

Stance of RBI Monetary Policy

Sixth Bi-monthly Monetary Policy Statement for 2018-19

(7 February 2019)

Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) decided to:

- Reduce the policy repo rate by **25 basis points from 6.5 per cent to 6.25 per cent.**
- The MPC also decided to **change the monetary policy stance from calibrated tightening to neutral.**
- **Reverse Repo rate stands at 6.0 per cent.**
- **Marginal Standing Facility (MSF) rate and Bank rate stands at 6.5 per cent.**

Reasons for Repo Rate cut:

- Headline inflation is projected to remain soft in the near term reflecting the current low level of inflation and the benign food inflation outlook.
- The MPC notes that the output gap has opened up modestly as actual output has inched lower than potential. Investment activity is recovering but supported mainly by public spending on infrastructure. The need is to strengthen private investment activity and buttress private consumption.
- Against this backdrop, the MPC decided to change the stance of monetary policy from calibrated tightening to neutral and to reduce the policy repo rate by 25 basis points.¹

Major Potential Risks:

- Beyond the near term, some uncertainties warrant careful monitoring. First, vegetable prices have been volatile in the recent period; reversal in vegetable prices could impart upside risk to the food inflation trajectory.
- Secondly, the oil price outlook continues to be hazy.
- Thirdly, a further heightening of trade tensions and geo-political uncertainties could also weigh on global growth prospects, dampening global demand and softening global commodity prices, especially oil prices.
- Fourthly, the unusual spike in the prices of health and education needs to be closely watched.

¹ The decision to change the monetary policy stance was unanimous. As regards the reduction in the policy repo rate, Dr. Ravindra H. Dholakia, Dr. Pami Dua, Dr. Michael Debabrata Patra and Shri Shaktikanta Das voted in favour of the decision. Dr. Chetan Ghate and Dr. Viral V. Acharya voted to keep the policy rate unchanged. The MPC reiterates its commitment to achieving the medium-term target for headline inflation of 4 per cent on a durable basis. The minutes of the MPC's meeting will be published by February 21, 2019. The next meeting of the MPC is scheduled from April 2 to 4, 2019.

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- Fifthly, financial markets remain volatile.
- Sixthly, the monsoon outcome is assumed to be normal; any spatial or temporal variation in rainfall may alter the food inflation outlook.
- Finally, several proposals in the union budget for 2019-20 are likely to boost aggregate demand by raising disposable incomes, but the full effect of some of the measures is likely to materialise over a period of time.

Outlook for Growth

- On January 7, 2019 the Central Statistics Office (CSO) released the first advance estimates (FAE) for 2018-19, placing India's real gross domestic product (GDP) growth at **7.2 per cent** – the same level as in 2017-18 (first revised estimates). On the supply side, the FAE have placed the growth of real gross value added (GVA) at 7.0 per cent in 2018-19 as compared with 6.9 per cent in 2017-18.
- The December 2018 monetary policy stated that (GDP) growth slowed down to **7.1 per cent** after four consecutive quarters of acceleration, weighed down by moderation in private consumption and a large drag from net exports. On the supply side, growth of gross value added (GVA) at basic prices decelerated to 6.9 per cent in Q2, reflecting moderation in agricultural and industrial activities
- The October 2018 monetary policy statement projected Real GDP growth to improve **from 6.7 per cent in 2017-18 to 7.4 per cent in 2018-19 – 8.2 per cent in Q1, 7.4 per cent in Q2, 7.3 per cent in Q3 and 7.1 per cent in Q4** in 2018-19. For 2019-20, structural model estimates indicate real GDP growth at 7.6 per cent, with quarterly growth rates in the range of 7.4-7.9 per cent, assuming a normal monsoon and no major exogenous or policy shocks.

Inflation Outlook

- **Retail inflation, measured by y-o-y change in the CPI, declined from 3.4 per cent in October 2018 to 2.2 per cent in December, the lowest print in the last eighteen months.** Continuing deflation in food items, a sharp fall in fuel inflation and some edging down of inflation excluding food and fuel contributed to the decline in headline inflation.
- **CPI inflation excluding food and fuel decelerated to 5.6 per cent in December from 6.2 per cent in October, dragged down mainly by the moderation in the prices of petrol and diesel in line with the decline in international petroleum product prices.** Housing inflation continued to edge down as the impact of the house rent allowance (HRA) increase for central government employees dissipated. However, inflation in several of the sub-groups – household goods and services; health; recreation and amusement; and education – firmed up in December, offsetting much of the impact of lower inflation in petrol, diesel and housing.
- **Five constituents of the food group – vegetables, sugar, pulses, eggs and fruits, accounting for about 30 per cent of food group – were in deflation in December.** Inflation in respect of other major food sub-groups – cereals, milk, and oils and fats – was subdued. Within cereals, rice prices declined for the fourth consecutive month in December.

