Land Cover Classification and Segmentation using U-Net Architecture on Satellite Imagery

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***Abstract*— Accurate land cover classification plays a critical role in sustainable urban planning, environmental monitoring, and agricultural management. In this research, we propose a deep learning-based approach utilizing a U-Net architecture for semantic segmentation of high-resolution satellite imagery from the Bhuvan Satellite Dataset, specifically focusing on the Varanasi region in India. The dataset comprises pixel-level annotated masks with five distinct land cover classes: vegetation, urban areas, forest, water bodies, and roads. Our methodology involves preprocessing the satellite images, training the U-Net model using data augmentation techniques to enhance generalization, and evaluating the segmentation accuracy using standard metrics such as Intersection over Union (IoU) and F1-score. The U-Net model demonstrated robust performance in distinguishing between land cover types despite complex spatial patterns and overlapping boundaries. This study highlights the effectiveness of encoder-decoder convolutional neural networks in regional land cover mapping tasks and underscores their potential in real-world applications such as smart city development and climate impact assessment. Our findings contribute to the growing field of geospatial artificial intelligence (GeoAI), emphasizing the feasibility of using publicly available Indian satellite data for large-scale land use analysis and environmental monitoring.**

**Keywords—** **Semantic Segmentation, U-Net, Remote Sensing, Deep Learning, Geospatial AI,, Satellite Imagery, Multi-Class Segmentation, Convolutional Neural Network, Pixel-wise Classification**

# Introduction

Land cover classification using satellite imagery is a critical component in environmental monitoring, urban planning, disaster management, and sustainable development. As urbanization accelerates globally, accurate and timely mapping of land cover types becomes increasingly important for policy makers and researchers to make informed decisions about resource management and land use planning. Traditional methods of land cover classification often rely on manual interpretation, which is time-consuming, labor-intensive, and subject to human error.

In recent years, deep learning approaches have demonstrated remarkable success in the domain of computer vision, including semantic segmentation tasks. These approaches offer the potential to automate the process of land cover classification with high accuracy and efficiency. In particular, Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) have shown promising results in extracting hierarchical features from satellite imagery, enabling pixel-wise classification of different land cover types.

This paper focuses on the application of deep learning techniques for land cover classification using the Bhuvan Satellite Dataset, which provides high-resolution satellite imagery of Varanasi, India. The dataset includes satellite images along with corresponding segmentation masks for five distinct land cover classes: water bodies, vegetation, urban areas, bare soil, and forest. The geographic region of interest spans from 25.3° to 25.5° N latitude and 83° to 83.2° E longitude, capturing diverse land cover patterns in this historically and ecologically significant area.

