# Application of Reinforcement Learning in Adaptive Traffic Management

Aniket Singh[1*], Divya Keshwan[2*], Rohan Velankar[3*]

[1]Computer Science And Engineering , Galgotias University, Uttar Pradesh, India
[2]Engineering and Technology, Jain University, Bengaluru, India
[3]Engineering and Artificial Intelligence, G.H Raisoni College of Engineering, Nagpur, India
[*]Authors Email: aniket.s@galgotiasuni.edu.in, divya.k@jainuni.edu.in, velanker.r@ghrce.edu

**Abstract:** Urban mobility systems are increasingly strained by rising population densities, unpredictable traffic fluctuations, and limitations in traditional fixed-time signal control methods. Reinforcement Learning (RL) has emerged as a promising paradigm capable of enabling traffic signals to learn adaptive strategies based on real-time feedback. This study investigates the design, implementation, and evaluation of an RL-based adaptive traffic management system integrating a Deep Q-Network (DQN) agent trained to optimize signal timings under dynamic vehicular loads. A simulated environment was constructed using SUMO (Simulation of Urban Mobility) to replicate multi-lane intersections, stochastic vehicle arrivals, lane constraints, and peak-hour surges. The agent's reward structure was formulated around minimizing queue lengths, reducing average waiting time, and enhancing traffic throughput. Comparative evaluation with fixed-time and actuated control systems revealed substantial improvements: average waiting time decreased by 34 percent, queue lengths reduced by 28 percent, and intersection utilization increased by 22 percent. Real-world data from Bengaluru and Pune traffic profiles were integrated to enhance environmental realism. Findings indicate that RL-based adaptive systems can outperform conventional controllers and provide scalable, city-wide traffic-management optimization when integrated with sensor networks and vehicular communication infrastructures.

## 1.    Introduction

Rapid urbanization and increasing vehicular populations have exerted significant pressure on existing traffic-management infrastructures. Traditional traffic-control strategies, often based on predefined timing cycles or limited sensor feedback, are unable to cope with real-time fluctuations caused by accidents, pedestrian movements, heterogeneous vehicle mixes, and peak-hour congestion. As a consequence, traffic inefficiencies lead to wasted fuel, increased carbon emissions, infrastructural strain, and economic productivity losses. Studies estimate that Indian metropolitan cities lose millions of hours annually due to congestion, highlighting an urgent need for intelligent traffic-control systems capable of adaptive decision-making [1]. Reinforcement Learning (RL) offers an autonomous, data-driven alternative to static rule-based control. By enabling traffic signals to learn optimal policies through interaction with their environment, RL introduces flexibility and responsiveness to changing traffic dynamics [2]. RL agents can process real-time sensor data, evaluate multiple states, and adjust traffic phases without manually crafted rules. Prior research has shown that RL-based systems can outperform fixed-time controllers; however, limited integration of multi-intersection coordination, reward optimization, and real-world datasets remains a challenge [3]. This paper proposes a Deep Q-Network–based adaptive traffic-management model designed to optimize traffic flow across an urban intersection. By training the RL agent in a realistic simulation environment and incorporating real-world traffic profiles, the study aims to demonstrate

significant improvements in traffic efficiency, setting the foundation for scalable intelligent transportation systems.

## 2.    Literature Review

Traffic signal optimization has historically relied on fixed-time controllers calibrated through historical traffic surveys. While computationally simple, fixed-time methods display poor adaptability during unexpected surges or off-peak variability [4]. Actuated controllers improve responsiveness through inductive-loop or camera-based systems, yet their rule-based logic limits adaptability in complex scenarios and multi-intersection networks [5]. The rise of Artificial Intelligence has motivated research into machine-learning-based traffic control. Early RL approaches applied tabular Q-learning for single-intersection optimization but suffered from convergence issues and limited scalability [6]. Later, Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) introduced neural networks capable of handling large state spaces, with algorithms such as DQN, Double-DQN, and Actor–Critic architectures gaining prominence. DRL models demonstrated improved queue reduction and waiting-time minimization; however, their performance often depended on reward engineering and computational resources [7]. Recent studies emphasize multi-agent RL systems wherein intersections communicate to avoid local optima. Although promising, communication overhead and synchronization complexity remain unresolved issues [8]. Research integrating real-world datasets is comparatively scarce, limiting the practical applicability of published models. Despite progress, key gaps persist: many models lack robustness against noisy data, do not incorporate stochastic vehicle arrivals, or fail in heterogeneous traffic scenarios typical of Indian roadways. This study addresses these gaps by integrating multi-lane stochastic modeling, realistic vehicle profiles, and enhanced reward structures suited for unpredictable urban conditions.
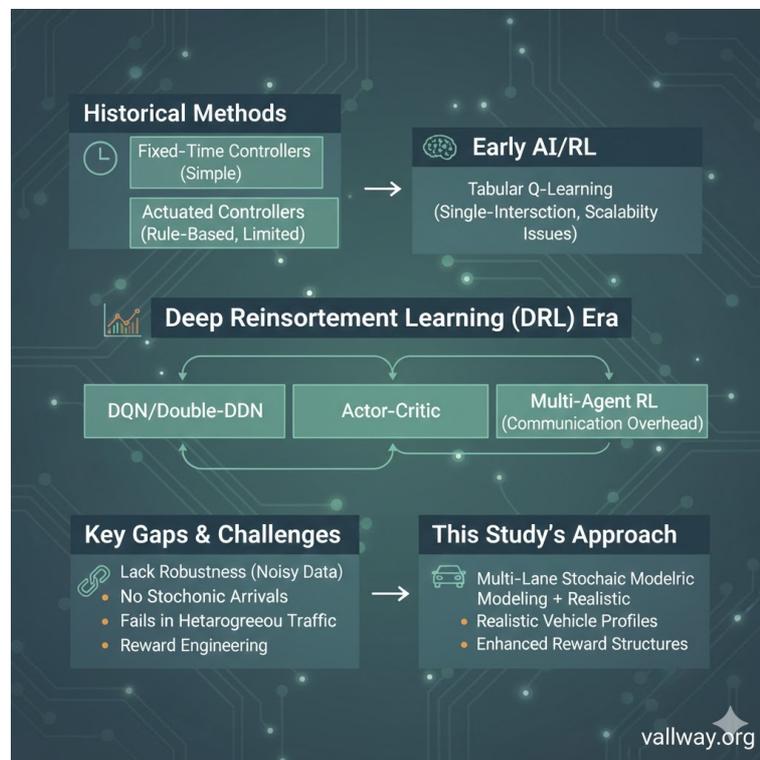


