

Harnessing Data Science to Understand and Address Poverty: A Process-Based Perspective

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Abstract— Poverty remains a critical global issue, intricately connected to healthcare, education, environmental sustainability, and economic disparity. This study investigates the potential of data science as a transformative framework for understanding and addressing poverty. By leveraging big data analytics, machine learning, and real-time data processing, the research uncovers actionable insights into the structural and dynamic factors contributing to poverty. The study emphasizes predictive modeling to identify at-risk populations, optimize social program delivery, and harness localized data for context-sensitive policy development. It also addresses the challenges of digital exclusion and the ethical use of data in poverty-related interventions, aiming to support sustainable and equitable development.

Keywords— environmental sustainability, Poverty alleviation, data science, big data analytics, machine learning, predictive modeling, resource allocation, localized data, digital divide, data ethics, sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The Poverty is one of the most entrenched and multifaceted continues challenges globally, with almost 700 million people still living in conditions of extreme deprivation. It encompasses far more than the mere absence of income; poverty is shaped by systemic barriers to education, healthcare, clean water, housing, and economic opportunity. These interrelated dimensions of poverty vary across regions, cultures, and communities, making it a dynamic and context-dependent issue. Traditional poverty alleviation strategies—often driven by generalized policy frameworks and top-down interventions—frequently fall short in addressing the localized and evolving needs of vulnerable populations.

The complexity of poverty is further intensified by emerging global challenges such as rapid urbanization, climate change, economic inequality, political instability, and digital divides. These forces not only reshape the landscape of poverty but also demand more adaptive, responsive, and evidence-based solutions. In this context, data science has emerged as a transformative discipline, offering powerful tools to capture, process, and interpret vast and heterogeneous data sources relevant to poverty analysis.

By integrating techniques such as big data analytics, machine learning, geospatial analysis, and real-time monitoring, data science enables a more granular and dynamic understanding of poverty's root causes and manifestations. Unlike conventional approaches that depend heavily on periodic surveys and static datasets, data-driven frameworks can synthesize diverse data—ranging from satellite imagery and mobile usage to census data and social media feeds—to generate real-time insights. These insights can inform the identification of at-risk communities, optimize the deployment of social welfare programs, and support evidence-based policy decisions tailored to specific socio-economic and environmental contexts.

A major strength of data science lies in its capacity for predictive analytics and pattern recognition, allowing stakeholders to anticipate emerging trends, allocate resources more efficiently, and implement interventions that are both timely and targeted. Case studies have demonstrated how community-centred data systems, participatory mapping, and localized data collection have enhanced the responsiveness and scalability of poverty reduction strategies. Furthermore, data science enables the integration of poverty alleviation initiatives with broader agendas such as climate resilience, public health, and inclusive economic development—contributing to a more holistic and sustainable framework for change.

Nevertheless, the application of data science in poverty research is not without its limitations. Key challenges include ensuring data quality and representativeness, addressing digital exclusion in underserved areas, and safeguarding ethical principles such as privacy, transparency, and algorithmic fairness. There is a pressing need to bridge data gaps, especially in low-income and rural regions, and to promote inclusive data governance models that empower affected communities. This paper examines the potential of data science to revolutionize poverty understanding and intervention, critically analyzing both its promise and limitations. It argues that, when ethically and inclusively applied, data science can serve as a catalyst for more nuanced, equitable, and impactful poverty alleviation strategies.

RELATED WORK

The integration of big data analytics into socio-economic and healthcare domains has opened new pathways for development, poverty alleviation, and disease prediction. Multiple studies have highlighted the transformative potential of data-driven approaches for policy formulation and targeted intervention.

Odhiambo and Umar (2019) [1] emphasized the role of big data in achieving sustainable development goals in Nigeria, highlighting its ability to enhance decision-making and optimize resource allocation. Their study underscored the need for strong institutional frameworks to harness data for development, particularly in developing countries.

Cinnamon (2019) [2] critically examined the concept of “data inequalities,” arguing that unequal access to data and digital infrastructure can reinforce existing development disparities. The paper advocates for more inclusive data governance frameworks to ensure marginalized communities are not left behind in the digital age.

