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Highly selective ammonia sensing at room temperature using DC plasma-modified MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers

This cover art features the research work of Anurag Kashyap and Hemen Kalita from the Nanomaterials and Nanoelectronics Laboratory, Department of Physics, Gauhati University, Assam, India. It visually represents the enhancement in ammonia sensing by DC plasma-modified MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers at room temperature. It highlights the effect of plasma treatment on the hydrothermally synthesized MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers in enhancing sensitivity and selectivity towards very low concentrations of NH<sub>3</sub>. This advancement holds potential for the development of efficient, low-cost gas sensors for environmental monitoring applications.

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# Highly selective ammonia sensing at room temperature using DC plasma-modified MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers†

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This study explored the enhancement of ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>) sensing properties of MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers through a direct current (DC) plasma treatment with nitrogen incorporation. Plasma treatment induced sulfur vacancies and introduced nitrogen atoms into the MoS<sub>2</sub> surfaces, enhancing the number of active sites and improving the charge carrier mobility. The structural and chemical alterations were confirmed by characterisations using FE-SEM, XPS, and Raman spectroscopy. The resulting plasma-treated MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor demonstrated highly selective detection of NH<sub>3</sub> at room temperature with a rapid response time of 22 s and a recovery time of 23 s. The experimental limit of detection was achieved at 5 ppm (theoretically  $\approx$  80 ppb), which was lower than the safety threshold set by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Results of DFT studies also agreed with the experimental results. Thus, this work highlights DC plasma treatment as an efficient, cost-effective approach to enhance gas sensing performance, with implications for developing highly sensitive and selective sensors for environmental monitoring and safety applications.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the detection of toxic gases has gained increasing importance in various fields, ranging from air quality control and workplace safety to medical diagnostics.<sup>1–3</sup> In particular, detection of ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>) has received significant interest owing to its adverse health effects, including severe respiratory conditions like asthma, emphysema, and chronic bronchitis, even when exposed to low levels.<sup>4</sup> Different types of sensing technologies, such as electrochemical cells and metal oxide chemiresistors, have been reported for the commercial detection of toxic gases.<sup>5</sup> However, these sensors often face challenges, such as the need for high operating temperatures and poor selectivity for differentiating between various gases.

To address these limitations, researchers have focused on alternative materials, particularly low-dimensional materials. Owing to their unique physiochemical properties, such as large

specific surface areas, distinct electrical properties, and ease of functionalisation, 2D materials have gained significant importance in gas sensing in recent years.<sup>4,6,7</sup> Among the 2D materials, transition metal dichalcogenides (TMDs) are promising candidates for fabricating highly sensitive gas and volatile organic compound (VOC) sensors.<sup>8</sup> These materials provide weak gas-molecule binding and efficient charge transfer, enabling gas detection at room temperature.<sup>9,10</sup> Among the TMDs, molybdenum disulfide (MoS<sub>2</sub>) has sparked a lot of research interest as a prominent sensing material owing to its high surface-to-volume ratio, high surface activity and sensitivity, quick response time, and outstanding stability.<sup>11–16</sup> In fact, MoS<sub>2</sub> is more appealing than graphene-based gas sensors owing to its semiconducting nature and the appropriate, adjustable band gap energies.<sup>17</sup> Despite its potential, MoS<sub>2</sub> still suffers from selectivity issues owing to similar VOC adsorption energies, making it difficult to detect one gas without interference from the other.<sup>18,19</sup> To overcome this, advanced fabrication techniques have been implemented, including doping, intercalation, and the creation of heterostructures, enhancing the material's ability to target specific gases more effectively.<sup>20–24</sup>

Plasma treatment is a prevalent method to alter the inherent physical and chemical properties of TMDs for application in gas sensing, ion storage, and oxygen reduction and hydrogen evolution reactions.<sup>5,25–28</sup> RF plasma treatment is commonly

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employed to alter surfaces because of its ability to provide homogeneous treatments applicable to 2D, complicated, and 3D materials.<sup>29</sup> The direct current plasma (DC plasma) treatment is another method by which material sensing properties can be modified by incorporating surface defects.<sup>30,31</sup> The procedure involves high-energy ions and reactive plasma species that alter the surface morphology and electronic characteristics. The creation of defects such as vacancies, surface states, and dangling bonds results in such changes, which increase the surface area. These modifications increase the sensitivity of the ability to adsorb the analyte, facilitate charge transfer, and thus increase the sensitivity and selectivity of the sensor. Moreover, plasma treatment with DC offers an avenue to modify sensor surfaces because it is extremely adaptable, less expensive than RF plasma, and suitable for a variety of materials.<sup>31</sup> Plasma processing has recently demonstrated itself as a rapid, convenient, straightforward, and effective approach for modifying the surface chemical characteristics of materials, particularly for the treatment of 2D materials without solvent contamination.<sup>32,33</sup> The chemical properties of the plasma process gas are crucial for determining the reaction mechanisms involved in plasma surface modification. Various gases, including oxygen, argon, helium, nitrogen, ammonia, carbon dioxide, and water, are used as process gases in surface modification techniques using plasma.<sup>34</sup> This approach may produce additional edge sites and heteroatoms, enhancing their charge carrier mobility and catalytic and optoelectronic capabilities.<sup>35,36</sup> Among the many existing methodologies, nitrogen plasma treatment has recently been recognized as an excellent approach for achieving controlled nitrogen atom incorporation into TMDs.<sup>5,28,34,37</sup> Zhao *et al.* developed an N-doped MoS<sub>2</sub> nanosheet-based sensor with improved sensitivity to NO<sub>2</sub> at room temperature.<sup>28</sup> Initially, MoS<sub>2</sub> nanosheets were

hydrothermally fabricated and N-doping was performed *via* nitrogen plasma to synthesize N-MoS<sub>2</sub> nanosheets. Nitrogen atoms were introduced using a plasma-assisted technique. The atoms were adsorbed on the surface and doped into the lattice defects of MoS<sub>2</sub>. This modified the electronic properties, such as the reduction of the Fermi level and the narrowing of the band gap.<sup>36</sup> The structure increased the conductivity and sensitization with NO<sub>2</sub>, thereby increasing the response and reducing the detection limit.

This study reported the effects of DC plasma treatment on the NH<sub>3</sub> sensitivity of the MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflower structure. Plasma-treated MoS<sub>2</sub> shows selective detection of NH<sub>3</sub> at RT (25 °C), greatly improving its sensing performance. N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor has a faster response time of 22 s and takes 23 s to recover. Moreover, plasma treatment significantly stabilized the sensing response of the sensor. The experimental and theoretical limits of detection were 5 ppm and 80 ppb, respectively. An effective way of improving room temperature NH<sub>3</sub> detection is described in this study.

## 2. Experimental section

### 2.1. Materials

Sodium molybdate (Na<sub>2</sub>MoO<sub>4</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O), thioacetamide (CH<sub>3</sub>CSNH<sub>2</sub>), and oxalic acid (H<sub>2</sub>C<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>) were obtained from Sisco Research Laboratories (SRL) and used as received. The plasma treatment was performed using a glow discharge plasma reactor to produce N<sub>2</sub> and Ar plasma. Fig. 1 shows a schematic of the experimental assembly. Deionised water (DIW) was used throughout the experiment.

