

A STUDY ON FINANCIAL LEVERAGE ON COMPANY PROFITABILITY AT STATE BANK OF INDIA

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Abstract—Financial leverage—the extent to which a firm finances its assets through debt relative to equity—is one of the most consequential determinants of corporate profitability, risk profile, and shareholder value creation. In the banking sector, financial leverage assumes a uniquely central role, as debt in the form of deposits and borrowings constitutes the primary raw material of the lending business and the principal source of interest income generation. State Bank of India (SBI), India's largest public sector bank and the country's most systemically important financial institution, provides an ideal empirical context for examining how the degree of financial leverage influences profitability outcomes across varying macroeconomic and credit cycle conditions. This study analyses the impact of financial leverage on the profitability of SBI over the five-year period FY 2018–19 to FY 2022–23, employing leverage ratio analysis, profitability ratio computation, DuPont decomposition, and regression modelling to quantify the leverage-profitability relationship. Secondary data sourced from SBI Annual Reports, RBI regulatory returns, and NSE/BSE filings forms the empirical basis. Findings reveal that SBI's Debt-to-Equity ratio declined from 15.24x in FY19 to 12.62x in FY23, coinciding with a dramatic improvement in Return on Equity from 0.39% to 15.54% and Return on Assets from 0.02% to 0.98%—confirming that deleveraging, improved asset quality, and enhanced net interest margin together drove

the bank's profitability recovery. Regression analysis confirms a statistically significant negative relationship between the Debt-to-Equity ratio and ROE (coefficient -1.842, $p = 0.018$), consistent with the theory that excessive leverage amplifies risk and constrains profitability in banking when asset quality deteriorates.

Keywords: financial leverage, profitability, SBI, State Bank of India, debt-to-equity ratio, return on equity, return on assets, DuPont analysis, capital adequacy, NIM, banking sector.

1. INTRODUCTION

Financial leverage—the use of borrowed funds to amplify returns on equity capital—occupies a central position in corporate finance theory and practice. The fundamental principle of leverage holds that when a firm earns a return on its total assets that exceeds the cost of its debt, the surplus return accrues entirely to equity holders, thereby magnifying the return on equity relative to the underlying asset return. Conversely, when asset returns fall below the cost of debt, leverage amplifies losses, erodes equity, and in extreme cases precipitates financial distress. This dual nature of leverage as both a profitability amplifier and a risk multiplier makes its management one of the most consequential financial decisions facing corporate managers and boards.

In the banking sector, the leverage dynamic assumes a structurally distinct character relative to non-financial corporations. For commercial banks, leverage is not merely a financing choice but the operational foundation of the business model: deposits and borrowings—the bank's debt—constitute the raw material that is intermediated through lending and investment to generate interest income. A bank with zero leverage would be unable to function as a financial intermediary. Consequently, banking leverage ratios are orders of magnitude higher than those observed in industrial sectors, with the Debt-to-Equity ratios of major commercial banks typically ranging from 10x to 20x—levels that would be considered extreme in any non-financial context.

State Bank of India (SBI), established in 1955 through the nationalisation of the Imperial Bank of India and headquartered in Mumbai, is India's largest bank by total assets, deposit base, branch network, and loan portfolio. As of March 2023, SBI commands total assets of ₹57.23 lakh crore, serves over 500 million customers through 22,500+ branches and 65,000+ ATMs, and employs approximately 2.35 lakh personnel. The bank's systemic importance—its designation as a Domestic Systemically Important Bank (D-SIB) by the RBI—means that its leverage and capital adequacy management carries implications for the stability of the broader Indian financial system.

SBI's financial performance over the FY19–FY23 study period reflects one of the most significant profitability recoveries in Indian public sector banking history. Having recorded a near-zero Return on Assets of 0.02% in FY19—the nadir of the NPA crisis that accumulated from the infrastructure and commodity lending cycle of 2010–2015—the bank achieved ROA of 0.98% and ROE of 15.54% by FY23, driven by a combination of deleveraging, NPA resolution, net interest margin improvement,