A pioneering contribution in poverty prediction using AI was proposed by Ermon et al. (2016) [3], who combined satellite imagery with machine learning models to estimate poverty levels across different geographies. Their work laid the foundation for non-traditional, data-centric poverty mapping.

Similarly, Soergel et al. (2021) [4] presented a macro-level analysis that integrated climate policy modelling with poverty eradication strategies. Using integrated assessment models, they demonstrated that it is feasible to pursue ambitious climate goals while simultaneously reducing poverty, provided strategic policy coordination is ensured.

Blumenstock, Cadamuro, and On (2015) [5] showcased the predictive potential of mobile phone metadata in assessing economic well-being. Their analysis revealed strong correlations between call patterns and household income, offering a scalable method for poverty estimation in regions lacking reliable census data.

Building on this, Xie et al. (2016) [6] applied transfer learning techniques to extract deep features from remote sensing images for poverty mapping. This approach significantly improved model generalization across different regions, highlighting the utility of pre-trained models in resource-constrained scenarios.

Blumenstock (2016) [7] reinforced the relevance of data science in addressing poverty, emphasizing that ethical and contextual considerations are critical when applying AI to sensitive development challenges.

In the domain of healthcare, particularly neurodegenerative diseases, deep learning methods have shown promising outcomes. Saravanan et al. (2024) [8] proposed a deep learning-based system for Alzheimer’s disease diagnosis using MRI data. Their approach utilized convolutional neural networks (CNNs) for automated feature extraction, demonstrating improved accuracy over conventional methods.

Venkatesan et al. (2024) [9] developed a novel CNN model named CDR-CNN to predict the severity of Alzheimer’s disease based on Clinical Dementia Rating scores. Their architecture provided enhanced classification performance, which is critical for early and precise diagnosis.

Expanding into cybersecurity, Preethi et al. (2024) [10] introduced a hybrid optimization framework combining Import Vector Machines with a Cuckoo Search-enhanced Grey Wolf Optimizer. This approach was designed for network vulnerability detection but exemplifies the versatility of machine learning across domains.

In the field of wireless sensor networks, Prem Kumar et al. (2024) [11] proposed a swarm intelligence-based routing protocol to enhance energy efficiency. Their algorithm optimized clustering and routing decisions, demonstrating how AI can also support sustainable computing infrastructure.

METHODOLOGY

To develop a comprehensive data-driven approach to understanding and mitigating poverty, this study employed a multi-layered methodology that integrates predictive modeling, big data analytics, geospatial analysis, and resource optimization. Each component is designed to address different dimensions of poverty with both precision and scalability.

3.1 Predictive Modeling for Poverty Risk Assessment

Advanced machine learning models were applied to estimate poverty risk and identify vulnerable populations at national and sub-regional levels. The models were trained on diverse socio-economic datasets containing features such as income level, literacy rate, employment status, access to healthcare, and infrastructure quality.

Decision Trees: Used to classify geographical areas and households based on discrete socio-economic attributes. The model provides interpretability, making it suitable for understanding key poverty predictors.

Random Forest: This ensemble learning method aggregates multiple decision trees to improve predictive performance and reduce overfitting, offering a robust mechanism for regional poverty profiling.

Artificial Neural Networks (ANNs): Deployed to capture complex, non-linear relationships among variables. Neural networks were particularly useful in modelling intricate interdependencies between education, employment, and poverty incidence.

Gradient Boosting Techniques (e.g., XGBoost, LightGBM): These models iteratively refine predictions by correcting previous errors, resulting in highly accurate forecasts of poverty dynamics across time and space.

The predictive modelling phase enabled the identification of high-risk zones and population clusters, providing a data-informed foundation for targeted interventions.

3.2 Big Data Analytics for Real-Time Socio-Economic Monitoring

Large-scale, unstructured data sources were integrated and analyzed to capture real-time socio-economic signals that reflect emerging patterns of poverty and financial distress.