### 2.2. Synthesis of MoS<sub>2</sub>

A wet chemical route is followed to synthesize MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers. In a typical reaction, 1 g of sodium molybdate and 1.2 g

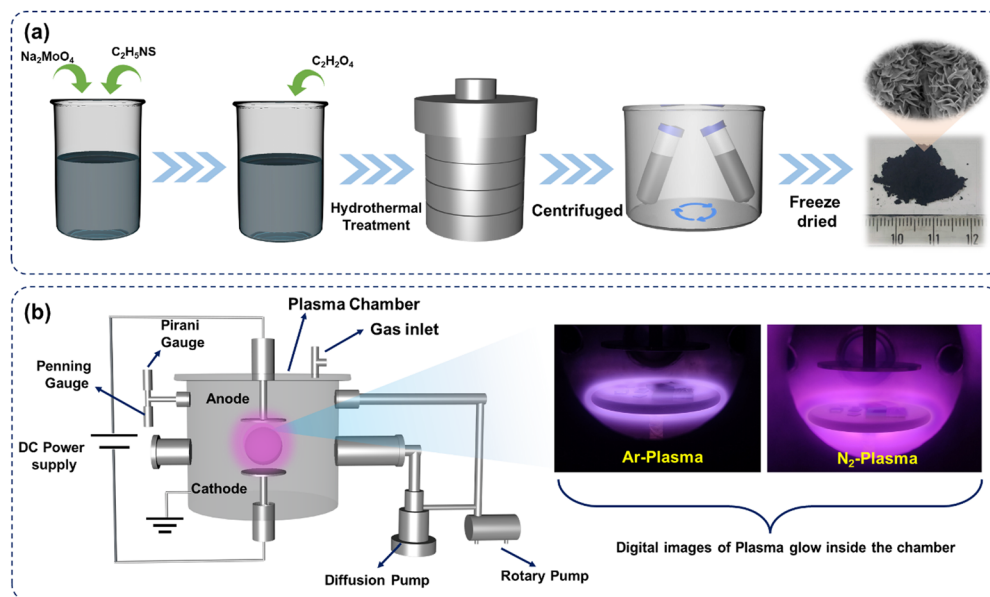


Fig. 1 Schematic of (a) synthesis of MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers following the wet chemical route and (b) plasma treatment assembly with digital images of Ar and N<sub>2</sub> plasma during treatment.



of thioacetamide are stirred in 50 mL of DI water for 30 min at ambient temperature. Then, 0.6 g of oxalic acid was added to the mixture, which was further stirred for another 30 min. The solution was then hydrothermally treated for 24 h at 200 °C by being put in a 100 mL Teflon beaker and sealed inside a stainless steel (SS) container. After cooling to room temperature, the sample is centrifuged with ethanol and DI water and freeze-dried for 24 h.

### 2.3. Sensor electrode fabrication

Interdigitated electrode structures (IDE) have been fabricated following a standard copper (Cu) etching procedure using a ferric chloride (FeCl<sub>3</sub>) solution. The desired IDE structure was transferred to the copper printed circuit board (PCB), which was dipped in FeCl<sub>3</sub> solution following agitation for the etching of the unwanted copper. Finally, the IDE structure remains on the board and is rinsed with ethanol and DI water and dried by purging nitrogen before deposition of the sensing material.

### 2.4. Synthesis of N-MoS<sub>2</sub>

As nitrogen plasma is treated on the sensor, the sensor is termed as N-MoS<sub>2</sub> in the entire report. Sensors were treated with an argon/nitrogen plasma produced from a custom-built glow discharge reactor. The sensor was fabricated using the drop-casting method. The synthesized MoS<sub>2</sub> sample was dispersed and drop-cast on sensors composed of copper IDEs and dried in a vacuum oven at 60 °C for 3 h before plasma treatment. Fig. 1(b) shows a schematic of the experimental setup. The plasma chamber, a cylindrical stainless steel (SS 304L) vessel with a volume of approximately  $3.5 \times 10^3$  cm<sup>3</sup> (diameter: 30.0 cm, height: 50.0 cm), was evacuated using a diffusion pump (1000 L min<sup>-1</sup>) backed by a rotary pump (540 L s<sup>-1</sup>). A base pressure of  $\sim 10^{-6}$  mbar was achieved.

Two circular stainless steel (SS 304L) electrodes initiated the discharge and were powered by a DC power supply (1000 V, 2.5 A). Ultra-pure argon/nitrogen gas (99.99%) was introduced into the chamber through a digital flow controller to maintain a working pressure of  $1.0 \times 10^{-1}$  mbar. The sensors were exposed to Ar and N<sub>2</sub> plasma for 2 and 10 minutes, respectively.

A Langmuir probe was used for plasma diagnostics. The measured plasma density was  $4.35 \times 10^{15}$  m<sup>-3</sup> and  $4.43 \times 10^{15}$  m<sup>-3</sup> in the presence and absence of sensors, respectively. The electron temperature remained relatively constant at 1.38 eV. The slight decrease in plasma density observed in the presence of sensors is attributed to plasma-sample interactions.<sup>34,38</sup>

### 2.5. Computational details

The computations conducted utilised the density functional theory (DFT) – based Cambridge Serial Total Energy Package (CASTEP) module, which is integrated into the Materials Studio software suite.<sup>4,7,39</sup> The Kohn–Sham equations were solved using the plane-wave pseudopotential method developed within the DFT framework.<sup>40</sup> For the exchange–correlation function, the generalized gradient approximation (GGA), as outlined by Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE), was used for

geometry optimization.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the computations, the DFT-D dispersion correction suggested by Grimme and used in CASTEP was used to account for the van der Waals (vdW) intermolecular forces.<sup>42</sup> A  $6 \times 6 \times 1$  *k*-point mesh was used to sample the Brillouin zone with an energy cutoff of 517 eV. Geometry optimization, which is essential for achieving a configuration's equilibrium state with minimum energy, was performed using the Broyden–Fletcher–Goldfarb–Shanno (BFGS) algorithm, which is highly effective for energy minimization in crystalline materials.<sup>43</sup>

A medium convergence tolerance was adopted for geometry optimization, and electronic minimization parameters utilized the Gaussian smearing scheme with a smearing width of 0.1 eV. Additionally, a 20 Å vacuum was introduced perpendicular to the interface surface to eliminate interactions between the interfaces and their periodic images.

The difference in charge density between the MoS<sub>2</sub> system and the adsorbed gas is computed as:

$$\Delta\rho = \rho_{(\text{MoS}_2+\text{gas\_molecule})} - \rho_{\text{gas\_molecule}} \quad (1)$$

where  $\rho_{(\text{MoS}_2+\text{gas\_molecule})}$  and  $\rho_{\text{gas\_molecule}}$  are the charge densities of the MoS<sub>2</sub> + gas molecule system and the gas molecule, respectively.

The binding energy of the adsorbed gas molecules is calculated using the equation:

$$E_b = E_{(\text{MoS}_2+\text{gas\_molecule})} - E_{(\text{gas\_molecule})} \quad (2)$$

where  $E_{(\text{MoS}_2+\text{gas\_molecule})}$  and  $E_{(\text{gas\_molecule})}$  are the total energies of the MoS<sub>2</sub> + gas molecule system and the gas molecule, respectively.

### 2.6. Characterization

The morphology of the synthesized samples were observed using field emission-scanning electron microscope (FE-SEM, SIGMA 300 VP, Carl Zeiss). The structural characteristics of the fabricated samples were characterized using an X-ray diffractometer (XPRT PRO, Philips/PANalytical) with Cu K $\alpha$  radiation (1.54 Å) and with a laser micro-Raman system (Make: Horiba JobinYvon, Model: LabRam HR). XPS analyses were performed using an X-ray Photo Spectrometer (Model-K Alpha, Make: Thermo Fisher Scientific).

