

What's left of the Left?

●The tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 symbolised the end of an era of communism which started only a little more than 100 years earlier with the writings of Karl Marx, who predicted the establishment of a classless society.

●But several governments still call themselves communist, and communist candidates in East Europe are winning elections.

●In addition, Marxist thinking is still a key influence on what is generally called the Left.



●Karl Marx, 1818-1883, German philosopher and economist. His book 'Das Kapital' is the fundamental text of Marxist economics

Here, while three Gemini News features look at the Left's fight-back in East Europe, its continuing commitment in India and its demise in Africa, a Bangladeshi family living in Moscow for 20 years gives its account of experiences in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star.

The Statue of Lenin that still Reigns Supreme

Rahul Bedi writes from New Delhi

With 54 MPs and control of two state governments, Indian communists remain convinced that they are the keepers of the true faith. But, reports Gemini News Service, the two communist parties have suffered from a series of political twists and turns, and remain divided.

FOR Indian leftists, communism is alive and thriving on Alimuddin Street in Calcutta, headquarters of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM.

Murmurs by other political parties of bringing down Lenin's statue in central Calcutta is considered seditious by the communists who have ruled West Bengal state for 17 years, and invites militant reaction. According to a party insider, the statue, like the ideology, will be defended to the last Indian leftist.

Pictures of another former Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, hang in every CPM party office across the country. "We have still not denigrated Stalin," said a member from the CPM, India's largest left party with 40 MPs and state governments in West Bengal and Tripura.

Although India's two principal left parties — the CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI) — were temporarily confused after the break-up of the Soviet Union, they have

since strengthened their commitment to Marxism.

"There was not much internal turmoil after the break-up of the Soviet Union," says a CPM official. Besides, there has been no shrinking of the party's base, she says. And, if records are any yardstick of sustained popularity, Jyoti Basu of West Bengal is India's longest-serving chief minister ever, having been in office since 1977.

The CPI, on the other hand, with 12 MPs, is unwilling to believe communism has failed in the Soviet Union, claiming that what really is taking place there is "socialism with a reformed system."

Leftist leaders who consider themselves the repository of communist ideology say Marxist principles are not only the safest to pursue in today's world, but also the only ones committed to overall development.

India's communist parties have 54 MPs, the CPM runs the governments in two



Jyoti Basu: India's longest-serving Chief Minister

states and both parties have pockets of influence in the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the south, Bihar in the east and Punjab in the north.

Outside the movement, however, there is a feeling that Indian communists have cho-

sen to become guardians of a lost cult. Now that Marxism-Leninism has been disowned in the Fatherland itself, Indian leftists seem to have convinced themselves that their responsibility for preserving communist ideology is all the greater.

The Communist Party of India was founded in the early 1920s by feudal-minded Oxbridge intellectuals, ideologically identifying with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

Although the communists supported the Congress party during India's freedom struggle against the British in the 1930s, it became tainted with a "pro-British imperialist" label when it opposed Mahatma Gandhi's nationwide civil disobedience movement in 1942, arguing that fighting European fascism was the priority.

The party was also discredited in the eyes of many people for supporting the Muslim League's demand for the formation of the Islamic state of Pakistan. This eventually led to the partition of India in 1947 in which millions were killed and rendered homeless.

In 1964, following political differences on the ground spawned by the Soviets, the Communist Party of India split into the CPI and the CPM. Moscow tried to coerce those who later formed the CPM to align themselves with the left element inside the ruling Congress government.

But the breakaway CPM leaders felt supporting such a

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EAST Europe's ex-communists have replaced the red star with a red rose and are fighting back.

They lead a broad-based government in Romania, won two-thirds of the seats in the lower house of the Polish Parliament, and look set to return to office in the 8 May elections in Hungary.

And communists had held on to power in two republics of the rump-Yugoslavia — Serbia and Montenegro — though only by exploiting extreme nationalism and a war psychosis that they themselves helped create in the region.