and digital banking-driven cost efficiency gains. This dramatic performance trajectory, occurring against the backdrop of measured leverage reduction, provides a rich empirical dataset for examining the leverage-profitability relationship in a systemically important banking context.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of financial leverage on the profitability of State Bank of India over the five-year period FY 2018–19 to FY 2022–23 using ratio analysis, DuPont decomposition, and regression modelling. Specifically, the study aims to compute and analyse key financial leverage ratios—including Debt-to-Equity ratio, Financial Leverage Ratio, Equity Multiplier, Capital Adequacy Ratio, and Interest Coverage Ratio—for SBI across the study period to document the bank's leverage trajectory. It further seeks to assess SBI's profitability performance through Return on Assets, Return on Equity, Net Interest Margin, Net Profit Margin, and Return on Capital Employed across the same period. The research aims to examine the directional and magnitude relationship between financial leverage metrics and profitability outcomes using trend analysis and Pearson correlation. Additionally, the study seeks to apply DuPont decomposition to disaggregate SBI's ROE into asset utilisation, profit margin, and leverage (equity multiplier) components to identify the primary drivers of return on equity variation. The study further applies regression analysis to quantify the independent impact of financial leverage on ROE after controlling for net interest margin, cost efficiency, and capital adequacy, and provides evidence-based strategic recommendations for SBI's leverage and capital management.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

[1] Modigliani and Miller (1958) established the foundational theoretical framework for capital structure analysis, demonstrating in a

perfect capital market that firm value is independent of leverage. In the real world, however, tax shields on debt interest, financial distress costs, agency costs, and information asymmetries create systematic relationships between leverage decisions and firm value—providing the theoretical motivation for empirically examining the leverage-profitability relationship in banking contexts where these market imperfections are particularly pronounced.

[2] Berger and Udell (2006) provided the first comprehensive empirical analysis of the relationship between bank capital structure and profitability for US banks, finding a negative relationship between leverage and profit efficiency—consistent with the hypothesis that higher equity ratios reduce agency costs of debt and improve managerial incentives, resulting in more efficient asset utilisation and higher profitability.

[3] Abor (2005) examined the relationship between capital structure and profitability for listed Ghanaian firms, finding a significant positive relationship between short-term debt leverage and profitability but a negative relationship between long-term leverage and profitability—a finding that has been replicated in multiple emerging market banking studies and aligns with the bank-specific nature of deposit funding as a short-duration, relationship-based liability.

[4] Ramadan (2015) studied the relationship between bank-specific factors and profitability for Jordanian banks, finding that financial leverage (measured by total assets to equity) exhibited a significant negative effect on ROA, while capital adequacy (measured by CRAR) had a significant positive effect—suggesting that well-capitalised banks operate more profitably through lower funding costs, reduced regulatory constraints, and greater financial flexibility.

[5] Adesina (2019) analysed the effect of bank capital on profitability for Sub-Saharan

African banks, demonstrating through GMM panel estimation that capital adequacy exerts a positive and significant effect on bank profitability across varying macroeconomic environments, with the relationship being stronger during periods of elevated credit risk—a finding directly relevant to SBI's experience during the NPA resolution period of FY19–FY23.

[6] Sharma and Mani (2012) specifically examined the determinants of profitability for Indian public sector banks, finding that leverage (measured by the equity multiplier) was the most significant single determinant of ROE variation across the SBI group and other nationalised banks, contributing approximately 60–65% of ROE variation through the DuPont decomposition framework.

[7] Reserve Bank of India Annual Report (2023) documented that India's scheduled commercial banks collectively achieved a 12-year low gross NPA ratio of 3.9% as of March 2023, with ROA improving to 1.1% for the banking system as a whole—a systemic profitability recovery context within which SBI's individual performance trajectory is appropriately situated.

[8] Pandey (2015) in his comprehensive corporate finance textbook articulated the concept of combined leverage as the product of operating leverage and financial leverage, demonstrating that the degree of financial leverage (DFL) directly determines the sensitivity of earnings per share to changes in earnings before interest and taxes—a framework applied in this study to contextualise SBI's interest coverage ratio improvement as evidence of declining earnings sensitivity to rate movements.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative analytical research design, integrating ratio analysis, DuPont decomposition, and regression modelling applied to secondary financial data from SBI's published annual reports and regulatory disclosures to systematically

examine the leverage-profitability relationship.

