

Cite this: *J. Mater. Chem. C*,
2026, 14, 2880Received 30th July 2025,
Accepted 26th November 2025

DOI: 10.1039/d5tc02868j

rsc.li/materials-c

Photochromism and photofluorochromism of arylvinylene phenanthridines

Atul B. Nipate, Vinutha K. Venkatareddy and M. Rajeswara Rao*

Novel phenanthridine-based light-induced, multicolour photochromic π -conjugated compounds (**PC**₁–**PC**₃) have been developed. **PC**₁–**PC**₃ were synthesised via Knoevenagel condensation on phenanthridine using various aromatic aldehydes [triphenylaminyl (TPA) and pyrenyl (PY)] in the presence of benzoic acid and benzoic anhydride in 63–70% yields. The compounds absorb strongly in the visible region ($\lambda_{\text{max}} = 360$ – 408 nm for **PC**₁, $\lambda_{\text{max}} = 360$ nm for **PC**₂, $\lambda_{\text{max}} = 385$ nm for **PC**₃). Interestingly, the solutions of these compounds undergo photo-transformation (under 254 nm UV light) with a colour change from yellow to purple, orange, and brown, respectively, for **PC**₁–**PC**₃, accompanied by a redshift of 120–140 nm in the absorption maxima. This transformation is rapid (within 60 seconds) and reverts to its original state by heating the solution at 35 °C for 30 minutes. In addition, **PC**₁–**PC**₃ also exhibit variations in fluorescence, with **PC**₁ and **PC**₂ red-shifting by 150 nm (yellow to red emission) and **PC**₃ undergoing complete quenching. We attribute this transformation to a photoexcited partial proton transfer, leading to a metastable hydrogen bonding state, as supported by ¹H NMR and DFT calculations.

Introduction

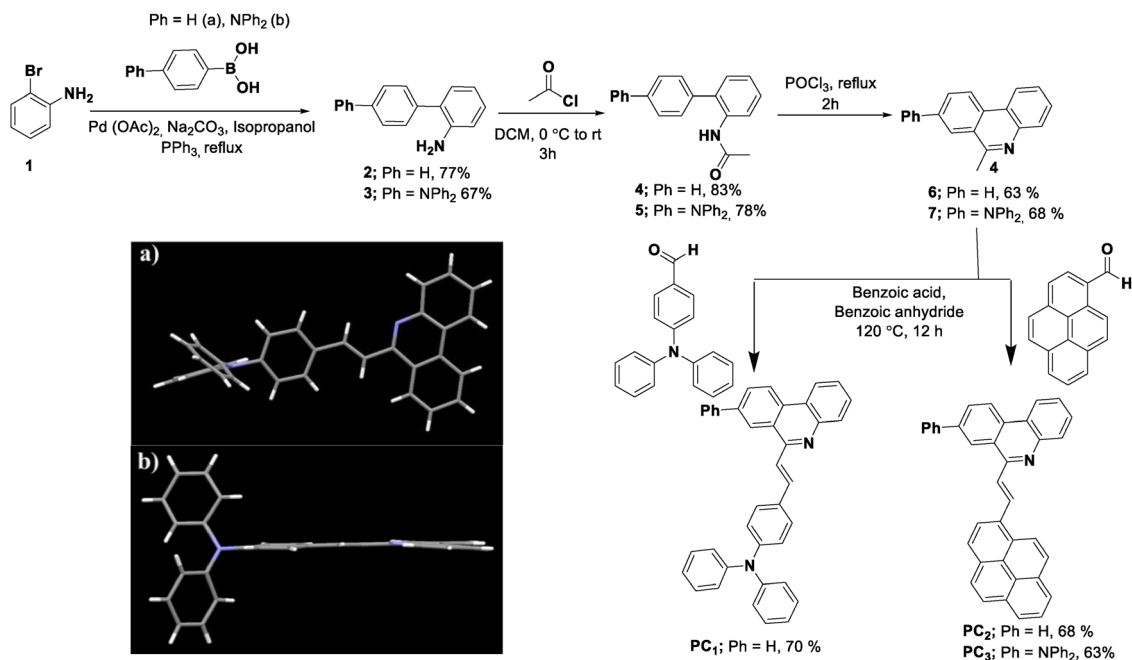
Chromic materials are smart materials that undergo a reversible change in response to heat, light, electricity, chemicals, and mechanical force. As a result, they alter the optical properties; these materials are widely used in sensors, displays, and smart coatings, among other applications.^{1–8} Among the various chromic materials, photochromic systems offer significant advantages due to activation by light, which is a non-invasive, environmentally friendly, and sustainable energy source.⁹ These systems exhibit reversible colour changes upon UV or visible light exposure. This phenomenon occurs due to the structural transformation between two forms, resulting from a change in the optical properties of the compounds.¹⁰ The photochromic materials have diverse applications in optical and photonics,^{11,12} display technology,¹³ data storage,^{14,15} biological sensing,¹⁶ smart materials,^{17,18} etc. Photochromism occurs in both inorganic and organic materials. Inorganic photochromic materials, such as transition metal oxides (WO₃, TiO₂, V₂O₅, Nb₂O₅, and MoO₃), have gained attention in the photochromic field due to their high thermal stability, long cycling life, and thermal/chemical resistance. However, these materials suffer from tunability (difficult to modify structure) and a complex synthetic process.^{19–22} In contrast, organic photochromic materials exhibit outstanding structural flexibility and can be easily modified, making them more versatile for specific applications.^{23–27} Several

