

Our Opinion, Their Opinion

Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.

Without them humanity cannot survive.

- Dalai Lama

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Control Inflation

With Lok Sabha Election round the corner and government at the Centre popping up facilitation to the common people the monetary authority too seems gearing up complementing the efforts of the government by easing the market situation. Higher rates of inflation and price fluctuations always put the general public at inconvenience, as such it is being used as a key tool by the opposition parties. In the wake of easing of retail inflation in April and a further possibility of its decline there is every likelihood that the General Credit Control Policy of repo rate (Bank Rate) may not be raised by the Reserve Bank of India during its upcoming June 8 announcement. Headed by RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das, a meeting of the six-member Monetary Policy is scheduled for June 6-8. The decision of the MPC would be announced on Thursday, June 8. Repo Rate is a quantitative instrument of the Monetary policy of the Reserve Bank of India under which loans are advanced by RBI to other commercial banks and it plays a significant role in containing inflation rate or controlling deflation in the economy. When the Reserve Bank increases the basis points of repo rate credit becomes costlier for the commercial banks and their tendency to borrow from RBI subdues, moreover the commercial banks are also compelled to increase the market rate of interest for their clients. Ultimately a decline in the availability of money for the purpose of public spending restrains price-rise or inflation in the market. Previously the Central Bank had cumulatively hiked the repo rate by 250 basis points since May 2022 and this nominal increase corrected the price-fluctuations considerably. Inspired by the past result and keeping in mind the intentions of the government ahead of Lok Sabha election the Supreme Monetary authority is likely to pause the push on interest rate. The RBI Governor's meeting is coming up in the backdrop of consumer price-based inflation or retail price index has fallen down to an 18-month low of 4.7 percent. The consumer price index is expected to drop further in May owing to positive trends of production on both agricultural and industrial front. The CPI for May is scheduled to be announced on June 12. It may also be noted here that there has already been an increase in liquidity as deposits increase due to the announcement of the exchange of the currency notes of the denomination of Rs. 2,000. The decision also seems to be justified as the Kharif harvest may be affected by the possible ill effects of El Niño. All the commercial banks would be more comfortable with a stable repo rate so the bankers are sure to welcome it. Simultaneously an increase in Cash Reserve Ratio by the Monetary Authority would also help to set the inflation rate hanging around 4-5 percent and it will not only strengthen the liquidity status of the Central Bank but also prevent the private commercial banks from floating credit supplies unrestricted.

Stock taking: Nine years of Modi's regime

From the expansion of India's infrastructure to rapid technological diffusion, the PM's nine years in office have included plenty of worthy achievements. But, they have also featured flawed policies in a wide range of areas

LAST WEEK, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government inaugurated a new parliament building in New Delhi. It was supposed to symbolise the vision of a "new India" that Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) claim they have been realising during nine years in power. But the building has proved highly controversial, with 20 opposition parties boycotting the inauguration ceremony – the latest manifestation of the seemingly irreparable breakdown in relations between the opposition and the government.

As a member of the opposition, I, too, have strongly criticised the Indian government's policies, rhetoric, and functioning. But the fact is that Modi reportedly enjoys the highest approval ratings of any world leader. As we approach the beginning of an election year, it is worth considering the sources of this support.

The Modi government can claim some notable accomplishments. The most obvious has been the rapid construction of much-needed infrastructure, including new airports, ports, and highways, enabled by streamlined procedures, quick approvals, and extensive reliance on private contractors. The infrastructure boom has changed the face of many parts of India, and the work continues, with large new investments in modernising India's railway network – one of the world's largest, but among its creakiest.

The government has also strengthened the social safety net for millions of poor Indians. Though Modi campaigned in 2014 against the previous government's welfare schemes, which he claimed were colossally wasteful and bred a culture of dependence, his government has presided over the provision of toilets, cooking-gas cylinders, cash transfers to farmers, and access to electricity and clean drinking water in rural India.

Such initiatives are not perfect – toilets lack enough running water, women are unable to afford to refill gas cylinders, and electricity supplies are erratic. But they have undoubtedly improved the quality of rural life, especially in the poor states of the northern "Hindi Belt." The Modi government has also overseen progress in the diffusion of technology. The proliferation of smartphones with cheap data plans has connected nearly a billion Indians to the internet. The much-

vaunted "India Stack" – comprising government-backed application programming interfaces (APIs) – has enabled private companies to build the online commons. A startup culture has developed, mainly in the tech domain, and several unicorns (startups valued at more than \$1 billion) have emerged.

When a Pakistani video blogger gushes about Indian street vendors offering Paytm QR codes on their tea carts, or bankers rave about India's Unified Payments Interface (which transfers money directly between bank accounts), India gains in global esteem. The government's claim to have reduced "leakage" by delivering welfare payments directly to beneficiaries' accounts is credible.

