# **RSC Advances**



# **PAPER**

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Cite this: RSC Adv., 2021, 11, 14399

# Unique hierarchical SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> marigold flower like nanoheterostructure for solar hydrogen production†

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The novel marigold flower like  $SiO_2@Znln_2S_4$  nano-heterostructure was fabricated using an *in situ* hydrothermal method. The nanoheterostructure exhibits hexagonal structure with marigold flower like morphology. The porous marigold flower assembly was constructed using ultrathin nanosheets. Interestingly, the thickness of the nanopetal was observed to be 5–10 nm and tiny  $SiO_2$  nanoparticles (5–7 nm) are decorated on the surface of the nanopetals. As the concentration of  $SiO_2$  increases the deposition of  $SiO_2$  nanoparticles on  $Znln_2S_4$  nanopetals increases in the form of clusters. The optical study revealed that the band gap lies in the visible range of the solar spectrum. Using X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS), the chemical structure and valence states of the as-synthesized  $SiO_2@Znln_2S_4$  nano-heterostructure were confirmed. The photocatalytic activities of the hierarchical  $SiO_2@Znln_2S_4$  nano-heterostructure for hydrogen evolution from  $H_2S$  under natural sunlight have been investigated with regard to the band structure in the visible region. The 0.75%  $SiO_2@Znln_2S_4$  showed a higher photocatalytic activity (6730  $\mu$ mol<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>) for hydrogen production which is almost double that of pristine  $Znln_2S_4$ . Similarly, the hydrogen production from water splitting was observed to be 730  $\mu$ mol<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>. The enhanced photocatalytic activity is attributed to the inhibition of charge carrier separation owing to the hierarchical morphology, heterojunction and crystallinity of the  $SiO_2@Znln_2S_4$ .

Received 10th February 2021 Accepted 10th April 2021

DOI: 10.1039/d1ra01140e

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## 1 Introduction

In recent years, the combined extreme energy shortages and environmental degradation have been triggered by technological development that demands a huge amount of fossil oil. Therefore, intensive studies focus on investigating alternative energy resources with renewable and environmentally-friendly advantages.  $^{\rm 1-2}$  Among them, hydrogen will be considered a possible candidate for future use in conventional fuels.  $^{\rm 3}$  Photocatalytic  $\rm H_2S$  & water splitting is one of the most promising approaches for hydrogen production, as it can perform a conversion that converts solar light into chemical energy.  $^{\rm 4-6}$  Various materials with important photocatalytic hydrogen evolution properties, such as MoS2, BiVO4, CuO, Ti3C2 etc., have been prepared to date.  $^{\rm 7-10}$  Ternary ZnIn2S4 is a semiconductor

As one of the most promising n-type semiconductors, ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> has captured much interest in the field of photocatalytic hydrogen generation, which can be attributed to its non-toxic properties and suitable band structure (2.2-2.5 eV)16,17 Similar to other photocatalysts, ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> suffers electron-hole recombination, slow oxygen evolution reaction kinetics and low visible light utilization.18 Combining ZnIn2S4 with other semiconductors is an effective method to inhibit the recombination of photogenerated charge carriers and improve the photo-Until now, many  $ZnIn_2S_4$ heterostructures and doped ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> with various morphologies such as ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>/Ni<sub>12</sub>P<sub>5</sub>, 19 g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Ag:ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>, 20 SnS@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>, 21 Ag-doped ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>,<sup>22</sup> CdS/QDs/ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>,<sup>23</sup> Ti<sub>3</sub>C<sub>2</sub> MXene@TiO<sub>2</sub>/ ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ref. 24) have been reported to exhibit admirable visiblelight photocatalytic activity. These literatures emphasized that while some prodigious work has been done in the field of photocatalysis, catalytic efficiency is still insufficient. It also needs more studies to explore new ways of further improving it.

 $SiO_2$  is an insulator mesoporous material.  $SiO_2$  has been widely used in the fields of catalysis, separation and adsorption due to its large specific surface area, abundant surface hydroxyl

chalcogenide with great visible-light-responsive photocatalytic activity, considerable chemical stability and ample flat band potential which attracted considerable interest in lithium ion batteries and gas sensor applications. 11-15

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<sup>†</sup> Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: 10.1039/d1ra01140e