organic photoswitch derivatives have been reported. Among them, azobenzene, which undergoes *cis*–*trans* isomerisation, and diarylethene and spiropyran, which undergo ring-opening/closing upon shining light, are highly explored.^{14,28–30} On the other hand, photochromic systems that undergo reversible colour changes based on changes in intramolecular hydrogen bonding interactions have found significant interest due to their high rate of conversion, precise colour tuning, and enhanced stability (Chart 1).

Ivan Ap *et al.*³¹ reported the quinoline-substituted hydrazone (*E*) photoswitch in the solution state; after shining the 442 nm light, the *Z* isomer converted to an *E* isomer with a colour change from yellow to colourless, and the *Z* isomer completely reversed back to *Z* after shining the 340 nm light. Newhouse *et al.*³² and Castellano *et al.*³³ developed hemithioindigo- or dicyanorhodanine-pyrrole-based photoswitches, where upon shining the UV-light (405 nm), the system converts from *Z* to *E* with a considerable redshift in the absorption spectra from 503/436 nm to 567/466 nm. The *E*-isomer develops an intramolecular H-bonding pyrrole N–H with the adjacent carbonyl group. Besides, excited-state intramolecular hydrogen bonding (ESIPT) inspired photochromism has also been studied. For example, Tang *et al.*,³⁴ Yoon *et al.*³⁵ and Li *et al.*³⁶ developed salicylaldehyde-containing photoswitches that, upon photoexcitation, undergo enol to keto conversion, resulting in a change of colour and fluorescence. The keto form reverts to the enol form when exposed to visible light. Along similar lines, Bernard M. *et al.*,³⁷ reported a triaryl hydrazone-based ESIPT photoswitch. The compound under light turns the hydrazo

Department of Chemistry, IIT Dharwad, Dharwad, 580011, Karnataka, India.
E-mail: rajesh@iitdh.ac.in





Scheme 1 Synthesis of aryl-vinylene phenanthridine-based photoswitches; crystal structure of compound **PC₁** (CCDC: 2351276): (a) top view and (b) side view.