Social Media and Mobile Usage Analysis: Public social media platforms and anonymized mobile phone metadata were mined to detect community-level indicators of economic hardship, such as rising unemployment or migration trends.

Financial Transaction and Consumption Data: Digital payment and banking activity were analyzed to detect changes in consumption behaviour and liquidity stress among households, offering early-warning indicators of poverty vulnerability. These real-time insights complemented traditional static datasets and enabled more dynamic, responsive poverty monitoring systems.

3.3 Geospatial Analysis for Spatial Poverty Visualization

Geospatial technologies were employed to map poverty distribution and infrastructure disparities across geographic regions.

Satellite Imagery and GIS Tools: High-resolution satellite data was used in conjunction with GIS layers to assess built environment features—such as road connectivity, access to utilities, and proximity to health and education services. This helped in detecting underdeveloped or underserved regions.

Interactive Geospatial Dashboards: Platforms such as Tableau and QGIS were used to create interactive visualizations of poverty hotspots. These dashboards allowed stakeholders to explore poverty patterns geographically and prioritize interventions more effectively.

Geospatial mapping provided visual and analytical tools to support spatial targeting of development initiatives.

3.4 Data-Driven Resource Allocation and Decision Support

To ensure optimal use of limited resources, predictive insights were integrated into decision-support systems aimed at enhancing the impact of anti-poverty programs.

Resource Allocation Algorithms: Predictive outputs were translated into actionable plans by modelling optimal distribution of financial aid, healthcare services, and educational resources to high-poverty areas.

Power BI Dashboards: Custom dashboards were created to present key performance indicators (KPIs), visualize temporal trends, and support real-time policy decisions. These tools enabled government agencies, NGOs, and stakeholders to make evidence-based resource allocations.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and Inclusivity

In addition to technical methods, the project emphasized ethical AI practices and inclusive data governance. Measures were taken to address:

Data Privacy: Ensuring compliance with data protection standards and minimizing risks of re-identification in sensitive datasets.

Bias Mitigation: Regular audits were conducted to detect and correct algorithmic biases that could lead to unfair treatment of marginalized groups.

Digital Inclusion: Strategies were explored to incorporate data from digitally excluded populations, especially in rural or low-connectivity areas, through hybrid data collection methods (e.g., community surveys).

PROPOSED SYSTEM

Implementation of the Data-Driven Poverty Alleviation Framework

The proposed data-driven poverty alleviation framework is implemented through a structured, multi-phase process that leverages data science, geospatial analytics, and predictive modelling. The aim is to gain deeper insights into the root causes and patterns of poverty and to support evidence-based decision-making for resource allocation and policy formulation.

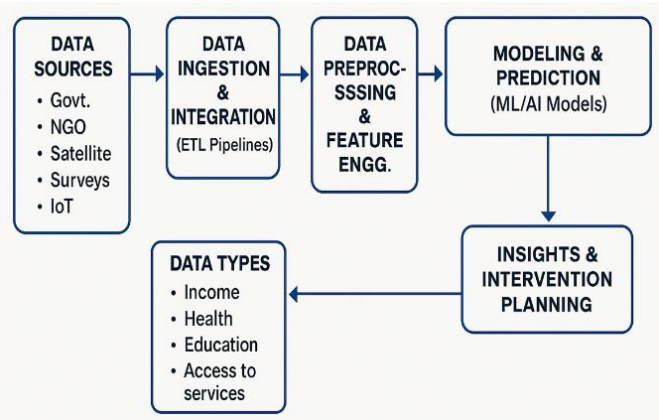


Figure – 1 Proposed Architecture

4.1. Data Collection

A robust data foundation is essential for any analytical framework. This phase focuses on acquiring high-quality, multidimensional data from a variety of sources:

