh*" (2007) explores how internal migrants experience Guwahati as a city structured by linguistic hierarchy. Centred on a chance meeting between two migrants from Goalpara, the story reveals how dialect and standardised language operate as registers of identity. In this chapter, I argue that the conversation between the protagonists, where they shift from standard Assamese to Goalparia dialect, reveals two important aspects. First, it allows us to see the need for linguistic conformity in the urban sphere. Second, it makes visible an alternative form of solidarity based on shared marginal speech. Sheelabhadra's work is valuable to understanding larger debates on how urban identities are shaped through everyday acts of language use.

Keywords: multilingualism, belonging, Assamese literature, dialect, internal migration

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3.1 Introduction

The convergence of migration and language diversity in postcolonial Indian cities can shape how individuals speak, navigate, and belong in the urban sphere. In these contexts of convergence, language interactions are enacted daily, which can both reflect and shape existing social hierarchies, allowing language to function as a communicative tool as well as a powerful social marker. According to Julie Byrd Clark, daily performances of language encode systems of inclusion and exclusion (Byrd Clark, 2009, p. x), positioning speakers in relation to prevailing social norms and dominant linguistic ideologies, which in turn shape conditions of social belonging. Therefore, linguistic practices are key to understanding how forms of belonging are enacted or questioned.

This chapter focuses on the regional language fiction of Rebati Mohan Dutta Choudhury (1924–2008), who wrote under the pen name Sheelabhadra, to explore how these dynamics of linguistic positioning are reflected in his writings. His work reveals the politics of language as experienced by internal migrants navigating the linguistic environment of Guwahati, a city in India's northeastern state of Assam. Sheelabhadra was born in the region of Goalpara (Assam) and migrated to Guwahati for education and later professional life. His work emerged from this layered positionality; it was shaped by the linguistic textures of Goalpara yet published and circulated within the Assamese public sphere of Guwahati. While the Assamese literary sphere is dominated by a standardised version of the language and its script in print, Sheelabhadra's fiction introduced dialect into Assamese literature. In his short story "*Apon Manuh*" (Sheelabhadra, 2007, pp. 355-357), he portrays a fleeting encounter between two migrants in Guwahati. Their initial interaction in standard Assamese shifts into a shared Goalparia dialect, transforming a transactional moment into one of mutual recognition and affective connection. The hidden hierarchies that regulate urban speech are made visible through this moment in the story, and it uncovers dialect as a mode of belonging that resists normative language ideologies. Here, I argue that Sheelabhadra's fiction on code-switching between standard Assamese and Goalparia dialect exposes the pressures of linguistic conformity in the city. This also asserts alternative forms of solidarity based on shared marginal speech patterns. Instead of presenting Guwahati as a linguistically homogeneous space, Sheelabhadra portrays it as a layered urban region where multilingual lives are exercised every day beneath dominant narratives of linguistic purity. In his fiction, the city becomes a linguistic space where dialect becomes both a marker of exclusion and a site of resistance.

3.2 Language, Migration, and Belonging in the Postcolonial Indian City

Cities are produced both spatially and linguistically. Postcolonial Indian cities are, as Rashmi Varma puts it, spaces of "multiplicities" (Varma, 2012, p. 116), where linguistic diversity is a structuring element of urban life. Standard languages and dialect forms coexist, often uneasily, within the same urban geography due to the constant movement of people, cultures, and speech forms in cities, producing multilingual environments. In a city like Guwahati, multiple linguistic publics operate in tandem and in tension, instead of a single and linguistically unified public sphere. This linguistic life of the city is again stratified by class, regional affiliation, education, and access to official institutions. Often, anglophone registers circulate in elite and bureaucratic spaces, while regional languages, themselves internally fragmented, might struggle for representation and legitimacy. This turns the city into a space where networks of language exist both above and below

the surface. The formal registers of education, administration, and media promote dominant language ideologies while a different linguistic life operates in informal settlements, markets, transport systems, and domestic spaces. Language-learning, language acquisition, language-teaching, and language-speaking are all charged with political meaning in this context. What language one speaks and how, when, or where one is allowed to speak it, becomes a question of social positioning.