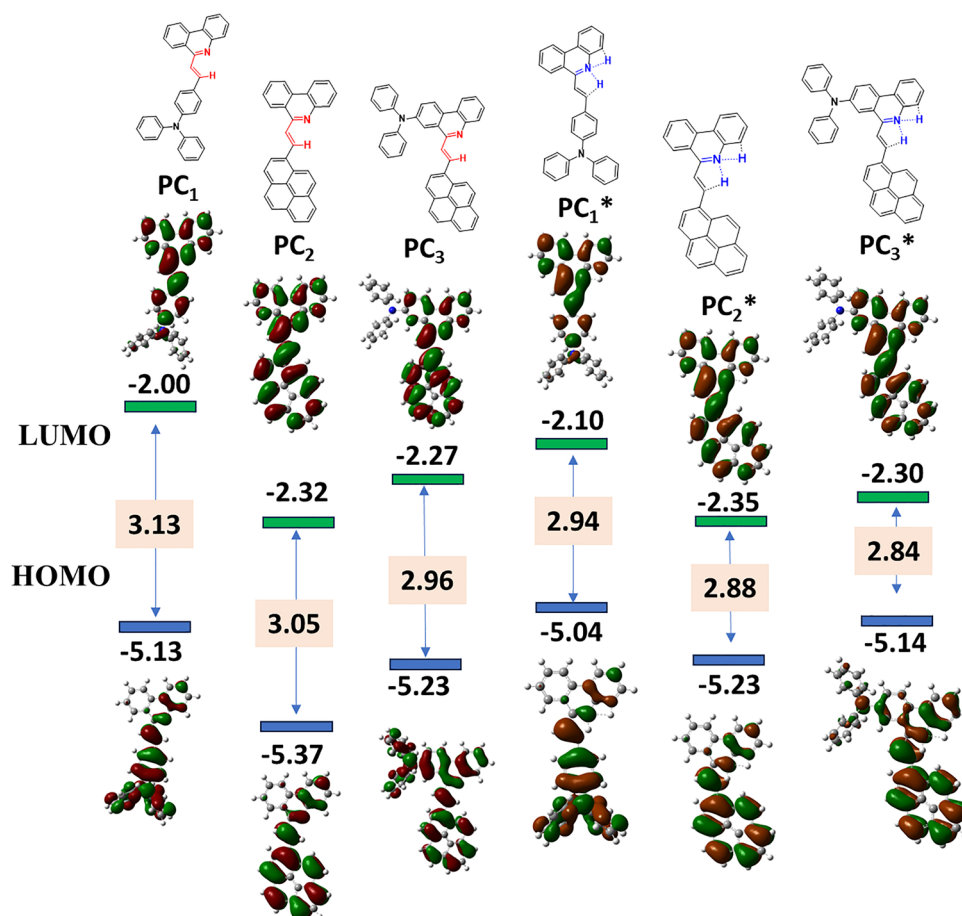


Fig. 1 DFT-optimised energy level diagram of the HOMOs and LUMOs of **PC₁–PC₃** and their photo-transformed products (**PC₁^{*} – PC₃^{*}**).



Orbitals (HOMOs) of **PC**₁ and **PC**₂ are mainly localized on the aryl units due to their electron-donating nature. In contrast, the HOMO of **PC**₃ is delocalized across the entire molecule, due to the strong electron-donating diphenylamine unit connected to the phenanthridine core. On the other hand, the Lowest Unoccupied Molecular Orbital (LUMO) of **PC**₁ is mainly localised on the phenanthridine unit, whereas in **PC**₂ and **PC**₃, it is delocalized over the aryl and phenanthridine units. The HOMO and LUMO energies of **PC**₁, **PC**₂ and **PC**₃ have been found to be $-5.13/-2.00$, $-5.37/-2.32$ and $-5.23/-2.27$ eV, and the band gaps are 3.13, 3.05, and 2.96 eV, respectively. This indicates that the aryl substitution significantly affects the HOMO and LUMO energy levels: compared to **PC**₁, the LUMO energies of **PC**₂ and **PC**₃ are lowered by 0.3 eV and 0.2 eV, while the HOMO energy of **PC**₁ is higher than that of **PC**₂ and **PC**₃ by 0.2 eV and 0.1 eV, respectively. In addition, the band gap of **PC**₃ is found to be smaller than those of **PC**₁ and **PC**₂ by 0.04 eV and 0.1 eV, respectively, due to the strong donor–acceptor (D–A) interactions between the diphenylamine and phenanthridine units.

Optical properties

The UV-Vis absorption spectra of **PC**₁, **PC**₂, and **PC**₃ in CHCl₃ solution exhibit one or two strong $\pi \rightarrow \pi^*$ transitions in the visible region (300 to 410 nm) (Fig. 2) with absorption maxima at 308 and 410 nm ($\epsilon = 16250$ and $29390 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$) for **PC**₁, 364 nm ($29390 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$) for **PC**₂, and broad band 300–500 ($29390 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$) for **PC**₃. At the same time, a blue shift of 25–46 nm is observed for **PC**₂ compared to **PC**₁, due to strong donor–acceptor interaction, while **PC**₃ exhibits a broad absorption band. The broad absorption spectrum of **PC**₃ could be attributed to several signals resulting from (a) vibronic transitions of pyrene and (b) strong intramolecular charge transfer (ICT) transitions between triphenylamine (donor) and phenanthridine (acceptor). The ICT in **PC**₃ will be significantly higher due to greater π – π communication between the donor and acceptor.

Recording the absorption spectra of **PC**₁–**PC**₃ in different solvents resulted in no change in the peak positions (only a variation of 3–5 nm), indicating minimal influence of solvent polarity (Fig. S2). **PC**₁–**PC**₃ have been found to be fluorescent in the solution state. The chloroform solutions of **PC**₁–**PC**₃ display

green, cyan and yellow fluorescence with emission maxima at 518 (fluorescence quantum yields, $\phi_f = 45\%$), 500 ($\phi_f = 15\%$) and 550 nm ($\phi_f = 55\%$), upon excitation (λ_{ex}) at 405 nm, 365 nm and 420 nm, respectively (Fig. 2b). The emission spectra in different solvents vary significantly, with a redshift of 90–100 nm in polar solvents, emphasising the strong D–A interactions (Fig. S3).