## 3. Results and discussions

### 3.1. Structural and morphological characterizations of MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub>

Fig. 2 shows the FESEM images and EDX analysis of MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub>. As shown in Fig. 2(a), the MoS<sub>2</sub> nanosheets are arranged in a flower-like structure. EDX analysis (Fig. 2(c)) provides elemental information about the synthesized materials. In the case of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 2(b)), the flower-like structure is intact with a bit of deformation, which may be due to the bombardment of energetic ions during argon plasma treatment, followed by nitrogen plasma. The EDX spectrum (Fig. 2(d)) shows the presence of nitrogen, which is absent in



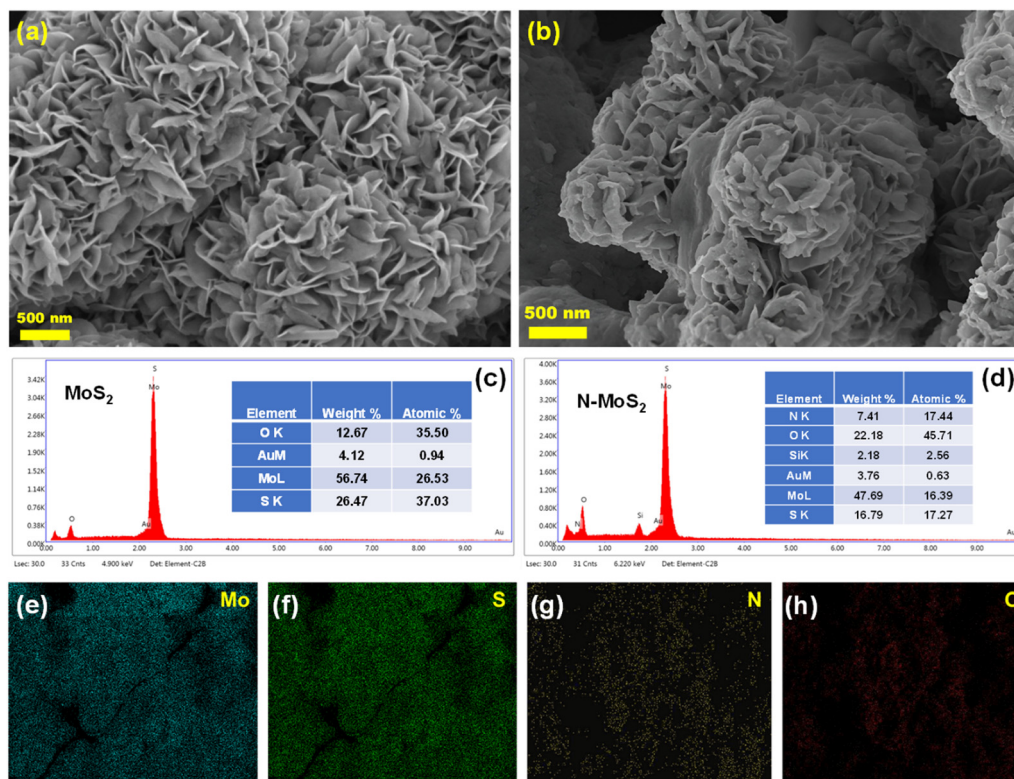


Fig. 2 FESEM images of (a) MoS<sub>2</sub> nanosheet and (b) N-MoS<sub>2</sub> nanosheet; EDX spectra of (c) MoS<sub>2</sub> and (d) N-MoS<sub>2</sub>; and (e)–(h) colour mapped images of Mo, S, N and O elements of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sample.

the EDX spectrum of MoS<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 2(c)). The colour-mapping images of different elements present in the nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> sample are shown in Fig. 2(e–h).

Fig. 3(a) shows the Raman spectra of MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub>, in which two distinct peaks E<sub>2g</sub><sup>1</sup> and A<sub>g</sub><sup>1</sup> represent the vibration modes of hexagonal MoS<sub>2</sub>. The A<sub>g</sub><sup>1</sup> peak that appears at ~ 402 cm<sup>-1</sup> is attributed to the out-of-plane vibration of Mo and S atoms, whereas E<sub>2g</sub><sup>1</sup> appears at ~ 375 cm<sup>-1</sup> and is attributed to the in-plane vibration of Mo and S atoms.<sup>44</sup> The peak spacing between the E<sub>2g</sub><sup>1</sup> and A<sub>g</sub><sup>1</sup> peaks for both MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> was the same (26.4 cm<sup>-1</sup>), confirming their similar layer numbers.<sup>44</sup> The Raman spectra of MoS<sub>2</sub> after various nitrogen plasma treatment times are presented in the ESI† (Fig. S1). The X-ray diffraction patterns of the synthesized MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers and bulk MoS<sub>2</sub> are presented in the ESI† (Fig. S2). Fig. 3(b) shows the XPS survey spectra of MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub>. From this figure, the N/Mo ratios are 0.5 and 3.3 for MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub>, respectively. Fig. 3(c)–(h) shows the deconvoluted XPS spectra of the MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> samples. In Fig. 3(c), the Mo 3d spectrum of MoS<sub>2</sub> exhibits four peaks, among which Mo<sup>4+</sup> 3d<sub>5/2</sub> and Mo<sup>4+</sup> 3d<sub>3/2</sub> correspond to 228.9 eV and 232.0 eV, respectively.<sup>45</sup> Along with this, a small peak around 235 eV appears due to the oxidation of Mo on the MoS<sub>2</sub> surface and is assigned to Mo<sup>6+</sup> 3d<sub>3/2</sub> and Mo<sup>6+</sup> 3d<sub>5/2</sub>, respectively.<sup>46</sup> The peak at 226.1 eV was assigned to the S 2s of MoS<sub>2</sub>.<sup>45</sup> For N-MoS<sub>2</sub>, the deconvoluted spectrum of Mo 3d in Fig. 3(f) shows the peak present at 233.5 eV along with the peaks present in Fig. 3(c),

which arise due to bonds between Mo and N.<sup>28,47,48</sup> Moreover, the intensity of the Mo<sup>6+</sup> 3d peaks increased, which may have been due to the oxidation of Mo after treatment.

Fig. 3(d) and (g) show the S 2p spectra of MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub>, respectively. Two peaks appear at 163.1 and 161.7 eV, corresponding to S<sup>2-</sup> 2p<sub>1/2</sub> and S<sup>2-</sup> 2p<sub>3/2</sub>, respectively.<sup>28</sup> Fig. 3(e) and (h) show the Mo 3p spectra of MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub>, respectively. The peaks at 394.7 eV arise due to Mo 3p<sub>3/2</sub> in both spectra. Along with that, two distinct and intense peaks in Fig. 3(h) at 398.5 eV and 402.0 eV appear due to characteristic Mo–N bond and N–O, respectively, which are less intense in the case of the Mo 3p deconvoluted spectrum of MoS<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 3(e)).<sup>47,49</sup>

### 3.2. Gas sensing measurements of the MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensors:

The gas sensing measurements of the MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensors were performed in a homemade sensing assembly (Fig. 4). The sensing material was dropcasted onto the interdigitated electrode fabricated on the PCB, as described in Section 2.3. The sensor was then dried in a vacuum oven at 60 °C for 3 h. The sensor was then plasma-treated with argon and nitrogen plasma in a plasma chamber. The sensor was then exposed to VOCs in the gas sensing chamber (Fig. 4). The required amount of ammonia, calculated using the standard formula (ESI† eqn (S1)), was inserted inside the sensing chamber.<sup>4,7</sup>