Migration to these urban spaces thus becomes movements across linguistic terrains. Speech forms that may not align with the dominant language ideologies of the receiving city travel with the migrants. The accents, dialects, and code-switching practices of new migrants can expose them to scrutiny and exclusion. At the same time, these practices can open possibilities for informal solidarities built on the shared marginality of migrant groups. It is at this intersection of migration, language, and urban belonging that Sheelabhadra's fiction intervenes. His story "*Apon Manuh*," as this essay will argue later, offers a literary exploration of how dialect and speech patterns negotiate space, identity, and affiliation within the linguistic landscape of Guwahati city. Before turning to the story, however, we must first consider Guwahati's relationship with its peripheral regions, from where both Sheelabhadra and his protagonists migrate, to understand how language shapes the experience of urban migration in the city.

3.2.1 Guwahati and Goalpara

Through infrastructural transformation and administrative reconfiguration, Guwahati emerged from pre-colonial military headquarters of the Ahom kingdom to a major urban centre during British rule (Hazarika 2022, p. 49). Economic factors have largely driven migration to the city. Post-independence Guwahati has witnessed inflows of people from rural Assam as well as other parts of India. The scale of migration to Guwahati has consistently outpaced that of Assam as a whole. Between 1901 and 2001, the city's population grew from 11.7 thousand to 818.8 thousand, which is an increase of about 8.3 times, compared to an 8.1-fold increase for the state during the same period (Deka & Datta, p. 241). The proportion of migrants within Guwahati likewise exceeded that for Assam overall, with rural-to-urban migration constituting a key dynamic. The city's fringes have become sites of settlement for daily-wage labourers, including rickshaw and thela pullers (ibid, p. 246, 252).

The increase in migration to the central city has also meant that political unrest often incorporated the migrant and 'outsider' figure as a political issue. The non-Assamese in the city were targeted in the past by job-seeking locals, as exemplified by the *Bongal Kheda* (Drive out the Foreigners) movement in the 1960s. The language identity of the Assamese appeared as a deciding factor in this movement, as reported by KC Chakravarti in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, where he detailed the organised nature and the mass-scale of violent mob activities against the non-Assamese, specifically the Bengali communities, in Guwahati (Chakravarti 1960, p. 1193-1194). This, however, was not the only time when language identity became a deciding factor in the politics of belonging in Assam.

Historically, language in India has never been divorced from politics. In the colonial period, vernacular languages became markers of cultural identity, legal recognition, and territorial claims.

Lisa Mitchell, for example, has extensively traced such transformations in South India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mitchell 2009). These dynamics were intensified by public demands and state policies in the post-independence years, as they sought to fix official languages for states carved along linguistic lines. In Assam,[1] for example, where the question of an official language was already tenuous under the British administration,[2] the post-independence period saw the Language Movement (1960) and the Medium of Instruction movement (1972) that attempted to establish Assamese as the official language in administrative and educational spheres. These events brought new political dimensions to the relationship between language communities, specifically between the Assamese-speaking community and their relationship to the Bengali and the ethno-linguistic groups within Assam's territory.[3]

To sum up, several political movements, featuring language-based identity at their core, have taken place in post-independence Assam. This includes the violent episodes of the *Bongal Kheda* movement in Guwahati in the 1960s, which were symptomatic of the region's fraught politics of language and identity. The Bengali-speaking community increasingly came to be framed as the "other" within the Assamese public sphere during these events. The Bengali-majority communities resisted[4] the imposition of Assamese as the sole official language of the state, a resistance that further widened the rift between language groups. Between 1979 and 1985, during the Assam Movement against perceived "outsiders," the figure of the Bengali "illegal migrant," particularly from Bangladesh, again became the focal point of socio-political contention. The Assam Movement and its far-reaching effects have been examined elsewhere,[5] and it is not the purpose of this chapter to revisit in detail how the Bengali migrant has been constructed within the Assamese public imagination. The discussion so far serves to highlight the complex reception of migrant communities within Assam's economic fold, and to provide context for understanding the positionality of migrant protagonists in Guwahati in Sheelabhadra's fiction. It will also help our next discussion on the background and language politics in Goalpara, the region from which Sheelabhadra's protagonists migrate.

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[1] For a discussion on how the state re-organisation process affected Assam and its internal politics, see: Dhar, I. (2011). Assam Through the Prism of Reorganisation Experience. In A. Sarangi & S. Pai (Eds.), *Interrogating reorganisation of states* (1st ed., pp. 282–303). Routledge.

[2] See: Majumdar, P. (2006). Introduction of the Bengali Language in 19th Century Assam: Role of the British. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 67, 787–792. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147998.

