

1 **Enhanced photoelectrochemical response of 1D TiO₂ by atmospheric pressure**
2 **plasma surface modification**

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13
14 **Abstract:**

15 In this paper we demonstrate the use of atmospheric pressure plasma jet (APPJ) to functionalize
16 the surface of hydrothermally synthesized vertically aligned TiO₂ nanorods (TNRs) for photo
17 electrochemical (PEC) application. The TNRs functionalized with the atmospheric pressure He-
18 plasma showed relatively higher crystallinity, improved light absorption, and change in the
19 morphology with additional surface area, leading to an enhanced photocurrent density than that of
20 the untreated. Achieving the PEC performance on par with the best in the literature, this APPJ
21 treatment is shown to be a promising technique to obtain better functionality with TNR kind of
22 materials and many other nano-micro systems for various applications such as PEC hydrogen
23 generation.

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25 **Keywords:** One-dimensional, atmospheric-plasma-jet, functionalization, photoelectrochemical.
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34 **1. Introduction:**

35 TiO₂ has been widely explored for thin film solar cells [1], photocatalytic H₂ evolution [2], photo-
36 electrochemical (PEC) water splitting [3], self-cleaning and antifogging applications [4] due to its
37 optical and electronic properties along with the nontoxicity, economical, chemical stability, and
38 anticorrosive characteristics [5]. TiO₂ finds valuable applications in LEDs, as photo-anode in new
39 photovoltaic devices, photoelectrochemical cells, water splitting, and in gas sensors & heat reflec-
40 tors [6–12]. Of particular interest are, one-dimensional TiO₂ nanorod (TNR) arrays fabricated by
41 a simple and economical hydrothermal method [13], found to have a superior chemical stability
42 and high electron mobility [14,15] that are required for all the above applications. Furthermore,
43 for solar energy applications, the vertical alignment of nanorods on a substrate can offer improved
44 absorption of light due to the diffuse reflection happening between the nanorod arrays. Also, such
45 structures offer a direct and efficient transport pathway for the photo-generated electrons. Alto-
46 gether, these features are expected to enhance the carrier generation, their separation, and transport
47 in solar energy conversion devices [16]. However, the wide band-gap of the TiO₂ (3.2 eV) limits
48 its light-absorption only to the UV range, which is only a small part of the solar spectrum [17].
49 Hence, bandgap engineering of TiO₂ has been explored through metal, non-metal doping [18], and
50 also metal doping with Ar, N₂, & O₂ plasma treatment [19] to improve the absorption of the solar
51 radiation. Such efforts on improving the optical properties of TiO₂ film with & without doping
52 have been made by employing the plasma treatment technique [20]. In another way, many methods
53 for its surface modification have been practiced including surface hydrogenation, vacuum activa-
54 tion and plasma treatment [21–23]. The plasma treatment cover's a very broad range of different
55 plasma techniques based on the operating pressure (low and atmospheric), thermodynamics (ther-
56 mal and non-thermal), temperature (low and high), source of plasma (Microwave discharge, DC
57 discharge, dielectric barrier discharge, corona discharge, AC arc discharge, electron beam, plasma
58 torch, glow discharge, hollow cathode discharge) [24–36].

59 Among them, non-thermal and atmospheric pressure plasmas have grown to be of huge scientific
60 and commercial importance for materials processing due to their simple cost effective nature and
61 ability to bring in rich chemical as well as physical properties [37,38]. Plasma treatment technique
62 has been the most versatile surface treatment [39–42] based on a few of its advantages namely; (i)
63 the air plasma treatment removes organic impurities absorbed on the surface of TiO₂, (ii) formation
64 of hydroxyl group on the surface during the plasma treatment to improve wettability [43], and (iii)

65 oxygen vacancies might serve as the trap centers for photo-generated electrons and suppress the
66 recombination. Hence, the electron-hole pairs could be separated and transported more effectively
67 [44]. For example, the plasma treatment of TNRs with reactive gases such as H₂, N₂, and O₂ has
68 been explored and an improved the PCE efficiency from 0.62 % (untreated) to 1.11 % (N₂ plasma-
69 treated) of DSSCs [45].