Photochemistry

PC₁–**PC**₃ exhibited photochromic properties upon irradiation with a 254 nm light source. All the compounds exhibit positive photochromism, displaying a bathochromic shift in their absorption bands (324 to 546 nm). Upon shining the light for 30 secs, the photo excited systems (**PC**₁^{*} – **PC**₃^{*}) displayed new absorption bands in the red region: 324, 546 nm ($\epsilon = 19110$, $36160 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$); 346, 512 nm ($\epsilon = 24670$, $14710 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$) and 345, 515 nm ($\epsilon = 37820$, $14850 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$), respectively (Fig. 3 and Fig. S4). When the light was irradiated at an interval of 5 seconds, the spectrum gradually changed from PC to PC^{*} and reached a final state, characterised by two isosbestic points at 356 nm and 455 nm for **PC**₁, and the colour of the solution changed from yellow to purple (Fig. 3a and Fig. S4a). A similar observation was found in **PC**₂ and **PC**₃; **PC**₂ also shows two absorption bands at 284 and 364 nm, which disappear, and new bands at 346 and 512 nm appear, with isosbestic points at 306 and 396 nm, upon light irradiation. The colour of the solution also changes from light yellow to orange (Fig. 3b and Fig. S4b). **PC**₃ exhibits a broad absorption band from 300 to 500 nm, which, upon UV radiation, splits into three new bands at 278, 345, and 520 nm, accompanied by three isosbestic points at 280, 262, and 454 nm. The colour changed from yellow to brown (Fig. 3c and Fig. S4c). The significant redshift in the absorption can be attributed to the increased donor–acceptor interactions within the molecule upon photoexcitation. This could be possible if the photo-excited state promotes photoinduced partial proton transfer, leading to the formation of a phenanthridine carbocation. Such molecular transformation enhances the donor–acceptor interactions within the molecule, altering its optical properties (Fig. 3g). Photochromic kinetics studies of **PC**₁–**PC**₃ in the solution state have been conducted. The rate constant for the forward photochromic step

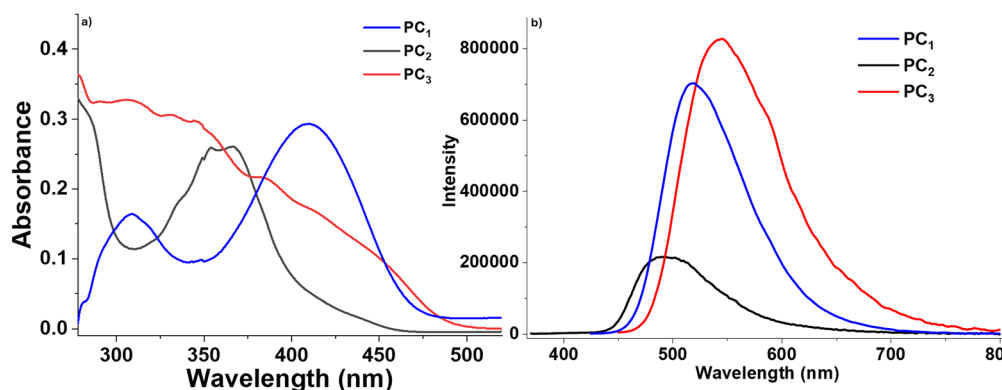


Fig. 2 (a) Absorption spectra (CHCl₃, 1×10^{-5} M) and (b) emission spectra (CHCl₃, 1×10^{-6} M) of **PC**₁–**PC**₃.