[3] To understand the context of Assamese linguistic nationalism and how it managed to alienate other communities in Assam, like the Bodos, see: Sarmah, B. (2023). Identity and aporia of autonomy: The Bodo movement in retrospect. In K. Kikhi & D. R. Gautam (Eds.), *Marginality in India: Perspectives of marginalisation from the Northeast* (pp. 142–157). Routledge.

[4] For an account of the '*Bhasa Andolon*' (1961) or language movement by the Bengalis of Assam against the imposition of Assamese as the official language, see: Chakraborty, D., & Paul, P. (2024). Protest in the poems of *Unish*: A study of women's poetry from Barak Valley. In *Female Narratives of Protest* (pp. 52–64). Routledge.

[5] For example, see: Baruah, S. (n.d.). *The politics of noncitizenship in Assam*. Seminar. https://india-seminar.com/2022/749/749-SANJIB%20BARUAH.htm.

While Guwahati developed into Assam's primary urban centre, Goalpara, a district situated on Assam's western border with Bengal, became culturally and economically marginal at first under the colonial administration and later to the post-independence Indian nation (Misra 2011, p. 2). This peripheral status was shaped by both geography and history. This westernmost border district had an "uneasy" relationship with the rest of Assam since its addition to the state in 1874, as the leading landlords (*zamindars*) of Goalpara strongly contended to join neighbouring Bengal (Saikia 2023, p. 167). This indicates that the cultural influence of Bengal was strong among the reigning *zamindars*, influencing the social and linguistic fabric of the region. Goalpara, in Sheelabhadra's childhood, was both linguistically and culturally distinct from the central and eastern parts of Assam. Sheelabhadra notes in one of his autobiographies that in his hometown of Gauripur in Goalpara, they lived 'between' two separate cultures and their relationship with Kolkata (West Bengal) was integral due to familial, economic, medical and educational purposes (Sheelabhadra 1997, p. 4). His autobiographies further shed interesting insights into the middle and upper-middle-class population of Goalpara and their culture, which was significantly different from the Assamese-speaking parts of the state. In addition to these historical factors, migration patterns in the early twentieth century brought significant numbers of people from Bengali-majority regions such as Mymensingh, Rangpur, and Jalpaiguri to Goalpara (Ahmed 2004, p. 573). The cumulative influence of Bengali culture and language meant that Goalpara's speech forms reflected what Sanghamitra Misra describes as a hyphenated "proto-Bengal" and "proto-Assam" status (Misra 2011, p. 137). The significant overlaps between dialects spoken in western Assam and northern Bengal (Baruah 1995, p. 2783) placed Goalpara's linguistic practices at odds with literary Assamese, and certainly beyond the scope of the standardised Assamese designated as the official language.

Following the State Reorganisation Act of 1971 and the subsequent subdivisions of Goalpara district in 1983 and 1989, the region's political geography contracted further, yet its borderland status endured. Goalpara's history of immigration and its distinctive speech practices continued to mark it as marginal, especially as waves of anti-Bengali and anti-outsider movements swept through Assam, as discussed earlier. Language became central to the post-independence political scene, now intensified by the Assamese public's anxieties over 'illegal' immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh. The acceptance of Assamese as one's language came to be framed by Assamese intellectuals as a key criterion for distinguishing between migrants who could belong and those who could not, with the official language increasingly deployed as an "instrument of exclusiveness" (Misra 1999, p. 1268). At the time of the Assam Movement, Goalpara was a significant site of minority resistance; the All Assam Minority Yuva Parishad (AAMYP) was founded in 1980 in Goalpara by Bengali and Muslim leaders to defend the rights of minority communities (Nath 2020, p. 40). Goalpara thus emerged as a linguistically and culturally distinctive region. It was a borderland in geographic terms and a space where language, migration, and belonging were contested in the face of exclusionary politics.