The key element in their political revival of the ex-communists is the catalogue of continuing economic ills.

Throughout Eastern Europe the transition from the communist command economy to the market economy has been painful. It has brought a precipitous drop in production, mass unemployment and increased poverty for large sections of the population, particularly pensioners and others living on incomes that have been overtaken by galloping inflation.

Gross domestic product in the countries of the region has dropped 20-50 per cent.

The "shock therapy" of closing down loss-making plants led to large-scale redundancies before new private enterprises emerge to take on the jobs. With the exception of the Czech Republic, unemployment has become a serious social problem, with joblessness averaging around 15 per cent.

Even in the more advanced economies of Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, the annual rise in prices is in the 20-35 per cent range. Further south, annual inflation reaches into three figures.

For many people — particularly the elderly and industrial workers — low inflation and job security remain associated with memories of the communist era. Many electors are new prepared to gloss over the major shortcomings of the command economy — empty shelves in the shops and the low standard of living for almost all.

Overall, the transition to a market economy has not been well managed. It has been tainted by bribery and corruption, and not enough effort has been made to provide a social safety-net for the emerging poor.

As a result, Hungarians now quote one of the country's top political satirists. "The current government has done what the communists failed to do in 40 years: it's made us like the communists!"

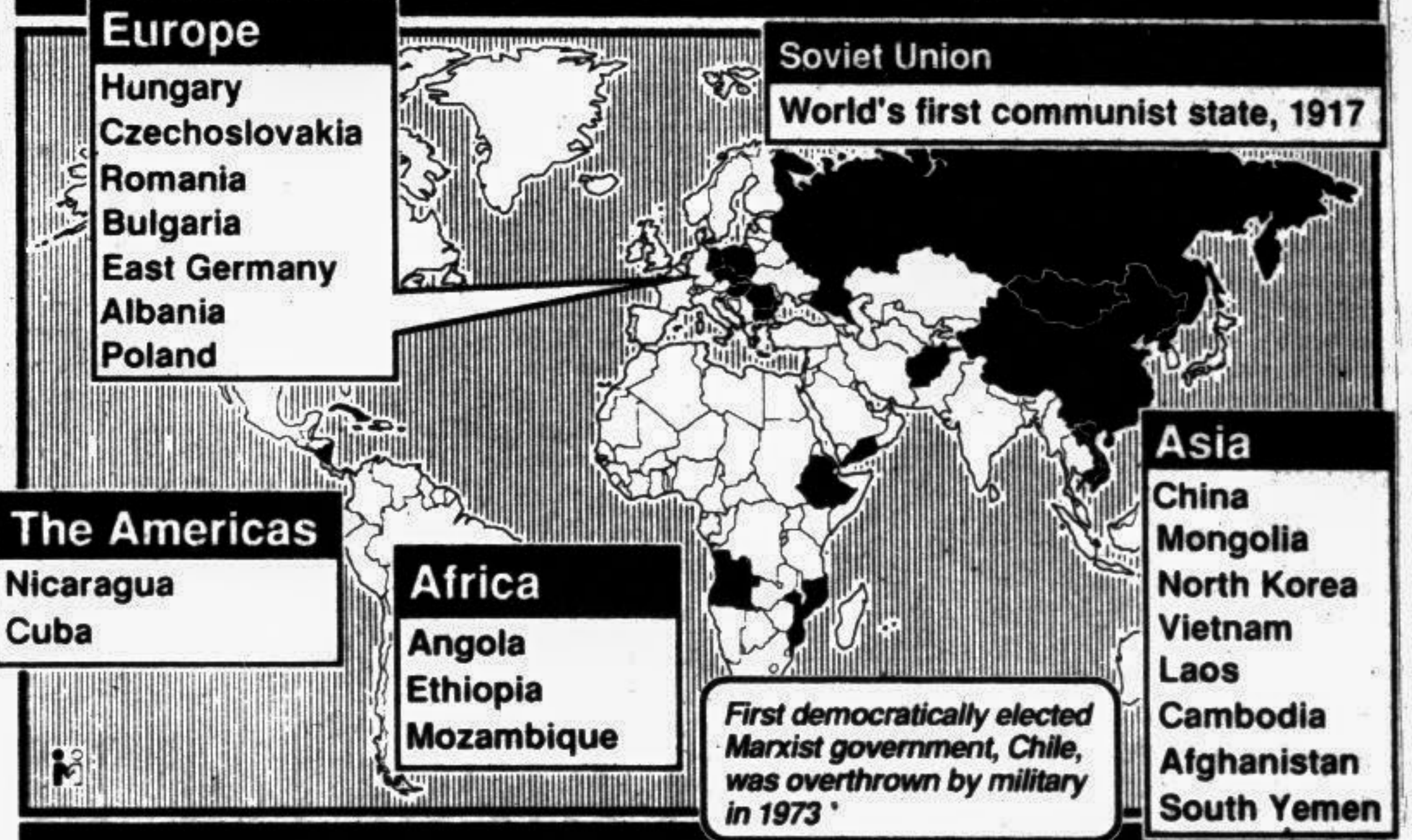
Yet those who now hard back to the economic certainties of the communist age are somewhat unfair in charging the post-communist governments with responsibility for the current difficulties.