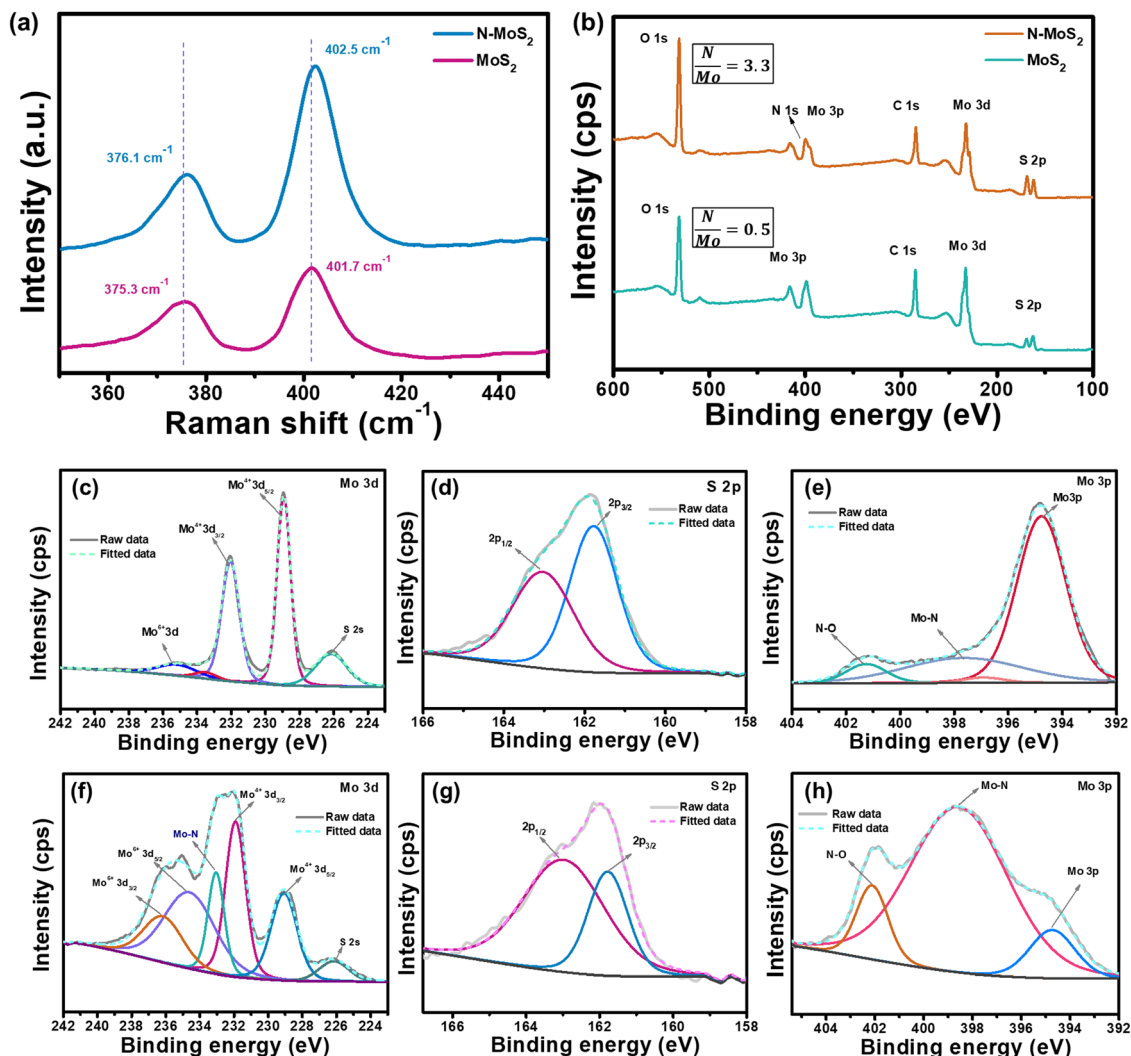


Fig. 3 (a) Raman spectra of MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> XPS; (b) XPS survey spectra of MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub>; XPS deconvoluted spectra of (c) Mo 3d, (d) S 2p, and (e) Mo 3p of the MoS<sub>2</sub> sample and (f) Mo 3d, (g) S 2p, and (h) Mo 3p of the N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sample.

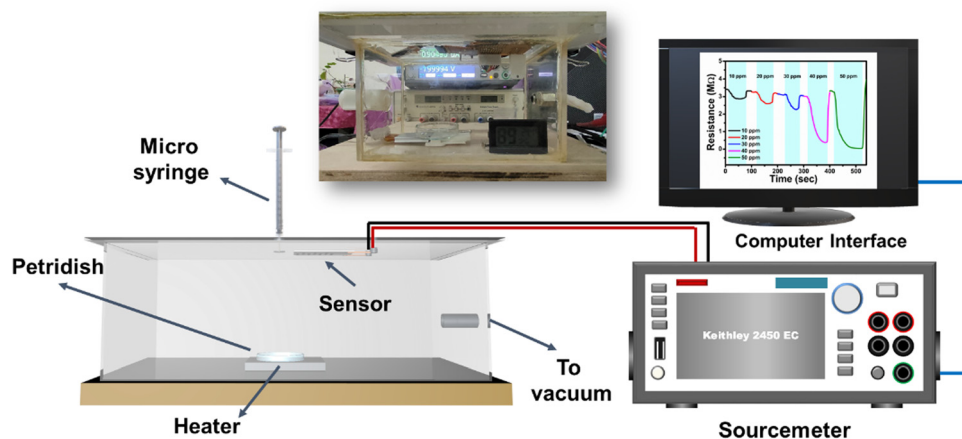


Fig. 4 Schematic of the gas sensing setup assembly; inset: digital image of the sensing assembly.

Fig. 5 shows the dynamic responses of the MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensors at room temperature towards ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>), formaldehyde (HCHO), and triethylamine (TEA). Fig. 5(a) shows the responses of the MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensors to ammonia. N-



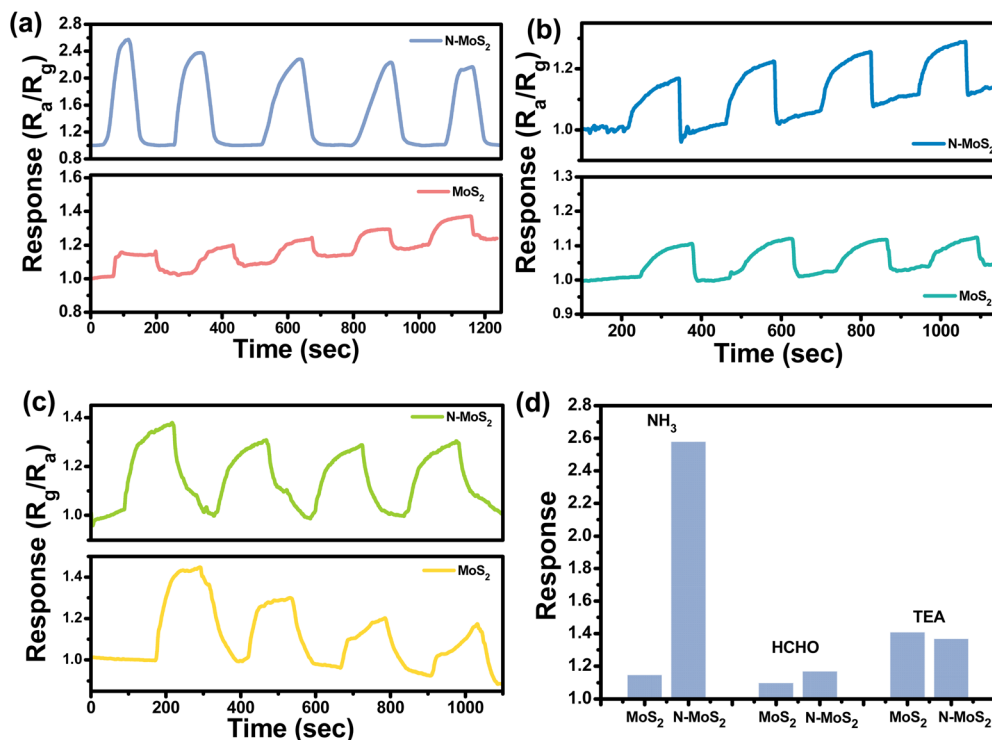


Fig. 5 Dynamic sensing responses of the MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensors towards (a) NH<sub>3</sub>, (b) HCHO and (c) TEA at room temperature and (d) comparison of the sensing responses of MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensors towards various analyte VOCs.

MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor exhibits an enhanced sensing response to NH<sub>3</sub> compared to the MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor. In contrast, in the case of HCHO and TEA (Fig. 5(b) and (c)), there is little change in the response. Fig. 5(d) shows a comparison histogram of the sensing responses of MoS<sub>2</sub> and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> towards NH<sub>3</sub>, HCHO and TEA, respectively. To check the selectivity of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor towards common interfering VOCs, acetone and ethanol were also exposed to measure the sensing response.