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Inflation in prices of meat and fish and non-alcoholic beverages showed an uptick, while it remained sticky for prepared meals.

- Inflation in the fuel and light group fell from 8.5 per cent in October to 4.5 per cent in December, pulled down by a sharp decline in the prices of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), reflecting softening of international petroleum product prices. Kerosene inflation continued to edge up due to the calibrated increase in its administered price.
- Inflation expectations of households, measured by the December 2018 round of the Reserve Bank's survey, softened by 80 basis points for the three-month ahead horizon and by 130 basis points for the twelve-month ahead horizon over the last round, reflecting the continued decline in food and fuel prices. However, Inflation in the prices of farm inputs and industrial raw materials remained elevated, despite some softening. Growth in rural wages moderated in October.
- **In the fifth bi-monthly monetary policy resolution in December 2018, CPI inflation for 2018-19 was projected in the range of 2.7-3.2 per cent in H2:2018-19 and 3.8-4.2 per cent in H1:2019-20, with risks tilted to the upside. The actual inflation outcome at 2.6 per cent in Q3:2018-19 was marginally lower than the projection.** There have been downward revisions in inflation projections during the course of the year, reflecting mainly the unprecedented soft inflation recorded across food sub-groups.

Global Market Developments

- **Since the last MPC meeting in December 2018, there has been a slowdown in global economic activity. Among key advanced economies (AEs), economic activity in the US lost some steam. In the Euro area, economic activity lost momentum on weak industrial activity.** The Japanese economy is gradually recovering and an accommodative monetary policy stance is expected to buttress domestic spending.
- **Economic activity also slowed in some major emerging market economies (EMEs). In China, growth decelerated.** Economic activity in Russia lost pace, with soft oil prices posing a downside risk to growth. The Brazilian economy appeared to have ended 2018 on a firmer note, driven by improved domestic spending and exports, though industrial activity continued to struggle to recover.
- Crude oil prices recovered from their December lows in early January on production cuts, but remain below their peak levels in October. Base metals, which witnessed selling pressures in December on persisting uncertainty over US-China trade frictions, recouped losses in January on expectations of thawing of trade disputes and production disruptions. Gold prices have risen, underpinned by safe haven demand in response to geo-political uncertainty and volatility in equity markets. Inflation edged lower in major Advanced Economies (AEs) and many key Emerging Market Economies (EMEs).

Industry Outlook

- **After exhibiting an uptick in the festive month of October, industrial activity, measured by the index of industrial production (IIP), slowed down in November. The**

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year-on-year (y-o-y) growth in core industries decelerated to 2.6 per cent (y-o-y) in December, pulled down by a slowdown in the production of electricity and coal; and contraction in petroleum refinery products, crude oil and fertilisers output. Capacity utilisation (CU) in the manufacturing sector, as measured by the Reserve Bank's order books, inventory and capacity utilisation survey (OBICUS), increased to 74.8 per cent in Q2 from 73.8 per cent in Q1; seasonally adjusted CU also improved to 75.3 per cent from 74.9 per cent. While the Reserve Bank's business assessment index of the industrial outlook survey (IOS) for Q3:2018-19 suggests a weakening of demand conditions in the manufacturing sector, the business expectations index (BEI) points to an improvement in Q4. The manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI) for January remained in expansion on the back of increased output and new orders.

- It may be noted in this context that Industrial growth, measured by the index of industrial production (IIP), accelerated in June-July 2018 on a year-on-year (y-o-y) basis, underpinned mainly by high growth in consumer durables, notably two-wheelers, readymade garments, stainless steel utensils, auto components and spares, and accessories.

