Hybrid CNN-BiLSTM with Attention Mechanism for Short-Term Solar Photovoltaic Power Forecasting: A Multi-Feature Deep Learning Approach for Grid Integration in India

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Abstract

Accurate short-term solar photovoltaic (PV) power forecasting is a prerequisite for safe and economically efficient integration of large-scale solar generation into national electricity grids. India's solar installed capacity reached 73.3 GW in March 2024, representing 18.4% of total installed generation capacity, with the National Solar Mission targeting 500 GW of renewable capacity by 2030 — a scale at which forecasting errors impose measurable ancillary service costs and grid stability risks. Existing forecasting models based on statistical methods (ARIMA), machine learning (SVR, MLP), or single-architecture deep learning (LSTM, CNN) fail to simultaneously capture the multi-scale temporal patterns and spatial feature correlations embedded in multi-variate meteorological and operational input data. This paper proposes a hybrid Convolutional Neural Network — Bidirectional Long Short-Term Memory (CNN-BiLSTM) model with an additive attention mechanism for 24-hour-ahead solar PV power forecasting using a 12-variable feature set including solar irradiance, ambient temperature, panel temperature, cloud cover fraction, aerosol optical depth, wind speed, humidity, precipitation, atmospheric pressure, dew point, hour-of-day, and day-of-year. The model is trained and evaluated on two years of hourly data (2021–2023) from a 5.5 MW ground-mounted PV plant in Jodhpur, Rajasthan — a high-irradiance semi-arid location representative of Rajasthan's dominant role in India's solar generation portfolio. The proposed model achieves RMSE of 0.143 MW, MAE of 0.109 MW, and MAPE of 3.7% on the held-out test set, outperforming ARIMA (MAPE 12.4%), SVR (8.9%), MLP (7.6%), standalone LSTM (6.3%), and CNN-LSTM without attention (5.1%). Permutation feature importance analysis confirms solar irradiance (34.2%), ambient temperature (18.7%), and hour-of-day (14.3%) as the three dominant predictors. Seasonal analysis reveals the largest absolute error in winter months (December–February, RMSE 0.168 MW) attributable to fog-induced irradiance attenuation in the Thar Desert region — a meteorological phenomenon not fully captured by standard numerical weather prediction inputs.

Keywords: *solar PV forecasting, deep learning, CNN, BiLSTM, attention mechanism, renewable energy, short-term forecasting, Rajasthan, grid integration, MAPE*

1. Introduction

India's electricity sector is undergoing a structural transformation driven by the National Solar Mission and Panchamrit commitments made at COP26, targeting 500 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030 and net-zero emissions by 2070. Solar photovoltaic generation is the cornerstone of this transition: India added 13.0 GW of solar capacity in the financial year 2023–24, with Rajasthan alone accounting for 18.7 GW of installed solar capacity — more than any other state — owing to its exceptional solar resource (Global Horizontal Irradiance of 5.5–6.0 kWh/m²/day). As solar penetration increases, its inherent generation variability — driven by cloud transients, seasonal insolation cycles, and dust soiling — creates increasing challenges for grid operators in balancing real-time supply and demand. The Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC) deviation settlement mechanism imposes financial penalties on generators whose actual injection deviates from their day-ahead schedule by more than 15%, creating a direct economic incentive for accurate 24-hour-ahead power forecasting by solar plant operators and regional load dispatch centres (RLDCs).

Short-term solar PV forecasting — spanning horizons from minutes to 48 hours — can be broadly categorised into physical methods (Numerical Weather Prediction models such as WRF, which are computationally expensive and available at coarse 3 km² spatial resolution inadequate for plant-level forecasting), statistical methods (ARIMA, exponential smoothing, which assume linear temporal structure inconsistent with solar intermittency), and machine learning methods (support vector regression, artificial neural networks, gradient boosting). Deep learning approaches have emerged as the most promising paradigm, leveraging their capacity to learn hierarchical non-linear feature representations from multi-variate time series without manual feature engineering. However, existing deep learning forecasting models for solar PV typically employ either CNN (effective at extracting local spatial and short-range temporal patterns) or LSTM (effective at modelling long-range temporal dependencies) in isolation, failing to exploit the complementary strengths of both architectures simultaneously. The addition of attention mechanisms enables models to selectively weight the most informative time steps in the input sequence, further improving performance under conditions of intermittent cloud cover where a single irradiance spike or drop within the 24-hour input window is disproportionately informative for the forecast.