70 Several efforts were made to improve the PEC activity of TiO₂ nanostructures. TiO₂ nanoparticle
71 layer synthesized on Ti foil via the potentiostatic anodization method showed a PEC current den-
72 sity of 2 μAcm⁻² and further improved up to 40 μAcm⁻² after combining it with Cu₂O [46]. The
73 photocurrent density up to 1 mAcm⁻² was achieved with TiO₂ nanoporous photoelectrodes with
74 mixed anatase and rutile phases by a dip-coating and subsequent calcination process [47]. Further,
75 the PEC performance of TiO₂ was also improved by doping such as Fe, N, Mn, Cr, Si, Co [48–
76 51]. Particularly, Fe doped TiO₂ nanoparticles exhibited a photocurrent density of 54 μAcm⁻²,
77 which was 3.6 times higher than that of un-doped TiO₂ nanoparticles [52]. Peng et al. reported the
78 N-doped TiO₂ (P25 Degussa) for photoelectrochemical CO₂ reduction and achieved the maximum
79 current density of 0.104 mAcm⁻² at 2 V (vs. SCE) [53]. N doping of anatase and rutile phase TiO₂
80 nanowires also improved the PEC performance [54,55]. The activity of TNRs was improved up to
81 1.25, 2.0, 1.53 mAcm⁻² (vs. Ag/AgCl) and 0.81 mAcm⁻² (vs. RHE), by doping of C, Sn, W and Si
82 [56–59]. The hydrogenation of TNR via rapid thermal annealing (RTA) process was also explored
83 for PEC H₂ evolution. The highest photocurrent of 3.7 mAcm⁻² was obtained using TNRs treated
84 with RTA at 400 °C for 1 hr [60].

85 Few of such efforts to improve the PEC performance of TiO₂ were involving the conventional
86 plasma. The TiO₂ nanotubes treated under vacuum with air plasma for 20 minutes also showed a
87 stable & improved photocurrent density (2.4 mAcm⁻² vs. RHE) [43]. The TiO₂ thin film deposited
88 by the atomic layer deposition method showed enhancement in the PEC current density from 0.12
89 to 1 mAcm⁻² after hydrogen plasma treatment [61]. TiO₂ nanosheets plasma-treated using a plasma
90 cleaner under Ar atmosphere showed the current density of 43.7 μAcm⁻²(vs. Ag/AgCl) under 300
91 W Xenon arc lamp with an AM 1.5 filter [62]. In another report, after incorporation of hydrogen
92 by H₂ plasma treatment, the mesoporous TiO₂ films showed the current densities of 22.9 μAcm⁻²
93 & 0.16 μAcm⁻² under UV-LED & Blue-LED respectively [63]. Thus, in general, the conventional
94 plasma treatment was already proved to be an effective technique to improve the PEC performance
95 of TiO₂. The plasma treatment is also known to improve the functional properties in many other

96 materials as well [64–66] and for example, it has also been reported that helium (He) plasma treat-
97 ment is a promising method to reduce the contact resistance of source/drain region for Indium-
98 Gallium-Zinc oxide (IGZO) thin film transistors [64] due to the formation of oxygen vacancies
99 [65].

100 One-dimensional TNRs could offer an advantageous conducting network because of their short
101 electron pathway as discussed in the works of literature [16]. Thus, it was expected that the
102 nanorods would show a better PEC performance with higher photocurrent density. However, it can
103 be also observed from the literature that they generally showed relatively inferior PEC activity
104 with lower photocurrent, probably due to the lower crystallinity, higher contact angle with water,
105 as well as due to the absence of surface defect states. Few efforts, as mentioned above, were made
106 to overcome these limitations and to improve the PEC performance of TNRs. However, most of
107 these efforts used the plasma treatment process under vacuum and high temperature conditions.
108 As reported, the low-power atmospheric pressure plasma jet (APPJ) is an easily scalable, non-
109 thermal technique to improve the electronic properties of many functional materials [67–69].
110 Presently, there has been an increasing interest for APPJ in materials processing, as there is no
111 requirement for sophisticated vacuum equipment and high temperatures which makes it cost
112 effective [38,69]. Additionally, plasma jets can be directed towards substrated, hence can be used
113 remotely suitable for industrial applications. APPJ is known to control the defects, crystallinity,
114 and surface wettability [68–70]. APPJs can deliver transient electric fields along with charged
115 particles, neutral metastable species, radicals, and radiation in the UV and visible regions
116 conveniently in a processing plume [68,71]. To overcome the small area covered by the plasma jet
117 on the substrate, several approaches have been reported so far, e.g. array of plasma jet or by varying
118 the plasmas jet operating conditions [72–75].

119 It can be expected that the functionalization of TNRs using APPJ could improve the optical,
120 electrical, and interface properties between TNR and electrolyte resulting in better PEC
121 performance. Being a simple technique, which consumes minimum time and can be done at room
122 temperature, this could prove to be a quick and cool tool to use even with flexible substrates. Such
123 functionalized TNRs with atmospheric pressure plasma treatment at room temperature are not
124 reported to the best of our knowledge. Herein, we demonstrate for the first time, the room
125 temperature APPJ surface modification of high performance 1D TNR arrays that are grown by a
126 simple, one-step hydrothermal process on FTO substrate. We chose He, (He+O₂), & (He+N₂) as

127 carrier gases to modify the surface of the 1D TNR and observed the changes leading to enhanced
128 photoelectrochemical activity.