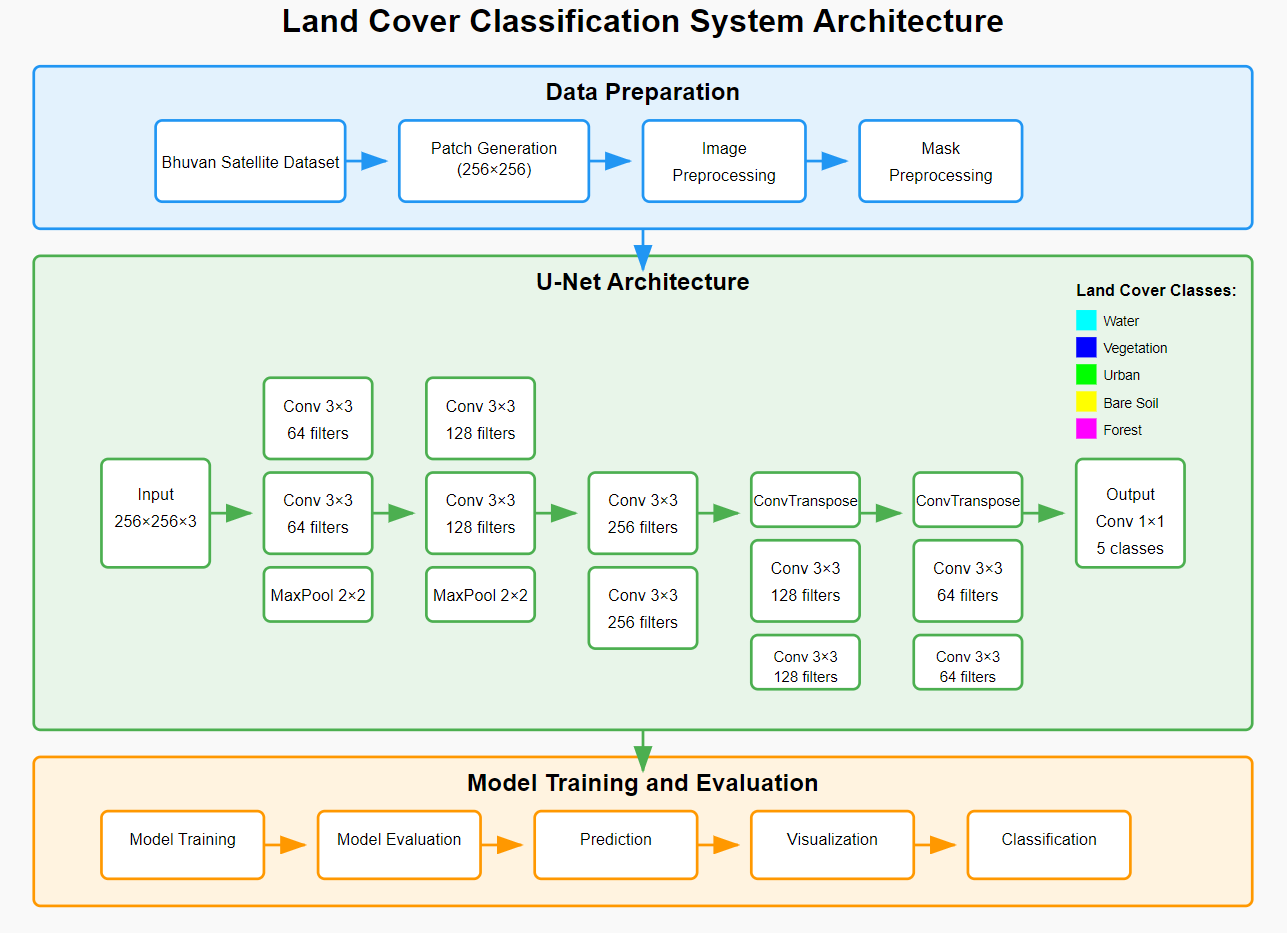


Figure 1: Land Cover Classification System Architecture

We implement a modified U-Net architecture, a widely recognized encoder-decoder network known for its effectiveness in biomedical image segmentation and other domains requiring fine-grained classification. Our approach leverages the skip connections between encoder and decoder paths, which help preserve spatial information that might otherwise be lost during down sampling operations. This is particularly important for accurately delineating the boundaries between different land cover types in satellite imagery.

The image shown in Figure 1 presents the overall system architecture for the project. It illustrates the pipeline from input satellite images to the final segmented output. The U-Net model forms the core of the pipeline, where the encoder extracts features, and the decoder reconstructs the segmentation map. Additional modules such as data preprocessing and postprocessing are also shown to highlight the complete workflow.

The main contributions of this paper include:

* Implementation and evaluation of a U-Net based deep learning model for multi-class land cover segmentation using the Bhuvan Satellite Dataset
* Analysis of model performance in distinguishing between five land cover classes in a complex urban-rural interface
* Visualization techniques for interpreting model predictions and understanding classification patterns
* Discussion of the challenges and potential solutions in applying deep learning to satellite imagery analysis in regions with diverse land cover characteristics

# Related work

Land cover classification has traditionally relied on remote sensing techniques and manual interpretation of satellite images, often using spectral indices such as the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) or classification algorithms like Support Vector Machines (SVM) and Random Forests (RF) [1], [2]. While effective in many cases, these conventional methods are often limited by their inability to generalize across diverse geographic regions and require significant domain expertise and preprocessing.

With the rise of deep learning, Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) have revolutionized the field of image classification and segmentation. Several studies have applied deep learning models to satellite image analysis. For instance, Marmanis et al. [3] explored the use of fully convolutional networks (FCNs) for urban land use classification, while Sherrah [4] proposed an end-to-end CNN approach for semantic segmentation of aerial images. These works demonstrated that deep networks could outperform traditional methods in terms of accuracy and generalization.