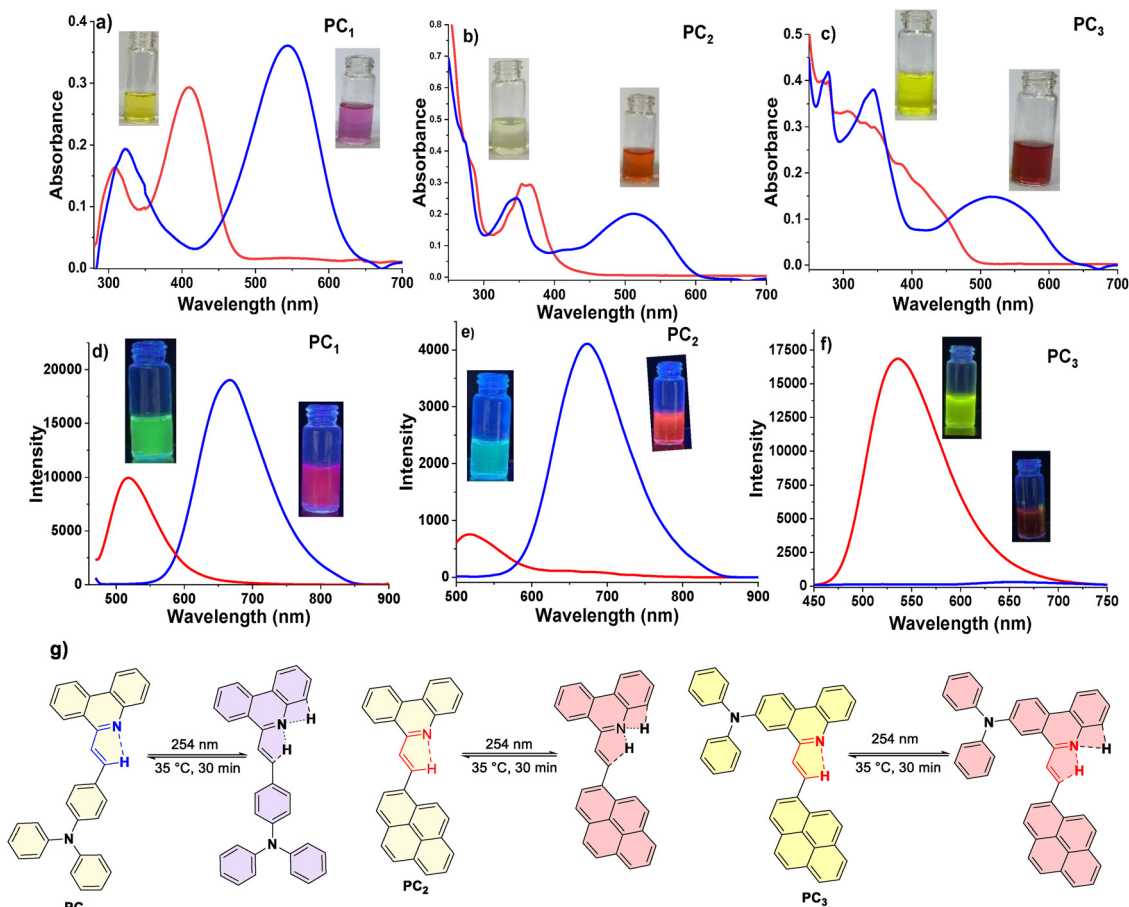


Fig. 3 Absorption spectra [(a)–(c) (CHCl_3 , 1×10^{-5} M)]; emission spectra [(d)–(f) (CHCl_3 , 1×10^{-6} M)] of PC_1 – PC_3 (before irradiation (red line) and after irradiation at 254 nm (blue line)); (g) schematic representation of photoexcited partial proton transfer forming a metastable hydrogen-bonded state.

in PC_1 – PC_3 was found in the range of 3×10^{-2} – 12×10^{-2} sec^{-1} . The photochromic change was found to be faster in the case of PC_3 , followed by PC_2 and PC_1 , which is reflected in their rate constants. The quantum efficiency of the PC_1 – PC_3 colouring process was found to be 16–27%. On the other hand, the rate constants for the thermal reversibility of PC_1 – PC_3 are in the range of 10×10^{-2} to 76×10^{-2} min^{-1} with the order of $\text{PC}_2 > \text{PC}_3 > \text{PC}_1$ (Fig. S37 and S38 and Table S6).

Interestingly, we have also found that the fluorescence of the photo-transformed products of PC_1 – PC_3 changes significantly upon light irradiation (Fig. 3d–f and Fig. S5). Upon light irradiation, the fluorescence signal of PC_1 shifted from 518 nm to 665 nm, exhibiting a redshift of 147 nm, accompanied by an increase in emission intensity. Moreover, the fluorescence colour has changed from green to orange-red (Fig. 3d and Fig. S5a). The same observation was found for PC_2 , which showed a redshift of 154 nm in the emission maximum from 520 nm to 672 nm (Fig. 3e and Fig. S5b). On the other hand, the fluorescence of PC_3 (536 nm) was completely quenched after applying the UV light (Fig. 3f and Fig. S5c). The fluorescence quantum yields of light-irradiated samples PC_1^* and PC_2^* were increased to $\phi_f = 58\%$ and 65% , respectively. We have also tested the photo-transformation of PC_1 under

sunlight, which showed similar spectral and colour changes as the UV lamp; however, the complete conversion takes about 2 h (Fig. 5a). The reversible process of the photoexcited compounds can be triggered by heating the samples at 35 °C for 30 min (Fig. 4). Moreover, the system exhibits excellent stability with little degradation for PC_1 in absorbance over five cycles of photoexcitation and heating (Fig. 5b). The solid-state photochromic behaviour was also tested by dispersing PC_1 in a polymer matrix. The blend of PC_1 and PMMA (polymethyl methacrylate) exhibits photochromism when illuminated for 5 minutes, changing the colour (colourless to pink) and fluorescence (cyan to red) of the coated film. The process is also found to be reversible, as evidenced by heating the film at 50 °C for 10 minutes (Fig. 6a).