129

130 **2. Experimental:**

131 **2.1. Preparation of TiO₂ nanorods:**

132 One dimensional TiO₂ nanorods (TNRs) were prepared via a simple hydrothermal route by
133 following the procedure reported in the literature [76]. In a typical synthesis, the TiCl₄ was added
134 to the mixture of concentrated hydrochloric acid (HCl) and DI water (1:1 solution) followed by
135 stirring for 30 min. The solution was then transferred into a Teflon coated 50 ml autoclave with
136 pre-cleaned Fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) substrates placed at an angle against the wall of a
137 container with the conducting side facing down. The reaction was carried out at 180 °C by keeping
138 the above autoclave in an electric oven for 2 hours. After the reaction the FTO/TNR substrate was
139 taken out, washed 3 times with DI water, dried, and was annealed at 450 °C for 1 hr in the air. The
140 obtained TNR films were used for further studies.

141

142 **2.2. Plasma-functionalization of TNR surface:**

143 To functionalize the TNR surface, an atmospheric pressure plasma jet was employed [67]. The
144 radio frequency (RF) plasma jet with Helium carrier gas mixed with either oxygen or nitrogen was
145 used in this process for surface modification. A RF field was applied between two stainless steel
146 electrodes covered on the sides with quartz plates forming a gap of 1×1 mm² in cross section and
147 30 mm in length [77]. The plasma was ignited using a gas mixture of helium and oxygen,
148 corresponding to flow rates of 3 slm and 30 sccm, respectively, with an input power of 10 watts.
149 The distance between the jet and the substrate was maintained at 5 mm during the exposure for 5
150 mins.

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152 **2.3. Characterization:**

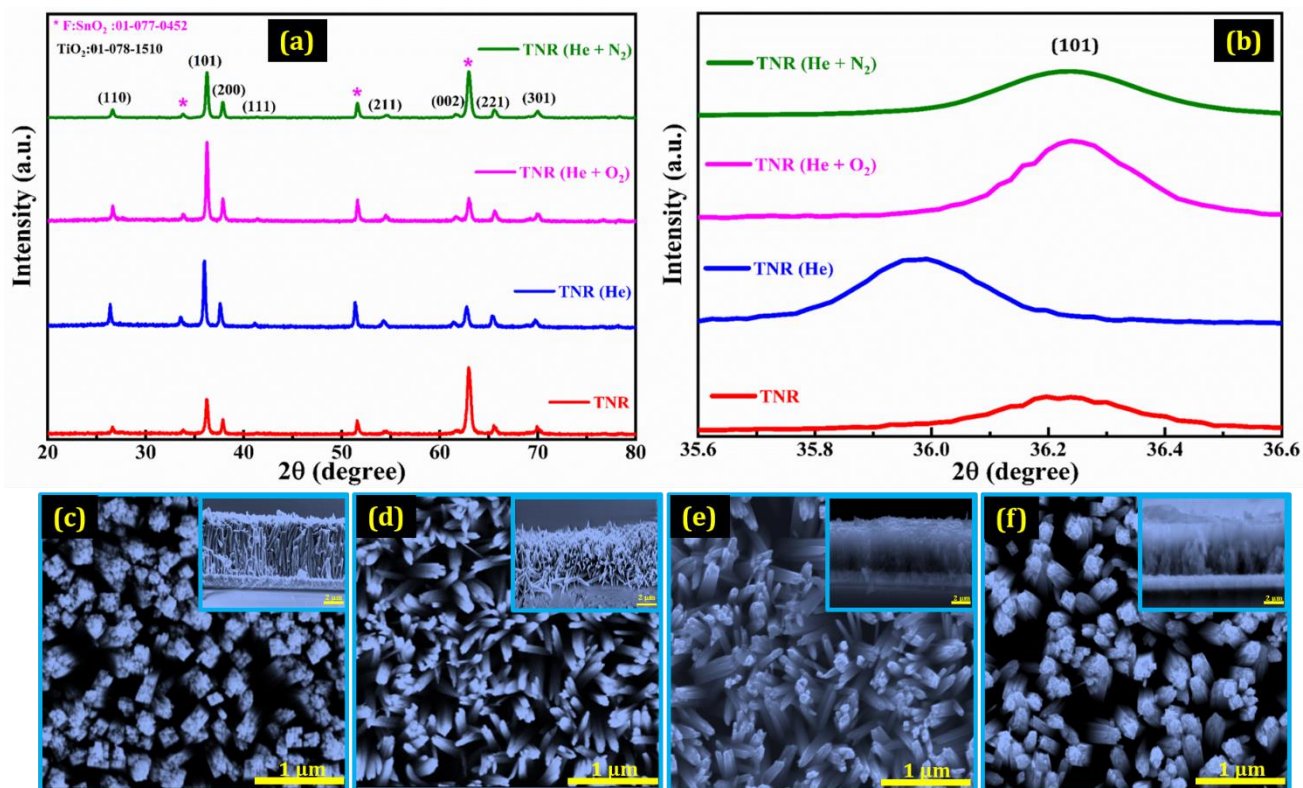
153 The X-ray diffraction was carried out using Cu K α radiation (BRUKER USA D8 Advance,
154 Davinci, wavelength =1.5405 Å) with the diffraction angle from 10° to 80°. Absorption studies
155 were carried out with the ultraviolet-diffuse reflectance spectroscopy (UV-DRS) by using Agilent-
156 Cary (Cary 5000 UV-Vis-NIR) spectrophotometer. Raman spectra were recorded using Micro
157 Raman spectrometer (HORIBA France, LABRAM HR Evolution) with a 532 nm laser