The effect of plasma exposure time on the sensing performance of the MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflower structure was analysed by exposing the nitrogen plasma at three different times (5 min, 10 min and 15 min). The sensing responses of the plasma-treated sensors and the non-treated MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor (MS sensor) are shown in Fig. 6. The different plasma-treated sensors were termed NMS\_05 (5 min plasma exposure), NMS\_10 (10 min plasma exposure), and NMS\_15 (15 min plasma exposure), depending on the plasma exposure time. The results show that NMS\_05 exhibits no significant change in response compared with the MS sensor. However, NMS\_10 and NMS\_15 sensors have similar responses to 10 ppm NH<sub>3</sub> vapour at room temperature.

Fig. 7(a) shows the selectivity of the synthesized N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor towards various VOCs. As shown in the figure, the sensor is highly selective towards NH<sub>3</sub> compared to other common VOCs in the ambient environment. Fig. 7(b) shows the response and recovery times of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> towards 10 ppm NH<sub>3</sub> vapour. The response time of a sensor is the time taken for the resistance to reach 90% of its total change when the sensor

is in the proximity of the target gas, while the recovery time is the duration needed for the resistance to return to 90% of its original baseline after the gas is removed.<sup>4,7</sup> The response time of the sensor was 22 s, whereas the recovery time was 23 s.

The dynamic changes in the response of the sensor to 10 ppm NH<sub>3</sub> vapour are shown in Fig. 7(c). Up to five cycles, the sensor showed an almost constant response with a little bit of deviation from the initial response. Fig. 7(d) shows the variation in sensor resistance towards 10 ppm NH<sub>3</sub> vapour. The changes in the resistance values were almost constant from the baseline value, with a deviation at the initial cycle.

Fig. 8(a) shows the dynamic response of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor to varying NH<sub>3</sub> concentrations during continuous measurement. The sensor has a very high response with increasing concentrations of the analyte vapour, which may be due to humidity. Fig. 8(b) shows the linear response with the fitting curve of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor to different VOC concentrations. From the calibration curve with increasing concentration of the NH<sub>3</sub> vapour, it can be observed that the curve is statistically linear with a correlation coefficient value  $R^2 = 0.97$ . The theoretical estimation of the limit of detection (LOD) of the sensor can be estimated using the following eqn (3):<sup>50</sup>

$$\text{LOD} = 3 \frac{\text{RMS}_{\text{noise}}}{\text{Slope}} \quad (3)$$

where RMS<sub>noise</sub> is estimated using the root mean square deviation from the variation of the relative sensor response in the baseline before exposing the sensor to the NH<sub>3</sub> vapour and the



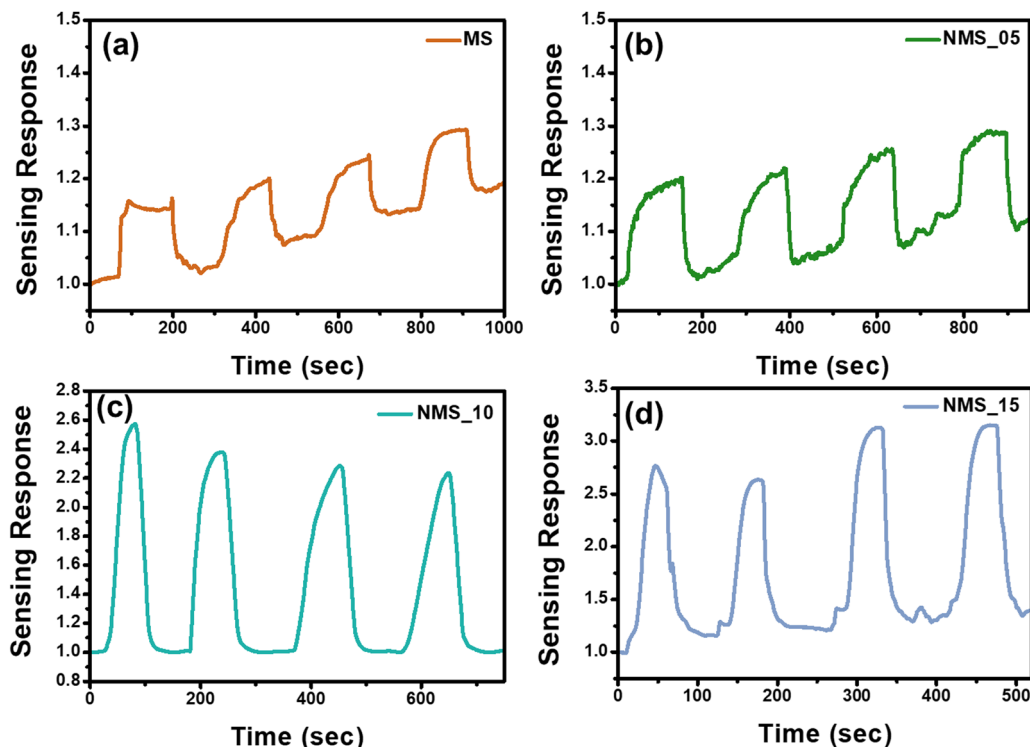


Fig. 6 Dynamic sensing response of (a)  $\text{MoS}_2$  (MS sensor) and N- $\text{MoS}_2$  sensors with different nitrogen plasma exposure times of (b) 5 min (NMS\_05), (c) 10 min (NMS\_10), and (d) 15 min (NMS\_15) towards 10 ppm  $\text{NH}_3$  vapour.

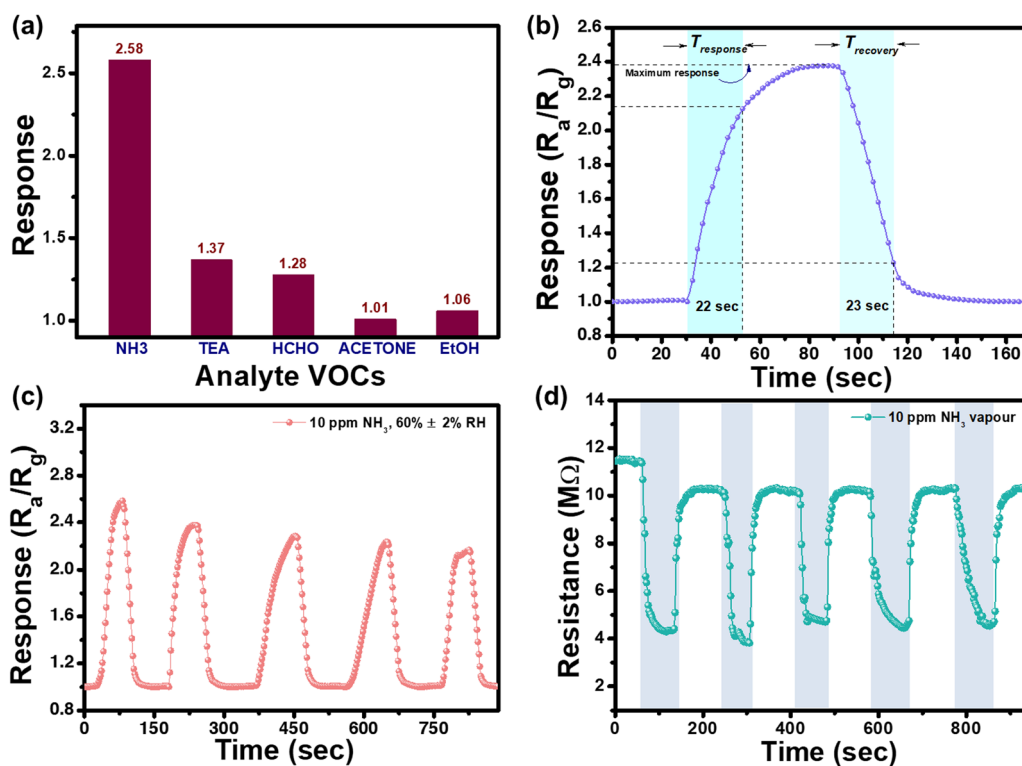


Fig. 7 (a) Selectivity of N- $\text{MoS}_2$  sensor towards different analyte VOCs; (b) response and recovery time measurements of N- $\text{MoS}_2$  sensor; (c) dynamic sensing response of N- $\text{MoS}_2$  sensor towards 10 ppm  $\text{NH}_3$ ; and (d) resistance change during the exposure of 10 ppm  $\text{NH}_3$  vapour to N- $\text{MoS}_2$  sensor.