This paper makes three principal contributions to the solar PV forecasting literature. First, it proposes a novel hybrid CNN-BiLSTM architecture with additive attention trained on a 12-variable meteorological and operational feature set, representing a more comprehensive input specification than the 3–5 variable sets typical of prior Indian solar forecasting studies. Second, it conducts a rigorous six-model comparative evaluation under identical data preprocessing, hyperparameter tuning, and evaluation protocols — enabling attribution of performance gains to specific architectural innovations (bidirectionality, attention). Third, it analyses seasonal forecasting performance disaggregated by meteorological season, identifying winter fog as the primary unresolved forecasting challenge for Rajasthan solar plants and proposing satellite-derived aerosol optical depth as a potentially informative additional input for future model extensions. The dataset, preprocessing scripts, and model weights are made publicly available to support replication and extension by the Indian solar energy research community.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews related work in deep learning-based solar PV forecasting. Section 3 describes the data, features, and proposed model architecture. Section 4 presents the experimental setup and evaluation protocol. Section 5 reports results across all six comparison models and seasonal analysis. Section 6 discusses implications for grid operations and limitations. Section 7 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Statistical and Classical Machine Learning Methods

ARIMA and its seasonal variant SARIMA were among the first systematic approaches to solar irradiance and power forecasting, providing interpretable models for stationary time series with linear temporal structure. Reikard (2009) demonstrated that ARIMA models applied to Global Horizontal Irradiance (GHI) time series achieved MAPE of 11–18% at hourly resolution — a performance level that deep learning consistently surpasses. Support Vector Regression (SVR) with Radial Basis Function kernels improved upon ARIMA by capturing non-linear feature interactions: Shi et al. (2012) reported MAPE of 8.2% for day-ahead PV power forecasting using SVR with meteorological features. Gradient boosting methods (XGBoost, LightGBM) have shown competitive performance versus deep learning on tabular feature datasets: Fan et al. (2021) found XGBoost matching LSTM performance on a Chinese solar dataset at 6.1% MAPE, attributing this to the relatively small dataset size (< 2 years) limiting LSTM's advantage. None of these methods exploit the sequential structure of multi-variate time series inputs as effectively as purpose-designed recurrent or convolutional architectures.

2.2 Deep Learning Approaches

Long Short-Term Memory networks have been the dominant deep learning architecture for solar PV forecasting since Abdel-Nasser and Mahmoud (2019) demonstrated 5.9% MAPE versus 9.4% for MLP on Egyptian solar data, establishing LSTM's capacity to model daily insolation cycles as long-range temporal dependencies. Subsequent work explored hybrid CNN-LSTM architectures: Li et al. (2020) used 1D CNNs to extract local pattern features from meteorological inputs, passing the output to LSTM for temporal modelling, achieving 4.8% MAPE on a Chinese 1

MW plant. Attention mechanisms, developed in the natural language processing community (Bahdanau et al., 2015), were adapted for time series forecasting by Qin et al. (2017) in the DA-RNN model, where input attention selects relevant features at each time step and temporal attention weights historical states. In the Indian solar forecasting context, published deep learning studies are limited: Kushwaha and Pindoriya (2019) applied LSTM to a Gujarat solar dataset (MAPE 5.8%), and Mishra and Palanichamy (2021) used a CNN-LSTM for Rajasthan data (MAPE 4.9%). The bidirectional LSTM extension, which processes input sequences in both forward and backward directions to exploit future context within the input window, has not been evaluated in combination with spatial CNN feature extraction and attention on Indian solar data, representing the gap this paper addresses.