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groups, environmental friendliness, stable chemical properties, uniform pore size and relatively high mechanical strength.<sup>25-27</sup> SiO2 is mainly used in many heterostructures to enhance the photocatalytic performance of other semiconductor by increasing the surface area of the catalyst and it affects on the charge carrier recombination.<sup>28,29</sup> In past, various attempts have been made to enhance the photocatalytic activity of individual semiconductors by coupling with SiO<sub>2</sub> such as g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/SiO<sub>2</sub>, <sup>30</sup> SiO<sub>2</sub>@TiO<sub>2</sub>core@Shell,<sup>31</sup> SiO<sub>2</sub>/CNOs/TiO<sub>2</sub>,<sup>32</sup> gC3N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub>/Fe<sub>3</sub>- ${\rm O_4@SiO_2,^{33}} \ \, \gamma\text{-Fe}_2{\rm O_3@SiO_2@TiO_2,^{34}} \ \, {\rm TiO_2\text{-}SiO_2Ag,^{35}} \ \, {\rm NiO/SiO_2,^{36}}$ ZnFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>@SiO<sub>2</sub>@TiO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>37</sup> So, to overcome the problem of fast recombination of photoinduced electron-hole pair and enhance the photocatalytic performance of pure ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>, we synthesized a ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> and decorated with SiO<sub>2</sub> nanoparticles to enhance the separation and transfer efficiency of electrons. With this motivation, we have prepared a new SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> hybrid semiconductor by coupling SiO<sub>2</sub> and ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report on SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> heterostructure for H<sub>2</sub> production from H<sub>2</sub>S & Water splitting.

In the view of above findings, we report the hierarchical SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nano-heterostructure for efficient generation of hydrogen, which was synthesized using facile hydrothermal method. These fabricated heterostructures were thoroughly characterized using XRD, FESEM, UV-Vis spectroscopy, PL and TEM. The fabrication of SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nano-heterostructure increases the charge separation and also enhances the solar light response. Thus, under solar light irradiation, the high output rate of hydrogen is observed. In addition, the component effect on photocatalytic efficiency of SiO2@ZnIn2S4 nanoheterostructure and the proposed photocatalytic mechanism have been further investigated.

# **Experimental sections**

Zinc nitrate hexahydrate (Zn(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·6H<sub>2</sub>O), Indium nitrate (In(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O), Thiourea (CSNH<sub>2</sub>CS), Silicon Dioxide (SiO<sub>2</sub>) used for the preparation of catalysts are of analytical grade (SDfine-chem limited, India) and used without any further purification.

## Synthesis of ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> and SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>

All the chemicals used for SiO2@ZnIn2S4 synthesis were analytical grade and used without further purification. The hydrothermal method was used to synthesise SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> photocatalysts and the procedure is briefly defined as follows: first, 1 mole of hexahydrate zinc nitrate (Zn(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·6H<sub>2</sub>O) (99.99%) and 2 moles of indium nitrate  $(In(NO_3)_3 \cdot 4H_2O)$ (99.99%) and 8 moles of thiourea were mixed in a beaker (a) in 70 mL distilled water and stirred at room temperature for 15 minutes. After stirring, 0.25 wt% of silicon dioxide was applied to the above solution in beaker (a). The clear solution was then moved to a Teflon autoclave with a capacity of 150 mL and held in an electric oven at 150 °C for 30 hours. As the synthetic catalyst was washed several times with absolute ethanol and deionized water, the yellow powder was obtained. For pure  $ZnIn_2S_4$ , 0.25% $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$ , 0.50% $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$ , 0.75%

 $SiO_2$ @ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>, 1%  $SiO_2$ @ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> were labelled as (ZS-1), (ZS-2), (ZS-3), (ZS-4) and as (ZS-5) respectively and were subsequently used for further analysis and comparison.

## 2.2 Photocatalytic study

2.2.1 Photocatalytic hydrogen generation from water. The photochemical reaction was carried in a 70 mL total volume airtight cylindrical quartz reactor with a cooling jacket for water circulation. All the reactions were carried out at ambient conditions under natural sunlight on sunny days (March to May months) between 10 am to 3 pm at Pune, located in the Maharashtra state of India. The intensity of solar light was measured by using a digital Lux meter. The measured average intensity of solar light reaching the surface of the earth was 145 000 Lux. In a typical photocatalytic experiment, 15 mg of the photocatalyst was dispersed in 25 mL total volume containing 20% methanol (v/v) in aqueous solution. The 45 mL free space of photoreactor made airtight with rubber septum followed by ultrasonication for 5 min for the uniform dispersion of catalyst. The solution mixture was then purged with Ultra High Purity nitrogen gas (UHP-99.999%) to remove all the gases in the headspace of the reactor and dissolved oxygen from the reaction mixture. Before and after irradiation with solar light, the gas in the free space of the reactor was analyzed using gas chromatography (GC). The generated gas was analyzed immediately using GC with a specific time interval.

