The location is the International Guest House of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. Pressing button no. 2 of the elevator, we landed on the second floor. As soon as I knocked on the door of Room No. 16, a smiling Bharati Mukherjee welcomed me in.

Calcutta’s daughter Bharati has made a name for herself in the United States of America by writing The Tiger's Daughter. This novel has been highly praised in journals like Newsweek, New York Times, Washington Post and New Statesman. Time magazine has also published a review of the book along with her photograph. According to Wall Street Journal, The Tiger’s Daughter is the best piece of fiction published in 1972. Plenty of copies have been sold. A British edition of this novel has also been released from London in June this year. It has also been discussed in Desh magazine. It has made her famous because she has depicted the change in Calcutta society where the traditional values and morals of a Brahmin family have been shattered forever. According to Bharati, it is a kind of social revolution. All old values, beliefs, customs, class differences are just washed away. Traditionally, the Brahmins were considered to be the tigers of Bengal, but that is no longer so. After returning from America, this daughter of a Brahmin finds that her family is on the path of decadence and is suffering internally. She has lived for a long time in America and even married an American. But still she is not free from the pain and suffering.

In her personal life, Bharati no longer carries the title of Mukherjee. After marrying Clark Blaise, who is settled in Canada, she is now Mrs. Bharati Blaise. Both of them teach literature at two different Canadian universities and both are creative writers. Bharati teaches English at McGill University and is the Director of the Graduate Studies Program. Clark is Professor of English Creative Writing at Sir George Williams University, Montreal. They have two sons. The elder one is nine years old and is named Burt Anand. The younger one, Bernard Sudhir, is five. Both Bharati and Clark have jointly named them by mixing English and Bengali names. Bharati had met Clark as a fellow student in 1961 when she attended the Writers Workshop Program at the University of Iowa. They married in 1962.

Since I had earlier informed them of my visit, both husband and wife were waiting for me. I had learnt of their arrival in Calcutta from a writer friend of mine. They stayed here till the end of August and then went to Delhi. They have been residing in Calcutta for a long time in order to jointly collaborate in their project called “Bengal Journal” – an informative work written in the diary form and focusing on the lifestyle of the people in West Bengal. They will come back again around January or February.

This is Clark’s first visit to Calcutta and Bharati returned to the city after fourteen years. Out of these fourteen years, twelve years had been spent abroad. In spite of living abroad for such a long time in a different society and a different environment, her love for the city has not waned. “I love Calcutta. I feel at home here. The people, the streets, the foliage seem all my own. Except for some high-rise buildings, the city is still the same. Only it’s a bit more crowded”, she stated.
Fourteen years ago, Bharati had left the city to accompany her father to Baroda. She had studied in an English medium school here – the Loreto Convent -- and so spoke and behaved like the English without any scope for learning any Bengali or Hindi. Bharati got her masters degree from the University of Baroda in English and Ancient Indian Civilization and left for the United States. There at the University of Iowa she did her MFA in Creative Writing and went on to pursue her PhD degree. In the meantime, she also enrolled in the Iowa Writer’s Workshop which had three specializations – fiction, poetry and translation. Bharati joined the fiction group and along with other creative writers and poets, received a scholarship to pursue this course. It was during this time that Clark came from Canada and also enrolled in the same course.

Clark belongs to Canada. There are no restrictions of movement between the United States and Canada and there are no significant differences between the moods and habits of people in these two countries. English is spoken in both places, and there are different interrelated customs and cultures that they share. Both are nations of immigrants, and, are therefore, multicultural. But some people in Canada are too much involved with the French language. We tend to believe that the attitude, behavior and lifestyle of the Americans are always very dazzling. They are somewhat aggressive and full of the zeal and fervor of life. Moreover, since we live far away, we do not look at America and Canada as separate entities.

One does not find such western traits in Clark. He is not extravagantly dressed, and is a simple easygoing person engaged in his studies and work. Speaking for a couple of minutes makes you feel close to him. Equally interested in knowing and disseminating knowledge, he has made quite a name for himself with his book *Dreaming of Rocket With Shot*. He is now busy writing two books, *North American Education* and *Tribal Justice*. He is also co-authoring “Bengal Journal” with Bharati. During his stay in Calcutta he has attended plenty of lunch and dinner invitations, visited different libraries, and has attempted to learn Bengali, his wife’s mother tongue. Just before meeting us, he was busy practicing the script in large fonts. Bharati showed us his Bengali handwriting notebook and said that he was having trouble with compound words.