158 wavelength. The surface morphology of the film was studied by using a high-resolution Scanning
 159 Electron Microscope (F E I Quanta FEG 200). Water contact angle measuring instrument (HO-
 160 IAD-CAM-01) was used in this study to measure the wettability of TNR substrates before and
 161 after AP treatment. 1 mL of deionized water was dispensed for each measurement. The
 162 photoelectrochemical measurements of the TNR samples were recorded using CHI604E
 163 potentiostat with the scan rate of 50 mV/s and a scanning range of -1.0V to 1.5V.
 164 Photoelectrochemical cell had the platinum, Ag/AgCl, and TiO₂/FTO films used as a counter,
 165 reference, and working electrodes respectively. 0.1 M NaOH was used as the electrolyte
 166 throughout measurements and the light from a PET (Photo Emission Tech, Inc. USA, 300WSS-
 167 EM) solar simulator with power 100 mW/cm² was used for illumination under 1.5 AM filter.

168

169 3. Results and Discussion:

170 3.1 Structural and morphological study:



171

172 *Fig.1. (a) XRD patterns with (b) overlay spectra of (101) plane & (c), (d), (e), (f) surface and (inset)*
 173 *cross-sectional FE-SEM images of the TNR, TNR(He), TNR(He + O₂) and TNR(He + N₂) films*

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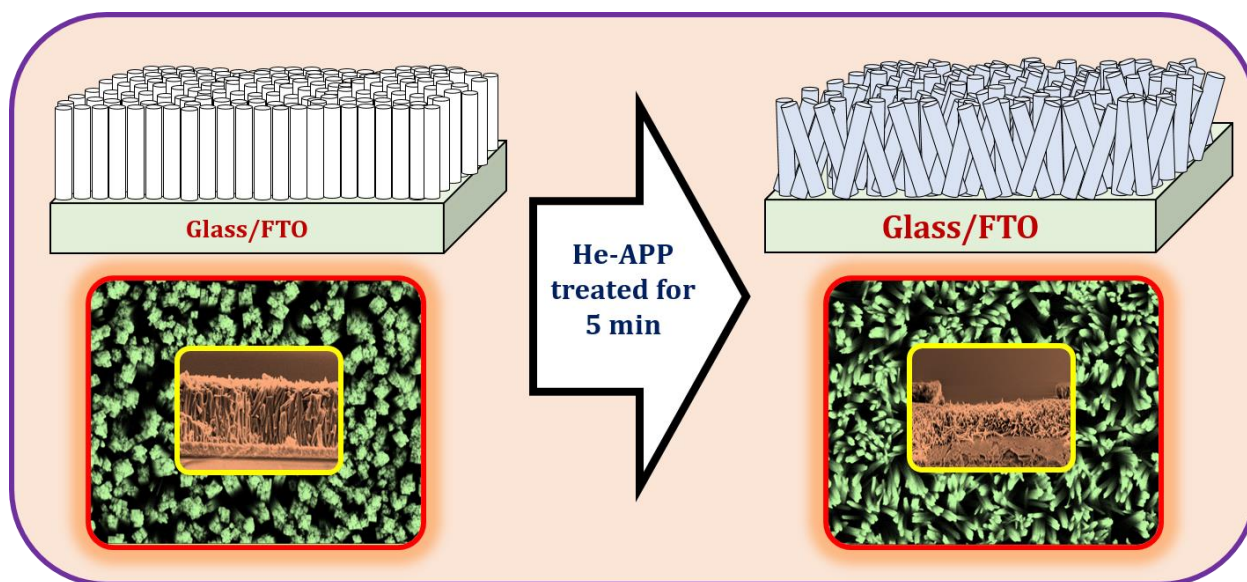
175 Fig.1 (a) shows that the XRD patterns of TNR, TNR (He), TNR (He + O₂), and TNR (He + N₂)
176 films were in accordance with the standard data for TiO₂ (space group; P42/mnm) as provided by
177 JCPDS (Joint Committee on Powder Diffraction Standards), reference: 01-078-1510, thereby
178 confirming tetragonal rutile phase of TiO₂. All the films exhibited crystalline nature having the
179 most intense peak consistent to (101) plane of TiO₂. Six more peaks corresponding to (110), (200),
180 (111), (211), (002), (221), (112) and (301) planes were also observed. No peaks were observed
181 corresponding to anatase or brookite phase indicating the high purity of the rutile TNR samples.
182 The crystallite size (D) was estimated by using Debye–Scherrer formula,

