La Lingua Bengalese

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"Where do you live?" I ask Francesco. His reply comes jerkily, like a car in the wrong gear. "*Aami*... San Giovanni-tey... *thaaki*." YESSS! The accent and intonation might be wrong but the sentence is correct. I beam at my student, "Bravo! *Khub Bhalo*!"

I turn to Martina. "*Tu, chiedi a Paolo dove abita.*" She turns to Paolo and does what I ask her to do: "Paolo, *tumi kothaaye.....er....thaaki*?" Martina darts me a hesitant look under her thick lashes. I smile but wag my finger; immediately she corrects herself. "Ah! Si, si.....*tumi kothaaye THAAKO*." She claps her hand to her forehead in disgust and reminds herself: '*Certo*! It's the second person singular. *Quanto sono stupida*!"

"No, you're not at all *stupida*, my dear." I pat her streaked blonde head. In fact, none of my Italian students in my Bangla class are remotely stupid. They are all bright young men and women in their early twenties, trying to graduate from the University of Rome's Centre for Oriental Studies and specialising in languages ranging from Arabic, Korean, Hebrew, Mandarin, Japanese, Hindi to even Urdu. But not Bangla! There are basic courses in Bangla to be taken as elective or subsidiary classes, which I teach, but unfortunately Bangla is not yet a specialist course. Why ever not, is my question and that of my second year students. My modest intention is to raise enthusiasm towards that goal within the *facolta*. This is our micro-*bhasha andolon*!

We are sitting in the airy and spacious classroom or *Aula* at La Sapienza, as this 700 year old Roman university is called. Actually, our particular department, the centre for oriental languages and studies has been relocated from the original campus to this modern building in the ethnic heart of Rome. You are lucky to live inside a real life language lab, I tell my students. Go out and practice, I always prompt them. And indeed, the windows of the second floor classroom on this side of the university building overlook a street, fringed with Bangladeshi and Chinese shops.

The canopied establishment directly across from our window is a restaurant. If you please, it's a *Bangladeshi* eaterie called 'A Taste of *India*' written in *English* in an *Italian* neighbourhood with a majority of non-Italians none of whom speak any English! Sometimes I itch to ask the restaurant-*wallahs* about this choice of name. Yet, I have noted that the anomaly hasn't prevented the place from being a reasonable commercial success. So, why fix it if it ain't broke?

I and my students have done our bit for the restaurant, since I sometimes take them to practice their language skills with the waiters. I prepare the waiters beforehand, requesting them to speak slowly and make general conversation. They are tickled and most obliging.

My first year class was there last week. It was their first time, and my treat. I started out by pointing at the snacks displayed and nudged Francesco to stop drooling, choose something and ask the waiter what it was in Bangla.