Finally, Modi has invigorated Indian diplomacy, traveling tirelessly around the world, hugging world leaders, and addressing raucous rallies of Indian expatriates in foreign capitals. India's relations with the United States and its allies have never been better, and cooperation with key Gulf countries has never been closer. But these successes have been offset by far less admirable policies. The BJP's belligerent Hindutva nationalism – which promotes a narrow interpretation of history and demonises India's minorities, particularly Muslims – can be likened to a toxin injected into the veins of Indian society.

With BJP leaders and their acolytes in the Hindutva "Parivar," or "family" of associated organisations, regularly spouting inflammatory and divisive rhetoric, it should be no surprise that violence has surged. Muslims have faced lynching by so-called cow vigilantes, and some Christians have been subjected to vandalism and assault during the Christmas season.

Though Indian elections remain free and fair, anti-democratic trends have taken hold between votes. Dissent is framed as disloyalty, with criticism of government policies labelled "anti-national." The tax agencies and financial police have been unleashed against opposition leaders and their supporters, and "bulldozer justice" has been dispensed mainly against Muslim protesters – whose homes and businesses are literally bulldozed – without due process.

Moreover, the autonomy of Indian institutions – from the Reserve Bank of India to the Election Commission – has been weakened. Even the judiciary has come under pressure. Parliament has been reduced to a bul-

letin board for government decisions.

The Modi government has also fallen far short on economic policy. Despite the progress in areas like transport infrastructure and technology diffusion, India has a long way to go on many fronts, particularly schooling, skills development, sanitation, and public health-care facilities. Likewise, the benefits of economic growth have failed to reach the poor and lower-middle class. Unemployment is at record highs, and female labour-force participation is plummeting. Many small and micro-enterprises had to be permanently closed after the disastrous demonetisation of 2016. Farmers are struggling to cope with falling incomes. Budgetary allocations for many essential welfare programs, including the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, have dwindled. Crony capitalism is rampant.

The Modi government's response to the COVID-19 crisis also left much to be desired. Though Indians were eventually vaccinated, images of migrant workers trudging homeward during a nationwide lockdown still haunt the country. And while the government claims that less than 500,000 people died, the World Health Organization estimates that the real figure is ten times higher, raising questions about the reliability of official statistics.

The jury is still out on the Modi government's handling of several other challenges, from the Ukraine war to Chinese encroachments along the disputed Himalayan frontier. It is far from clear that India is prepared to handle a conflict with China or Pakistan (or both). The 2015 deal to buy 36 Rafale fighter jets from the French company Dassault Aviation continues to draw controversy, owing to contractual irregularities. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is the only one to have won three successive terms in office. Next year, the Indian people will weigh Modi's mixed record and decide whether it warrants making him the second.

BY-SHASHI THAROOR

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Budget Airlines Or Air Buccaneers? Govt Needs to Rein in Opaque System of Surge Pricing

Budget airlines have become plunderers in the skies, running amok, selling everything – exorbitant fares, printed tickets, baggage, seats, leg space, and food, in the name of "open skies policy", "deregulation", and "surge pricing". Naked, unfettered extortion is happening, making the lives of thousands of travellers including students a plain misery.

India is a nation that is quick to adapt all regressive Western practices. One such practice imbibed by the airline, railway, and taxi network is 'surge pricing'. This is the practice of hiking the standard prices of goods and services to high levels, citing greater demand. The individual consumers do not get to know the quantum of the demand level, as there is zero transparency. The complete anonymity that online transactions guarantee makes it a secret exercise by a coterie of airline officials to jack up prices abnormally. The holiday season, festival season, and student admission season, all witness manipulated soaring airfares. Currently, many routes in India are witnessing a 4 to 6 times abnormal hike in fares. There are millions of travellers proceeding to Gulf countries and Europe, and vice versa, but exorbitant hikes in airfare are proving to be beyond the reach of ordinary people. Voracious greed for profiteering is propelling ticket fares to dizzying heights. With zero accountability of any kind and hardly any competitors, the air pirates are engaged in a daily price-hike game. The government and the

Ministry of Civil Aviation are helpless spectators, watching the everyday game of price hikes, now restricted to just two major airlines. One also wonders as to why the Government of India is maintaining a full-fledged Ministry of Civil Aviation along with a battery of bureaucrats.

Unable to instil any sense in this every-minute game of price-hike, the Kerala government has taken a bold decision to launch a ship service with the cooperation of the Department of Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs (NORKA), the official body of the diaspora of Kerala ethnicity. The Kerala government has allocated Rs 15 crore for this proposed venture. However, this project will not have any effect on the domestic flight sector and will only have a marginal impact on the Gulf sector, as and when the shipping service commences.

The Government of India can initiate effective steps to control the manipulated every-minute price hike by simply curtailing the travel plans of ministers and bureaucrats who constitute a major chunk of daily travellers. By switching over to online meetings, much unwanted expenditure can be reined in. It is also pointless in wasting taxpayers' money on abnormal airfare. Similarly, the government should not permit any Leave Travel Concession (LTC) and Home Travel Concession (HTC) to employees when fares go beyond an optimal level. Just by simply regulating the air travel of bureaucrats and their families, the market can be influenced to keep fares within



the Lakshman Rekha.