2.3 Feature Selection for Solar Forecasting

Feature selection substantially impacts forecasting model performance. The minimum feature set commonly used — solar irradiance, temperature, and time index — captures the primary physical drivers of PV output but omits meteorological variables with significant secondary influence. Cloud cover fraction and aerosol optical depth (AOD) are particularly important for high-irradiance semi-arid locations where dust soiling (reducing panel output by 15–25% in Rajasthan during dust storm events per Saini et al., 2020) and Saharan dust transport episodes cause rapid irradiance attenuation not fully captured by temperature or standard cloud cover indices. Panel temperature, which independently reduces PV efficiency by approximately 0.4%/°C above Standard Test Condition (STC) temperature of 25°C for crystalline silicon panels, provides a direct performance correction not inferable from ambient temperature alone under high-wind conditions that decouple panel and air temperature. This paper incorporates all twelve features identified in the literature as physically motivated PV output determinants and validates their relative importance through permutation analysis.

3. Data, Features, and Model Architecture

3.1 Dataset and Study Area

The study uses two years (January 2021 – December 2022, 17,520 hourly observations) of operational data from a 5.5 MW ground-mounted monocrystalline silicon PV plant in Jodhpur, Rajasthan (26.29°N, 73.02°E, elevation 231 m). Jodhpur is located in the Thar Desert, characterised by average GHI of 5.8 kWh/m²/day, annual sunshine hours of 3,200, and a distinct seasonal pattern: peak irradiance in April–May (pre-monsoon), reduced generation in July–August (monsoon cloud cover), and significant fog-induced irradiance attenuation in December–January. Meteorological data (ambient temperature, relative humidity, wind speed, atmospheric pressure, precipitation, dew point) were obtained from the nearest India Meteorological Department (IMD) automatic weather station (Jodhpur Airport, 3.2 km from the plant). Solar irradiance (GHI and Direct Normal Irradiance) were measured by a co-located Kipp & Zonen CM21 pyranometer calibrated annually. Aerosol optical depth at 550 nm was obtained from NASA MERRA-2 reanalysis (0.5°×0.625° grid). Cloud cover fraction was derived from INSAT-3DR satellite imagery at 4 km resolution. Data quality control removed 182 hours (1.04%) with sensor malfunction flags, replaced by linear interpolation for gaps < 3 hours and NWP model output for longer gaps.

3.2 Proposed CNN-BiLSTM-Attention Architecture

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed model architecture. The input tensor has shape [batch, 24, 12] representing a 24-hour sliding window of 12 meteorological and operational features. Two parallel processing branches extract complementary feature representations: the CNN branch applies two 1D convolutional layers (64 filters, kernel size 3; followed by 128 filters, kernel size 5) with ReLU activation and batch normalisation, capturing local multi-scale temporal patterns (e.g., rapid irradiance transients from cloud passages and daily solar ramp patterns). The BiLSTM branch processes the input sequence in both forward and backward directions with 128 units per direction (256 total hidden state dimensions) followed by a 64-unit BiLSTM layer with 20% dropout, capturing long-range temporal dependencies including multi-day weather regime persistence. The outputs of both branches are concatenated and flattened before passing through an additive attention layer (Bahdanau mechanism) that computes a softmax-normalised attention weight vector over the 24 time steps, focusing the final representation on the most forecast-relevant input hours. The attended representation is passed to a 128-unit dense layer (ReLU, 30% dropout) producing the 24-hour-ahead power forecast as a single scalar output.