2.2.2 Photocatalytic hydrogen generation from water. The hydrogen generation is performed in a cylindrical quartz photochemical thermostatic reactor introducing 0.5 g SiO<sub>2</sub>@-ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>. The reactor was filled with 700 mL 0.5 M aqueous KOH and purged with Argon for 30 min. Hydrogen sulfide is bubbled through the solution for 1 h at the rate of 2.5 mL min $^{-1}$  at 299 K. SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> photocatalyst is introduced as a suspension into a cylindrical quartz reactor and irradiated with the sunlight at a constant stirring with a continuous flow of H2S (2.5 mL min $^{-1}$ ). The excess of H<sub>2</sub>S was trapped in 10% NaOH solution. The amount of H2 gas evolved was measured using a graduated gas burette and analyzed using gas chromatography technique (GC) equipped with thermal conductivity detector (TCD) and Porapak-Q packed column with N2 as a carrier gas.

### Samples characterization

The phase formation and crystallite size of all synthesized samples were estimated via X-ray Diffractometry (XRD-D8, Advance, Bruker-AXS) with Ni-filtered Cu-K $\alpha$  radiation ( $\lambda$  = 1.5418 Å). Optical properties of the bare and Au loaded samples were studied by UV-Vis-DRS spectrophotometer (UV 2600 spectrometer, Lambda-950, Perkin-Elmer) in the spectral range of 200-800 nm. The surface morphology was characterized using Field Emission Scanning Electron Microscopy (FESEM; Hitachi, S-4800 II) and Field Emission Transmission Electron Microscopy (FETEM; JEM-2000 FS). Image processing and interplanar distance (d) evaluation were performed with the help of micrograph Gatan software. Surface characterization of all SiO2@ZnIn2S4 samples was carried out using X-ray

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Photoelectron Spectroscopy (XPS, ESCA3000, VG Scientific Ltd.) at a pressure of  $>1 \times 10-9$  Torr. The general scan C1s, S2p, In3d, Sn3d, and Zn2p core level spectra were recorded with non-mono chromatized Mg-Ka radiation (photon energy-1253.6 eV). Baseline correction and peak fitting for all the samples were done using software package XPS peak-41. The core level binding energies (BEs) were aligned with respect to the C1s binding energy of 285 eV. The collected gas sample was analyzed using a Gas chromatography system (Shimadzu GC-2014) with portapak-Q packed column coupled with TCD detector and nitrogen (N2-UHP) as a carrier gas.

## Results and discussions

#### Structural study 3.1

The phase purity and crystallinity of the as-synthesized pristine ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> and SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nano-heterostructure were investigated by using X-ray diffraction analysis. Fig. 1 depicts the XRD diffractogram of the as-synthesized samples (ZS1-ZS5). The pristine ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS1) shows diffraction peaks at 27.93°, 47.57°, 33.62°, 44.44°, 29.14° and 56.89° are indexed to crystalline planes (311), (440), (400), (511), (222), and (533), respectively. The diffraction peaks reveal presence of cubic phase of ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (JCPDS 00-023-0295).38 For the SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> heterostructures, it has the similar XRD patterns like pristine

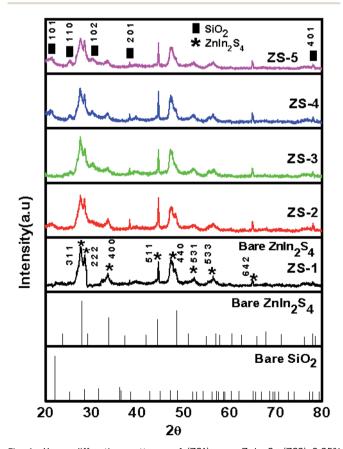


Fig. 1 X-ray diffraction patterns of (ZS1) pure ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS2) 0.25%  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  (ZS3) 0.50%  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  (ZS4) 0.75%  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$ and (ZS5) 1% SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> sample Photocatalyst.

ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> and the diffraction peaks corresponding to SiO<sub>2</sub> are not observed because very small amount of SiO<sub>2</sub> (i.e. less than equal to 1%). This also could be because of nano tiny SiO2 surface is covered with dense nano-petals of ZnIn2S4, which may prevent XRD from detecting the inner SiO<sub>2</sub>. Additionally, the peak intensity of ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> slightly decreased with the increase of SiO<sub>2</sub> content. The crystalite size is obtained for nanoheterostructure is around 15 nm against bare ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> i.e. 13.65 nm. The lattice parameter of  $SiO_2$ @ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> is a = b = c 10.78 Å having cubic system (space group Fd3m & space group number 227). The XRD findings may suggest the coexistence of SiO2 and ZnIn2S4 in the nano-heterostructures of SiO2@ZnIn2S4, which will be further illustrated by the following observations from XPS, FESEM and TEM. No diffraction peaks were obtained for any impurities, which indicate the pure nature of the SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> samples assynthesised.