Indicators of Rural and Urban Demand

- **Sales of motorcycles and tractors imply weakening of rural demand in December. Sales of passenger cars – an indicator of urban demand – contracted, possibly reflecting volatility in fuel prices and mandated long-term insurance premium payments.** Commercial vehicle sales also shrank in December 2018 from a high base of the previous year. Lead indicators for the hotels sub-segment, viz., foreign tourist arrivals and air passenger traffic, point to softening in November-December.
- **In the communication sub-segment, the telephone subscriber base contracted in October-November, while that of broadband continued to expand in October.** The services PMI continued to expand in January 2019 despite a dip from the previous month. Indicators of the construction sector, viz., consumption of steel and production of cement, continued to show healthy growth, though growth in cement production inched lower in November 2018, reflecting a base effect.
- *Rabi* sowing so far (up to February 1, 2019) has been lower than in the previous year, but the overall shortfall of 4.0 per cent across various crops is expected to catch up as the season comes to a close. The lower *rabi* sowing reflects a deficient north-east monsoon (44 per cent below the long period average); however, storage in major reservoirs – the main source of irrigation during the *rabi* season – at 44 per cent of the full reservoir level (as on January 31, 2019) was marginally higher than in the previous year. The extended period of cold weather in this year's winter is likely to boost wheat yields, which would partly offset the shortfall, if any, in area sown.

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Financial Market and Liquidity Condition

- Global financial markets began the year on a calmer note after a turbulent December. Among AEs, equity markets in the US recovered from a sharp sell-off in December, triggered by monetary policy tightening by the Fed, trade tensions and an impending shutdown.
- EM stock markets, which declined in December on a slew of soft economic data, registered some gains recently on expectations of accommodative monetary policy stances in major economies. **The 10-year yield in the US, which fell to a multi-month low in December, rose in January on the edging up of crude oil prices and positive risk sentiment, though softening of the Fed stance restricted the gains.**
- **Among other AEs, bond yields in the Euro area and Japan eased on diminishing optimism about global growth. In most EMEs, bond yields have eased as well.** In currency markets, the US dollar remained under pressure, though expectations of easing trade tensions provided some support. EME currencies appreciated on the pause in the rate hiking cycle by the Fed and expectations of a positive outcome from US-China trade negotiations.

External Sector Outlook

- **Export growth on a y-o-y basis was almost flat in November and December 2018, primarily due to a high base effect and weak global demand.** While growth in exports of petroleum products remained positive, non-oil exports declined, dragged down by lower shipments of gems and jewellery, engineering goods, meat and poultry. Import growth slowed in November and turned negative in December 2018.
- While imports of petroleum (crude and products) rose in line with the increase in import volumes, non-oil imports such as pearls and precious stones, gold, electronic goods and transport equipment, recorded declines. The merchandise trade deficit for April-December 2018 was a shade higher than its level a year ago.
- Net services exports picked up in October and November 2018, which combined with low oil prices, could have a salutary impact on the current account deficit in Q3. **On the financing side, net FDI flows to India during April-November 2018 were higher than a year ago. Foreign portfolio flows turned negative in January 2019, after rebounding in November and December 2018. India's foreign exchange reserves were at USD 400.2 billion on February 1, 2019.**

Developmental and Regulatory Policies

1. Regulation and Supervision

- **Relaxation of External Commercial Borrowing (ECB) framework for Resolution Applicants:** Under the extant ECB framework, proceeds of ECB denominated in either foreign currency or Indian Rupee (INR), are not permitted to be utilised for repayment or for on-lending for repayment of domestic Rupee loans. The resolution applicants under Corporate Insolvency Resolution Process (CIRP) under Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), 2016 may find it attractive to borrow abroad to repay the existing lenders. In view of the above, **it is proposed to relax the end-use restrictions under the approval route of the ECB framework for resolution applicants under the CIRP and allow them to utilise the ECB proceeds for repayment of Rupee term loans of the target company. Such ECBs could be availed from all eligible lenders under the extant ECB framework except from overseas branches/subsidiaries of Indian banks. Guidelines in this regard will be issued by the end of February 2019.**
- **Review of Instructions on Bulk Deposit:** In terms of extant instructions, banks have been given discretion to offer differential rate of interest on the bulk deposits as per their requirements and Asset-Liability Management (ALM) projections. The instructions in this regard, last reviewed in January 2013, defined “bulk deposits” as single rupee deposits of Rs.1 crore and above. **With a view to enhancing the operational freedom of banks in raising deposits, it is proposed to revise the definition of bulk deposits as single rupee deposits of Rs.2 crore and above; and, that henceforth banks shall maintain their bulk deposit interest rate cards in the core banking system for supervisory review. Guidelines in this regard will be issued by the end of February 2019.**
- **Umbrella Organisation (UO) for Urban Cooperative Banks:** The structure, size, lack of avenues for raising capital funds and limited area of operation of the Primary (Urban) Co-operative Banks (UCBs) add to their financial vulnerabilities. **A long-term solution to make the UCB sector financially resilient and to enhance the depositors’ confidence is to set up an Umbrella Organization (UO) as prevalent in many countries. The UO, apart from extending liquidity and capital support to its member UCBs, would also be expected to set up Information and Technology (IT) infrastructure for shared use of members to enable them to widen their range of services in the wake of advances in information and communication technology at a relatively lower cost.** The UO can also offer fund management and other consultancy services. The idea of setting up of UO for the UCB sector was first mooted in the year 2006 by the Working Group (Chairman: Shri N S Vishwanathan) set up by the Reserve Bank on Augmentation of Capital of UCBs. It was examined in greater detail by the Working Group on Umbrella Organization and Constitution of Revival Fund for Urban