$$183 \quad D = \frac{0.9\lambda}{\beta \cos\theta}$$

184 where, λ - 0.15418 nm, β - full width at half maximum (FWHM), and θ - Bragg's angle in degree.
185 Fig. 1(b) shows the overlay spectra of (101) plane and we estimated 2θ values (36.26 °, 35.98 °,
186 36.25 ° & 36.23 °) FWHM (0.3085 °, 0.1278 °, 0.1299 ° & 0.2996 °) for (101) plane of TiO₂ (TNR,
187 TNR (He), TNR (He + O₂), & TNR (He + N₂)). The observed shift in 2θ values with respect to
188 the untreated TNR was about 0.28 °, 0.01 ° & 0.03 ° after He, (He + O₂), & (He + N₂) APPJ
189 treatments respectively. The shift in the 2θ values can be attributed to the stress on the lattice
190 caused due to the pressure exerted by the reactive gas used for the APPJ treatment. The calculated
191 crystalline sizes for TNR, TNR (He), TNR (He + O₂), and TNR (He + N₂) films were 28.31, 68.29,
192 67.24, and 29.10 nm respectively. It can be noticed that the APPJ treatment caused observable
193 changes in the crystalline size. He and He + O₂ plasma-treated samples showed bigger size crystals,
194 more than double in size, as compared to the He + N₂ APPJ treated and untreated TNRs. This
195 effect is similar to the observation with N₂ plasma-treated TiO₂ nanoparticles in the literature [78].
196 The increase in the crystalline size indicates the improvement in the crystallinity of TNRs and also
197 can be related to the formation of intrinsic defects on the surface of TiO₂ itself referring to the
198 similar observations in the literature [79]. The improved crystallinity with the formation of
199 intrinsic defects after He and (He + O₂) APPJ treatment may lead to an improved PEC activity
200 [80–82].

201 Fig. 1 (c, d, e & f) shows the surface and cross-sectional FE-SEM images of samples TNR, TNR
202 (He), TNR (He + O₂), and TNR (He + N₂) films respectively. In the Fig. 1(c & f), we observed
203 that the package of few TNR arrays which was vertically aligned perpendicular to the surface of
204 the substrate. But, after He and (He + O₂) APPJ treatment the TNRs became slightly slanted &