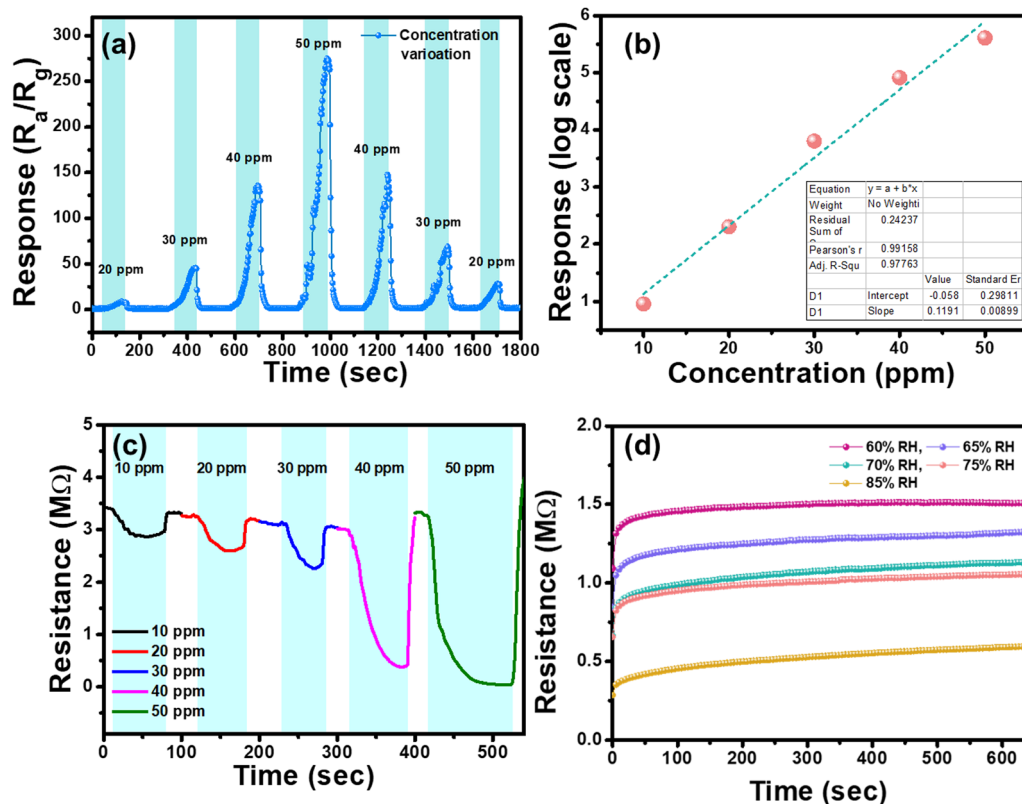


Fig. 8 (a) Response of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor to varying concentrations of NH<sub>3</sub> in a continuous measurement; (b) linear response with fitting curve of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor to different VOC concentrations; (c) measurement of resistance changes from its baseline resistance with increasing concentration of analyte VOC at room temperature; and (d) variation in the baseline resistance of the sensor with varying relative humidity.

slope refers to the slope of the linear fitting curve in Fig. 8(b). The slope was calculated as 0.1191. The RMS<sub>noise</sub> is calculated using eqn (4):

$$\text{RMS}_{\text{noise}} = \sqrt{\frac{S^2}{N}} \quad (4)$$

where  $S$  is the standard deviation (S.D.) of the data before exposing the sensor to formaldehyde vapour and  $N$  is the corresponding data point. From Fig. 8(a), the standard deviation for  $N = 80$  (the data before the sensor is exposed to NH<sub>3</sub> vapour) is  $\approx 0.0284$ . Therefore, RMS<sub>noise</sub> is 0.00319, and using eqn (3), the LOD is 0.080 ppm  $\approx$  80 ppb.

Fig. 8(c) shows the dynamic resistance changes of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor with varying concentrations of NH<sub>3</sub> vapour. The sensor is sensitive to humidity, and with an increase in the analyte VOC's volume, the humidity inside the chamber also increases, which enhances the sensor's response to high concentrations of NH<sub>3</sub>. Fig. 8(d) shows the variation in baseline resistance at different relative humidity values inside the sensing chamber at room temperature.

### 3.3. Computational analysis

For the computational analysis, a  $4 \times 4 \times 1$  supercell of MoS<sub>2</sub> containing 48 atoms was used. In the equilibrium state, the Mo and S atoms of the MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer form a hexagonal lattice.

The lattice constants of the MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer are  $a = 3.21 \text{ \AA}$  and  $c = 12.14 \text{ \AA}$ . The values are in good agreement with earlier experimental and theoretical results.<sup>51</sup> To depict the incorporation of nitrogen and sulphur vacancy in the MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer, one sulphur atom was replaced by a nitrogen atom, and one sulphur atom was removed.

The optimised geometrical configurations of nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayers with sulfur vacancy and with different gases are presented in Fig. 8. All possible binding sites of the MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer were considered, and the configuration with the highest binding energy was considered in further calculations to reflect the most probable experimental scenario.

The binding energies of all gases in the nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer, as calculated using eqn (4), are shown in Fig. 9. The binding energy of the NH<sub>3</sub> molecule with the nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer was the highest ( $-0.81 \text{ eV}$ ). The binding energy of the TEA molecule was the lowest ( $-0.18 \text{ eV}$ ). This finding is in close agreement with the sensing response of the nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer. To delve deeper into the interaction between the various gases and the nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer, a substantial charge transfer occurs between them, as shown in Fig. 9. In addition to the N-MoS<sub>2</sub> system with S vacancy, the effect of NH<sub>3</sub> adsorption on the N-MoS<sub>2</sub> system without S

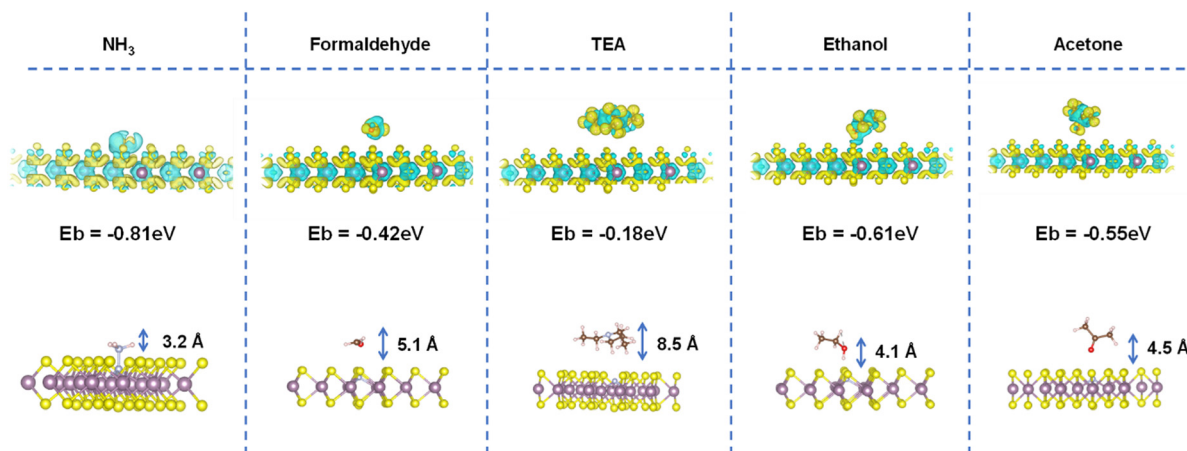


Fig. 9 Optimized configuration structures with electron charge density differences (EDDs) ( $\Delta\rho$ ) of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sample with S vacancy, along with intermolecular distances of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> with various VOCs. The yellow colour corresponds to charge accumulations, and the cyan colour corresponds to charge depletion.

vacancy was investigated. The charge density difference plots of all gases and the MoS<sub>2</sub> and nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer without sulfur vacancies are shown in the ESI† (Fig. S3).

