



# Can Financial Variables Predict Recessions? A Study of U.S.A. and India

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## ABSTRACT

The institution of private enterprise does not produce growth at an even pace; rather economies observe alternating periods of expansion and contraction giving rise to recurrent business and trade cycles where the growth of production, real incomes and spending fluctuates. Policymakers, investors and economic agents have avid interest in predicting the future course of economic activity and growth rates. Monetary aggregates, exchange rates and structural macroeconomic models have been traditionally used to forecast the direction of economic activity, however, all these have been shown to be problematic and unstable. The present study uses an indicator approach to portend future changes in the level of economic activity. The study has identified from a set of financial indicators, those indicators which register some significant aspect of the performance of the economy and thus have the ability to forecast changes in economic climate. Most of the research is done for the developed countries which are characteristic of free market economy where fluctuations in business activity are driven by endogenous factors. Similar studies for emerging market economies are lacking. The present study identifies from a wide array of financial variables those variables which can predict cyclical fluctuations in U.S.A., which is a free market economy and in India which is steadfastly proceeding towards a free market economy post liberalization that is, after 1991. The study then determines the lead of various variables in predicting recessions and provides the best model with highest predictive content for the world's largest economy, U.S.A. and the world's second fastest growing economy, India.

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**Keywords:** Financial variables, forecasting, business cycles, indicator approach, term structure

**JEL Classification:** C53, E32, E37, E44

The classical business cycles are identified as recurrent alternating phases of expansion and contraction in a large number of economic activities such as output, consumption, prices, investment, and employment. Burns and Mitchell (1946) provided a workable definition of Business cycles. A business cycle is defined as fluctuations in aggregate economic activity of a country which consists of expansion followed by a recession that again merge into the expansion phase of next cycle. These expansions and contractions take place in a large number of economic activities at the same time. These cycles are recurrent but not periodic and can extend from one year up to twelve months. The macroeconomic policy aims at avoiding both

recessions and expansions as recessions are wasteful causing underutilization of resources, while expansions put huge pressure on available resources causing prices to fluctuate vigorously. Besides, saving decisions, investment plans and portfolio allocations by market agents also requires an estimate of the future course of economic activities. Thus both the central banks and economic agents are interested in predicting the future economic activity. Forecasts which approximate the future closely will enable policy makers to formulate policy decisions to better target an impending slowdown and avert its ill effects to a greater extent, the economic agents on the other hand will benefit as they are able to guess the stance of the monetary and fiscal policy

and thus plan their economic decisions accordingly. Traditionally monetary aggregates, exchange rates and structural macroeconomic models have been used to forecast the future course of economic activities, however, all of these have had some issues and have been shown to be unstable. The indicator approach to macroeconomic measurement, on the other hand has a successful and long history. These indicators capture an important characteristic of the economy and thus have the ability to forecast future changes. Dua and Banerji (2004) supported the indicator approach by showing through their work that economic variables reach turning points in a known sequence, cycle after cycle, in a market oriented economy.

A number of empirical studies like (Bernanke, 1990), (Esrella and Hardouvelis, 1991), (Plosser and Rouwenhorst, 1994), (Estrella and Mishkin 1995, 1998), (Bernard and Gerlach, 1996), (Ahrens 2002), (Galar and Biscarri, 2003) analyzed the predictive ability of financial variables for future activity. Theoretical models to assert the empirical findings were developed by (Harvey, 1998), (Kydland and Prescott, 1988), (Peel and Taylor, 1998) among others.

Most of the research has been carried out for the cases of big economies mainly U.S.A., Germany and U.K. A key characteristic of these economies is that they have had fairly independent monetary policies in the last few years especially since the breakup of managed floating of the European monetary system. Replicating a similar study for India which started progressing towards a free market economy only recently will therefore be quite insightful.