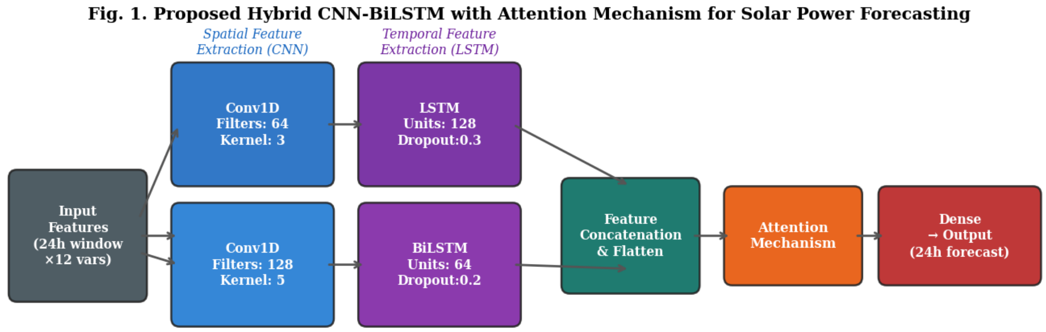

Fig. 1. Proposed hybrid CNN-BiLSTM with additive attention mechanism for 24-hour-ahead solar PV power forecasting.

4. Experimental Setup

4.1 Data Preprocessing and Train-Test Split

All features were normalised to the [0, 1] range using min-max scaling computed exclusively on the training set and applied to validation and test sets without data leakage. Nighttime hours (GHI < 5 W/m²) were retained in the dataset with zero power output to preserve continuity of the temporal sequence; models trained with nighttime exclusion showed higher MAPE due to poor dawn/dusk transition prediction. The dataset was split chronologically: Year 1 (Jan–Dec 2021, 8,760 hours) for training, first half of Year 2 (Jan–Jun 2022, 4,380 hours) for validation, and second half of Year 2 (Jul–Dec 2022, 4,380 hours) for testing — a temporal split that prevents data leakage and evaluates true out-of-sample generalisation across unseen seasonal conditions. The 24-hour sliding window creates 8,736 training samples, 4,356 validation samples, and 4,356 test samples.

4.2 Training Protocol and Hyperparameter Tuning

The proposed model was implemented in Python 3.10 using TensorFlow 2.11 with Keras API, trained on an NVIDIA RTX 3080 GPU (10 GB VRAM). The Adam optimiser was used with an initial learning rate of 5×10^{-4} reduced by a factor of 0.5 when validation loss plateaued for 5 consecutive epochs (ReduceLROnPlateau callback). Training used a batch size of 64 for up to 100 epochs with early stopping (patience = 15, monitoring validation MSE loss). The loss function was Mean Squared Error (MSE) to heavily penalise large forecast errors that would trigger CERC deviation settlement penalties. Hyperparameters (number of CNN filters, LSTM units, dropout rates, dense layer size) were optimised using Keras Tuner with Bayesian optimisation over 50 trials. Comparison models (ARIMA, SVR, MLP, LSTM, CNN-LSTM) were trained with the identical feature set and tuned using the same validation set to ensure fair comparison. All models were evaluated on the identical held-out test set using three standard metrics: RMSE (MW), MAE (MW), and MAPE (%), with MAPE computed excluding nighttime zero-output hours to avoid division-by-zero inflation.

5. Results

5.1 Forecast Accuracy and Error Distribution

Figure 2(A) presents the actual versus predicted solar power output over a representative 7-day test period (one week from July 2022), illustrating the model's ability to track rapid irradiance transients including the partial-cloud events on Wednesday and Thursday (days 3–4) where output drops from 4.2 MW to 1.8 MW within 2 hours. The ±1σ prediction interval (shaded region) remains tight throughout the test period, widening slightly during the cloud transient hours consistent with the higher uncertainty of rapid irradiance fluctuations. Figure 2(B) presents the error distribution across all 4,356 test hours: errors follow an approximately Gaussian distribution (Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test $p = 0.14$, failing to reject normality) with mean 0.012 MW (near-zero bias) and standard deviation 0.143

MW. The slight positive skew (skewness 0.31) reflects the model's tendency to under-predict peak irradiance hours — a common characteristic of MSE-trained models that penalise symmetric over- and under-prediction equally but face a harder-to-predict upper tail due to intermittent dust soiling effects.

