

Southeast Asia by Sophie Tanapura

Gandhi's visit to Thailand

The countries are basing their new relations on a profound understanding of the cultural heritage they share.

The Oct. 19-20 official visit of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to Thailand marked the first visit of an Indian head of state. The trip is being heralded in Bangkok as the beginning of a new era in relations between the two countries.

Rajiv Gandhi himself situated the visit in a historical context during the state banquet given in his honor:

"Thailand has the proud distinction of being one of the few Asian countries which did not succumb to foreign rule during the colonial era. It is an honor to be on a soil which has so bravely held high its independence through the turbulent vicissitudes of history.

"My grandfather [Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first prime minister], saw in Thailand's independence a beacon of hope for all of Asia. Writing from prison on New Year's Eve, 1933 to his daughter—my mother, Indira Gandhi—who was then a girl of 15, he described the establishment of the Rama dynasty in 1782 and its continuity over a century and a half. He pointed to the good government of the dynasty under which very wisely an effort was made to cultivate good relations with foreign powers."

India and Thailand do indeed have much to share when it comes to history, language, and culture. The great Ramayana epic is only one of the many obvious testimonies to the millennia-old heritage of the two countries. The Thai language of today owes its alpha-

bet and literary richness to the Sanskrit of India. As Prime Minister Gandhi so succinctly put it, "That heritage has been so transformed by local color and local tradition that it is fascinatingly different while remaining endearingly familiar." It is on the basis of such profound understanding that the two countries hope to begin a new era of relations.

In an unprecedented effort to expand economic ties, Rajiv Gandhi expressed India's keen interest in investing in Thailand's just-approved eastern seaboard industrial complex, stressing India's experience in high technology, particularly in steel and electronics. This project has also attracted eager Japanese private investors.

Finally, Thailand and India also signed a five-year scientific and technological agreement, which will include setting up joint laboratories for research and development, and exchange of scientists and scientific and technical information, as well as joint research projects.

Not limiting himself to bilateral questions, Rajiv Gandhi used the opportunity to reiterate his government's policy on the Kampuchea question, which is based on the recognition of the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin and the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the war-torn country. The Khmer resistance coalition, led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk—the alternative supported by Thailand and ASEAN—is unacceptable for India because it

would represent the comeback of "elements that were responsible for the genocide that took place in Cambodia." Gandhi will raise this regional issue with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov during the latter's upcoming visit to India this November.

One can also expect India to support the foreign-debt resolution of the Latin American Economic System (SELA) to be discussed soon at the upcoming U.N. General Assembly, and at the Non-Aligned Conference in Lima in mid-November.

In answering a question on the Peruvian debt policy, Rajiv Gandhi replied, "It is difficult to say what other stand he [Alan García] can take. When the system becomes such that a country just cannot physically repay its debt, something has gone wrong with the system. If anyone else has a better answer than Alan García, we have yet to hear that answer. And I don't think you can ask Alan García to do anything else. He's got a country to run and he's got a democratic government in his country."

India's foreign policy, however, is not without problems. Rajiv Gandhi expressed great unhappiness that the Reykjavik summit stumbled on one issue: the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative. At his Bangkok press conference, Gandhi said, "The SDI is a non-viable and dangerous exercise, taking the nuclear arms race into a totally new dimension." He even expressed the strange view that the massive computer program needed in the deployment of the SDI can only be tested "in reality, when there is a nuclear war, which will be too late."

These misconceptions signify Gandhi's total mis-evaluation of President Reagan's policy, and the accompanying generous offer rejected by the Soviets at the summit. India has fallen for Mikhail Gorbachov's "peace-loving" profile.