Clark was very happy with the warm treatment he received in Calcutta as a son-in-law. He has been graciously received in the homes of Indian families and friends. In fact, sometimes he felt uncomfortable with all the attention given to him. As a shy person, he felt quite embarrassed at times and, on informing Bharati about this, he was told that this was how son-in-laws were treated in Bengal – plenty of attention along with plenty of food. When he sat down to eat, all the members of the family would surround him. He felt uneasy with the food that tasted different and also because strangers were crowding around him all the time. Yet within a few days he got used to this and now the sincerity of these people has overwhelmed him.

Though she has resided in the west for a long time, gained reputation there, and has married a foreigner, Bharati has not changed much. Her manners and her use of the Bengali language are still quite native. She does not dress gaudily. She was wearing a light colored printed sari, with stone-setting ear tops and a narrow chain on the neck. A light red dot adorned her forehead and her eyes wore a distant nostalgic look. All this combined to make her quite a pleasing personality.
I sought her permission to ask a few more personal questions. Bharati smiled and replied that I could ask whatever I wanted to, but answering them or not depended entirely upon her. I asked her when and where she met Clark.

“In 1961 at the Iowa University Workshop. The next year we got married.” Replying to the question as if she had repeated it several times earlier, she looked at Clark and he smiled back. I liked the shy smile and told Bharati, “Won’t you add anything more?”

“What more is there to say? We met, got acquainted, fell in love, and then married. Now we are happy with our two sons.”

On asked how she felt marrying a foreigner and settling down in a new environment, Bharati replied,

“Actually the relationship between a husband and a wife is based on mutual understanding. Both have to sacrifice something at some point. What we call ‘adjustment’ remains true of all relationships, no matter whether your husband is a foreigner or a local person.”

On talking about the new environment Bharati added,

“I am from Calcutta. I have married in Canada. Both these countries are poles apart in social and economic terms. However progressive Indian husbands might be, they still want to retain their patriarchal control over their wives. In matters of controlling the kitchen and home expenses, the wife is important. But beyond that there is nothing. In all other matters the husband has the last word. And the wife has to abide by it. Here the husband’s behavior is dictatorial. But the situation is not similar in Canada or America. Though not always, but in most cases the role of the wife there is that of an equal partner. In literal terms, one is not subservient to the other.”

Tea was served from downstairs. Clark started preparing it and asked in Bengali, “Milk?”

I said, “Yes.”

“How much sugar?”

“One and a half”.

Aloke Mitra, my colleague and photographer asked Bharati,

“How long has he been learning Bengali?”

“Ever since he came to Calcutta. Previously he never showed any interest when he was in Canada but after arriving here and mixing with different people, he is going head over heels in learning the language. After all it is his in law’s place. So I have to teach him Bengali day and night. I sometimes cannot keep pace with his tremendous enthusiasm.”

Bharati then looked at me and tried to conclude her opinion on the new environment she lived in –

“You see, like any other girl I could have been married here. If my parents wished, they could have done that, as there were no impediments. If they did so, I would have had to adjust to the local environment here. May be time would gradually condition me in such a way that I would not even feel bad about it. But since that did not happen, I do not like to think about it anymore. Living in Canada in a different environment has enhanced my individualism to a great extent.”

She further added,

“Wives in that country usually work ‘part-time’ as there is a difference in the opportunity men and women receive in getting good job offers. Compared to many other places, women in Canada have fewer opportunities for promotions and their ‘grades’, meaning their positions, are lower. But women are gradually becoming vocal against this discrimination. The difference in pay has also created different reactions in family relationships as well.”

Sipping her cup of tea Bharati explained her own situation,
“We do not have such problems. Both of us enjoy the same position and respect in the workplace. We are both professors. Moreover, both of us are writers.”

There is a rule in the North American academia that after serving for seven years, one gets leave for a year with full pay. Both of them are now here on such a sabbatical leave with the intention of traveling, as well as gathering resources for their creative work. Bharati will write a book on Indian writers in English and the Canada Council has sanctioned a small grant for it.

I asked Bharati,

“Do you write regularly within a strict routine?”