The government is also guilty of adopting this obnoxious practice of 'surge pricing' in the railway sector. Many train fares are unaffordable for the common man as the dubious practice of 'surge pricing' is being resorted to for augmenting revenue. Here also, by simply regulating the travels of bureaucrats, and LTC, HTC, fares shooting into top gear can be controlled.

This unethical practice of 'surge pricing' has spread to taxi aggregators, hotels, and private inter-state bus operators, causing great hardship to commuters, tourists, and students. Imagine the plight of the common man if restaurants, city bus services, autorickshaw services, cinema theatres, electricity, and water charges, are going to indulge in 'surge pricing'. The nation would be thrown into utter crisis and set the momentum for a revolution

by the common people.

The government cannot plead helplessness in controlling the usurious practice of 'surge pricing', as it is definitely within its realm to frame rules and regulations prohibiting this egregious practice. Delhi and Karnataka had banned 'surge pricing' in 2016 by taxi aggregator companies.

In October 2022, the Karnataka government had taken a radical step to eradicate the issue of surge prices on popular cab platforms such as Ola, Uber, and Rapido by calling for a complete discontinuation of autos from these apps, as there was rising dissent against surge prices in Bengaluru's mobility environment. The Karnataka State Transport Department clarified that the auto services cannot charge passengers more than the fare prescribed by the government, which is what greedy aggregators were doing. In 2016 the Karnataka High

Court also upheld rules framed by the state government to regulate fares by taxi aggregators, indulging in 'surge pricing'. The Government of India needs to do something along similar lines to control the spiralling domestic and international airfare. Meanwhile, passengers can teach these greedy operators a simple lesson. When the aircraft lands at any destination, the cabin crew goes around instructing passengers to close the window shades. If none of their services are free, why should passengers be asked to provide free service for them? Let them employ window-closers.

By-By: Dr G Shree Kumar Menon
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The world's first flowers were pollinated by insects

Plants existed on Earth for hundreds of millions of years before the first flowers bloomed. But when flowering plants did evolve, more than 140 million years ago, they were a huge evolutionary success.

What pollinated these first flowering plants, the ancestor of all the flowers we see today? Was it insects carrying pollen between those early flowers, fertilising them in the process? Or perhaps other animals, or even wind or water? The question has been a tricky one to answer. However, in new research published in *New Phytologist*, we show the first pollinators were most likely insects.

What's more, despite some evolutionary detours, around 86 per cent of all flowering plant species throughout history have also relied on insects for pollination.

How to move pollen The timing of the evolution of the first flowering plants is still a matter of debate. However, their success is inarguable.

Around 90 per cent of modern plants – some 300,000-400,000 species – are flowering plants, or what scientists call angiosperms. To reproduce, these plants make pollen in their flowers, which needs to be transferred to another flower to fertilise an ovule and produce a viable seed.

Small and highly mobile, insects can be highly effective pollen transporters. Indeed, recent research on fossil insects shows some insects may have been pollinating plants even before the first flowers evolved. Most of today's flowering plants rely on insects for pollination. The plant's flowers have evolved to attract insects via colour, scent and even sexual mimicry, and most reward them with nectar, pollen, oils or other types of food, making the relationship beneficial to both parties. Some flowers, however, rely on other means to transport their pollen, such as vertebrate animals, wind or even water. Which kind of pollination evolved first? Were insects there at the beginning, or were they a later "discovery"? While early evidence suggests it was probably insects, until now this has never been tested across the full diversity of flowering plants – their full evolutionary tree.

A family tree To find an answer, we used a "family tree" of all families of flowering plants, sampling more than 1,160 species and reaching back more than 145 million years. This tree shows us when different plant families evolved. We used it to map backwards from what pollinates a plant in the present to what might have pollinated the ancestor of that plant in the past. We found insect pollination has been overwhelmingly the most common method over the history of flowering plants, occurring around 86 per cent of the time. And our models suggest the first flowers were most likely pollinated by insects.

Birds, bats and wind We also learned about the evolution of other forms of pollination. Pollination by vertebrate animals, such as birds and bats, small mammals and even lizards, has evolved at least 39 times – and reverted back to insect pollination at least 26 of those times.

Wind pollination has evolved even more often: we found 42 instances. These plants rarely go back to insect pollination.

We also found wind pollination evolved more often in open habitats, at higher latitudes. Animal pollination is more common in closed-canopy rainforests, near the equator. What kind of insects were the first pollinators? If you think of a pollinating insect, you probably imagine a bee. But while we don't know exactly what insects pollinated the first flowering plants, we can be confident they weren't bees. Why not? Because most evidence we have indicates bees didn't evolve until after the first flowers.

So what do we know about the pollinators of the first flowering plants? Well, some early flowers have been preserved as fossils – and most of these are very small.

The first flower pollinators must have been quite small, too, to poke around in these flowers. The most likely culprits are some kind of small fly or beetle, maybe even a midge, or some extinct types of insects that have long disappeared.

If only we had a time machine we could go back and see these pollinators in action – but that will require a lot more research!

By-Ruby E. Stephens