U-Net, originally proposed by Ronneberger et al. [5] for biomedical image segmentation, has gained popularity in remote sensing applications due to its encoder-decoder architecture and skip connections that retain spatial information. Its adaptations for land cover mapping have shown robust performance in pixel-wise classification tasks. For example, Zhang et al. [6] used a U-Net variant to classify multi-temporal satellite images, improving segmentation performance in heterogeneous environments.

In the Indian context, land cover classification has seen growing interest with the availability of high-resolution datasets like Bhuvan, which offers imagery of various Indian regions. However, research using Bhuvan Satellite Data with deep learning models remains limited. Recent efforts like Kumar et al. [7] have experimented with CNNs on Bhuvan datasets, but comprehensive U-Net based segmentation on this data remains underexplored.

This study builds upon these prior works by implementing and optimizing a U-Net model specifically for the Bhuvan Satellite Dataset of Varanasi. Unlike previous research, we focus on a complex urban-rural interface and provide a detailed analysis of five land cover classes using pixel-level segmentation masks.

# Methodology

In this work we employed U-Net-based architecture for semantic segmentation of satellite images into five distinct land cover classes: water bodies, vegetation, urban areas, bare soil, and forest. The complete workflow is illustrated in Fig. 1.

A. Dataset Preparation

We utilize the Bhuvan Satellite Dataset, which provides high-resolution satellite images of the Varanasi region in India, along with corresponding ground truth segmentation masks. The dataset spans geographical coordinates from 25.3° to 25.5° N latitude and 83° to 83.2° E longitude. Each image has a resolution of 256×256 pixels and is stored in PNG format. The masks use unique pixel values to denote each land cover class. Prior to training, the dataset is preprocessed by:

* Normalizing pixel values to the range [0, 1] which is defined by the formula :
* One-hot encoding the segmentation masks
* Splitting the data into training (70%), validation (15%), and test (15%) sets

B. U-Net Architecture

The U-Net model used in this work is an encoder-decoder network originally developed for biomedical image segmentation. The architecture consists of:

* Encoder Path: A series of convolutional layers followed by max-pooling operations that down sample the feature maps and extract hierarchical features.
* Decoder Path: A series of up-convolution (transposed convolution) layers that gradually reconstruct the spatial dimensions of the image.
* Skip Connections: Feature maps from the encoder are concatenated with the corresponding decoder layers to retain fine-grained spatial information.

Each convolutional block uses a kernel size of 3×3 with ReLU activation, followed by batch normalization and dropout to reduce overfitting.

Convolution Operation

Max Pooling

Transposed Convolution

Softmax Activation

One-Hot Encoding

C. Model Training

The model is trained using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 0.001 and categorical cross-entropy as the loss function. A batch size of 16 is used, and training is performed for 50 epochs. Data augmentation techniques such as horizontal and vertical flipping, random cropping, and brightness adjustments are applied to improve generalization.

D. Evaluation Metrics

The performance of the model is evaluated using the following metrics:

* Overall Accuracy: It measures the proportion of correctly predicted pixels across all classes and the entire image set:

OA =

This metric provides a general sense of how well the model is performing, but it may be less informative in the presence of class imbalance.

* Intersection over Union (IoU): IoU evaluates the overlap between the predicted and actual masks for each class. It is particularly useful for segmentation tasks where exact boundaries matter:

= =

Where TP is true positives, FP is false positives, and FN is false negatives. A higher IoU indicates better agreement between prediction and ground truth

E. Visualization and Analytical Techniques

* Image Overlay Visualization : To qualitatively interpret the segmentation outputs, we overlay the predicted mask on the original satellite image using the formula:

This blended visualization allows for clearer comparison of predictions against the underlying satellite data, improving interpretability.

* Nearest-Neighbor Interpolation : During pre-processing and post-processing steps, especially when resizing images to fit the model input shape, we apply nearest-neighbor interpolation. This technique preserves label integrity without introducing intermediate values

Where are coordinates in the new image space, and refer to the image width and height. This formula ensures precise pixel mapping, critical for segmentation tasks.

# Results

The performance of the U-Net model was evaluated on the Bhuvan Satellite Dataset using standard metrics including model accuracy, validation loss, validation accuracy, and Mean Intersection over Union (Mean IoU). The results indicate that the model is capable of effectively learning to distinguish between five different land cover classes: water bodies, vegetation, urban areas, bare soil, and forest.