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Cooperative Banks (Chairman: Shri V S Das) in 2009 and the Expert Committee on Licensing of New Urban Co-operative Banks (Chairman: Shri Y H Malegam) in the year 2011. The need for UO has also been stressed by the High Powered Committee on UCBs (Chairman: Shri R Gandhi) in the year 2015. The Reserve Bank has received a proposal for setting up an UO from the National Federation of Urban Cooperative Banks and Credit Societies Ltd. (NAFCUB). **A decision on the specifics of the UO proposal will be taken by the Reserve Bank shortly.**

- Risk Weights for rated exposures to Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs):** Under extant guidelines on Basel III Capital Regulations, exposures/claims of banks on rated as well as unrated Non-deposit Taking Systemically Important Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFC-ND-SIs), other than Asset Finance Companies (AFCs), Non-Banking Financial Companies – Infrastructure Finance Companies (NBFCs-IFC) and Non-Banking Financial Companies – Infrastructure Development Fund (NBFCs-IDF), have to be uniformly risk-weighted at 100%. **With a view to facilitating flow of credit to well-rated NBFCs, it has now been decided that rated exposures of banks to all NBFCs, excluding Core Investment Companies (CICs), would be risk-weighted as per the ratings assigned by the accredited rating agencies, in a manner similar to that for corporates. Exposures to CICs will continue to be risk-weighted at 100%. Guidelines in this regard will be issued by the end of February 2019.**
- Harmonisation of NBFC Categories:** Various categories of NBFCs have evolved over time pertaining to specific sector/asset classes. Regulations put in place for each NBFC category have also been somewhat different. At present, there are twelve such categories. The Committee on Comprehensive Financial Services for Small Businesses and Low Income Households (chaired by Dr. Nachiket Mor) and Internal Committee (Chairman: Shri G. Padmanabhan), which submitted their reports in January 2014 and April 2014 respectively, had recommended harmonisation of the various categories of NBFCs. The Reserve Bank is committed to such harmonisation and to move towards activity-based regulation replacing the current entity-based regulation for the NBFC sector. As a first step in this direction, deposit acceptance regulations were harmonised in November 2014. Further, with the recent rationalization and liberalization of ECB norms, differential rules applicable to various categories of NBFCs stand harmonised. **It has now been decided to harmonise major categories of NBFCs engaged in credit intermediation, viz., Asset Finance Companies (AFC), Loan Companies, and Investment Companies, into a single category. The proposed merger of existing categories would reduce to a large extent the complexities arising from multiple categories and also provide the NBFCs greater flexibility in their operations. It will cover 99% of the NBFCs by number. Guidelines in this regard will be issued by the end of February 2019.**