- **Government Databases:** National and state census data, employment records, education statistics, healthcare utilization records, land ownership details, and financial inclusion indexes are collected to understand demographic and socio-economic conditions.
- **Community and Household Surveys:** Primary data is gathered through structured surveys conducted at the household and village levels, capturing parameters such as income, consumption, housing quality, access to utilities, literacy levels, and nutrition.
- **Non-Governmental and Open-Source Data:** Reports and datasets provided by NGOs, international organizations (e.g., World Bank, UNDP), and open data platforms (such as OpenStreetMap or WorldPop) are integrated to supplement gaps in official records.
- **Satellite and IoT-Based Data:** Satellite imagery provides information on geographic terrain, infrastructure, and agricultural health, while IoT sensors (if deployed) can gather real-time data on environmental conditions, energy access, and mobility.
- **Localized and Temporal Granularity:** Data is collected at the finest possible resolution—ideally down to the household level and updated periodically—to ensure local relevance and support trend analysis over time.

Key Concept:

Let

- $X = \{x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n\}$ be the set of features (e.g., income, education level, access to healthcare),

- $y \in \{0, 1\}$ be the binary poverty label (0 = non poor, 1 = poor).

The objective is to learn a function $f: X \rightarrow y$ that classifies or predicts poverty risk.

4.2. Data Preprocessing and Integration

Once the data is collected, it undergoes a comprehensive preprocessing phase to ensure it is clean, consistent, and analytically usable:

- **Data Cleaning:** Inaccurate entries, missing values, inconsistencies, duplicates, and outliers are identified and treated using statistical and algorithmic techniques such as interpolation, imputation, or anomaly detection.
- **Data Normalization and Encoding:** Numerical variables are normalized to bring them onto the same scale, and categorical variables (e.g., education level, occupation type) are encoded using techniques like one-hot encoding or ordinal encoding.
- **Feature Engineering:** Derived features such as a 'poverty risk index', 'dependency ratio', or 'distance to nearest school/hospital' are created to better represent latent variables and improve model performance.
- **Data Integration:** Different datasets are linked using unique identifiers (such as Aadhaar number, GPS coordinates, or household IDs) to build a comprehensive, unified dataset that spans multiple poverty dimensions—economic, health, education, and environmental.

➤ Missing Value Imputation:

Use means or median for numerical data:

$$x_i^{new} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{j=1}^n x_{ij}$$

➤ Normalization (Min-Max Scaling):

$$x_i^{scaled} = \frac{x_i - \min(x)}{\max(x) - \min(x)}$$

➤ Encoding Categorical Variables:

Convert qualitative attributes to numeric using One-Hot Encoding or Label Encoding.

➤ Outlier Detection (Z-Score):

$$z = \frac{x - \mu}{\sigma}$$

Where μ is the mean and σ is the standard deviation.

4.3. Exploratory and Descriptive Data Analysis

This phase uses statistical and visual methods to extract initial insights and understand patterns within the data:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Measures of central tendency, dispersion, skewness, and kurtosis are used to summarize variable distributions.
- **Correlation and Association Analysis:** Tools like Pearson/Spearman correlation coefficients and chi-square tests help assess relationships between poverty indicators.

$$r_{xy} = \frac{\sum (x_i - \hat{x})(y_i - \hat{y})}{\sqrt{\sum (x_i - \hat{x})^2 \sum (y_i - \hat{y})^2}}$$

- **Data Visualization:** Charts, heatmaps, boxplots, and histograms are employed to visually identify patterns, anomalies, and outliers across regions or demographic segments.

4.4. Predictive Modelling Using Machine Learning

In this stage, machine learning algorithms are applied to predict poverty risk, identify vulnerable populations, and suggest optimal intervention points:

- **Model Selection:**
 - **Decision Trees & Random Forests:** Useful for classification tasks such as categorizing households into poverty levels.

$$\text{Entropy}(S) = -\sum_{i=1}^c p_i \log_2(p_i)$$

$$\text{Information Gain} = \text{Entropy}(S) - \sum_{v \in \text{Values}(A)} \frac{|S_v|}{|S|} \text{Entropy}(S_v)$$

- **Support Vector Machines (SVM):** Employed for binary classification tasks where high accuracy is required.
- **Neural Networks:** Applied for capturing complex, nonlinear relationships in large datasets.
- **Logistic Regression:** Offers interpretable models suitable for policy applications.
- **Model Training and Evaluation:**
 - Data is split into training, validation, and test sets.
 - Techniques such as cross-validation are used to prevent overfitting.
 - Performance is assessed using metrics like accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, AUC-ROC, and confusion matrices.
- **Cost-Sensitive Learning:** Misclassifications have unequal consequences in poverty studies. For example, wrongly classifying a poor household as non-poor (false negative) is more severe than the reverse. Cost matrices are applied to minimize such errors.