The performance of PC_1 – PC_3 has been compared to the reported ESIPT systems (Table S6). PC_1 – PC_3 are comparable to the reported systems in terms of stability, switching time, and reversibility. Moreover, PC_1 – PC_3 possess several unique features, such as (a) tunability of the photochromic colours by changing the substituents; (b) tunable photofluorochemical behaviour, such as turn-on fluorescence along with emissive colour modulation for PC_1 and PC_2 and turn-off fluorescence for PC_3 ; and (c) large red shift of 154 nm in the emission signal,



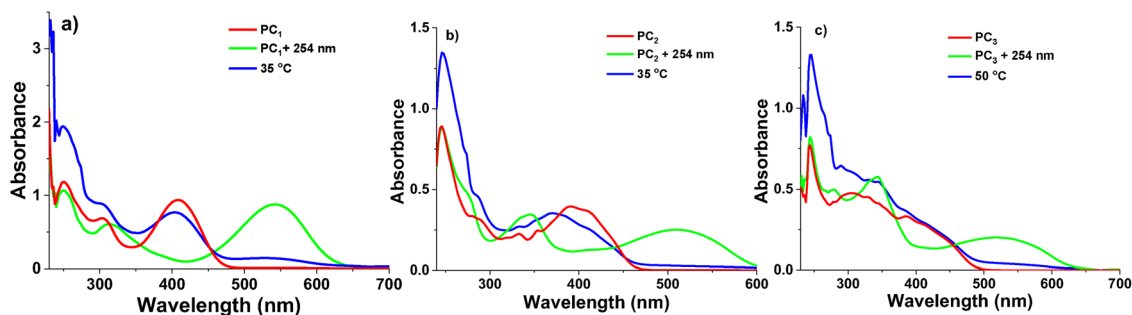


Fig. 4 Reversibility analysis of (a) PC_1 , (b) PC_2 , and (c) PC_3 after heating at 35 °C for 30 minutes.