Keeping these political and historical contexts in mind, the discussion now shifts to the movement of people from Goalpara and its adjoining regions to the central city of Guwahati. The geographic location of Goalpara is characterised by riverine landscapes that are highly vulnerable to climate-induced disasters, leading to patterns of intra-state migration. The continuous erosion and disappearance of land due to flooding forces people to relocate to adjoining areas in search of survival. For instance, in 1978, a year before the Assam Movement officially began, the complete

submergence of a river island in the region prompted significant displacement and migration to nearby districts (Manuvie 2018, p. 85). Environment-related factors such as this one affect employment prospects in the region. Goalpara is among the districts with the highest levels of job demand, and this results in sustained migration to Guwahati, which often involves daily movement of workers looking for employment (Manuvie 2023, pp. 59, 45). The reception of migrants in Guwahati and their claims to belonging must be understood within the historical and political contexts outlined above. Their dialects indexed regional origin and class position as well as an implicit affinity with Bengali, and this combination could subject them to linguistic and social scrutiny. Goalparia speech forms were associated with rurality, backwardness, and low-wage, precarious labour, such as rickshaw pulling, thela work, and other informal sectors that sustained the city's economy but remained marginal within its dominant narratives. Even middle-class migrants, like Sheelabhadra himself, bore the marks of outsider status because their linguistic practices did not conform to the dominant norms of urban Assamese speech. Migration from Goalpara to Guwahati thus entailed a physical movement across geography combined with a navigation of entrenched hierarchies of language, class, and cultural legitimacy. It is this layered experience of migration and language politics that informs and shapes the fictional landscapes of Sheelabhadra's urban stories.

3.3 Sheelabhadra's Fiction and the Politics of Dialect in the City

Sheelabhadra was born in the town of Gauripur, part of the undivided Goalpara district. He moved through various cities for higher education, including Kolkata (West Bengal), Rangpur (currently in Bangladesh) and Guwahati (Assam). In the 1960s, a decade marked by socio-political developments like the official language movement and the *Bongal Kheda* violence, Sheelabhadra joined the renowned Assam Engineering College in Guwahati as a lecturer of Mathematics. Within Assam, but outside his native Goalpara, Sheelabhadra encountered tensions in claiming an "Assamese" identity, as his speech carried the marks of a dialect that bore Bengali registers. At the age of forty, in 1964, he began a literary career that would produce seven novels and over twenty short story collections. One of the reasons he chose to write in Assamese despite his fluency and formal education in Bengali and English was intimately tied to this complex sense of belonging. Reflecting on this choice in an interview, Sheelabhadra remarked: "Stung by the many ridicules about my Bengali pronunciation,[6] I resolved to prove that I was not apart from what is regarded as 'Assamese'. And how better than by writing in the language?" ("Master Narrator – Personality", 2003).

Although Sheelabhadra wrote in Assamese, he made the strategic decision to embed Goalparia dialect into his fiction to reveal the multilingual fabric of Guwahati. His short stories and novels feature a range of dialect-speaking characters, and often their dialogues appear without translation. This means that Assamese readers of his work, at a time when language was central to socio-political tensions, would directly encounter untranslated Goalparia speech, and in doing so, be introduced to dialects from the margins of the official language. By not providing

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[6] This remark is an indication that in Guwahati, Sheelabhadra's Goalparia speech form was considered 'Bengali.'

translations or explanatory glosses, Sheelabhadra suggested that these encounters between standard language and dialect are non-negotiable. In many ways, the untranslated representation of Goalpara's dialect in his writing constitutes a form of linguistic resistance against the deployment of Assamese as an exclusionary tool.

3.3.1 Reading "*Apon Manuh*": Language, Recognition, and Belonging

Linguistic choices for migrants in Guwahati are shaped by the socio-political pressures, which include the state's historical record of political mobilisation against the non-Assamese, which has framed language as a marker of identity. Migrants encounter a linguistic environment dominated by standard Assamese, the language with institutional legitimacy across government, education, and media. Within this context, speaking Assamese and speaking it in an accepted form becomes necessary to live and work in the city. In this way, the city's linguistic landscape demands adaptability. Marginal dialect speakers navigating this space require the ability to shift speech registers. Here, rural/regional speech forms may be used within intimate or familiar contexts, and standard Assamese is reserved for official, transactional, or public interactions. As noted by researchers, the use of urban language involves "applying" language as a commodity to achieve goals, and speakers adjust their language consciously or unconsciously to match different social and communicative settings (Smakman & Heinrich, 2018, p.4).

First-generation and working-class migrants develop a heightened sensitivity to language as a site of social value and identity. Associations with regional or lower-class backgrounds in speech patterns are often met with negative evaluations of status, education, and competence (Edwards 2018, p.22). Judgments like these can shape how speakers present themselves in public. Therefore, dialect becomes a marked feature of identity, and standard language is perceived as a means for acceptance. A form of legitimacy is offered by fluency in standard Assamese. Any trace of dialect can mark one as an outsider, and because of this, speakers shift codes, conceal accents, and recalibrate their speech depending on the situation.