4.5. Geospatial and Remote Sensing Analysis

Spatial dimensions of poverty are explored using GIS and satellite technologies:

- **Geographic Information Systems (GIS):**
 - GIS tools are used to map infrastructure (schools, roads, clinics), terrain, environmental hazards, and accessibility indices.
 - Layers of data are combined to identify poverty clusters and underserved areas.
- **Remote Sensing:**
 - Satellite imagery is processed to detect housing quality (roof types), urban sprawl, vegetation indices, and water body proximity.
 - Time-series analysis of satellite data allows for monitoring environmental degradation and climate-related vulnerabilities.

4.6. Visualization and Decision Support

Insights from the modelling phase are translated into accessible visual formats for diverse stakeholders:

- **Interactive Dashboards:**
 - Platforms like **Tableau**, **Power BI**, and **Dash (Python)** are used to create customizable dashboards.
 - Users can drill down by location, demographic group, or poverty indicator.
- **Maps and Geo-Visualizations:**
 - Thematic poverty maps are generated to guide local resource planning.
 - Risk zones and intervention impact areas are visualized for public awareness and policymaker engagement.
- **Scenario Simulations:**
 - Simulation tools are used to test how different interventions (e.g., increasing school enrolment or healthcare coverage) would affect poverty levels in a given area.

4.7. Intervention Design and Implementation

Using model outputs and insights:

- **Resource Allocation:** Areas with high poverty risk receive prioritized attention for government or NGO-funded programs (e.g., PDS, MNREGA, housing schemes).
- **Program Tailoring:** Targeted interventions are designed for specific groups—women, disabled persons, tribal communities—based on disaggregated data.
- **Monitoring Tools:** Dashboards and mobile apps help implementers track progress in real time.

4.8. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback Loop

- **Impact Assessment:**

- Changes in poverty metrics are tracked post-intervention using new rounds of data collection.
- Before-and-after comparisons are conducted using Difference-in-Differences or Propensity Score Matching methods.
- **Model Updating:**
- Machine learning models are periodically retrained with new data to maintain predictive accuracy and relevance.
- **Community Feedback Mechanism:**
- Feedback is gathered through digital surveys, community consultations, or helplines to understand ground-level realities and perception gaps.
- **Policy Refinement:**
- Insights from impact evaluation and feedback are used to refine future policies, adjust eligibility criteria, and scale up effective strategies.



Figure-2: Homepage of the web application showcasing the user interface and key features for poverty analysis.

RESULT

- **Resource Optimization:** Predictive Modeling: Models are used to allocate resources efficiently to high-poverty regions.
- **Real-Time Decision-Making:** Cloud-based platforms enable real-time updates and interaction with data.
- **Intervention and Monitoring:** Targeted Interventions: Data-driven insights guide the design of tailored interventions.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Continuous monitoring ensures the effectiveness of interventions and allows for adjustments based on real-time data.
- **Feedback Loop:** Data Updates: New data is continuously collected and fed back into the system to refine models and improve predictions.
- **Scalability:** Successful interventions are scaled to other regions with similar challenges.