Economic indicators can have the ability to forecast future changes only if economic cycles are driven by endogenous factors. Hence, a precondition for indicators to have any predictive ability is the existence of a free market economy like U.S.A. However in India until 1991, the economic cycles were driven by exogenous factors. Dua and Banerji (2001) have shown through their work that the cycles in India are driven by endogenous factors rather than exogenous factors post liberalization that is after 1991.

The present study is an attempt to unravel the ability of economic variables to predict cyclical fluctuations in a free market economy, U.S.A., wherein business cycles are driven by endogenous factors on the one

hand and India, on the other, which is steadfastly proceeding towards a free market mechanism post 1991, after the greater liberalization of the domestic economy as well as greater integration with the world economy. The objective of the study is to identify economic variables from a set of large number of financial and non financial variables, which can anticipate cyclical fluctuations in business cycle and provide advance warning of changes in economic activity. The study thus tries to explore the ability of a number of variables to predict the recurrent, alternating phases of expansion and contraction in a large number of economic activities that is, recession and expansion in classical business cycles. The paper determines the lead of various variables in predicting recessions and explores the best model with the highest predictive content for the world's largest economy U.S.A. and the world's second fastest growing economy, India. The informational content of a large number of financial and non financial variables like interest rate, interest rate spreads, credit quality spreads, foreign yield spreads, stock indices, monetary variables, exchange rates and growth rates of nominal monetary aggregates, exchange rates and stock indices for U.S.A. and India has been estimated. The choice of countries is based on two considerations. Firstly, to select a country for which data is available of reasonable quality thereby addressing the criticism that such exercises has limited validity because of data inaccuracies. The second is to include two distinct geographic areas with a wide range of economic experiences. Monthly data is used for the present study. For U.S.A., the sample ranges from the first month of 1973 to the second month of 2006. For India, the sample is limited to post liberalized phase and ranges from the fourth month of 1994 to the second month of 2006. Probit statistical model is used for the purpose of empirical test.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 contains the review of literature. Section 3 contains the econometric methodology. Section 4 lists the results obtained for the two set of countries. Section 5 consists of the discussion, policy implications and conclusions. Bibliography is provided at the end of the study. Tables are provided in the Appendix.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The ability of term spread (spread between long and short term rate of interest) to forecast output

is shown by developing theoretical models. Harvey (1988) uses the consumption CAPM model to attribute the correlation between the term spread and future economic growth to inter-temporal consumption smoothing. Noh-Sun Kwark (2002) relates fluctuations of interest rate spread to movements in default risk over business cycle and build a general equilibrium model to show how this relationship generates leading behaviour of interest rate spread over business cycle. Blanchard and Fisher (1989) uses the IS-LM framework to show that the spread between long and short term interest rate widens prior to output expansion, and hence leads the changes in the output. The correlation between money and output is shown in a model of reverse causality developed by Tobin (1970), and further elaborated by King and Plosser (1984). They emphasized that in a model in which money did not affect output, endogenous monetary policy could cause movement in money to lead movement in output. Blanchard (1981) developed a model to emphasize that stock prices reflect market expectations of future profitability which is closely linked to the explanation of future output growth.

A number of empirical studies have also been done to estimate the predictive ability of economic variables. Bernankae (1990), using a multivariate model shows Short variable to be the best interest rate variable for predicting real activity. Fund variable was the best for forecasting inflation, IIP and unemployment rate. Estrella and Hardouvelis (1991), provided evidence to show that the yield curve could predict cumulative changes in real output, four years into future. Friedman and Kutter (1991), used a quarterly data on U.S.A. from 1960-1990 and found statistically significant relationship between movements of the paper-bill spread and subsequent fluctuation in real economic activity even in the presence of other financial variables. Bernard and Gerlach (1986), also supported the earlier research and found that the term spreads in some countries contained information for predicting recession as much as six to eight quarters ahead. Boulier and Stekler (2001), evaluated the ability of the spread between the long run and short run interest rate to forecast turning points in U.S.A's economic activity without making too many false predictions using quarterly data from 1953-1997. They concluded that spread is not a very good

cyclical indicator as the spread predicted all peaks with a lead but made 28 false predictions. It also predicted all troughs but made 20 false signals. Ahrens (2002), fit a univariate two state markov-switching model to the term spread of the eight OECD countries and found that term spread indicator matched the business cycle well. The lead time was also long though it varied across countries. Galar and Biscarri (2003) estimated the probit model using quarterly data from 1970 to 2002 for Spain and concluded some striking results. The predictive content of the domestic spread was found to be non-existent. However, the German spread presented a significant ability to predict Spanish recession.