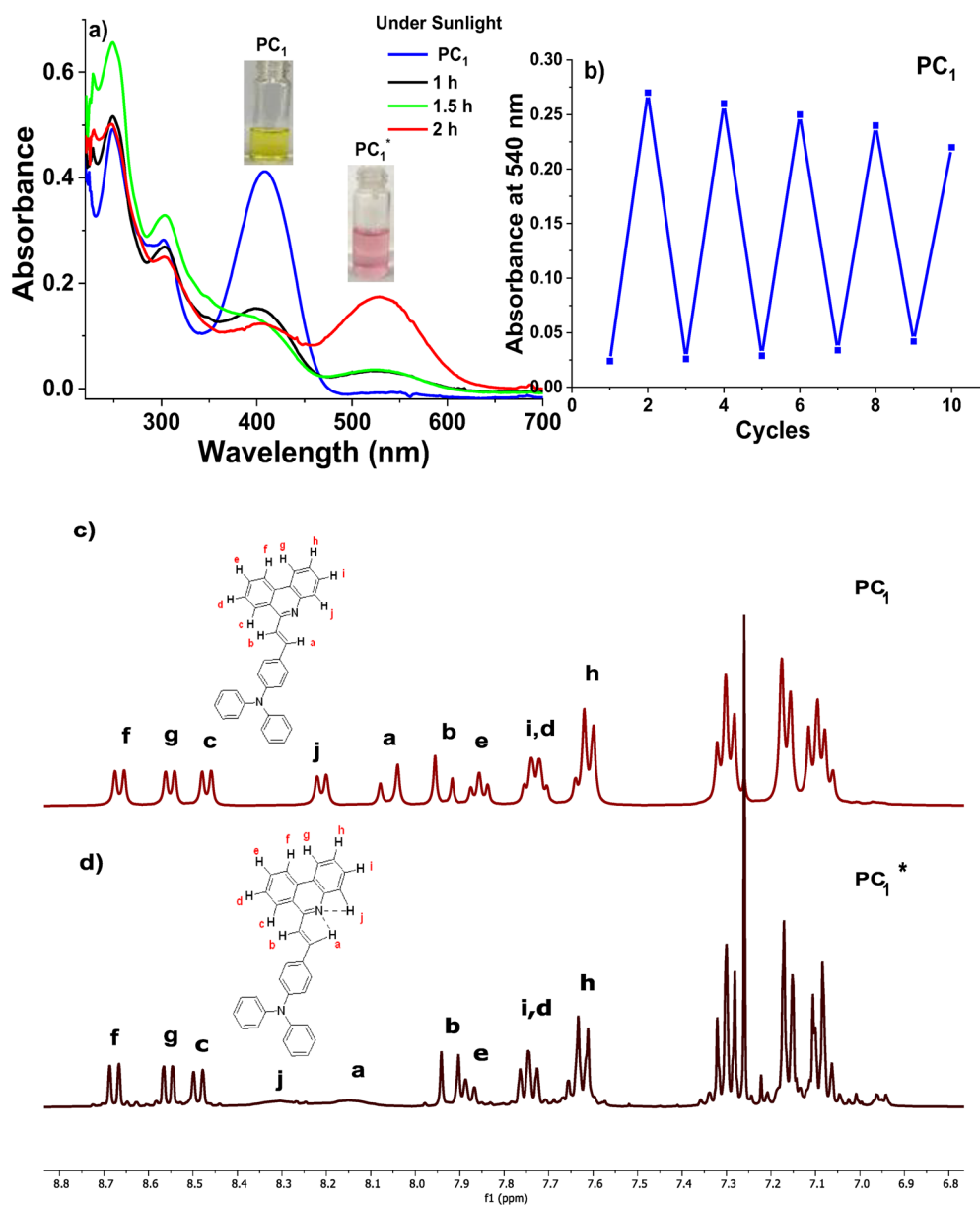


Fig. 5 (a) Absorption spectra of compound PC_1 under sunlight, (b) photo-transformation cycles of PC_1 (1×10^{-5} M) in $CHCl_3$; the absorbance change at $\lambda_{max} = 540$ nm was monitored under irradiation at 254 nm and during heating at 35 °C; 1H NMR spectra (400 MHz, $CDCl_3$) of compound PC_1 before (c) and after (d) exposure to UV light.



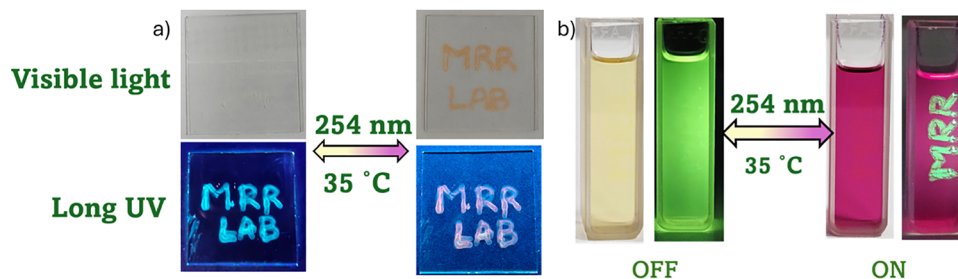


Fig. 6 (a) The usage of the PC_1 and PMMA blend in the application of anticounterfeiting and (b) the usage of PC_1 solution in chloroform and showing its application in signboards.

which helps to avoid the overlap of colours, and obtain pure colours.

Time-resolved fluorescence decay measurements of PC_1 – PC_3 were carried out in chloroform (Fig. S6). Before irradiation, the fluorescence decay profiles of PC_1 and PC_3 were best fitted with a single exponential function, yielding lifetimes of $\tau = 1.18$ ns (100%) for PC_1 and $\tau = 6.35$ ns (100%) for PC_3 . In contrast, PC_2 exhibited a biexponential decay with components $\tau_1 = 0.30$ ns (97%) and $\tau_2 = 3.0$ ns (3%). Upon photoirradiation, both PC_1 and PC_2 showed biexponential decay behaviour. The photo-irradiated PC_1 exhibited lifetimes of $\tau_1 = 1.2$ ns (95.45%) and $\tau_2 = 5.0$ ns (4.55%), while photo-irradiated PC_2 showed $\tau_1 = 1.5$ ns (92.04%) and $\tau_2 = 5.0$ ns (7.96%). The longer lifetimes of PC_1^* and PC_2^* indicate that these species possess stable charge–transfer states.

To understand the mechanism of the photo-transformation, PC_1 has been studied using 1H NMR spectroscopy before and after photo-irradiation (Fig. 5c and d). Interestingly, the 1H NMR spectra of PC_1 , before and after light irradiation, match closely (with a variation of 0.01–0.02 ppm) with each other except for the two protons corresponding to the β -proton of vinylene and the j -proton of phenanthridine. These proton signals have been broadened and experienced a downfield shift from 8.06 ppm to 8.15 ppm for the β -proton of the vinylene and from 8.20 ppm to 8.30 ppm for the j -proton of the phenanthridine. The 1H NMR studies suggest that PC_1 , upon light irradiation, (1) undergoes minimal structural changes, indicating that there is no isomerisation; (2) the β -proton of vinylene and j -proton of phenanthridine possess a labile nature; (3) sharp signals indicate that there is no radical formation.

