

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

The Arkhipov visit

When the Soviet deputy premier talked with Mrs. Gandhi, the agenda included oil, nuclear energy, and—what else?

Just what message Soviet Deputy Premier I. V. Arkhipov carried to India Prime Minister Indira Gandhi during his visit to New Delhi in early December has been a matter of some speculation here. Although Arkhipov formally signed one of the protocols in the Indo-Soviet trade talks occurring simultaneously, it is assumed that his presence had little to do with trade. Soviet ambassadors have been delivering messages to selected heads of state in light of increasing Soviet-U.S. tensions. It was also reported that the message may have concerned Andropov's inability to attend the Indian Republic Day celebrations as chief guest on Jan. 26. (Subsequently, it was announced that King Hussein of Jordan will play that role.)

A veteran of the Brezhnev-Kosygin era, Arkhipov is considered here an old "India hand." He is very familiar with the country and its history, and of all other present Soviet leaders except Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Arkhipov is probably closest to the Indian premier. Arkhipov has visited India a number of times, most recently in May, when he inaugurated the Soviet-aided oil refinery in Mathura.

His December visit indicates the Soviets' desire to strengthen relations with India. Since the affair last summer of Mrs. Gandhi's letter to Yuri Andropov carried by a now-disgraced CPI leader, Yogendra Sharma, relations between India's left and the ruling Congress-I have become more tenuous. The letter, which was deliv-

ered to Sharma by the prime minister's office prior to his visit to Moscow, apparently contained references to the phenomenon of left parties ganging up with "rightist and reactionary forces," a jab at the Moscow-supported CPI's current moves against Mrs. Gandhi. It is anybody's guess whether Mrs. Gandhi was seeking Moscow's intervention to persuade the left leaders to abandon their anti-national activities, or whether she was simply reminding Andropov and CPI boss Rajeswar Rao that some Indian communists enjoyed her trust and were prepared to start a faction fight within the CPI. Mrs. Gandhi is fully aware that the Soviets have on more than one occasion advised the CPI and to some extent the CPI (Marxist) to develop a working relationship with the Gandhi government.

But Mrs. Gandhi has also indicated that she does not want Soviet leaders to dabble in India's internal politics, in the name of guiding the CPI toward better relations with New Delhi, or for any other reason. While she will readily discuss the left problem in India with certain senior Soviet leaders, in general she does not want visiting Soviets to exceed the bounds of protocol.

Since Arkhipov has developed a rapport with the Indian prime minister over the years, it is speculated here that his mission was to discuss some thorny Indo-Soviet issues, such as India's demand for a larger supply of Soviet crude oil to India. Dependent for 60 percent of its oil supplies on

imports, India faces severe foreign-exchange pressure on this account. Expanding crude oil imports under the rupee payment terms of the Indo-Soviet trade agreements would decrease this pressure. The Soviets had resisted, but the Indians persuaded them to supply an additional 1 million tons to India in 1983 and 1984.

Another issue stems from Moscow's offer in 1979, when the Janata Party was in power in New Delhi, to build a 1,000-megawatt nuclear power plant in India. Although negotiations are continuing, with any future agreement to be incorporated in the Seventh Five-Year Plan, the Indian nuclear establishment appears to be resistant to Soviet intrusion in a big way into the nuclear power program. Since the 1950s, India has preserved a three-stage nuclear power program, based upon indigenous development of the heavy-water reactor, the fast breeder reactor, and the use of thorium, of which India has the world's largest reserves, as breeder fuel. The light-water reactors offered would require enriched uranium fuel, for which the Indians would have to depend on the Soviets. After the bitter experience of U.S. refusal on to supply Tarapur with nuclear fuel, the Indian nuclear establishment is understandably hesitant to enter into another dependency in this vital area.

Arkhipov might also have extended an invitation to Mrs. Gandhi to visit Moscow in the near future. Since the Indian prime minister had met Andropov only briefly while attending Brezhnev's funeral in Moscow last year, the Soviet leadership is apparently eager to stage a meeting between them at an early date. Mrs. Gandhi has not visited Moscow since 1980, while she has met with the U.S. President three times and discussed various issues in detail.