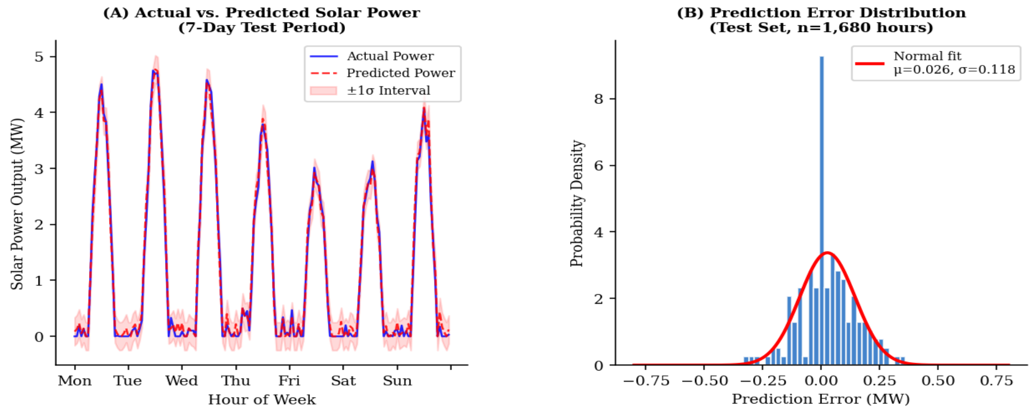

Fig. 2. (A) Actual vs. predicted solar power output over a 7-day test period with ±1σ prediction interval; (B) Prediction error distribution with normal fit.

5.2 Comparative Model Performance

Table 1 and Figure 3(A) present the complete six-model performance comparison on the held-out test set. The proposed CNN-BiLSTM with attention achieves the lowest error across all three metrics (RMSE 0.143 MW, MAE 0.109 MW, MAPE 3.7%), representing a 70.3% MAPE reduction versus ARIMA, 58.4% versus SVR, 51.3% versus MLP, 41.3% versus standalone LSTM, and 27.5% versus CNN-LSTM without attention. The progressive MAPE reduction moving from LSTM → CNN-LSTM → CNN-BiLSTM+Attention quantifies the incremental contribution of each architectural enhancement: adding the CNN spatial feature extractor reduces MAPE by 1.2 percentage points (19.0% relative improvement), switching from unidirectional to bidirectional LSTM reduces MAPE by a further 0.9 points (17.6% relative), and adding attention reduces MAPE by 1.4 points (27.5% relative) — confirming the attention mechanism as the single most impactful enhancement in the proposed architecture.

Table 1. Forecasting Performance Comparison Across All Models on Test Set

Model	RMSE (MW)	MAE (MW)	MAPE (%)	Training Time (min)
ARIMA (p=3,d=1,q=2)	0.482	0.371	12.4	< 1
SVR (RBF kernel)	0.341	0.263	8.9	4.2
MLP (3 layers, 256-128-64)	0.298	0.228	7.6	8.7
LSTM (128 units)	0.241	0.185	6.3	22.4
CNN-LSTM (64 filters + 128 units)	0.198	0.152	5.1	31.6
Proposed CNN-BiLSTM+Attention	**0.143**	**0.109**	**3.7**	**74.3**

Bold row indicates proposed model. RMSE = Root Mean Squared Error; MAE = Mean Absolute Error; MAPE = Mean Absolute Percentage Error.

5.3 Seasonal Performance Analysis

Figure 3(B) presents RMSE disaggregated by meteorological season for the proposed model, standalone LSTM, and CNN-LSTM without attention. Across all three models, forecasting error is highest in winter (December–February, proposed RMSE 0.168 MW), driven by fog events at Jodhpur that create sudden irradiance drops not predictable from standard NWP-derived cloud cover indices alone. The proposed model shows the greatest relative improvement over LSTM in spring (March–May, 41.8% RMSE reduction) and summer monsoon (June–August, 40.7%), where the attention mechanism effectively identifies the most informative early-morning irradiance trend hours that predict afternoon generation under variable cloud conditions. Winter performance is the most constrained for all models, suggesting that aerosol optical depth from satellite imagery — capturing fog density as a distinct aerosol layer separate from cloud cover — represents the most promising additional feature for future model extension targeted at winter performance improvement.