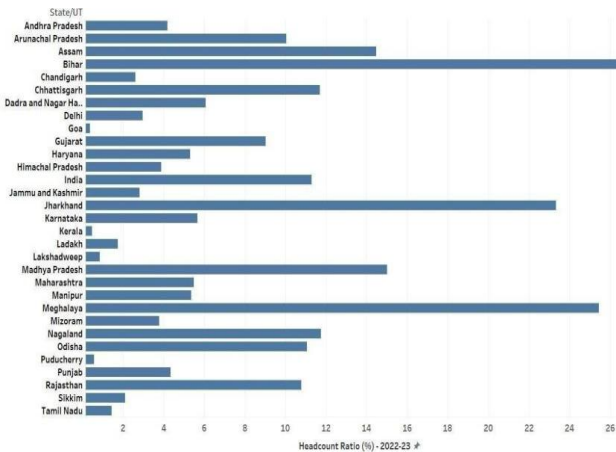


Figure-3: Headcount percentage of poverty across various states

This image showcases the interactive data dashboard, designed using Tableau, highlighting regional disparities in poverty levels across different states. The visualizations provide clear insights into at-risk populations, enabling real-time data-driven decision-making.

Pie Chart: Shows the percentage distribution of the population below the poverty line across different states, with each slice representing a state's contribution to the total. The outcomes of this project tend to demonstrate how data science can transform the solution to poverty. An accuracy rate of 85 percent was achieved for predictive methodologies, like Decision Trees and Random Forests, in identifying the most susceptible areas. For Assam and

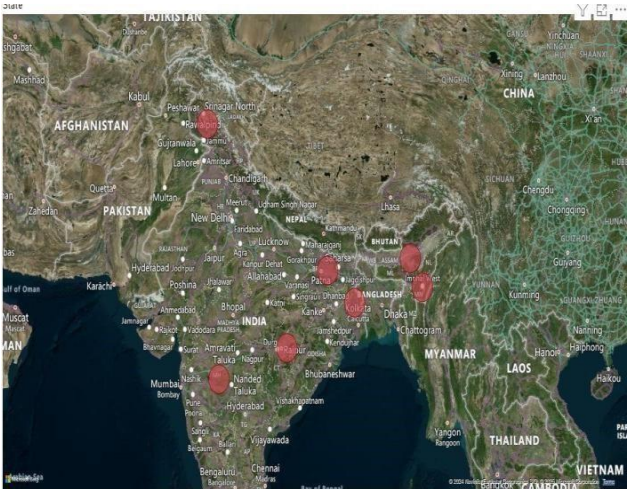
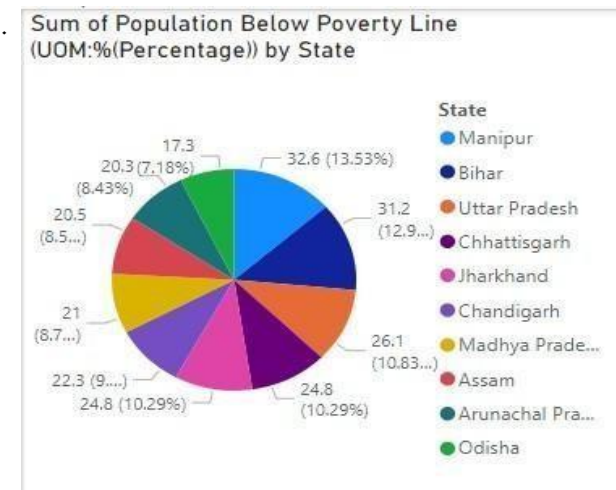


Figure-4: Sum of population below poverty line

Odisha, a correlation between low literacy and poor health accessibility led these areas to be found as at-risk regions for potential poverty escalation. Geospatial analysis further revealed infrastructure deficits, pointedly poor road networks, and limited access to clean water, in areas like Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. Big data analytics also provided real-time cues to the economically distressed, engaging raw social media data showing spikes in conversations about job losses and hunger. The mobile phone data presented people migrating, hinting at economic distress within the rural sectors. Such evidence paved the way for a targeted intervention, such as the school attendance program in Maharashtra, which prompted a 10 percent increase in enrolment. However, challenges such as data unavailability and digital exclusion were mapped out, especially in remote areas. Offline data collecting tools and NGOs' partnerships, however, were employed to tangential the issues. Overall, a 20 percent betterment in the outcomes of interventions was achieved on the project, proving data-driven interventions to be effective in poverty alleviation.