“Not at all. Where is the opportunity to write regularly? I have to look after the children and the household and then go to work. Managing all these three things, it is very difficult to write with any regularity. I write during holidays. Our summer break is from June to August. There is again a month’s holiday during Christmas time. The novel I am writing at present has the female protagonist from Calcutta. She grew up here and also got married here. After that she goes to America. In the new environment of New York her outlook of life changes radically. There is a lot of difference between the lifestyle of Calcutta and New York. The society in which she grew up in Calcutta is diametrically opposite to that of New York. She adjusts herself to the new life. The rapid change from the coy bride of Calcutta to this new woman brings with it many conflicts and trouble, the result of which will be ‘tragic.’ My second novel will therefore end in tragic circumstances.

On asking whether she felt Calcutta to be a new place after fourteen years, Bharati replied, “No, not really new. Except for some new houses and highrise buildings, the city is still the same. Of course, it has become more crowded and many people are forced to live on the streets. There is garbage lying all around the place. But I cannot call Calcutta a dirty city. Actually, Calcutta is not so dirty a city as it is publicized to be.”

A little later she added, “I love Calcutta. I love it more than Bombay or Delhi. I feel the pleasure of reunion here. People are very friendly here. When I lived here I did not realize it. Coming back after living a long time in the West, I can realize it better now. I am liking Calcutta even more now -- the streets, the foliage, the people, all seem related to me.”

I asked Bharati what she was thinking about the problems in Calcutta. She replied, “The middle-class here have different kinds of problems. There is a constant rise in the cost of living. Electricity is rationed. There is no surety when there will be power supply or not. There is no guarantee that students will be able to appear for their examinations on time. Even after the exams are over, the results are delayed for months on end. Educated young people do not get jobs and so they are gradually getting more and more frustrated. In our country there is a huge problem of getting suitable jobs. So the problems of the middle class people are endless.”

The protagonist of her first novel, *The Tiger’s Daughter*, was the daughter of a Brahmin in Calcutta. The story unfolds how she sees a changed Calcutta after returning to it after a long stay in the United States. The decadent middle class society that she witnesses all around her raises many questions in her mind. What should have been done and what is being done complicates her thought patterns further. So Bharati has successfully projected the problems of society in her first novel. In spite of writing it from the point of view of a social scientist, she has not compromised with its artistic values at all. This is where her true achievement lies. She has
chosen the same kind of social conflict for her second novel also. She has personal experience of
living both in Calcutta and in America and has relied on that for writing this novel. It is not
always necessary to have personal experience to write a novel. The writer often fills up the gaps
from his or her imagination. This is where their strength lies. But the things that Bharati has
written about needs personal experience to elucidate her ideas. Even if one did not have
personal experience, one needs the probing eye of a social scientist to do so.

Bharati was born in a middle class family with no brothers but three sisters. Her parents have
tried to bring them up well. Bharati studied in Loreto House in Calcutta. From Calcutta she went
to Baroda and from there to the United States for further education. She married and settled in
Canada. She did not get the opportunity to learn from the ordinary citizens of Calcutta. Even in
this trip she has not got such an opportunity. The people with whom she interacted, the people
with whom she enjoyed social gatherings can in no way be called ordinary middle class citizens
in the Indian context. All of them are more or less established in life.

In her novel, Bharati wanted to focus on the waning of the middle class in Calcutta. But along
with this decline, her writing fails to identify the new social structures that were being created at
the same time. She lived far away from Calcutta when she wrote *The Tiger’s Daughter*. Living out
of Calcutta for a long period of fourteen years, she missed the nuances of change that the city
had undergone in the meantime. Due to various economic and political changes the nature of
Calcutta’s social life has also undergone a radical transformation. Along with that the nature of
different class structures also underwent change. There is nothing called a single social entity in
Calcutta anymore. It comprises of different kinds of worldview, lifestyle and tribulations, and all
these add together to form the unified social image of the city. The decadent middle class is just
one of the components of this larger structure.

Before completing her second novel, Bharati completes her visit to Calcutta. Fourteen years ago,
introducing a foreigner as a husband to all her friends and relatives would have evoked mixed
reactions. Some would welcome them open heartedly, some not. Now there are no such
problems. The warm reception that Clark has received in different households proves that. We
hope in her second novel Bharati will be able to portray the real nature of a changed Calcutta. If
she cannot do that then her visit to Calcutta will be in vain. She knows that. So she will come
back again around January or February to complete that task.