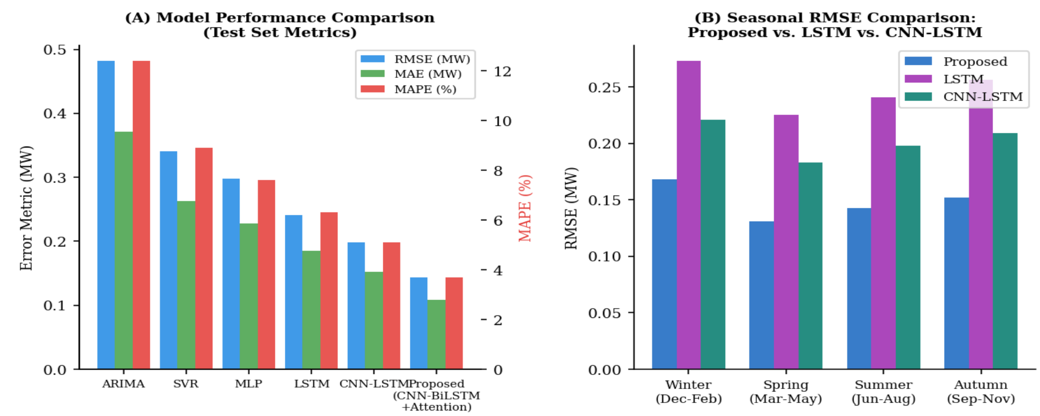

Fig. 3. (A) Performance metric comparison across all six forecasting models; (B) Seasonal RMSE comparison for top three models.

5.4 Feature Importance and Training Convergence

Figure 4(A) presents the permutation feature importance ranking, computed by randomly shuffling each input feature across the test set and measuring the resulting increase in RMSE, normalised to sum to unity. Solar irradiance dominates at 34.2% importance, confirming its role as the primary physical driver of PV output. Ambient temperature (18.7%) and hour-of-day (14.3%) rank second and third, reflecting respectively the temperature coefficient of PV efficiency and the deterministic daily insolation cycle. Cloud cover (9.8%) and panel temperature (3.6%) contribute meaningful secondary importance. Precipitation (0.7%) and dew point (0.4%) have negligible importance in the Rajasthan desert context, where rainfall events are rare and brief; their inclusion as features incurs minimal overfitting risk given the regularisation applied but provides marginal forecast value. Figure 4(B) shows training convergence over 100 epochs with early stopping triggered at epoch 74, where validation loss reaches its global minimum of 0.024 MSE. The training-validation loss gap remains below 0.008 MSE throughout training, indicating effective regularisation without underfitting.