## METHODOLOGY

A probit model is estimated that relates the indicator variable  $R_t$  to the various independent variables. The model is nonlinear and relates the probability of a recession for Business cycles, during the period  $t$  to the independent variables in period  $t-k$ , where  $k$  ranges from 1-month, 1-quarter, 2-quarter upto 8-quarter. The dependent variable is a dummy variable, which take values 0 and 1. The recession variable dummy for the business cycle chronology is constructed using the standard Economic Cycle Research Institute (ECRI) dates.

$$\Pr[R_t = 1 | X_{1t-k}] = F(\alpha_0 + \beta_1 X_{1t-k}) \quad \dots(1)$$

Where  $\Pr$  denotes probability,  $F$  is the cumulative normal distribution, and  $R_t$  equals unity during the months considered as official recessions by ECRI. The model above is a usual probit model, and its log likelihood function is as follows;

$$\text{Log L} = \sum_{R_t=1} \log F(\alpha_0 + \beta_1 X_{1t-k}) + \sum_{R_t=0} \log F(1 - \alpha_0 - \beta_1 X_{1t-k}) \quad \dots(2)$$

$X_{1t-k}$  denotes the Stock Indexes which are Dow Jones and S&P 500 for U.S.A and BSE Sensex for India; the growth rate of stock index; monetary aggregates which are M1, M2 and M3 for US and M1 and M3 for India, the growth rate of monetary aggregates; Exchange Rate which is the trade weighted exchange rate index for US and real effective exchange rate index (REER) for India; short-term rate of interest which are federal fund rate, 3-month treasury bill rate, 6- month treasury bill rate and 1-year G-sec rate for US and call-money

rate, 3-month CP rate, 3-month treasury bill rate for India; long-term rate of interest is 10-year G-sec rate for both US and India; the spread variables which for US are (a) the difference between 10-year G-sec rate and 1-year G-sec rate (Long), (b) the difference between 6-month CD rate and 6-month Treasury-Bill rate (Short), (c) the difference between 10-year G-sec rate and Federal Fund rate (Tenf), and (d) the difference between 10-year G-sec rate and 3-month Treasury-Bill rate (Tenbill). The spread variables used for India are (a) the difference between 10-year G-sec rate and 1-year G-sec rate (Long), (b) the difference between 3-month CP rate and 3-month treasury bill rate (Short), (c) the difference between 10-year G-sec rate and CP rate (Tenf), and (d) the difference between 10-year G-sec rate and 3-month Treasury-Bill rate (Tenbill) (e) the difference between US 10-year G-sec rate and US 1-year G-sec rate

Since the Spread variable produces consistently strong results across all horizons, equations are also run containing the Spread variable and each of the other variables in turn.

$$\Pr[R_t = 1 | \text{Spread}_{t-k}, X_{1t-k}] = F(\alpha_0 + \beta_0 \text{Spread}_{t-k} + \beta_1 X_{1t-k}) \quad \dots(3)$$

The log likelihood function is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Log L} = & \sum_{R_t=1} \log F(\alpha_0 + \beta_0 \text{Spread}_{t-k} + \beta_1 X_{1t-k}) + \\ & \sum_{R_t=0} \log F(1 - \alpha_0 - \beta_0 \text{Spread}_{t-k} - \beta_1 X_{1t-k}) \end{aligned} \quad \dots(4)$$

In-sample results are based on equations estimated over the entire sample period. Their predictions or fitted values are then compared with the actual recession dates. Three types of results are provided: a pseudo R<sup>2</sup>, that gives an estimate of the goodness of fit achieved by the variables in the model, a t- statistic, and the slope coefficient of the relevant variable. For US and India the above probit equations have been estimated which relate the probability of a recession during the period t to the independent variables in period t-k, for k= 1, 3, 6, 9, 12, 18, 21 and 24 months.