## 3.2 Surface and morphological studies

The morphological investigation of as-synthesized SiO<sub>2</sub>@-ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nano-heterostructures was observed by using field emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM). Fig. 2 shows FESEM images of as-synthesized pristine ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS1) and SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS2–ZS5) nano-heterostructures. The low magnification image (Fig. 2a) of pristine ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> demonstrates the ultrathin curled nanosheets which self-assembled in the form of marigold flower. The average diameter of flower was found to be 7-12 um. The high magnification image (Fig. 2b) indicate that these flower are assembled by ultrathin interlocked nanosheets (nanopetal) with the thickness about 5-10 nm. The FESEM images of SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nanoheterostructures (ZS-2 to ZS-5) as shown in Figure (2c to j). From figures, the effect of addition of SiO<sub>2</sub> on surface morphologies of nano-heterostructures was investigated.

Fig. 2c-j depicts FESEM imagos of as-synthesized nanoheterostructures (ZS-2 to ZS-5), where the flowers like morphology was retained. Most significantly, extremely crystalline ultrathin nanosheets are seen in case of ZS-4 (Fig. 2g and h). This shows the fully grown ultrathin nanosheets curled and form nanoflowers. Furthermore, as percentage of SiO2 increases (ZS-5), the small SiO<sub>2</sub> nanoparticles deposited on nanopetals of flower & ultrathin nanosheets (nanopetals) get distorted (Fig. 2i and j). As the concentration of SiO<sub>2</sub> increases there is a deposition of the SiO<sub>2</sub> particles on the nanopetals of ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>. Further, increasing concentration, there is a formation of SiO2 clusters on nanopetal of the flowers. We observed uniform deposition/ coating for sample ZS-4 (Deposition of 0.75% SiO<sub>2</sub>).

The microstructural aspects of as-synthesized SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS-4) nano-heterostructure were confirmed by field emission transmittance electron microscopy (FETEM). Fig. 3 depicts the TEM images of SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>. The TEM images of SiO<sub>2</sub>@-ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> clearly shows flower-like structure formed by ultrathin nanosheets (nanopetals). These results are well in accordance with FESEM (Fig. 2). More specific details about the nanoheterostructure of SiO2@ZnIn2S4 was further examined by HRTEM, as shown in Fig. 3c. The lattice fringes are distinctly identified with interplanar distances of 0.312 nm and 0.4 nm,

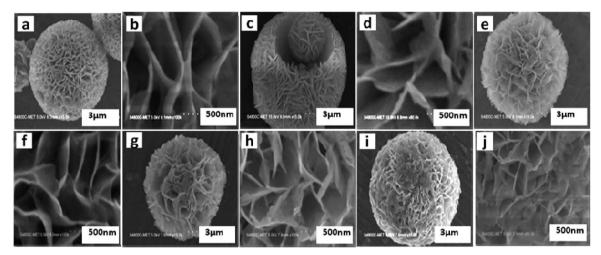


Fig. 2 Representative FE-SEM images of (a and b) pure  $ZnIn_2S_4$  (c and d) 0.25%  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  (e and f) 0.50%  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  (g and h) 0.75%  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  and (i and j) 1%  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  sample photocatalyst.

which correlates to the d spacing of (311) and (101) planes of  $ZnIn_2S_4$  and  $SiO_2$ , respectively.<sup>39,40</sup> Fig. 3d demonstrate the selected area diffraction pattern of as-synthesized sample, which clearly shows polycrystalline nature of  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nano-heterostructure. From Fig. 3e, the observed diffraction

dots can be assigned to (311) and (101) planes of  $ZnIn_2S_4$  and  $SiO_2$ , respectively. These results are consistent with XRD results. To investigate the distribution of  $SiO_2$  in  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nanoheterostructure the EDS analysis was performed (Fig. 3e and f). These results clearly indicate the uniform distribution of Si,

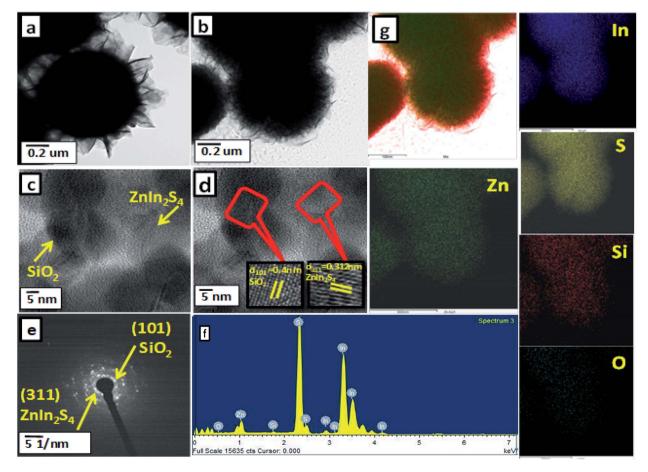


Fig. 3 (a) FE-TEM images of pure  $ZnIn_2S_4$ , (b) FE-TEM images of  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$ , (c) HRTEM (d) SAED pattern (e) EDAX spectra and (f) elemental mapping of 2%  $SiO_2$  loaded  $ZnIn_2S_4$ .