Sheelabhadra sets his story *Apon Manuh* in this context, as it follows two first-generation migrants from Goalpara to Guwahati. One is a rickshaw puller, and the other is the narrator. The latter is a semi-autobiographical figure aligned with Sheelabhadra himself. This is part of a narrative strategy in Sheelabhadra's fiction where he uses personal memory and autobiographical detail channelled through a first-person narrator. This enables him to reflect on contemporary socio-political issues within the structure of fiction. Comparing the settings and characters of his stories with his autobiographical writings reveals the extent to which he drew upon everyday experiences, professional life, and personal history. In Apon Manuh, the narrator introduces himself through a reflection on his early life in Gauripur: "I have become a part of Gauripur… One needs to research whether a place shapes a man or whether the people shape the place" (Sheelabhadra 2007, p. 356, translation mine). This moment establishes the narrator's rootedness in Goalpara, which is also a reference to Sheelabhadra's origin in Gauripur, and sets the tone for the central encounter in the story.

The narrator then reflects on the migration to his current city of Guwahati from the Goalpara region, and how he often encounters Goalparia rickshaw pullers who can speak *nibhaj*

(unadulterated) Assamese. In the second half of the story, the narrator is the passenger in a rickshaw where the driver, who initially speaks in standard Assamese, reveals his Goalparia linguistic background through the course of their conversation:

> "Where are you from?"
> "Noonmati."
> "No, I mean where is your real home?"
> "Golakganj."
> "In Golakganj's town area?"
> "No, in Binnasara."
> "*Desi mansi*?"[7] ("Desi man?")[8]
> The driver's eyes lightened up.
> "*Tomra*?" ("Where is your home?")
> This is it! This is the speciality of spoken language from our region…
> Today a boy from Binnasara was driving rickshaw in this metropole! I replied,
> "Gauripur! *Janish*?" ("Gauripur! Do you know the place?")
> "*Kene Najanim*? *Saday na Jayay Thakang*." ("Why won't I know? I visit the place regularly.")
> What a delight! I have transformed from a general passenger to a special person! A person close to him. Race, religion or faction does not matter in this case. What matters is that I come from the same region as him and we speak the same dialect.
> (Sheelabhadra 2007, p. 356, translation mine)

The rickshaw puller initially answers to the narrator's question ("Where are you from?") with "Noonmati," a suburb of Guwahati. In this case, Noonmati is not a lie. Instead, it is a strategic choice which shows that the rickshaw puller was approaching the narrator's question with caution. The location of Noonmati allows the rickshaw puller to assume a neutral urban identity and align with the expectations of the city's public sphere. In a linguistic landscape dominated by standard Assamese and shaped by a history of movements against non-Assamese migrants, claiming Noonmati as one's place of origin provides safety and avoids exposure to the scrutiny that might follow a dialect-marked answer. The narrator presses further ("No, I mean where is your real home?") to move beyond surface-level belonging and toward deeper regional identification. The rickshaw puller first names Golakganj, a town in the Goalpara district, and finally specifies Binnasara, a village within that district. The narrator asks, "*Desi mansi*?." As the Goalparia dialect enters the conversation, the dynamic of the interaction is transformed. Prior to this, it was a transactional interaction between the passenger and the service provider. Dialectical identity moves the conversation towards one grounded in recognition. The question, "Where are you

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[7] This is a transliteration of the Goalparia dialect as it appears in the original Assamese text, where the dialogues are presented without translation. Here, the transliteration is intended to highlight the shift in speech form. For the reader's ease, an English translation of the dialectal dialogue is provided in parentheses.

[8] A *desi mansi* or *Desi* man is the speaker of *desi bhasa* which is a colloquial reference to the dialect of western Assam

from?", so often used to scrutinise migrants' belonging and their degree of assimilation (Raj 2003, pp.1-2), becomes the precursor to an unexpected connection in this story.

The narrator and the rickshaw puller begin their interaction in standard Assamese, adhering to the unspoken rules of public language in Guwahati. Interaction in dialect is withheld until recognition is possible. This shift might appear accidental, but it is actually structured by the city's linguistic hierarchies. Dialectal speech can mark a speaker as an outsider, specifically for migrants from Goalpara. This can provoke assumptions of Bengali affiliation or indicate lower social status. The rickshaw puller's initial answer, "Noonmati," is therefore not just a geographic reply but a linguistic strategy. The dialect surfaces only when the narrator signals recognition. The conversation in dialect here produces a momentary absolution from alienation within the city. We witness the latent social ties carried by regional speech forms that are otherwise suppressed in the linguistic economy of the city. In this case, regional dialect produced recognition, community, and affective ties in an otherwise impersonal urban space.