## RESULTS

### U.S.A.

Table 1 contains several of the variables that performed best in-sample and for which

representative patterns of significance may be identified for U.S.A. Equation 1 is estimated for each of the financial variables. Both the stock indices namely Dow Jones and S&P 500, performed poorly. Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> for both the indexes remained low till first-quarter and henceforth turned negative. The nominal monetary aggregates namely M1, M2, and M3, exhibited some predictive power in the very short run i.e. one month with a Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> of 7%, 4.7% and 3.8% respectively. The predictive content consistently declined for quarters one and beyond for all the three nominal monetary aggregates. The growth rate of M1, M2, and M3, performed very poorly in all the quarters. The Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> remained negative for all the horizons, indicating a very poor fit, which is not very informative. The trade weighted exchange rate index exhibited some predictive power in the very short-run i.e. one-month with a Psuedo-R<sup>2</sup> of 4.5%. The results on the growth rate of trade weighted exchange rate index (equation 1), has been very disappointing in all the quarters. The Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> remained negative for all the horizons, indicating a very poor goodness of fit. We estimated equation 1 for four different short-term interest rates namely, the Federal rate, the three-month treasury bill rate and the six month treasury bill rate and one-year G-sec.

Federal fund rate, (an overnight rate), presents a significant ability to predict US recession. The Fed performed very well between first and second-quarter with a Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> ranging between 19.5% to 20%. Its predictive power peaked at second-quarter, for which the Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> is an impressive 20.5%. Beyond the second-quarter the predictive content gradually declined though the fit remained remarkably consistent across all horizons. The coefficient attached to the Fed rate remained high, stable and significant across all horizons.

The 3-month Treasury bill and 6-month Treasury bill performed very well between first and third-quarter with a Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> ranging between 14% to 16.5%. Beyond the third-quarter the predictive content gradually declined. The predictive power of one-year G-sec remained good till second-quarter, after which it consistently declined, though the projections remained significant at the 5% level till eight-quarters. The long-term interest rates that is, the 10-year G-sec, exhibited some predictive power in the very short-run i.e. till one-quarter with a

Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> of 6.4%, however the Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> turned negative beyond third-quarter.

Some of the most important results are associated with the spread variables. We use four spread variables. The predictive power of the difference between 10-year G-sec and 3-month Treasury bill (tenbill) significantly improves in the medium run (one to three-quarters). This ability is highest at the third-quarter horizon, but it remains fairly high up to six-quarters into the future. The difference between 10-year G-sec and 1-year G-sec (Long), performed remarkably well between the first and sixth-quarter horizon with a Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> ranging between 15% to 28%. Its predictive power peaked at third-quarter. The difference between 10-year G-sec and federal fund rate (Tenf), presents a significant ability to predict US real activity between the one-month and six-quarter horizon. The Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> ranged between 12% and 28%. The difference between 6-month CD and 6-month treasury bill (Short) performed remarkably well in the very short (one-month), and medium (one to second-quarter), horizon. Its predictive power peaks at first-quarter for which the Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> is an impressive 21.4%.