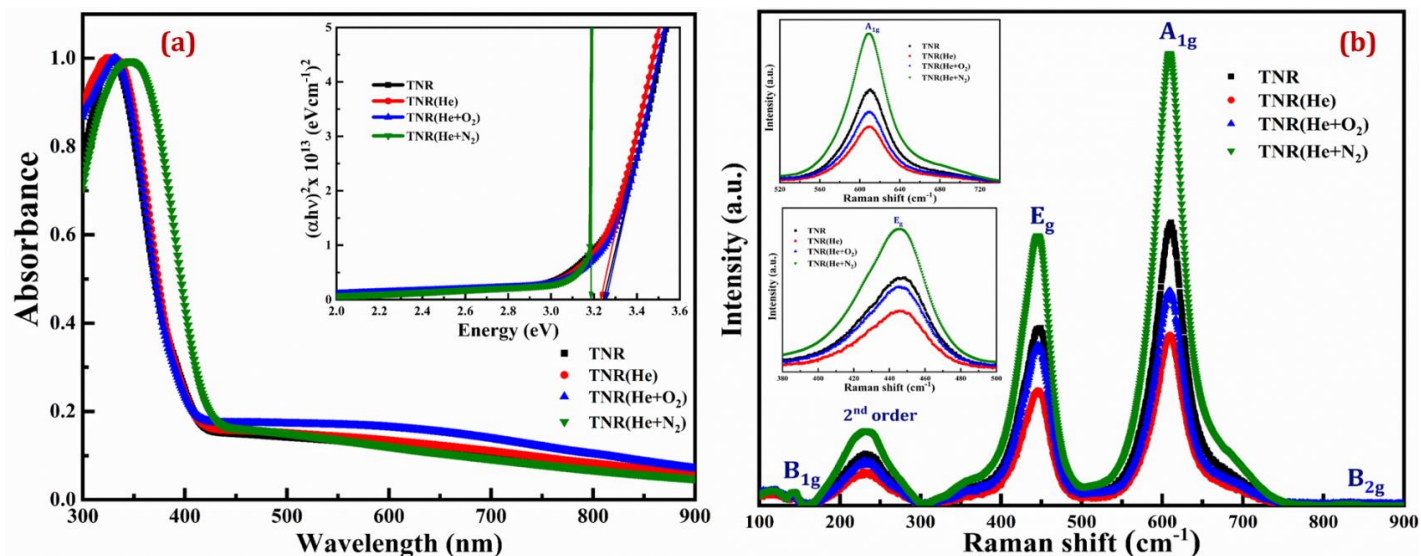
205 separated from each other (Fig. 1(d &f)). For the calculation of diameter and length of TNRs, we
206 have used imageJ software and an average value of 10 readings for each sample was taken. The
207 APPJ treated and untreated TNR films showed the uniform distribution of vertical TiO_2 nanorods
208 with a diameter of about 100 nm and the length of around 3 μm throughout the substrate [54]. As
209 shown in Fig. 2, the TNRs were aligned perpendicular to the surface of the substrate and the
210 alignment was changed slightly after the He atmospheric plasma treatment, where they became
211 slightly slanted & separated from each other. The reason behind this change in morphology could
212 be the longitudinal force exerted on the surface. This can be from the substantial gas velocity which
213 caused by the high input gas pressure or adatoms by the ions in the plasma. Also, the etching which
214 happens when the energetic ions hit the surface of TNRs could affect the morphology. Moreover,
215 the transient electric field (EF) at the tip of plasma plume, typically in the kV/cm could not be
216 neglected as well [83–85]. However, the observed change in morphology/alignment can offer an
217 additional surface for the interaction of He APPJ treated TNRs with the electrolyte and form an
218 effective TNR-electrolyte interface for the photoelectrochemical reaction. As we discussed in the
219 introduction section, there is also a possibility that the changes in the alignment of nanorods might
220 be detrimental for light absorption.
221



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Fig.2. Schematic of the He-APP treatment of the TNR films

225 **3.2 Optical study:**



226
 227 *Fig.3. (a) UV-visible spectra with (inset) Tauc plot and (b) Raman spectra with an overlay of*
 228 *Raman spectra for A_{1g} & E_g modes of the TNR, TNR(He), TNR(He + O₂), and TNR(He + N₂)*
 229 *films.*

230
 231 The UV-visible absorbance spectra of treated and untreated TNR films over the wavelength range
 232 of from 300–900 nm is shown in Fig. 3(a). The bandgap of the TNR films has been determined
 233 using the relation,

$$\alpha = A(h\nu - E_g)^{\frac{1}{2}}$$

234 where, α is the absorption coefficient, A is the constant, E_g is the energy gap and $h\nu$ is the incident
 235 photon energy. The values of bandgap were estimated from the Tauc plots (inset of Fig. 3(a)) as
 236 3.24, 3.22, 3.25, and 3.19 eV for the TNR, TNR (He), TNR (He + O₂), and TNR (He + N₂) films
 237 respectively, which are in accordance with the previous reports [86,87].