New Lease of Life for East Europe's Old Guard

Gabriel Partos writes from Budapest

Despite the collapse of the Soviet empire, East Europe's ex-communists have not simply faded away. They have changed their parties' names, adopted new symbols and argue that they are well-equipped to manage capitalism. Gemini News Service looks at the resurrection of their fortunes.

The red brigade: The communist camp in the early 1980s



Today's economic wasteland in large parts of Eastern Europe was created mostly by the inefficiency of the economic system.

None of the reformed communist parties is advocating a return to the old-style practices of that bygone era. Most advocate a Western-style social democratic approach that would place more emphasis on the provision of social benefits, introduce a more equitable taxation system and possibly slow the closure of loss-making plants.

Some ex-communist leaders even make a virtue of tough pro-market policies. In Poland's governing coalition it is not the communist party's successors in the Left Democratic Alliance who are in favour of slowing down the economic reforms but the Polish Peasant Party, which represents more conservative

rural constituency.

The Hungarian Socialists' chief economic spokesman, Laszlo Bekesi, is proud to acknowledge that as the finance minister of Hungary's last communist government he was one of the architects of his country's market-oriented economic reforms.

Commitment to a market economy and multi-party democracy is one of the hallmarks of the reformed communist parties. Their current wave of success does not represent an attempt to return to the communist era of one-party, dictatorship and economic rationing.

"There is no going back to the system before 1989," says Jozef Oleksy, one of the leaders of the ex-communist Social Democracy of Poland.

Even the former communist parties' new names and sym-

bols are designed to demonstrate that they have abandoned their discredited past. The reformed communist parties are now known by a variety of names — socialist and social democratic are the most popular.

Unlike the reformed communists who are enjoying a revival, the hardline communist parties remain on the margins of political life and the top leaders of the communist era are now all dead, retired or behind bars.

Throughout much of Eastern Europe today's former communists are determined to prove that they can manage capitalism more efficiently and humanely than their political rivals. In some countries they might even succeed.

