

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Breaking new ground

Rajiv Gandhi's tour of Southeast Asia continues India's "discovery of Asia."

Billed as a "goodwill tour," the prime minister's week-long official visit to Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, and Thailand marks another important advance in the effort to redress the Europe-oriented bias in Indian foreign policy, a bias this administration has acknowledged and pledged to overcome.

As Gandhi put it on his return here on Oct. 20, India hadn't been paying sufficient attention to Southeast Asia and the Pacific region, and in this sense the visit—with which he said he was very satisfied—marked a "turning point."

Incredibly, it was the first-ever visit of an Indian head of state to Thailand—a nation with which India shares a centuries-old cultural tie! Similarly, for 20 years or more, India has had little relationship with Indonesia—a nation whose independence from Dutch colonial rule was fiercely defended by Nehru's India, and with which India also has ancient cultural ties.

The importance the prime minister attaches to deepening India's involvement in Asian affairs was indicated by the composition of his delegation. Accompanying Mr. and Mrs. Gandhi were the ministers of foreign affairs, commerce, and planning, the secretaries of the commerce and foreign affairs ministries, and the prime ministers' economic advisers.

The trip was also designed to give shape to India's policy of promoting "South-South" cooperation. Thus, in addition to discussion of regional and international issues, strengthening bi-

lateral economic and political ties was a specific focus at each stop. Though classed as "developed countries," both Australia and New Zealand—with whose leadership Prime Minister Gandhi developed close rapport on the apartheid and nuclear-disarmament issues in the past year—are suffering a typical "Third World" syndrome as primary commodity exporters.

New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange and Mr. Gandhi signed an agreement to avoid double taxation, and set up a joint trade committee to pursue economic links. Forestry, dairy farming, sheep-breeding, and mutton processing head India's list, while Lange said that New Zealand was looking for Indian technology in several areas, including production of vegetables. Officials later identified pharmaceuticals, pesticides, and detergents as items for import from India.

In Australia, meetings with government officials as well as business and industry leaders focused on expanding trade and economic relations. A high-level joint business council was set up, and many areas of cooperation, including joint ventures, financial investments, technology transfer, and assistance in mineral and marine resource exploitation was outlined. To date, the problem with Indo-Australian trade has been the imbalance in Australia's favor—a point which the Indian side pressed.

Political and economic views overlapped in the reported discussion of rerouting Australia's billion-dollar diamond sales through India from the

South Africa-dominated European market.

India and Australia also signed a major new accord on science and technology which emphasizes expanded institutional links as well as research collaboration. Space, water resource management, and fire technology are targeted areas for cooperation.

Overall, however, the visit to Indonesia and Thailand (see p. 58) may have been the most significant. Both are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with which the prime minister is interested in developing a working relationship. Among other things, Mr. Gandhi briefed the ASEAN members of a similar regional body, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), formally launched last year, as well as on India's perspective on the region. The Indian Ocean and Kampuchea were particular topics for discussion.

The fact that Indonesian President Suharto broke protocol to personally receive Mr. Gandhi at the airport indicates the significance attached to the visit by the Indonesian side. Suharto had earlier in the year stopped in New Delhi for consultations with Mr. Gandhi, presumably on the vexing Kampuchean issue, and Mr. Gandhi has acknowledged an "identity of views" on this and other major issues.

"I get the impression that President Suharto is very keen on further improving relations with India in all fields, including cooperation in the international areas," Gandhi told the press.

India and Indonesia are heavyweights in the Non-Aligned Movement. Their active collaboration in the early 1950s founded the movement. But India rejected Indonesia's bid to be the next chairman, stating that it's Ibero-America's turn.