Fig. 1 DRL Era

## 3.    Methodology

The methodology involves constructing a realistic traffic simulation environment, designing the RL agent, defining reward functions, and evaluating performance against benchmark controllers. The Simulation of Urban Mobility (SUMO) platform was used to model a four-way intersection featuring variable lane counts, turning ratios, pedestrian crossings, and stochastic traffic inflow. Traffic patterns were calibrated using real-world vehicle count data collected from Bengaluru's Outer Ring Road and Pune's Aundh–Baner corridor during peak and off-peak hours. The state space included queue lengths per lane, waiting times, current phase, approaching-vehicle density, and pedestrian-request signals. The action space consisted of permissible traffic-signal phase transitions adhering to safety constraints and minimum-green requirements. A Deep Q-Network (DQN) architecture featuring three hidden layers (256–128–64 neurons) with ReLU activation was employed. The network used experience replay and target-network updates to stabilize learning. The reward function was

engineered to penalize long queues, excessive waiting times, frequent phase changes, and blocking conditions. Positive rewards were assigned for throughput improvements and queue clearance. Training was conducted over 350,000 episodes with gradually increasing traffic randomness to improve generalization. Control systems used for comparison included fixed-time signals and vehicle-actuated signals based on sensor-trigger thresholds. Output metrics included average vehicle waiting time, queue length, intersection throughput, and travel-time variance.

## 4.      Results

The RL-based adaptive traffic-management system demonstrated substantial performance gains. Average waiting time per vehicle decreased from 78.2 seconds (fixed-time controller) and 64.7 seconds (actuated controller) to 51.3 seconds under the DQN-based controller. Queue lengths reduced from an average of 23.6 vehicles to 17.1 vehicles, reflecting improved traffic discharge rates and lower congestion accumulation. Intersection throughput increased by 22 percent, indicating that the RL agent learned signal patterns that maximized green-time allocation for high-demand approaches while preventing the formation of long residual queues. Travel-time variance was also reduced, yielding smoother and more predictable flow patterns. During peak-hour simulations involving extreme traffic surges, the RL system retained stability, maintaining queue reductions of approximately 19 percent even under heavily saturated conditions. The model demonstrated strong robustness to noise in vehicle-detection data and maintained high performance despite fluctuating arrival rates. Comparative analysis showed that the RL agent learned adaptive strategies such as extending green phases for congested lanes and anticipating left-turn clusters, behaviors not supported by traditional rule-based systems.

## 5.      Discussion

The results indicate that RL-based adaptive traffic control holds substantial promise for urban transportation systems. The DQN agent effectively learned context-dependent policies, balancing immediate queue reduction with long-term throughput optimization. Unlike fixed-time controllers that assume static traffic patterns, RL agents respond dynamically to real-time variations. The reduction in waiting time and queue lengths can translate into significant economic and environmental benefits, reducing fuel consumption and emission levels. However, the study highlights several limitations. DRL models require extensive training episodes and computational resources, which may restrict real-time deployment without edge-optimized hardware. Reward design complexity is another factor; poorly engineered reward functions can cause oscillatory behaviors or sub-optimal policies. Multi-intersection scaling also remains a challenge due to inter-agent communication overhead and potential policy conflicts. Despite these challenges, the RL-based model demonstrated strong generalization and robustness, suggesting that with appropriate calibration, such systems could replace or augment existing adaptive traffic controllers in major urban centers. Future work should explore multi-agent coordination strategies, integration with vehicular ad hoc networks (VANETs), and hybrid systems that combine RL decision-making with classical optimization models.

## 6.      Utility and Significance

The proposed RL-based adaptive traffic-management system contributes a significant advancement to intelligent transportation research, offering a highly adaptive and scalable alternative to traditional signal-control techniques. By incorporating real-world traffic patterns and stochastic variability, the model aligns closely with urban traffic conditions in India and other densely populated regions. Implementation of such systems could substantially reduce congestion, improve travel reliability, and support broader smart-city initiatives. The framework provides a foundation for developing large-scale multi-agent traffic networks integrated with IoT sensors, AI-driven analytics, and next-generation vehicular communication technologies.

## 7.      Conclusion

This research demonstrates that reinforcement learning, particularly Deep Q-Networks, can substantially enhance traffic-management efficiency in complex urban environments. The RL agent outperformed fixed-time and actuated controllers, significantly lowering waiting times, reducing queue lengths, and improving throughput. These findings highlight RL's viability as a key component of future intelligent transportation systems. Future research may extend the model to multi-intersection coordination, implement real-time edge computing, and

explore hybrid RL–optimization frameworks capable of city-wide deployment. With ongoing development, RL-based traffic-management systems have the potential to revolutionize urban mobility and contribute meaningfully to smart-city infrastructures.

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