Furthermore, we have also conducted FT-IR and cyclic voltammetric analysis on PC_1 and PC_1^* . In FT-IR, the stretching frequency of C=N in PC_1 changes from 1589 cm^{-1} to 1575 cm^{-1} for PC_1^* . On the other hand, in cyclic voltammetry, the oxidation potential of PC_1 shifts anodically from 1.06 V (vs. Ag/AgCl) to 1.23 V (vs. Ag/AgCl) for PC_1^* . FT-IR reveals that C=N is more polarised towards a higher single bond character, while cyclic voltammetry shows a reduction in the electron density on the nitrogen atom of the phenanthridine unit.

Based on the results obtained from the above experiments, we hypothesise that a light-induced hydrogen bonding interaction might exist between the β -proton of vinylene and the j -proton of phenanthridine with the phenanthridine nitrogen, leading to partial proton transfer to the phenanthridine moiety

(Fig. 5c, d and Fig. 3g). Further studies are necessary to prove this hypothesis.

To validate our hypothesis, DFT-optimisation has been carried out on $PC_1^* - PC_3^*$. The photoexcited systems exhibit no structural changes with respect to $PC_1 - PC_3$, which supports the minimal changes observed in the 1H NMR. The HOMO energy of $PC_1^* - PC_3^*$ compared to their pristine samples has been found to increase by 0.09–0.14 eV, while the LUMO energy decreases by 0.03–0.10 eV, resulting in a significant reduction in the band gaps (0.12–0.20 eV). $PC_1^* - PC_3^*$, compared to $PC_1 - PC_3$, have also been found to be less stable by 56.2, 55.2 and 55.3 Kcal/mol than the PC_1^* , PC_2^* and PC_3^* , respectively. These changes indicate the formation of a metastable state involving partial proton transfer upon exposure to light. This process enhances donor–acceptor (D–A) interactions, resulting in band gap reductions of 0.20 eV for PC_1 , 0.17 eV for PC_2 and 0.12 eV for PC_3 (Fig. 1). The absorption spectra of $PC_1 - PC_3$ and their photoexcited systems ($PC_1^* - PC_3^*$) optimised using TD-DFT have also supported the experimental data (Fig. S7).

The solid-state photochromic behaviour of PC_1 can be used as an anticounterfeiting ink. A dichloromethane solution of a blend of PMMA and PC_1 was used to write the MRR lab word on a glass slide, which remained invisible after writing. Upon exposure to light, the PC_1 changed its colour to pink, and the word became visible. The process was found to be reversible upon heating the glass slide at $35\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ (Fig. 6a). Under long UV, the fluorescence of the word changed from cyan to red, which can be used for signboards. A similar behaviour was also observed in the solution (Fig. 6b).

Conclusion

In conclusion, three photochromic systems based on phenanthridine have been developed by condensing active methylene-substituted phenanthridine units (6 and 7) with several aromatic aldehydes [triphenylaminyl (TPA), and pyrenyl (PY)] in the presence of benzoic acid and benzoic anhydride. The compounds have been thoroughly characterised using 1H NMR, HRMS, and single-crystal XRD (for PC_1). $PC_1 - PC_3$ have been studied to exhibit photochromic behaviour under UV light (254 nm). The photo-transformation changes the absorption maxima of $PC_1 - PC_3$ from 330–350 nm to 550–600 nm and



the colour from yellow to purple/orange/brown. Moreover, PC₁–PC₃ also exhibit a fluorescence change, turning on red emission ($\lambda_{em} = 665\text{--}675\text{ nm}$). The photo-transformation has been characterised by UV-Vis absorption, fluorescence and ¹H NMR spectroscopy. The studies indicated that the compounds undergo a photoexcited partial proton transfer, leading to a metastable hydrogen bonding state.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Data availability

The supporting data for this article have been included in the supplementary information (SI). Supplementary information contains synthetic experimental procedures, NMR spectral data, cyclic voltammograms, solvatochromic studies of UV-Vis absorption and fluorescence emission, crystal data, FT-IR, life time data. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d5tc02868j>.

CCDC 2351276 contains the supplementary crystallographic data for this paper.³⁸

Acknowledgements

Rajeswara Rao thanks SERB, India, and IIT Dharwad for partially supporting this research through a Core Research Grant (CRG/2023/002129). The authors are grateful to the Sophisticated Central Instrumentation Facility (SCIF), IIT Dharwad, and all its staff members for letting them use the facilities and assisting them with the material characterisation studies.

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