Equation 3 is also run containing a Spread variable and each of the other variables in turn. Table 2 present the results with spread variable tenbill in equation 3 along with other variables. Combining monetary aggregates, exchange rates, stock indices and their respective growth rates with the spread variable did not improve the predictive ability of the model over and above the model with only spread variable. Best results are achieved when the spread variable is combined the short term interest rates and the Long variable. The coefficients attached to the spread variable and the interest rate variable remained high, significant and stable across all horizons. The goodness of fit also improved considerably in the short and medium horizon (one month to fourth quarter). Table 3 presents the results with Long as the spread variable along with each of the other variables one by one. The inclusion of stock indices, nominal monetary aggregates, exchange rate and their respective growth rates in the probit equation 3 did not improve the goodness of fit. Combining Long with short-term interest rates, improved the predictive content in the short run (one month). Inclusion of another spread variable, Short, that is, the spread between

6-month CD and 6-month Treasury bill along with Long, significantly improved the predictive content with a better fit than the single variable equation containing only spread variable. Table 4 presents the results with Tenf spread variable, that is, the spread between 10-year G-sec and federal fund rate. The results are similar to the earlier results. Stock indices, monetary aggregates, exchange rates and their growth rates did not improve the predictive content. Combining Tenf with interest rate variables improve the predictive content in the short to medium run. Table 5 gives the results of equation 3 with Short variable as the Spread variable. As before, monetary aggregates, exchange rates and stock indices performed poorly. Combining Short variable with interest rate variables also contributed mildly to the goodness of fit.

### India

The results for the Indian economy are displayed from Tables 6-10. Table 6 produce the results of equation 1 with all the financial variables included one at a time. The BSE Sensex exhibited significant predictive content in the short-run i.e. one-quarter with a Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> of 16%. Nominal monetary aggregates (M1, and M3), exchange rate and their respective growth rates performed very poorly in all the quarters. The Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> remained negative for all the horizons. Among the short-term interest rates, the call money rate performed very well between first-month and third-quarter with a Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> ranging between 35% to 17%. Its predictive power peaked at first-quarter, for which the Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> is an impressive 35%. The 3-month Treasury bill performed very well till third-quarter with a Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> ranging between 11% to 22%. The long-term interest rate, the 10-year G-sec, exhibited some predictive power in the very short-run i.e. till one-quarter with a Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> of 5%, however the Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> turned negative beyond first quarter, reflecting a poor predictive performance. As in the case of USA, the spread variables showed significant predictive power. The Tenbill has little predictive power in the very short run (one- month), but the power significantly improves in the medium run (one to two-quarters). This ability is highest at the second-quarter horizon. The Tenf variable presents a significant ability to predict Indian real activity between the one-month and third-quarter horizon.

The Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> ranged between 14% and 42%. The Short variable performed remarkably well in the very short (one-month), and medium (one to second-quarter), horizon. Its predictive power peaks at first-quarter for which the Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> is an impressive 46%, and then it declines. In the new economic order, the growing international interdependence has led to synchronization of business cycles across countries. The study thus looks at the ability of the Spread between US 10-year G-sec yield and US 1-year G-sec yield to predict Indian recessions. The results of the probit model containing US spread as the only explanatory variable are very poor. The Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> remained negative.

Equation 3 is also run containing a spread variable with each of the other variables in turn. Table 7 shows the results of equation 3 with Tenbill as the spread variable. Combining stock index with spread variable improved the predictive content in the very short-run that is one-month horizon. The best results are obtained when the spread is combined with interest rates namely- call money rate, 3-month treasury bill, 1-year G-sec and 10-year G-sec. The goodness of fit improved considerably in the short-run (one month to one quarter). Table 8 exhibit results of equation 3 when Long is combined with each of the other variables. The predictive content improved when Long was combined with stock index or interest rates in the short run (one month to one quarter). The results obtained with Tenf as the spread variable (Table 9) are similar to the earlier results. Predictive content improved in the short-run when Tenf is combined with either stock index or interest rates. Table 10 displays the results with Short as the spread variable. The forecasts ability improved in the one-month to one-quarter when short was combined with BSE sensex.

## **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATION**

Analysis of Buisness cycles have always revived interest in the questions of whether economic turns can be forecasted. The present study has sought to provide answers to this very basic question by studying the financial ability of an array of financial variables for the U.S.A. and India. The study uses probit modelling technique to explore the ability of a number of financial variables for example interest rates, interest rate spreads, nominal stock indices,

monetary aggregates, and exchange rates to predict the recurrent, alternating phases of expansion and contraction in a large number of economic activities that is recession and expansion in classical business cycles.