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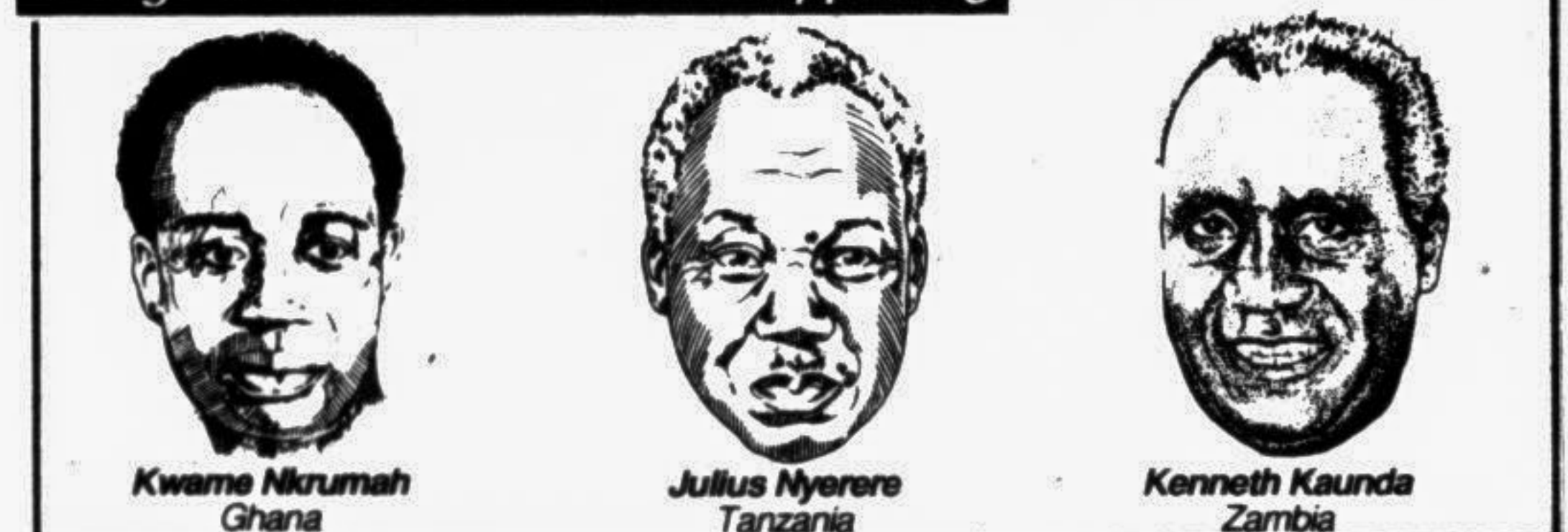
Polygamy Outlives African Socialism

Baffour Ankomah writes from London

In the 1960s, during the early years of African independence, there was much debate between the adherents of scientific socialism and supporters of African socialism. In the event, argues a Gemini News Service correspondent, both lost out, leaving the field to proponents of the free market.

Africa's flirtation with socialism

First generation made the left unappealing



Second generation confused community with socialism

LIKE polygamy, left-wing politics were once fashionable in Africa. Not any more. Polygamy is still fighting its corner, but African socialism is dead.

Today, apart from the South African Communist Party, the closest Africa gets to leftism is a small, poorly organised fringe group in The Gambia which romantically calls itself the People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism.

The current misery of the left in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, is partly due to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet empire — but only

partly. Since those momentous days in 1989, leftists in Africa have been shy about coming into the open and asserting themselves.

They admit that they had their day — and fluffed it. The first generation of African leaders, from Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah to Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda and Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, all flirted with leftism. They were popular figures who capitalised on the mass illiteracy of their citizens. Their rhetoric and activities gave great encouragement to the African left as a whole. In its many shades

Coming at the height of the

Cold War between the super-powers, this meant a lot to Moscow and its allies who contributed money and material to support their proteges in Africa.

Nyerere, Nkrumah and the others thus had a chance to make leftism work in Africa, but fluffed it. Their economic record was dismal. Remember the heart-broken Julius Nyerere who in the evening of his long rule admitted that his brand of socialism had failed to deliver the goods in Tanzania.

Although their individual efforts were sabotaged by the West, the dictatorial tenden-

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DIVJEN Sharma and his family are the only Bangladeshis in Moscow to have lived there continuously for over twenty years. Now, a state pensioner, who has "seen it all", from the hey days of '74 when his salary as a translator in Progressive Publishers, Moscow, covered all living expenses with cash to spare for luxuries to the present when people in his position can barely scrape by — despite the huge increases in salaries and pensions.