Similarly, from the intermolecular distances between gas molecules and nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayers with S vacancy, it was found that the NH<sub>3</sub> molecule exhibited the lowest distance (3.2 Å), whereas the TEA molecule exhibited the highest distance of 8.5 Å. This result can be explained by the increased electrostatic interaction between the NH<sub>3</sub> molecule and the nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer.

For comparison, the binding energy values of all three systems (*i.e.*, only MoS<sub>2</sub>, N-MoS<sub>2</sub> without S vacancy, and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> with S vacancy) are summarized in Tables 1, 2 and 3, respectively.

To examine the changes in the electronic properties of the nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer upon NH<sub>3</sub> molecule adsorption, the total density of states (TDOS) was plotted (Fig. 10). The adsorption of the NH<sub>3</sub> molecule on the nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer leads to a significant shift in the Fermi level towards higher energy. This also introduces new peaks at the conduction band at 0.52 eV and 1.97 eV. This shows that the introduction of the NH<sub>3</sub> molecule results in changes in the electronic properties of the nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayer.

To delve deeper into the mechanism behind the change in the density of the state of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> after NH<sub>3</sub> adsorption, we calculated the PDOS of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> with a sulphur vacancy before

Table 1 Adsorption energy and intermolecular distances of pure MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayers

System	Adsorption energy (eV)	Intermolecular distance (Å)
MoS <sub>2</sub> + ammonia	−0.38	5.2
MoS <sub>2</sub> + formaldehyde	−0.31	5.1
MoS <sub>2</sub> + TEA	−0.18	9.4
MoS <sub>2</sub> + ethanol	−0.27	5.8
MoS <sub>2</sub> + acetone	−0.35	5.5

Table 2 Adsorption energy and intermolecular distances for nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayers (without sulphur vacancy)

System	Adsorption energy (eV)	Intermolecular distance (Å)
MoS <sub>2</sub> + ammonia	−0.76	3.9
MoS <sub>2</sub> + formaldehyde	−0.45	5.7
MoS <sub>2</sub> + TEA	−0.12	9.1
MoS <sub>2</sub> + ethanol	−0.53	4.7
MoS <sub>2</sub> + acetone	−0.42	5.2

Table 3 Adsorption energy and intermolecular distances of nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> monolayers (with sulphur vacancy)

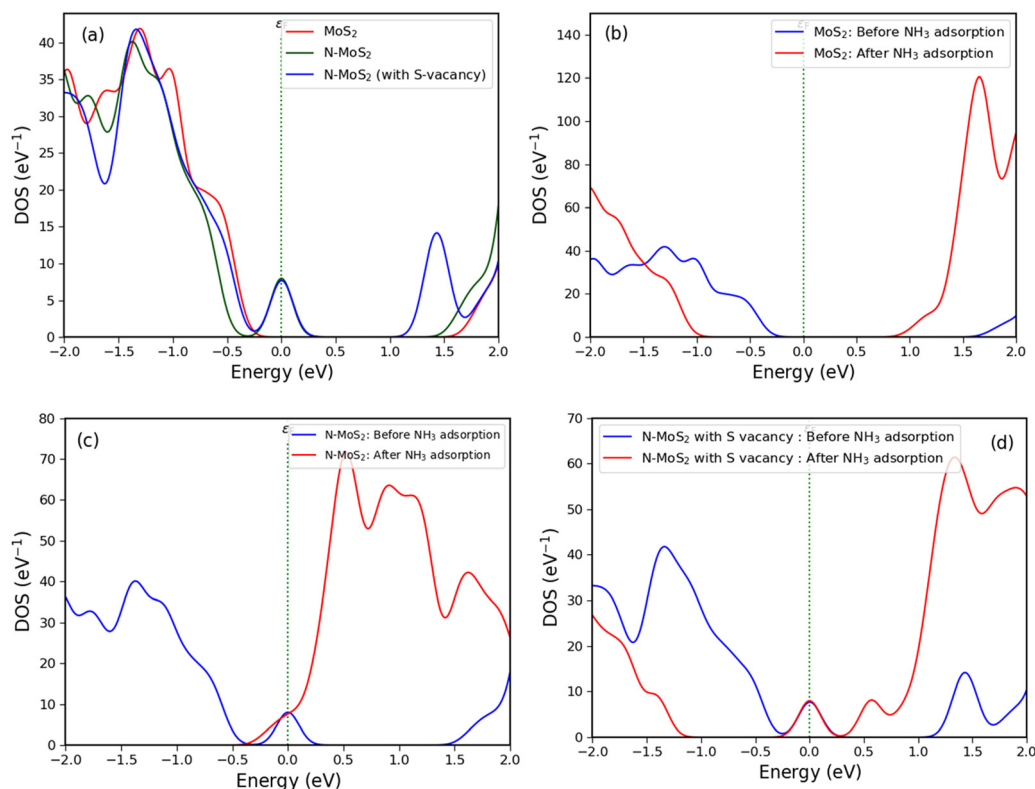
System	Adsorption energy (eV)	Intermolecular distance (Å)
MoS <sub>2</sub> + ammonia	−0.81	3.2
MoS <sub>2</sub> + formaldehyde	−0.42	5.1
MoS <sub>2</sub> + TEA	−0.18	8.5
MoS <sub>2</sub> + ethanol	−0.61	4.1
MoS <sub>2</sub> + acetone	−0.55	4.5

NH<sub>3</sub> adsorption and N-MoS<sub>2</sub> with a sulphur vacancy after NH<sub>3</sub> adsorption. From Fig. 11(a), it can be seen that the major contribution in the valence band near the Fermi level is from the d<sub>z<sup>2</sup></sub> orbital of molybdenum atoms, followed by a contribution from the p<sub>z</sub> orbital of sulphur atoms. In contrast, in the case of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> with S vacancy after NH<sub>3</sub> adsorption, the major contribution in the conduction band near the Fermi level is from the d<sub>x<sup>2</sup>−y<sup>2</sup></sub> orbital of Molybdenum atoms, followed by a contribution from the p<sub>y</sub> orbital of sulphur atoms (Fig. 11(b)).

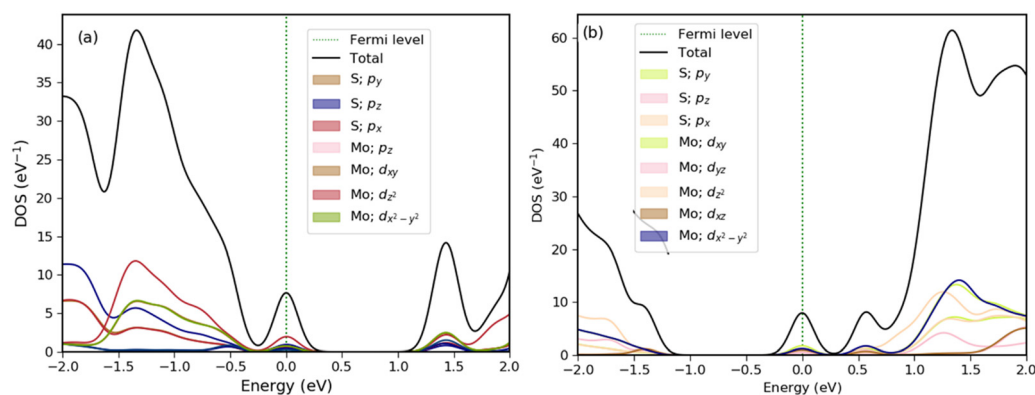
### 3.4. Gas sensing mechanism:

The sensing mechanism of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor is based on the change in the electrical resistance during the interaction of analyte vapour and the sensing material. Argon plasma treatment before nitrogen plasma may create sulfur vacancy due to





**Fig. 10** Total density of state (TDOS) of the (a) MoS<sub>2</sub> system with N attachment and N attachment with S vacancy before NH<sub>3</sub> adsorption; (b) MoS<sub>2</sub> upon NH<sub>3</sub> molecule adsorption; (c) N-MoS<sub>2</sub> without sulfur vacancy upon NH<sub>3</sub> molecule adsorption; and (d) N-MoS<sub>2</sub> with S vacancy upon NH<sub>3</sub> molecule adsorption.