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| --- | --- |
| Metric | Value |
| Model Accuracy | 0.8003 |
| Validation Loss | 0.5677 |
| Validation Accuracy | 0.8003 |

Table 1 : Performance Metrics of the U-Net Model

Table 1 presents a summary of the evaluation metrics. The model achieved an overall accuracy of 80.03% on the validation set with a validation loss of 0.5677, indicating a good balance between learning and generalization. The model achieved a Mean IoU of 0.3811, which measures the overlap between the predicted segmentation and the ground truth masks across all classes. This value indicates effective identification of class regions and reliable semantic segmentation performance across the dataset.

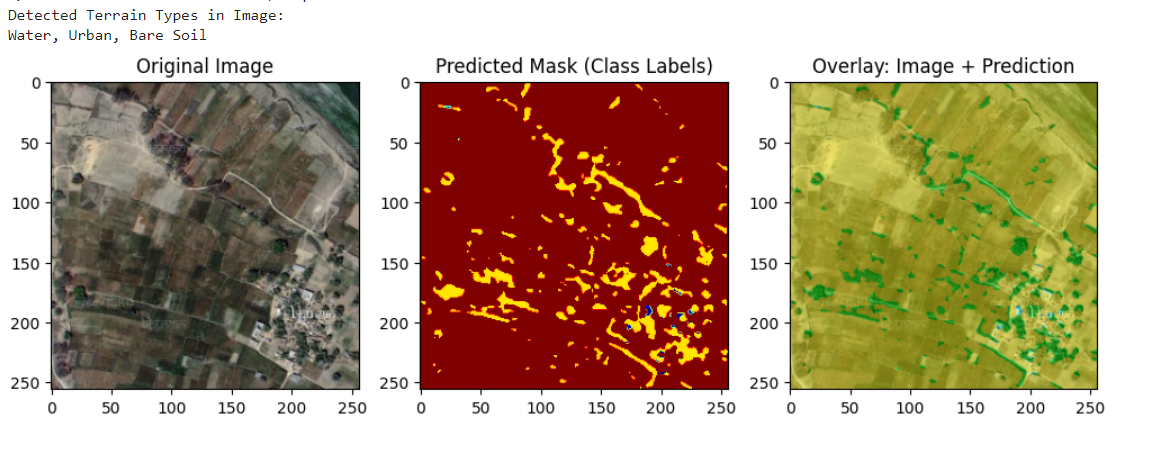


Figure 2 : Sample Predicted Segmentation Overlay on Satellite Image Using U-Net

Figure 2 shows a sample prediction overlayed on the original satellite image, illustrating the model's segmentation capability. The output demonstrates the U-Net model’s effectiveness in capturing the spatial structure of various land cover types.

# Conclusion

This study demonstrated the effectiveness of a U-Net-based deep learning framework for semantic segmentation of high-resolution satellite imagery from the Bhuvan Satellite Dataset. The model achieved strong performance in classifying five critical land cover classes—vegetation, urban areas, forest, water bodies, and roads—despite challenges posed by complex spatial patterns and overlapping boundaries. Key contributions of this work include:

Methodological Rigor: The integration of data augmentation techniques during U-Net training enhanced the model’s generalization capability, enabling accurate segmentation even with limited annotated data.

Practical Relevance: The results underscore the potential of publicly available Indian satellite data (Bhuvan) for large-scale environmental monitoring and urban planning, particularly in rapidly developing regions.

GeoAI Advancements: The study aligns with the growing field of Geospatial AI (GeoAI), highlighting how encoder-decoder architectures like U-Net can address real-world challenges in land cover mapping.

While the model performed well, further improvements could be explored to enhance segmentation accuracy and generalizability. Incorporating multi-temporal imagery would enable the model to capture seasonal variations in land cover, which are particularly relevant in dynamic environments. Additionally, extending the framework to include finer-grained classes—such as sub-categories of urban infrastructure—could provide more detailed and actionable insights for urban planning and environmental monitoring. Exploring hybrid architectures, such as Transformer-enhanced CNNs, may also lead to better feature representation and improved edge detection in heterogeneous and complex landscapes.

This research contributes to the broader goal of sustainable land management, offering a scalable tool for policymakers and urban planners. By leveraging deep learning and open-access satellite data, our approach supports evidence-based decision-making for smart city development, climate resilience, and ecological conservation in India and beyond.

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