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Scheme 1 Schematic representation of the formation mechanism of  $SiO_2$ @ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nanoheterostructure.

h)

Zn, In, S, & O in  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nano-heterostructure. More significantly, the TEM results confirm the successful formation of  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nano-heterostructure and there exists intimate contact between  $SiO_2$  and  $ZnIn_2S_4$ .

We can easily predict the mechanism of the flower-like structure of SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> based on morphological studies. Initially, the nucleation begins to form the Zn<sup>2+</sup>, In<sup>3+</sup> and S<sup>2-</sup> ions with the dissociation of the sulphur source, zinc and indium nitrate precursor at a low temperature. The degree of dissociation of zinc and indium salts is greater in the water-like polar solvent. In the supersaturated solution, the petite nuclei were formed and there was further growth of nanoparticles over a time (Scheme 1). In order to minimize their surface energy that further evolves anisotropically along with 2D directions, these new nanoparticles impulsively agglomerated, aligned and confer the formation of ultra-thin nanosheets (Nanopetals). And then after prolonged hydrothermal reaction the curled nanopetals are formed because of surface tension created on the petals. Further, this curving nature petals self-assembled and form marigold like flower structure. During reaction the disperse SiO2 nanoparticles gets deposited on the surface of the nanopetals.

## 3.3 Optical properties

The optical absorption study of the pristine  $ZnIn_2S_4$  and  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nano-heterostructures is important for its photocatalytic application. The UV-Vis diffuse reflectance spectra of

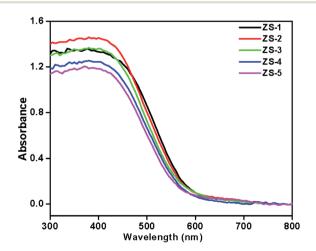


Fig. 4 UV-DRS spectra of (ZS1) pure Znln<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS2) 0.25% SiO<sub>2</sub>@-Znln<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS3) 0.50% SiO<sub>2</sub>@Znln<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS4) 0.75% SiO<sub>2</sub>@Znln<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> and (ZS5) 1% SiO<sub>2</sub>@Znln<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> sample photocatalyst.

as-synthesized nano-heterostructures (ZS-1 to ZS-5) are shown in the Fig. 4. The  $ZnIn_2S_4$  shows an absorption edge of about 570 nm and its band gap is estimated to be 2.16 eV.<sup>41</sup> Compared to the pristine  $ZnIn_2S_4$ , the all  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nano-heterostructures exhibited a small red shift in UV-vis diffuse reflectance absorption spectrum (DRS) and the visible light absorption intensity was also increased due to  $SiO_2$  nano-particles decoration. The addition of  $SiO_2$  will greatly improve light harvesting, separation and transfer of photoinduced charge carriers (h<sup>+</sup>/e<sup>-</sup>) and can be shown by the following spectrum of photoluminescence. Thus,  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nano-heterostructures demonstrated promising usage as a photocatalyst under visible light irradiation relative to pristine  $ZnIn_2S_4$ .

Photoluminescence (PL) emission spectrum measurement was performed for pristine ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS1) and SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS2-ZS5) nano-heterostructures (Fig. 5). This spectrum can provide useful information on capture and recombination charge carriers in semiconductor. The ZS-1 PL spectrum displays a broad peak  $\sim$ 572 nm, attributing to the band gap transfer emission with the light energy nearly equivalent to the ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> band gap energy. 42 For SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> Samples, their PL spectra are similar to that of pristine ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>, but after SiO<sub>2</sub> modification a significant decrease in PL intensity was observed. Such obvious reduction in PL intensity strength revealed the suppression in recombination rate of photogenerated e<sup>-</sup> & h<sup>+</sup> in the SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>. Interestingly, ZS-4 has shown lowest PL Intensity which indicates optimum concentration of SiO2 can inhibit electron hole recombination strongly. At very high concentration of SiO2 i.e. 1% the transport of electrons get hindered which ultimately increased the electron hole recombination. However, at moderate SiO2 concentration i.e. 0.75% to electron transport to the surface is quite high. Therefore, we conclude that of the ZS-4 sample has more efficient charge carrier separation compared to other samples.43

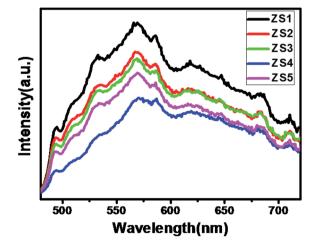


Fig. 5 Photoluminescence spectra of (ZS1) pure Znln<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS2) 0.25% SiO<sub>2</sub>@Znln<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS3) 0.50% SiO<sub>2</sub>@Znln<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS4) 0.75% SiO<sub>2</sub>@Znln<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> and (ZS5) 1% SiO<sub>2</sub>@Znln<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> sample photocatalyst.