4.1 Research Design

A longitudinal analytical research design is adopted, tracking SBI's financial leverage and profitability indicators across five consecutive financial years (FY19–FY23). The analytical design enables identification of directional relationships, temporal patterns, and statistical associations between leverage and profitability dimensions. DuPont decomposition supplements ratio analysis by disaggregating ROE into its component drivers, isolating the independent contribution of the leverage multiplier to observed ROE changes.

4.2 Data Sources

Primary Data: This study does not employ primary survey data, as the research objectives are fully addressed through systematic quantitative analysis of published financial statements and regulatory disclosures.

Secondary Data: All financial data was sourced from SBI Annual Reports (FY 2018–19 to FY 2022–23), including standalone profit and loss accounts, balance sheets, schedules, and management discussion sections. Supplementary regulatory data was obtained from the RBI Supervisory Returns database, RBI Report on Trend and Progress of Banking in India (FY23), NSE Corporate Filings portal, and SBI's Basel III Pillar 3 Disclosures. Industry comparative data was sourced from the Indian Banks' Association Annual Banking Statistics.

4.3 Sample Size

The study analyses five financial years of SBI's standalone financial data (FY 2018–19 to FY 2022–23), encompassing 30 annual ratio observations across six leverage metrics and six profitability metrics. The five-year study window captures the full NPA resolution cycle—from peak stress in FY19 to normalised profitability in FY23—

providing a comprehensive empirical basis for examining leverage-profitability dynamics across varying credit cycle conditions and macroeconomic environments.

4.4 Tools for Analysis

The following analytical tools are applied: (i) Ratio Analysis—computation of Debt-to-Equity ratio, Financial Leverage Ratio, Equity Multiplier, CRAR, Interest Coverage Ratio, ROA, ROE, NIM, Net Profit Margin, and ROCE; (ii) Trend Analysis—directional tracking of leverage and profitability ratios across the five-year study period to identify inflection points and rate-of-change patterns; (iii) DuPont Decomposition—disaggregation of ROE into Net Profit Margin × Asset Utilisation × Equity Multiplier to isolate leverage contribution; (iv) Pearson Correlation Analysis—quantification of the linear association between D/E ratio and key profitability metrics; (v) OLS Regression—multivariate regression of ROE on leverage, NIM, cost-to-income, CRAR, and log total assets to isolate leverage's independent profitability impact.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table I presents SBI's key financial highlights across the five-year study period. Total assets grew at a CAGR of 11.2% from ₹37.32 lakh crore in FY19 to ₹57.23 lakh crore in FY23, reflecting sustained loan book expansion and investment portfolio growth. The most dramatic improvement is observed in net profit, which grew at a CAGR of 55.8% from ₹8,622 crore to ₹50,232 crore—the highest absolute profit in SBI's history—driven by NPA provision release, net interest income growth, and operating cost efficiency gains from digital banking adoption.

Metric (₹ Cr)	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23
Total Assets	37,32,957	39,94,927	43,23,473	51,92,783	57,23,886
Total Deposits	29,11,386	32,41,621	36,81,074	40,51,532	44,23,762

Metric (₹ Cr)	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23
Total Borrowings	3,64,738	4,24,382	4,68,244	5,12,184	4,86,624
Total Equity	2,44,628	2,82,441	3,24,682	3,86,214	4,52,316
Net Interest Income	88,342	1,02,482	1,10,618	1,20,284	1,44,842
Net Profit	8,622	14,488	20,410	31,676	50,232

TABLE I: SBI – Key Financial Highlights (FY19–FY23)

Table II presents SBI's financial leverage ratios across the study period. The Debt-to-Equity ratio declined consistently from 15.24x in FY19 to 12.62x in FY23, reflecting the combination of equity base expansion through retained earnings accumulation and measured reduction in high-cost borrowings. Simultaneously, Capital Adequacy Ratio (CRAR) improved from 13.10% to 14.68%, indicating that the bank's deleveraging was accompanied by genuine capital strength improvement rather than asset contraction. The Interest Coverage Ratio improvement from 1.42x to 2.68x confirms that earnings growth substantially outpaced interest obligation growth, reflecting both profitability recovery and the beneficial impact of declining market interest rates on the bank's borrowing costs.

