As if asking a girl on the first date of his life, Francesco blushes and mumbles, "*Eta ki*?" Waiter Humayun, remembering my strict guidelines, responds loudly, one letter per minute, his voice rising to a crescendo: 'E-T-A ....S-A-M-O-S-A!' From the right side of my mouth I mutter to Humayun "They are not deaf" and from the left side of my mouth I prompt Martina to ask Humayun what the samosa contains: With panic-stricken eyes fixed on my face she mutters in the tones of a customs official, "*Etar bhitore ki aachey*", and looks at me for approval in spite of my gestures from 'the wings' for her to address Humayun, who is the only one in this motley group to be flowering lushly in the limelight, and already waxing over-enthusiastic, irrelevant and text-bookish, as if he were on TV: "*Jee, eta holo aik prokar khaddo.....*" I mutter at him again from the less-aching side of my mouth: "Keep it simple, everyday Bangla." Grinning and nodding wisely, he promptly takes the wrong end of the cue, now playing the Man in the Street: "*Etatey aasey giya... aapnar aloo, aar aapnaar motorshutki...aar giya...*" Martina gazes at me helplessly, as if terrorized by some mutant form of the alien language they are still grappling with. Before I can hiss again at Humayun, he realises the situation and like the consummate actor he is, this time he hits the right note: "*Etar bhitorey aachchey aaloo aar motorshooti....*" I sigh with relief. Already, fine-tuning this self-conscious 'casual conversation' in Italian, Shuddho Bangla and cholti Bangla has made me exhausted and in dire need of tea and sustenance. Well, more *Chaa* than *Taa*. But who said life for us...er... warriors of the Mother tongue, was easy. So, pressing my throbbing head I march on.

"Paolo, order us five cups of tea." I ask him in Italian. I know that Bangla numerals are not his forte, so I wait while Paolo studies the ceiling for guidance before launching forth with "*Chaar-ta chaa den.*" Humayun, momentarily puzzled slips from his role as the teacher's assistant-cum-Sanjeev Kumar of a Roman Khana Khazana to being the waiter and asks Paolo in fluent Italian, "*Vuoi quattro o Cinque*? You want four or five cups?" Between clenched teeth I admonish Humayun as if I had caught him corrupting my babies: "Don't you speak in Italian to my students." Meanwhile Paolo makes another shaky attempt "Teen-ta chaa?" I need the tea badly now, all three of the wrongly quantified cups. My otherwise bright students have suddenly regressed to blabbering idiots in front of a single, sweetly smiling and utterly simpatico waiter. Is a teacher's life worth it? Paolo has noted my agony. He takes a deep breath, looks Humayun in the eyes and takes the kamikaze plunge: "*Paanch cup gorom chaa den.*" YESS! Martina adds for good measure "*Taratari. Dhonnobad.*" YESSSSS! Is a teacher's life worth it? A sensation hundred times better than five cups of hot fragrant *elaichi chaa* goes down my parched soul. I could hug all my students and Humayun too.

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Instead we finish ordering and sit down at a table feeling proud of ourselves. Humayun follows with a tray load of food. As we dig in, he lingers at our table. He continues our Bangla conversation-lesson and asks one of the girls, my star pupil, her name. "Stefania", she replies with her mouth full. He almost drops the sauce: "What? Shefalia? Just like our Bangla name. Shefali." He nods approvingly. My mouth is full too. I leave it at that. Humayun is on a roll now, the happy professor. "And where do you study?" he asks. Shefalia.....I mean...Stefania replies, "*Aami Rome bishshobiddaloye Bangla pori. Ami ditiyo botchorer chatri.*" (I study at the University of Rome. I'm a second year student) Now, Humayun hisses at me from the side of his mouth, his smile frozen, his tone accusatory: "*Apa, era to dekhi aamader cheyo bhalo Bangla koye.*" I burst into laughter. Stefania and the others turn to me. I cannot help repeating to them the compliment. "Apparently you speak better Bangla than him." Thank God, they don't believe him.

On my way back from class, far from the ethnic centre, I stop at a gas station. Some young Bangali boys in attendant's uniform are working the pumps and chatting among themselves. I lower my window and hear them speak in fluent Italian among themselves. Perhaps for the benefit of the other Italian worker, I tell myself. I address one of them in Bangla. Incomprehension clouds his face, followed by incredulity. I repeat and ask if he is Bangali. He hesitates and says 'Si.' I smile, "Have you forgotten Bangla?" Abashed he says in faltering Bangla, "No, but where we live we don't get to speak it much."

I look at these bright young men, far from the motherland, far from their mother's language. In the everyday struggle they are earning a living but have lost their tongue. I wonder if International Mother Language Day means anything to these boys. I pay them as they kid around with each other and with the Italian attendant in perfect Italian. "Ciao!" They wave to me. "*Bhaalo theyko*!" I mumble and move on. If Stefania and Francesco could see my face now! Ah! Well, you win some, you lose some. ■