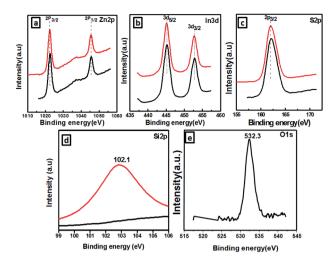


Fig. 6 XPS spectra of the as-prepared  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  (a) Zn2p, (b) In3d, (c) S2p, (d) Si3d.

## 3.4 XPS study

The SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> XPS spectra are analyzed in a contrastive manner in order to further confirm the formation of the SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nano-heterostructure and determine its elemental composition and valence states. The Zn 2p, In 3d, S 2p, Si 2P, and O 1 s high-resolution XPS spectra provides more detailed information on the chemical state of these elements in Fig. 6a-e respectively. Fig. 6a shows the Zn 2p region in SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nano-heterostructure with high resolution. Based on figure, 2p<sub>1/2</sub> and 2p<sub>3/2</sub> splitting respectively defined the doublet of Zn 2p. The binding energies at 1046.02 eV associated with  $Zn^{2^+}$   $p_{1/2}$ , whereas those of 1021.24 eV were correlated with  $Zn^{2^+}$   $p_{3/2}$ .<sup>44</sup> Fig. 6b shows the In 3d highresolution spectrum and the  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$ heterostructure peak at 453.54 eV and 445.18 eV corresponds to In<sup>3+</sup> 3d<sub>3/2</sub> and In<sup>3+</sup> 3d<sub>5/2</sub> respectively.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the XPS signal (Fig. 6c) observed at a 162.89 eV binding energy is attributed to  $S^{2-}$   $2p_{3/2}$  which is inconsistent with  $ZnIn_2S_4$ results.45 Similarly, Fig. 6d and e shows the high resolution spectrum of the energy levels of Si 2P and O 1 s. The binding energies located at 102.1 eV and 532.3 eV verified the existence of Si & O element in SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nano-heterostructure. 46 On the basis of the above results, it indicates that SiO<sub>2</sub> nanoparticle are distributed uniformly on ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>. Together with the TEM and optical results, these results suggest that ZnIn2S4 was hybridized with SiO2 by the successful formation of nanoheterostructure, which provides synergistic interaction between  $SiO_2$  and  $ZnIn_2S_4$  matrices for the transfer of charge carriers.

## 3.5 Photocatalytic study

3.5.1 Photocatalytic activity measurement. As conferred earlier,  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  is a good semiconductor having a narrow band gap falling in the visible region at room temperature. Considering the good response towards solar light, photocatalytic activities of  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  have been investigated. Herein, we report the photocatalytic  $H_2$  evolution performance from water and  $H_2S$  under natural sun light.

3.5.2 Photocatalytic  $H_2$  evolution from  $H_2O$ . The effect of  $SiO_2$  loading on  $ZnIn_2S_4$  and their photo-catalytic activity of hydrogen generation were studied under natural sunlight irradiation using  $Na_2S/Na_2S_2O_3$  as a scavenger electron donor. A series of experiments were performed using different concentrations of  $SiO_2$  on the surface of  $ZnIn_2S_4$ , and their results are given in Table 1. The investigation results indicated that the maximum hydrogen generation, *i.e.* 796  $\mu$ mol h<sup>-1</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>, was obtained for the sample ZS-4, whereas pure  $ZnIn_2S_4$ , shows hydrogen evolution rates of 138  $\mu$ mol h<sup>-1</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>. Furthermore, 0.25%  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$ , 0.50%  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  & 1%  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  give 237, 480 & 643  $\mu$ mol h<sup>-1</sup> g<sup>-1</sup> respectively from water splitting. Fig. 7 shows the time-dependent hydrogen generation

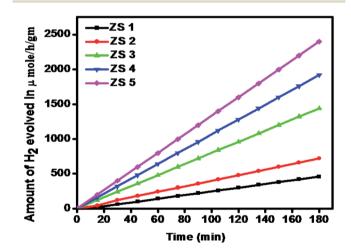


Fig. 7 Time versus volume of  $H_2$  (µmole) evolution from  $H_2O$  of the all samples synthesized at (ZS-1) pure  $Znln_2S_4$  and  $SiO_2@Znln_2S_4$  nanoheterostructure prepared with a different percent of  $SiO_2$  loading (ZS-2) 0.25%, (ZS-3) 0.50%, (ZS-4) 0.75%, and (ZS-5) 1%.