Just to give an inkling of the astronomical rate of inflation which has taken place in recent years, Sharma (on a visit to his homeland) told The Daily Star that before '91 (when the open market economy started to take off) one could live comfortably on a monthly pension of 100 rubles. Today, pensions have shot up to 50,000 rubles per month (the equivalent of US\$40,000), yet one can hardly get by let alone have anything left over for the odd treat.

"The cost of food has gone up so much that it is comparable to that of the rest of Europe. Previously most essentials such as meat, fish, bread, milk, vegetable and eggs were in abundance and so cheap," recalled Sharma. What about the notorious lines for food items which one has heard so much about regarding life in the Soviet Union? "Oh that," he dismissed, with a wave of the hand. "That only applied to luxury items like imported tropical fruits such as pineapples, bananas and certain kinds of fish. However, once you get your turn you can buy as much as you liked as they were very cheap. I remember buying four kgs of bananas one time and had them for days!"

Apart from food, another necessity of life, transport, has skyrocketed. "Previously, it



Mr Sharma with daughter and wife

only cost five kopecks (100 kopecks=1 rouble) for a ride. Today passengers find themselves out of pocket by 30 rubles per ride". Sharma continued.

In this landscape of ever soaring prices, the only item which has remained stable is the household rent, which has remained at rock bottom. The Sharmas live in a comfortable three-bedroom flat in a modern sixteen-storey building, overlooking a wooded area, complete with heating in winter and provided with security guards. Rental, together with electricity and water rates all add up to just US\$1 per month! However, if you are one of the recently arrived foreigners working in a joint venture company, you would have to pay US\$300 per month in the open market.

Divjen Sharma was a teacher at Notre Dame College while his wife, Devi, taught at the Central Women's College in the '70s. A meeting with the chief of the Bangla section of the Moscow-based Progressive Publishers at the Bangla Academy led to a translator's post in this prolific publishing company, which in those days, had interests in more than 150 languages. At that time there were many books which had been translated from Russian into Bengali, so Sharma's job was to translate English into Bengali and Bengali into English.

The Sharmas' daughter, Shreyasee, was four years old while their son, Sumitro, was seven when the whole family moved to Moscow. Now, young adults, the former has completed her M Sc in microbiology while the latter is a fully

fledged doctor. They too have witnessed the socio-political upheaval which has transformed Soviet society and changed a whole generation of young people's hopes and expectations of life. Visions of a steady job and salary which enabled a decent living standard upon graduation have been dashed and replaced by nightmares of too many qualified graduates chasing after too few jobs.

The rapid changeover from a state controlled economy to that of an open market one has affected students as drastically as anybody else. As Shreyasee explained, "Previously, graduates, after completing their M Sc could easily get scholarships to continue with their doctoral programme. Now one has to pay US\$2,500 per annum — a fortune beyond the

reach of ordinary people. There used to be a quota of scholarships allotted to developing countries. That too has vanished, as the places are now taken up by paying students from countries like Spain and Portugal who can afford to pay US\$4,000 per annum for fees."

Understandably, bitter about the drastic changes which have overtaken their lives in such a short time, young people are trapped in a gloomy outlook of despair and cynicism. The much publicised aid from Western countries seems to have barely touched the ordinary people's lives. The jobs which are supposed to have been generated by foreign investment are scarcely enough to reach even a fraction of graduates coming into the job market; and according to Shreyasee, "Wages are so low that it's like working for charity". Her brother, Sumitro, who graduated as a medical doctor, with brilliant results, was not able to get a job in his profession. His case was complicated by the fact that he is a foreigner and it is virtually impossible for a foreigner to work in a government institution. Finally, he had to engage in some kind of business venture.

Expectations had been too high at the beginning when the concept of the open market economy was sold to the Russian people. As Sharma explained: "They had hoped they would quickly move to capitalism and get a standard of living comparable to the West — in a very short time. This was what their leaders told them" and having been used for so long to believing what the government says in a state controlled press, they felt terribly let down when life turned out to be quite the opposite to the rosy picture painted for them.