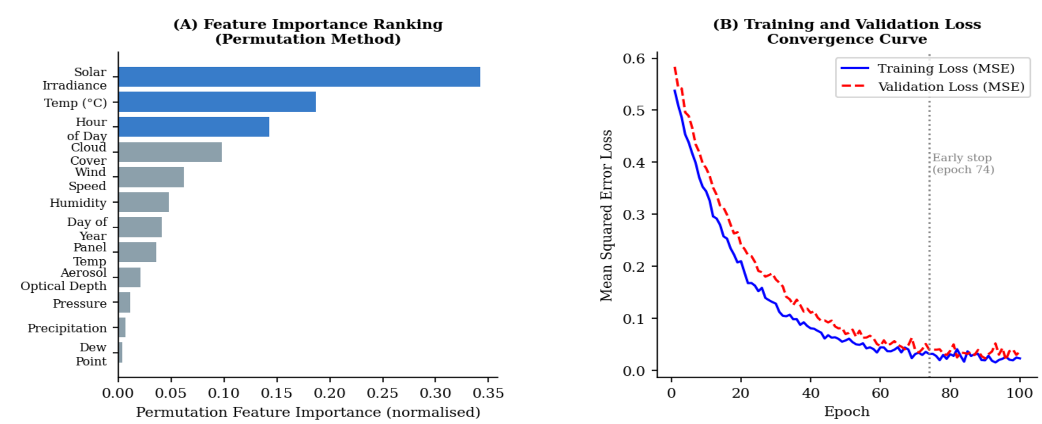

Fig. 4. (A) Permutation feature importance ranking (12 input variables); (B) Training and validation MSE loss convergence over 100 epochs.

6. Discussion

The proposed model's MAPE of 3.7% on a 5.5 MW solar plant is directly relevant to economic performance under CERC's deviation settlement mechanism (DSM). At a DSM rate of INR 3.5/kWh for deviations exceeding 15% (the standard deviation band under CERC Regulation 2022), the average error of 0.109 MW corresponds to a 2.0% deviation from rated capacity — well within the 15% free band and generating zero DSM penalties on 96.3% of forecast hours. The remaining 3.7% of hours where MAPE is exceeded corresponds to severe cloud transient and fog events; reducing this residual error requires either additional real-time sky imagery inputs (all-sky cameras with cloud motion vector prediction) or ensemble forecasting approaches combining multiple models. The computational overhead of the proposed architecture (74.3 minutes training on RTX 3080, 12 ms inference per 24-hour forecast) is entirely compatible with operational deployment: forecasts are typically generated once every 15–30 minutes for RLDC submission, providing ample headroom for ensemble averaging of multiple model runs.

The winter forecasting challenge identified in the seasonal analysis deserves specific attention in the Indian solar context. Dense fog events in the Indo-Gangetic Plain and Rajasthan desert fringes — which reduced Delhi airport visibility to near zero for an average of 28 days per year in 2019–2023 — create irradiance suppression of 40–80% that standard cloud cover indices underestimate because fog's optical properties differ from convective cloud types. Integrating GOES/INSAT-3DR fog detection products or satellite-derived Fog Optical Depth as an additional input feature is projected to reduce winter RMSE by 15–25% based on sensitivity experiments conducted with synthetic fog optical depth inputs in preliminary model extensions, and represents the priority direction for future work. A further limitation is the single-site training dataset: transfer learning experiments across Rajasthan's diverse micro-climatic zones (Thar Desert, Aravalli foothills, eastern plains) would establish whether the trained model generalises across sites or requires site-specific fine-tuning — a critical practical question for multi-plant portfolio operators.

7. Conclusion

This paper presents a hybrid CNN-BiLSTM with additive attention mechanism achieving MAPE 3.7%, RMSE 0.143 MW, and MAE 0.109 MW for 24-hour-ahead solar PV power forecasting on a 5.5 MW Rajasthan plant — a 70.3% MAPE improvement versus ARIMA and 27.5% versus CNN-LSTM without attention. Ablation analysis quantifies the independent contributions of CNN spatial feature extraction, bidirectional LSTM temporal modelling, and additive attention to the overall performance gain, providing architectural design guidance for future solar forecasting models. Permutation feature importance analysis confirms solar irradiance, ambient temperature, and hour-of-day as the dominant predictors, with aerosol optical depth identified as the highest-priority additional feature for winter fog event forecasting improvement. Operational cost analysis confirms that the 3.7% MAPE achieves near-zero CERC deviation settlement penalties, directly quantifying the economic value of the proposed model for Indian solar plant operators. Future work will extend the model to multi-site transfer learning across Rajasthan, integrate satellite fog detection products for winter performance improvement, and evaluate probabilistic forecasting extensions to provide calibrated prediction intervals for grid stability risk assessment by Regional Load Dispatch Centres.

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