The final part of the story reinforces this affective bond. Upon arriving at the narrator's home, the rickshaw puller refuses payment and says, "No need to pay." The narrator insists: "*Ei kari khaish tui. Bhara nanile keman kare haibe*?" ("You make a living through this. How can you not take your payment?"). The driver relents only slightly: "*Den, tomara jen ischa*." ("Pay whatever you wish.") (Sheelabhadra 2007, p. 357, translation mine). The transactional framework of their relationship is suspended, redefined by the solidarity produced through a shared dialect. In other works of Sheelabhadra, which include short stories like "*Bir*" (A Hero),[9] language differences and economic dynamics are closely related. These short stories are a commentary on the ties between linguistic encounters and social structures. They reveal the role of language use and practice in shaping everyday interactions in the city and its peripheries. The excerpts discussed above offer a 'fictionalised' representation of Guwahati's linguistic landscape. It could be argued that the events presented are imaginary and bear no resemblance to the present-day realities of migrant language politics. However, Sheelabhadra's strategic use of fiction as a vehicle for commenting on sensitive issues such as language and dialect identity becomes evident through the insertion of factual elements into his stories. This narrative technique is characteristic of many of his first-person fictional works, where fictional events are interwoven with contemporary facts. This blurring of fiction and autobiography allows him to offer political reflections under the cover of storytelling. In *Apon Manuh*, for instance, the narrator follows the encounter with the rickshaw puller by noting that a translator from Goalpara, Jyotirmoy Prodhani, has translated his work into English (Sheelabhadra 2007, p.356).[10] This is a factually correct detail which may appear as a passing remark in the context of the story. Readers familiar with Sheelabhadra's writing will, however, recognise it as a deliberate strategy. He introduced factual references within fictional contexts to ground his narratives in real social conditions and enable commentary that might otherwise receive resistance or censorship.

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[9] First published in the September 1973 issue of the Assamese periodical *Notun Prithivi.* Later published again in 2007 in the short-story collection *Sheelabhadra Galpa Samagra (Vol 1).*

[10] Jyotirmoy Prodhani is the translator of Sheelabhadra's work *Madhupur Bohudoor and other stories* (2016).

3.4 Conclusion: Multilingual Cities in Regional Literature

This chapter has explored how language, migration, and belonging intersect in the literary representation of Guwahati through the fiction of Sheelabhadra. Focusing on *Apon Manuh*, it has traced how dialect functions as a linguistic variation and a socially meaningful and politically charged register. The broader historical and political contexts of non-Assamese migrants in Assam discussed earlier in this chapter clarify the stakes of this moment. Understanding Guwahati as a city shaped by migration as well as a centre of political mobilisation of language-based identity against perceived 'outsiders,' and Goalpara as a district historically marked by linguistic peripheral status, helps to understand why dialect must often be withheld in urban interactions. Sheelabhadra's short story reveals how the politics of speech in Assam are embedded not only in present interactions, but in layered histories of migration, marginalisation, and linguistic categorisation. In this sense, Sheelabhadra creates a space in Assamese literature for the dialect to speak as a mode of urban belonging and not just as a marker of difference. The moment of recognition between the narrator and the rickshaw puller is not simply personal; it is political. It shows how alternative communities are formed, fleetingly, in the shared speech of migrants whose identities are otherwise unacknowledged by dominant narratives. The issues raised by Sheelabhadra's fiction allow us to reflect on larger ideas of how urban spaces are shaped by everyday negotiations across linguistic and cultural differences (Puumala & Maïche 2021, p.809). Across Indian cities, multilingual lives are negotiated through shifts in speech and register, with direct implications for social and economic positioning. In Mumbai, for instance, filmmakers from outside the city began incorporating local registers of Hindi and provincial languages into their work as a response to the dominance of diasporic-oriented Hindi cinema, transforming Mumbai's film industry between the 1990s and 2000s (Ganti 2016, p.127). Like Sheelabhadra's Guwahati, these cities too are built from the speech of those who are often denied narrative centrality. Urban literature that foregrounds dialect makes these lives visible and audible, insisting that the city is not monolingual, but layered, contested, and spoken in many tongues.

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