 $\textbf{Table 1} \quad \text{The $H_2$ generation rates for as-synthesized $ZnIn_2S_4$, $SiO_2 \& SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$}$ 

Sr. no.	Sample code	$H_2$ evolution rate from water (µmol $h^{-1} \; g^{-1})$	$H_2$ evolution rate from $H_2S$ (µmol $h^{-1}\ g^{-1})$
1	ZS1	138	3350
2	ZS2	237	4320
3	ZS3	480	5650
4	ZS4	796	6730
5	ZS5	643	6050

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using the as-synthesized ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> and SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nanoheterostructures. The linearity of the graph shows a continuous and stable hydrogen generation rate. Which reveals that most exciting electrons are available for proton reduction. For this experiment, we used 70 mL DI water and Na<sub>2</sub>S/Na<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> mixture as a sacrificial agent. In the present case, 0.25 M Na<sub>2</sub>S and 0.35 M Na<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> mixture were used to resist the photo-corrosion of the semiconductor. Moreover, the Na2S solution acts as a hole scavenger, and it oxidized S<sup>2-</sup> into S<sup>2-</sup>, which is beneficial for hydrogen generation from SiO2@ZnIn2S4 rather than alcohol. The photocatalytic hydrogen generation mechanism from water is well reported and discussed in the previous literature.47 The Semiconductor photocatalyst after interaction with solar light with energy greater than or equal to band gap energy generates electrons in CB and holes in VB. It causes redox reactions of adsorbed species on a semiconducting material. The photogenerated holes from VB irreversibly oxidize S<sup>2-</sup>, which was reduced back to S<sup>2-</sup> by Na<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and radially got adsorbed on the surface of semiconductor producing protons (H<sup>+</sup>) and free radicals, while electrons from CB reduce H<sup>+</sup> ions into molecular hydrogen.

$$SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4 \xrightarrow{hv} e^- + h^+$$
 (1)

Oxidation:

$$SO_3^{2-} + 2OH^- + 2h^+ \rightarrow SO_4^{2-} + 2H^+$$
 (2)

$$2S^{2-} + 2h^+ \rightarrow S_2^{2-}$$
 (3)

$$S_2^{2-} + SO_3^{2-} \rightarrow S_2O_3^{2-} + S^{2-}$$
 (4)

$$SO_3^{2-} + S^{2-} + 2h^+ \rightarrow S_2O_3^{2-}$$
 (5)

Reduction:

$$H^+ + 2e^- \rightarrow H_2 \tag{6}$$

3.7.1 Photocatalytic H2 evolution from  $H_2S$  splitting. The photocatalytic activity of the as-synthesized pristine  $ZnIn_2S_4$  and  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nano-heterostructure is evaluated for hydrogen production via.  $H_2S$  splitting under natural sunlight. Fig. 8 and Table 1 shows amount of hydrogen evolved via.  $H_2S$  splitting using ZS-1 to ZS-5 samples. The graph linearity clearly shows stable evolution rate of hydrogen. Control experiments indicated that no evolution of hydrogen was detected in the absence of photocatalyst.

From Fig. 8, it is observed that pristine  $ZnIn_2S_4$  exhibits hydrogen production rate of 3350  $\mu$ mol h<sup>-1</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>, The enhanced photocatalytic H<sub>2</sub> generation can be attributed to the hydrothermal assisted growth of flower-like  $ZnIn_2S_4$  assembled from ultrathin nanosheets (nanopetals) which facilitates more catalyst surface for reaction and light harvesting. The photocatalytic hydrogen production activity of  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nanoheterostructure increases with increase in  $SiO_2$  content. The sample ZS-2 exhibits significant H<sub>2</sub> production rate 4320  $\mu$ mol

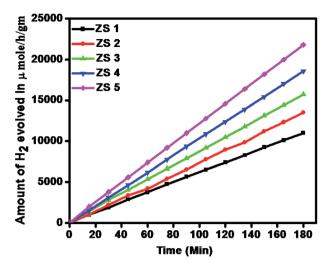


Fig. 8 Time versus volume of  $H_2$  (µmole) evolution from  $H_2S$  of the all samples (ZS-1) pure  $Znln_2S_4$  and  $SiO_2@Znln_2S_4$  nanoheterostructure prepared with a different percent of  $SiO_2$  loading (ZS-2) 0.25%, (ZS-3) 0.50%, (ZS-4) 0.75%, and (ZS-5) 1%.