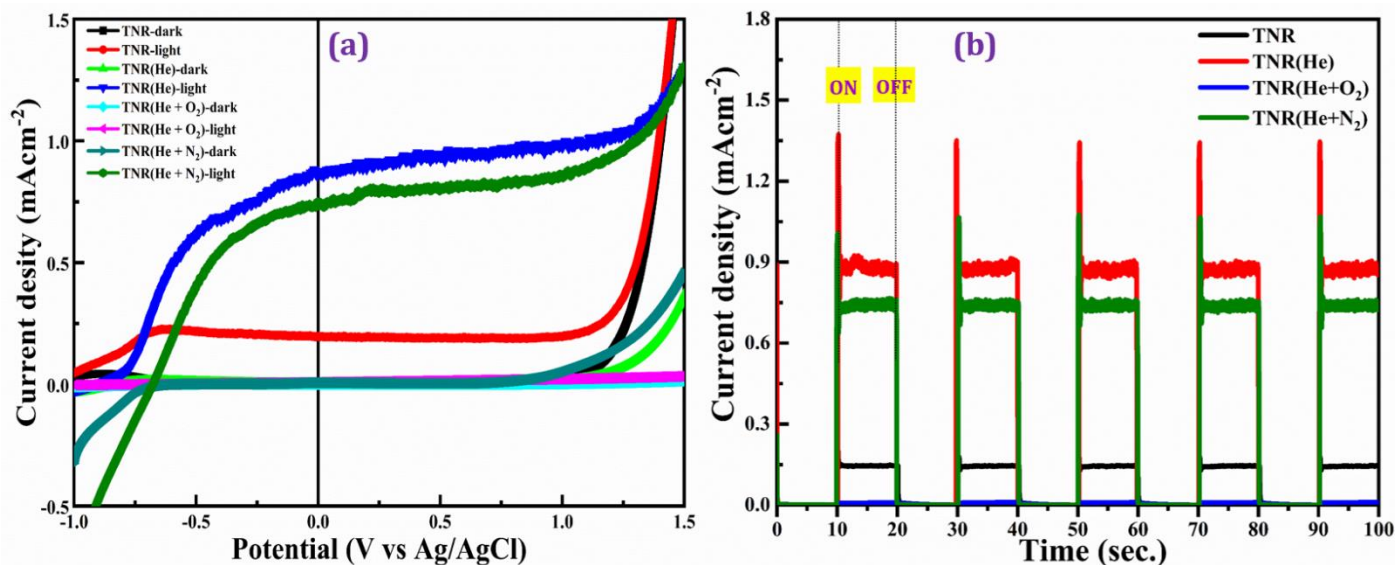
238 It can be observed that the absorption edge was shifted to higher wavelength (red shift) and the
 239 bandgap was reduced for TNR (He) as well as TNR (He+N₂) samples. In contrast, there was an
 240 increase in the bandgap (blue shift) for TNR (He+O₂). The possibility for such variation in the
 241 band edge after plasma treatment of TiO₂ is indicated in the literature and our results are in accord-
 242 ance with the same [20]. The plasma treatment was used as an effective technique to decrease the
 243 bandgap of TiO₂ and to promote the formation of defect states by introducing the oxygen vacancies
 244

245 [62], both of which could improve the UV-visible light absorption [88,89]. Similar changes ob-
246 served in our UV-visible absorption spectra of TNRs after the He and (He + N₂) APPJ treatment,
247 where there was an improved absorption and red shift of band edge [65, 66] indicating the for-
248 mation of oxygen vacancy defect states unlike in the case of (He + O₂) APPJ treatment. These
249 changes observed in the UV-visible light absorption after the He and (He + N₂) APPJ treatment
250 also indicate improved PEC activity, analogous to the earlier observation in the literature [62].
251 Fig.3 (b) shows the Raman spectra of the TNR, TNR (He), and TNR (He + O₂) films. Raman
252 spectra of all the samples confirmed the formation of the rutile phase of TiO₂. There are five Raman
253 active modes namely A_{1g}, B_{1g}, B_{2g}, E_g, and multi-photon process mode for rutile TiO₂ [76,88,90],
254 which appear around at 611 cm⁻¹, 143 cm⁻¹, 830 cm⁻¹, 447 cm⁻¹, and 240 cm⁻¹ respectively. The
255 two prominent maxima at 447 cm⁻¹ (E_g) and 611 cm⁻¹ (A_{1g}) are in accordance with literature for
256 rutile TiO₂ [76,91]. The A_{1g} peak position (Fig (b) inset) for TNR, TNR(He), TNR(He + O₂), and
257 TNR(He + N₂) films appeared at 611.10, 609.16, 610.07, and 611.10 cm⁻¹ with FWHM 27.42,
258 26.50, 28.75 and 38.86 cm⁻¹. Also, the E_g peak position (Fig (b) inset) appeared at 447.72, 445.23,
259 445.23 and 445.23 cm⁻¹ with FWHM 32.30, 30.07, 32.95 and 23.24 cm⁻¹ for TNR, TNR(He),
260 TNR(He + O₂), and TNR(He + N₂) films respectively. The decrement in the FWHM of A_{1g} and
261 E_g peaks indicated that the increment in the crystallinity of TNR after He APP, in concurrence
262 with their XRD result as well as the literature report [76].
263 Surface wettability, as one of the fundamental surface properties of an electrode, could show sig-
264 nificant influence on its functionalities such as electrolyte-wetting, redox electron transfer and gas
265 release in electrochemical reactions [92–97]. Its known that a hydrophilic surface leads to better
266 electron transfer rate between electrolyte and electrode [94]. The surface plasma treatment also
267 improves the wettability of the TiO₂ photoanode by forming hydroxyl groups and could contribute
268 to the enhancement of PEC performance [43]. Expecting the similar effect, we have performed the
269 wettability test of untreated and APPJ treated TiO₂ NRs with water, and the results are shown in
270 Fig. S1 (Supporting information). The contact angles of the water droplet for the APPJ treated
271 TiO₂ NRs were smaller than that for the untreated TiO₂ NRs. He APPJ treatment showed a small
272 change in wettability, and further optimization of plasma treatment conditions may be needed to
273 achieve the hydrophilic nature of the TNR films. Lee et al. had observed a significant improvement
274 in wettability of Ti substrate after plasma treatment by using He and O₂/He mixture carrier gases

275 [98]. Similarly, in our case wettability has improved after (He + O₂) & (He + N₂) APPJ treatment
 276 with a switch from hydrophobic to hydrophilic nature.