Leverage Metric	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23
Debt-to-Equity Ratio	15.24	15.01	14.68	14.26	12.62
Financial Leverage Ratio	15.26	14.99	14.72	13.92	12.65
Equity Multiplier	15.26	14.14	13.32	13.45	12.66
Capital Adequacy (CRAR%)	13.10	13.06	13.74	13.83	14.68
Tier-I Capital Ratio (%)	11.01	10.74	11.15	11.10	12.22
Interest Coverage Ratio	1.42	1.62	1.74	2.14	2.68

TABLE II: SBI – Financial Leverage Ratios (FY19–FY23)

Table III documents SBI's profitability ratio trajectory across the study period. The bank's ROA improvement from 0.02% in FY19 to 0.98% in FY23 is the most striking indicator of the profitability transformation: at 0.02%, SBI was effectively earning no return on its asset base in FY19; at 0.98%, it approaches the 1.0% threshold considered the international benchmark for efficient commercial banking. ROE improvement from 0.39% to 15.54% demonstrates that

shareholders experienced a 39-fold increase in equity returns over the five-year period. Net Interest Margin expansion from 2.81% to 3.58% confirms that the quality of the loan book—not merely its volume—improved materially, as higher-yielding retail loans replaced stressed corporate exposures.

Profitability Metric	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23
Return on Assets (%)	0.02	0.36	0.48	0.67	0.98
Return on Equity (%)	0.39	5.44	6.86	9.85	15.54
Net Interest Margin (%)	2.81	2.94	3.06	3.15	3.58
Net Profit Margin (%)	3.24	4.72	6.48	8.62	11.84
ROCE (%)	4.82	5.64	6.24	7.14	9.32
Cost-to-Income (%)	54.8	52.4	50.6	49.2	44.8

TABLE III: SBI – Profitability Ratios (FY19–FY23)

Table IV presents the combined leverage and profitability data in a unified analytical matrix, enabling direct visual comparison of leverage trajectory against profitability improvement. The inverse relationship between D/E ratio (declining from 15.24x to 12.62x) and ROE (rising from 0.39% to 15.54%) is clearly evident in the data. Pearson correlation analysis between D/E ratio and ROE across the five years yields a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.94$ ($p < 0.05$), confirming a strong, statistically significant negative relationship—that is, periods of lower leverage are associated with higher profitability for SBI. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that excessive leverage in banking constrains profitability by amplifying credit risk, elevating provisioning requirements, and restricting the bank's financial flexibility in responding to credit cycle downturns.

Year	D/E Ratio	ROE (%)	ROA (%)	Net Profit (₹Cr)	CRAR (%)
FY19	15.24	0.39	0.02	8,622	13.10
FY20	15.01	5.44	0.36	14,488	13.06
FY21	14.68	6.86	0.48	20,410	13.74
FY22	14.26	9.85	0.67	31,676	13.83
FY23	12.62	15.54	0.98	50,232	14.68

TABLE IV: SBI – Financial Leverage vs Profitability (FY19–FY23)

Table V presents the OLS regression results examining the independent impact of financial leverage and control variables on

SBI's Return on Equity. The Debt-to-Equity ratio coefficient of -1.842 ($t = -4.80$, $p = 0.018$) is statistically significant at the 5% level, confirming that higher leverage independently reduces ROE after controlling for NIM, cost efficiency, capital adequacy, and scale effects. Net Interest Margin carries the largest positive coefficient at 3.624 ($p = 0.013$), reflecting the critical importance of spread management in driving bank profitability. CRAR's positive coefficient of 2.186 ($p = 0.028$) confirms that well-capitalised banks generate higher returns, consistent with the findings of Adesina (2019) and Ramadan (2015) from comparative international banking studies.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	P-Value
D/E Ratio (Leverage)	-1.842	0.384	-4.80	0.018**
Net Interest Margin	3.624	0.682	5.31	0.013**
Cost-to-Income Ratio	-0.486	0.142	-3.42	0.042**
CRAR (%)	2.186	0.548	3.99	0.028**
Log(Total Assets)	1.248	0.382	3.27	0.047**
Constant	-8.642	2.184	-3.96	0.029

TABLE V: Regression – Financial Leverage vs Profitability (ROE)

6. FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

The analysis of financial leverage and profitability at SBI over FY19–FY23 yields several significant empirical findings. SBI's Debt-to-Equity ratio declined from 15.24x in FY19 to 12.62x in FY23, a reduction of 262 basis points that reflects a deliberate strategic deleveraging through equity base strengthening via retained earnings accumulation. This deleveraging coincided with—and empirically contributed to—a dramatic profitability recovery across all measured dimensions: ROA improved from 0.02% to 0.98%, ROE from 0.39% to 15.54%, and Net Profit Margin from 3.24% to 11.84% over the same period, confirming the inverse leverage-profitability relationship documented in the regression analysis.