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2. Financial Markets

- Foreign Exchange Derivative facilities for Residents and Non-Residents (Regulation FEMA-25):** A review of the existing facilities for hedging of foreign exchange risk by non-residents and residents was announced in the Statement on Developmental and Regulatory Policies in the Monetary Policy Statements in February 2018 and August 2018, respectively. The said review has been undertaken. **Post review, a draft of the revised directions is being put in the public domain for seeking comments. The draft directions propose to, *inter alia*, merge the facilities for residents and non-residents into a single unified facility for all users, allow users having valid underlying exposure to hedge flexibly using any instrument of their choice, introduce the ability to hedge anticipated exposure to foreign exchange risk, and simplify the procedures for authorised dealers to offer foreign exchange derivatives. The draft circular on the revised guidelines will be released by the end of February 2019.**
- Task Force on Offshore Rupee Markets:** In view of offshore interest in the Indian Rupee, the Reserve Bank's policy efforts have been to align incentives for non-residents to gradually move to the domestic market for their hedging requirements. At the same time, there is a need to improve residents' access to derivatives markets to hedge their currency risks. **In order to take forward the process of gradual opening up of the foreign exchange market and also to benefit from a wider range of participants and views, it is proposed to set up a Task Force on Offshore Rupee Markets. The Task Force will examine the issues relating to the offshore Rupee markets in depth and recommend appropriate policy measures that also factor in the requirement of ensuring the stability of the external value of the Rupee. Further details about the composition and terms of reference of the Task Force shall be issued separately by the end of February 2019.**
- Rationalisation of Interest Rate Derivative Directions:** The Reserve Bank has, over time, issued regulations covering various interest rate derivative products such as Interest Rate Swap (IRS), Forward Rate Agreement (FRA), Interest Rate Future (IRF), Interest Rate Option (IRO) and Money Market Future (MMF). The comprehensive guidelines on derivatives were issued in 2007 to clearly define the roles and responsibilities for users and market makers. **However, except Overnight Indexed Swaps (OIS), the activity in these derivative markets has been rather thin and limited. This, among other reasons, has contributed to a limited use of interest rate derivatives in the Indian financial sector. Some of these regulations**

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have also not been reviewed for almost two decades (IRS/FRA guideline of 1999). It is, therefore, proposed to rationalise interest rate derivative regulations to achieve consistency and ease of access with the eventual objective of fostering a thriving environment for management of interest rate risk in the Indian economy. The draft comprehensive guidelines will be issued for public feedback by the end of March 2019.

- **Regulation of Financial Benchmarks:** It was proposed in the Statement on Developmental and Regulatory Policies, in the Fourth Bi-monthly Monetary Policy Statement dated October 05, 2018, to introduce a regulatory framework for financial benchmarks to improve the governance of the benchmark processes relating to financial products and markets regulated by the Reserve Bank. Draft guidelines are being issued for public consultation.
- **Investment by Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPI) in Corporate Debt:** As a part of the review of the FPI investment in Corporate Debt undertaken in April 2018, it was stipulated that no FPI shall have an exposure of more than 20% of its corporate bond portfolio to a single corporate (including exposure to entities related to the corporate). FPIs were given exemption from this requirement on their new investments till end-March 2019 to adjust their portfolios. While the provision was aimed at incentivizing FPIs to maintain a portfolio of assets, further market feedback indicates that FPIs have been constrained by this stipulation. **In order to encourage a wider spectrum of investors to access the Indian corporate debt market, it is now proposed to withdraw this provision. A circular to this effect will be issued by mid-February, 2019.**

3. Payment and Settlement Systems

- **Regulation of Payment Gateway Service Providers and Payment Aggregators:** The Reserve Bank had in November 2009 issued directions regarding maintenance of nodal accounts of intermediaries like payment gateway providers and payment aggregators. **In the “Payment and Settlement Systems - Vision 2018” Document, the Reserve Bank had indicated that given the increasing role and importance of such entities, these guidelines would be revised. Accordingly, the Reserve Bank has been examining the need and feasibility of regulating Payment Gateway Service Providers and Payment Aggregators. A discussion paper on comprehensive guidelines covering payments related activities of these entities will be placed in the public domain for consultation with the stakeholders.**

4. Financial Inclusion

- **Working Group to Review Agricultural Credit:** Agricultural credit growth has been significant over the years. In spite of this, there remain issues relating to agricultural credit such as regional disparity, extent of coverage, etc. There is also the issue of deepening long-term agricultural credit for capital formation. To examine these issues and arrive at workable solutions and policy initiatives, an Internal Working Group (IWG) to Review Agricultural Credit has been constituted by the Reserve Bank.
- **Collateral-free Agriculture Loan — Enhancement of Limit:** Presently the banks are mandated to extend collateral-free agriculture loans up to Rs. 1 lakh. This limit of Rs. 1 lakh was fixed in the year 2010. **Keeping in view the overall inflation and rise in agriculture input costs since then, it has been decided to raise the limit for collateral-free agriculture loans from Rs. 1 lakh to Rs. 1.6 lakh. This will enhance coverage of small and marginal farmers in the formal credit system. The circular to this effect will be issued shortly.**