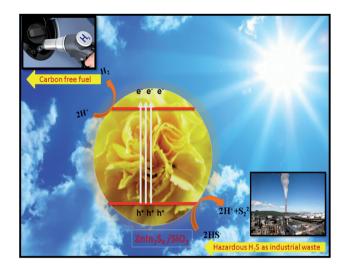
 $h^{-1}$   $g^{-1}$ , which is 30% higher compared to the ZS1 sample. Amongst all of the photocatalysts (ZS1-ZS5), 0.75 wt% loaded SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nano-heterostructure (ZS-4) showed the highest rate for  $H_2$  production (6730  $\mu$ mol  $h^{-1}$   $g^{-1}$ ) under natural sunlight. The optimized 0.75 wt% loaded SiO2@ZnIn2S4 shows twice hydrogen production rate as compared to pristine ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>. The highest H<sub>2</sub> evolution was achieved for ZS-4 (0.75 wt% loaded SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>) and is due to the high crystallinity, flower like morphology and band structure of SiO<sub>2</sub>@-ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>. More specifically, in contrast to earlier studies, the H<sub>2</sub> evolution obtained for sample ZS-4 is much greater. The sample ZS-5 shows substantially less evolution of H<sub>2</sub> due to the increase in band gap relative to sample ZS-4. It is mainly due to the fact that the relatively high weight ratio of SiO<sub>2</sub> in SiO<sub>2</sub>@ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (ZS-5) can increase shielding in the light absorption and opacity, which ultimately reduce penetration of light through the depth of the reaction solution. The efficient charge separation and possible hydrogen production mechanism in SiO2@ZnIn2S4 nano-heterostructure explained by considering the SiO<sub>2</sub>@-ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> band gap energy diagram as shown in Scheme 2. Initially, the nano-heterostructure SiO2@ZnIn2S4 is irradiated under sunlight during photocatalysis. The photo-excitation of the charge carriers occurs in ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>, which induces h<sup>+</sup> in the valence band (VB) and e<sup>-</sup> in the ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> conduction band (CB). The photo-induced holes in the VB oxidizes  $S_2^{2-}/SO_3^{2-}$  to oxidation products (SO<sub>4</sub><sup>2-</sup>/S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub><sup>2-</sup>).48 Meanwhile, photoinduced electrons in the CB will move to the deposited SiO<sub>2</sub> nanoparticles in order to reduce H<sup>+</sup> to H<sub>2</sub>.

$$H_2S + OH^- \leftrightarrow HS^- + H_2O$$
 (7)

$$H_2S + OH^- \leftrightarrow S^{2-} + H_2O$$
 (8)

Photo catalyst 
$$\rightarrow e_{CB}^- + h_{VB}^+$$
 (9)

$$2S^{2-} + 2 h_{VB}^{+} \rightarrow S_2^{2-}$$
 (10)



Scheme 2 Schematic representation of the photocatalytic mechanism of  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  heterostructure.

$$2HS^{-} + 2h_{VB}^{+} \rightarrow S_{2}^{2-} + 2H^{+}$$
 (11)

$$2H^{+} + 2e_{CB}^{-} \rightarrow H_{2}$$
 (12)

The existence of  $SiO_2$  nanoparticles in  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nanoheterostructure will thus prevent direct charge recombination and promote the separation of electrons and holes. Additionally, provide more active sites for surface reactions, resulting in the enhanced photocatalytic  $H_2$  production using  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$ . The enhancement of hydrogen evolution rate is also supported by photoluminance (PL) study. PL Study shows that there is a decrease in PL intensity in case of ZS-4 Sample which indicates many vacancy defects in the composites which ultimately inhibits charge carrier recombination. In nutshell, the nanoheterostructure, flower like morphology is responsible for good hydrogen evolution in case of ZS-4 Sample.

## 4 Conclusions

In nutshell,  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nanoheterostructure with marigold flower like structure was synthesized successfully. The photocatalytic efficiency of the  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$  nanoheterostructure for the evolution of hydrogen under natural sunlight was investigated. The highest  $H_2$  evolution *i.e.* 796  $\mu$ mol  $h^{-1}$   $g^{-1}$  for water splitting & 6730  $\mu$ mol  $h^{-1}$   $g^{-1}$  for  $H_2S$  Splitting using 0.75 wt percent  $SiO_2$  loading on  $ZnIn_2S_4$  was achieved which is almost twice of pristine  $ZnIn_2S_4$ . It is due to high crystallinity, flower-like morphology and band structure of  $SiO_2@ZnIn_2S_4$ . This study highlights the nanoheterostructure with marigold flower like morphology which shows efficient charge separations due to intimate contact of the  $SiO_2$  with nanopetals of flowers. Such kind of other nanoheterostructures may have potential as a photocatalyst for higher hydrogen evolution.

## Conflicts of interest

There is no any conflict of intrest.

# Acknowledgements

ARG like to thanks Dr R. J. Barnabas (Principal Ahmednagar College Ahmednagar) for useful suggestions and discussion and JRD Tata, SPPU for financial support. The authors would like to thank Nanocrystalline materials group. BBK would like to thanks the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (Meity), Government of India and C-MET Pune for providing research facilities.

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