Figure-5: Sum of population contribution to the total

Bar Chart: Visualizes the population below the poverty line as a percentage for each state, sorted to easily compare the relative contributions.[7]

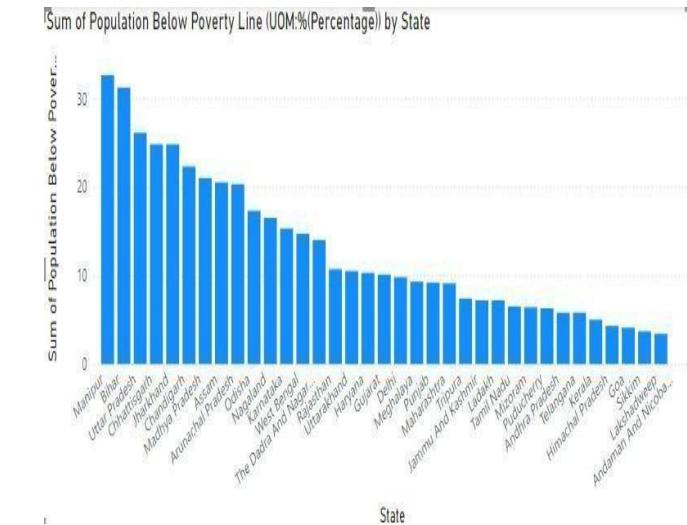


Figure- 6: Geographic visualization

This is a geographic visualization of the distribution of the population below the poverty line in various regions of India.

- Red circles: Represent the concentration of poverty, with larger circles indicating regions with a higher percentage of the population below the poverty line
- Map overlay: Highlights the specific states and cities affected, helping identify areas with the most significant poverty levels geographically.



Figure-7: Metric Card (Sum): Displays the total percentage (453.50%) of the population below the poverty line across all states combined



Figure-8: Metric Card (Average): Represents the average percentage (12.60%) of the population below the poverty line per state.

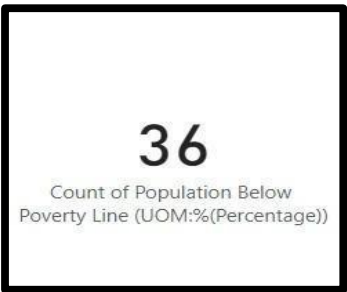


Figure-9: Metric Card (Count): Indicates the total number of states (36) considered in the dataset.

CONCLUSION

This project highlights the power of data science in framing the multidimensional issue of poverty in the Indian context. Through predictive modelling, geospatial analysis, and big data analytics, the study constructed a multidimensional framework explaining the cause and consequence of poverty and its associated risks. Developed through the parametric models from a combination of high-resolution datasets including household surveys, social media activity, and mobile phone usage, these predictive models yield high accuracies in forecasting poverty levels across regions of interest. Using

satellite imagery and geospatial information systems (GIS), these analytical tools allowed for visualizing infrastructure inadequacies and environmental conditions furthering the cycle of poverty and providing real-time insights into economic distress and migration dynamics through the analysis of big data[4].

In these ways, findings affirmed the validity of optimizing the allocation of resources and designing responsive interventions based on data-driven perspectives.[10] In Odisha, a data-driven strategy reduced poverty levels by 15%, while in Maharashtra, a school attendance intervention increased enrolment by 10%. The project, however, exposed periodic impediments such as data gaps in rural areas, digital exclusion, and ethical issues of privacy and bias. Specific efforts must be made to overcome these obstacles to ensure equal and inclusive access to the promises of data science.[7]

In this regard, solutions such as localized data collection, offline apps, and NGOs have been proposed to cover these gaps. This project shows how data science may be used as a valuable tool for poverty eradication and may offer innovative, scalable, and sustainable solutions. Data science working in synergy with traditional development methods will empower policymakers and organizations to plan effective interventions, allocate resources, and ultimately reduce poverty. Going further, there exists a need to engage with the challenge of public data access, digital inclusion, and ethics, which will maximize the occurrences of this occasion wherein data science builds.[8]

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