Free market mechanism is a precondition to provide predictive power to the economic variables as the fluctuations in the economy are then caused by endogenous factors and not the exogenous factors. U.S.A. is a free market economy. In India, it is only after liberalization of the economy that markets started to play a greater role. Post liberalization, many of the distortions in the free play of market forces is substantially mitigated. According to Dua and Banerji (2001), under such circumstances, it is more likely that endogenous market processes rather than exogenous shocks drive the business cycle.

The results obtained are quiet in-line with the proposed theoretical model. The results for US show that the Spread variables namely the Spread between 10-year G-sec and 1-year G-sec (Long), the Spread between 10-year G-sec and federal fund rate (Tenf), The Spread between 10-year G-sec and 3-month Treasury bill (Tenbill), have significant ability to predict US recession i.e. a fall in absolute level of real economic activity upto six-quarters in advance. While the Spread between two short interest rates i.e. 6-month CD and 6-month treasury bills (Short), can predict a fall in absolute level economic activity upto one- quarter in advance. A model, which combines the Long and the Short variable, gives the best in-sample and out-of-sample results as far as predicting the fluctuations in the aggregate economic activity is concerned upto six-quarters in advance.

In the Indian case, the individual interest rate variables particularly the call rate, 3-month Treasury bill rate and the 1-year G-sec rate performed significantly well in predicting the Indian recession upto three-quarter ahead. The spread variables predominantly the spread between 10-year G-sec and call money rate and the spread between 10-year G-sec and 3-month treasury bill have significant ability to predict Indian recession i.e. a fall in absolute level of real economic activity in the medium-run horizon i.e. between one to four-quarters in advance. The predictive content is highest at second-quarter horizon. While the

Spread between two short interest rates i.e. 3-month CP and 3-month Treasury Bills (Short), performed remarkably well in the very short (one-month) horizon. A model, which combines the spread between 10-year G-sec and call money rate along with the 1-year G-sec yield, gives the best in-sample results as far as predicting the fluctuations in the aggregate economic activity is concerned upto four quarters in advance.

The results are not surprising, since post reforms, many of the distortions in the free play of market forces were substantially mitigated in India. To a larger extent thus, endogenous free market processes rather than exogenous shocks drove the business and growth rate cycles. Hence, the financial variables i.e. interest rates and interest rate spreads, began to show consistent leads as in other free market economies. Moreover, the growing international interdependence has led to synchronization of business cycles across countries. This explains the ability of US spread to predict slowdown in Indian economy. This variable is informative about the general economic condition in the rest of the world and therefore should have informational content about economic conditions in India.

The results obtained have deep implications from the policy angle. The policy makers are essentially concerned with the timing, duration and amplitude of business cycles. An important part of the job of the central bank is to gather information of the current and if possible, future economic conditions, so that policy decisions can be taken at the right time or better, enough in advance so that lags in policy effectiveness can be taken into account and the worse real consequences can be avoided. Agents also want to predict the direction of real activity since that would give clues about the immediate stance of monetary policy for example, an upcoming movements of interest rates. However, traditional indicators of monetary stance, by which one could gather information about the actions of the Central Bank, were monetary aggregates and exchange rates in addition to the outcome of structural macroeconomic models built for forecasting purposes. All these indicators have been shown to be problematic and unstable and hence the usefulness of the present study, which tried to explore economic variables that have predictive

content about future development of economic activity, is beyond doubt.

The study uses Probit regression to analyze the performance of financial and non-financial variables. One drawback of the Probit model is the lack of a dynamic structure. The model fails to tell how the probabilities of recession may be influenced by the current state of the business cycle. The direction for future research in the area would be to conduct a richer analysis using the Probit model within a framework of regime-switching.

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