**Fig. 11** Projected density of states (PDOS) of (a) N-MoS<sub>2</sub> with S vacancy: before NH<sub>3</sub> adsorption and (b) N-MoS<sub>2</sub> with S vacancy: after NH<sub>3</sub> adsorption.

the bombardment of energetic ions, contributing to the n-type characteristics of N-MoS<sub>2</sub>.<sup>52–54</sup> Additionally, oxygen may get adsorbed on the sulfur vacancies, creating oxygen adsorbates, which may also contribute to the n-type behaviour of the sensor.<sup>55,56</sup> Along with this, nitrogen plasma treatment may attach nitrogen to the MoS<sub>2</sub>, which enhances electron carrier concentration in MoS<sub>2</sub> by introducing donor levels adjacent to the conduction band, hence augmenting n-type conductivity.<sup>57–59</sup> Moreover, the incorporation of nitrogen can make the sensor exhibit a more stable response than a non-

treated MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor.<sup>60</sup> Fig. 12 shows the plausible sensing mechanism of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor towards NH<sub>3</sub> vapours.

The *I*-*V* characteristic plot (ESI,† Fig. S4) also shows an increase in current after plasma treatment, which is also an n-type behaviour of N-MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor. When the NH<sub>3</sub> molecules interact with the sensing material, electron transfer occurs from NH<sub>3</sub> to the sensing material, which changes the resistance of the sensing material.<sup>4</sup> Hence, plasma treatment can enhance the sensing capabilities of MoS<sub>2</sub> sensors. The theoretical investigations are also consistent with the experimental results.





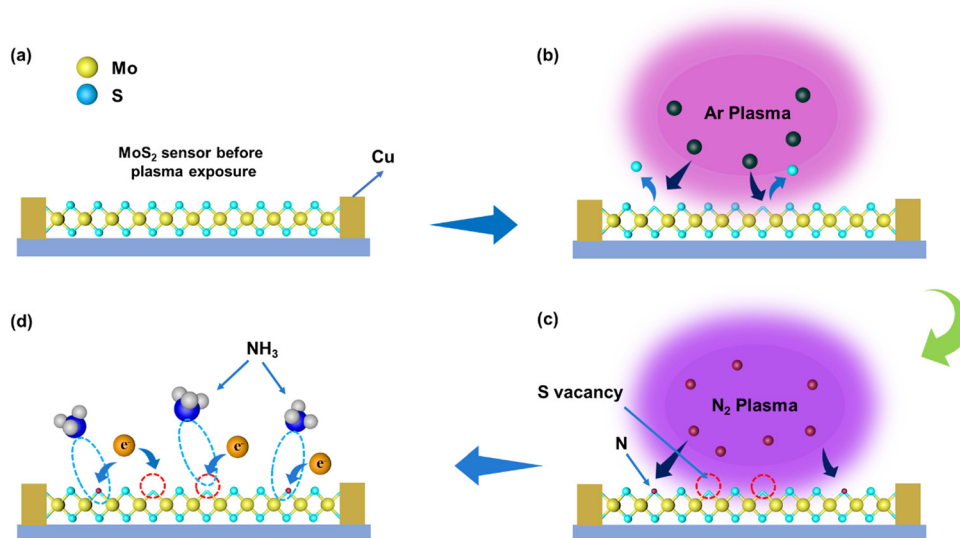


Fig. 12 (a) MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor before plasma treatment; (b) Ar plasma treatment on the MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor creating S vacancies; (c) N<sub>2</sub> plasma treatment on the sensor with nitrogen attachments taking place at some vacancies; and (d) interaction of NH<sub>3</sub> molecules with S vacancies and nitrogen attachment sites.

Table 4 Comparison of various MoS<sub>2</sub> sensors doped using plasma treatment and other chemical routes with this work

Sl no.	Title description	Targeted Gas/VOCs	Operating temperature	Limit of detection (LOD)	Response/recovery time	Ref.
1	Electronic modulation of MoS <sub>2</sub> nanosheets <i>via</i> N-doping	NO <sub>2</sub>	Room temperature	62.5 ppb	53 s/323 s (10 ppm)	28
2	Synergetic phase modulation and N-doping of MoS <sub>2</sub>	NO <sub>2</sub>	Room temperature	0.13 ppm	43.1 s/301.2 s (10 ppm)	61
3	Metal-doped MoS <sub>2</sub> nanoflower	SO <sub>2</sub>	Room temperature	250 ppb	—	62
4	Zinc-doped MoS <sub>2</sub> /RGO composites	NH <sub>3</sub>	200 °C	6 ppm	21.3 s/44.9 s (50 ppm)	63
5	N dopant-triggered MoS <sub>2</sub> nanosheets	NO <sub>2</sub>	Room temperature	125 ppb	20 s/113 s (10 ppm)	37
6	Dual functionalized flower-like MoS <sub>2</sub> nanospheres with Pd and g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	TEA	225 °C	17 ppb	38 s/26 s (30 ppm)	64
7	N-doped MoS <sub>2</sub> hierarchical structures	NO <sub>2</sub>	25 °C	10 ppb	146 s/52 s (10 ppb)	60
8	Cu-functionalized MoS <sub>2</sub> nanoworm thin films	NO <sub>2</sub>	100 °C	2 ppm	54 s/82 s	65
9	Co-incorporated MoS <sub>2</sub> nanosheets	NO <sub>2</sub>	Room temperature	7 ppm	10 s/600 s	18
10	<b>DC Plasma-modified MoS<sub>2</sub> nanoflower</b>	<b>NH<sub>3</sub></b>	<b>Room temperature</b>	<b>80 ppb</b>	<b>22 s/23 s</b>	<b>This Work</b>

Table 4 presents a comparison among various MoS<sub>2</sub>-based sensors modified by plasma treatment, as well as doping by chemical methods, with the work presented here.

## 4. Conclusion

In summary, we fabricated a nitrogen-incorporated MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor following DC plasma treatment with a highly selective sensing response towards NH<sub>3</sub> at room temperature. MoS<sub>2</sub> was synthesized following a wet chemical approach following argon and nitrogen plasma treatment, which created sulfur vacancies and nitrogen incorporation into the MoS<sub>2</sub> matrix. The XPS spectra of the plasma-treated sensor showed an increase in nitrogen content compared with the non-treated sample. Moreover, the FESEM images also show some deformation after plasma treatment. EDX spectra also show nitrogen content. Plasma treatment enhances the number of active sites on the MoS<sub>2</sub> surface, which enhances the transfer of electrons from NH<sub>3</sub> to the active sites and increases the sensing response of

the sensor compared to the pristine MoS<sub>2</sub> sensor. The sensor shows a fast response (22 s) and recovery time (23 s). The sensor also shows very selective detection of NH<sub>3</sub> compared to other common toxic VOCs, with a limit of detection of 80 ppb. This DC plasma treatment method can be applied for the fabrication of very highly sensitive VOC sensors in a controllable manner.

## Author contributions

A. K. – conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, visualization, data curation, and writing of the original draft. B. C. – methodology (theoretical), investigation, and writing – original draft. T. H. – methodology, investigation, data curation, and writing – original draft. S. C. – investigation, data curation. B. K. – resources, investigation, H. K. – resources, conceptualization, visualization, supervision, funding acquisition, and writing – review and editing\*.



## Data availability

The data supporting this article have been included as part of the ESI.†

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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