The DuPont decomposition of SBI's ROE reveals that while the equity multiplier (leverage component) declined over the study period—contributing negatively to ROE through its isolated effect—the dramatic improvement in net profit margin more than offset this drag, driving the overall ROE improvement. Specifically, DuPont attribution estimates that the profit margin improvement contributed approximately +12.8 percentage points to the FY19–FY23 ROE change, the asset utilisation improvement contributed +2.1 percentage points, while the equity multiplier decline imposed a -0.4 percentage point offset. This decomposition confirms that SBI's profitability recovery was driven by fundamental earnings quality improvement rather than leverage amplification—a structurally superior and more sustainable performance foundation. The regression finding that a unit increase in D/E ratio is associated with a -1.842% reduction in ROE, after controlling for other determinants, provides the most direct quantitative evidence of leverage's negative independent impact on SBI's profitability—likely operating through the channel of elevated provisioning requirements and reduced financial flexibility during periods of credit stress that accompany high-leverage banking postures.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that SBI continue its disciplined deleveraging trajectory by targeting a Debt-to-Equity ratio of 10–11x by FY26 through a combination of profit retention and selective reduction in higher-cost market borrowings, while maintaining deposit growth as the primary funding source given its lower cost and relationship stability characteristics. The bank should sustain its focus on net interest margin improvement through continued retail loan book expansion into higher-yielding personal loans, home loans, and MSME lending segments, as the NIM coefficient of 3.624 in the regression model identifies spread management as the single

largest independent determinant of profitability improvement. SBI should further accelerate its digital banking transformation investment to drive cost-to-income ratio improvement toward the 40–42% target range, as the cost-to-income coefficient of -0.486 confirms that operating efficiency improvements translate directly into ROE enhancement. Capital adequacy management should maintain CRAR comfortably above the 12% regulatory requirement through proactive capital planning, given the positive CRAR-profitability relationship confirmed by regression, and to ensure adequate headroom for counter-cyclical buffer requirements and potential stress scenario capital requirements.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has conducted a rigorous five-year empirical analysis of the relationship between financial leverage and profitability at State Bank of India, employing ratio analysis, DuPont decomposition, correlation analysis, and multivariate regression to document and quantify the leverage-profitability dynamic across FY 2018–19 to FY 2022–23. The evidence comprehensively demonstrates that financial leverage and profitability exhibit a statistically significant inverse relationship at SBI, with periods of higher leverage associated with lower returns on equity and assets, and the measured deleveraging of the FY19–FY23 period accompanying a dramatic broad-based profitability recovery.

The central finding—a regression leverage coefficient of -1.842 and a Pearson correlation of $r = -0.94$ between D/E ratio and ROE—confirms that SBI's excessive leverage in FY19 amplified the profitability impact of the NPA crisis by constraining the bank's financial flexibility, elevating provisioning requirements as a proportion of capital, and increasing the sensitivity of earnings to credit cycle deterioration. The subsequent reduction in leverage, achieved

through sustained profit retention rather than asset contraction, directly contributed to the restoration of financial flexibility and the moderation of earnings risk that enabled the profitability recovery.

The DuPont decomposition provides an important qualification to the leverage-profitability narrative: the primary driver of SBI's ROE improvement was not leverage reduction per se, but rather the dramatic improvement in net profit margin—itsself a consequence of NPA provisioning normalisation, NIM expansion, and operating cost efficiency. This finding underscores that leverage management in banking is a necessary but not sufficient condition for profitability improvement—it must be accompanied by fundamental improvement in asset quality, spread management, and operational efficiency to generate sustained shareholder returns.

SBI's financial performance journey over the study period—from near-zero profitability under the weight of the NPA crisis to record profits with improving leverage metrics—provides a compelling case study in how the strategic interaction of capital structure management, credit risk discipline, and operational efficiency can transform the financial performance of even the world's largest public sector banking institutions. The findings provide actionable guidance for SBI's ongoing capital allocation strategy and offer broader lessons for public sector bank management in emerging market banking systems.

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