277

278 3.3 PEC measurements of TiO₂ films:



279

280 ***Fig.4. (a) Linear sweep voltammogram (LSV) curves and (b) Results from a***
 281 ***chronoamperometry measurement of TNR, TNR(He), TNR(He + O₂), and TNR(He + N₂)***
 282 ***films under light chopping for 10 seconds.***

283 Fig. 4 (a) shows the linear sweep voltammogram (LSV) curves of the treated and untreated TNR
 284 samples in dark and under illumination. The maximum current density at 0 V (Ag/AgCl) observed
 285 for the TNR, TNR (He), TNR (He + O₂), and TNR (He + N₂) were 0.1964, 0.8715, 0.0079, and
 286 0.7450 mAcm⁻² respectively. Further, chronoamperometry measurement was performed to check
 287 the stability and reproducibility of the photoanode. The measurement was carried out with 5 on-
 288 off cycles of 10 s time interval, in a similar manner as reported earlier on PEC devices [62,99].
 289 Fig. 4(b) revealed the good reproducibility & stability of the current density with time. All treated
 290 and untreated TNR films were observed to be stable after 5 on-off cycles with a time duration of
 291 10 seconds at 0.4 V (Ag/AgCl). We observed almost 4 times enhancement in the maximum current
 292 density for TNR (He) film as compared to untreated TNR under the light. At fixed potentials the
 293 electrodes usually adopt a steady dark current. In our case, we could observe that the current
 294 reached a sharp maximum (the current spike) immediately after switching on the light. This might

295 be attributed to the rapid initial separation of electron/hole pairs or to the presence of the high
 296 initial concentration of negative charge carriers accumulated in the film during the deposition
 297 [100]. Such spikes are known to arise due to the electron recombination with surface-trapped holes
 298 or photo-oxidation intermediates [101].

299 Based on our observations, this enhancement in the current density of the He-treated TNRs can be
 300 ascribed to the higher crystallinity, reduced band gap, availability of additional surface area, and the
 301 possible formation of oxygen vacancy defect states in the TNRs. However, the TNR sample treated
 302 with (He + O₂) showed very less current density compared to all others, which may be due to the
 303 absence of oxygen vacancy defect states as indicated by the UV-visible absorption studies. Also,
 304 due to the lower crystallinity, as shown by the XRD & Raman results, TNR (He + N₂) samples
 305 exhibited lower current density compared to the TNR (He).

306 The results obtained are comparable with the previous reports in the literature (Table 1). It is
 307 noteworthy that the PEC activity of He plasma surface-modified TNRs was comparable to the best
 308 in the literature using ALD grown Hydrogen plasma-treated planar TiO₂. The photocurrent density
 309 shown by the He APPJ treated TNRs is the second-highest reported so far for TiO₂ and there is
 310 room for further improvement by optimization or employing the plasma of other carrier gases such
 311 as H₂, Ar, N₂, and O₂. The approach presented here for the first time by combining the simpler,
 312 greener, and a single step hydrothermal route for making the TNRs with the room temperature
 313 atmospheric pressure plasma functionalization technique can be explored for many other
 314 applications as well.

315

TiO₂	Plasma modification	Max. photocurrent density (mAcm⁻²)	Reference
ALD grown planar TiO ₂	As prepared	0.12 (0.8 V vs NHE)	[61]
	Hydrogen plasma for 1 hr at 200 °C	1.0 (0.8 V vs NHE)	
TiO ₂ nanosheet	As prepared	0.113 (0.6 V vs Ag/AgCl)	[62]
	Argon plasma for 2 hr at 40 Pa	0.0437 (0.6 V vs Ag/AgCl)	
Mesoporous TiO ₂	As prepared	0.00081(0.4 V vs Ag/AgCl)	[63]

	Hydrogen plasma for 5 min at 60mTorr	0.0229 (0.4 V vs Ag/AgCl)	
TiO ₂ nanorods	As prepared	0.1964 (0 V vs Ag/AgCl)	This work
	Helium atmospheric pressure plasma for 5 min	0.8715 (0 V vs Ag/AgCl)	
	(Helium+ Oxygen) atmospheric pressure plasma for 5 min	0.0079 (0 V vs Ag/AgCl)	
	(Helium+ Nitrogen) atmospheric pressure plasma for 5 min	0.7450 (0 V vs Ag/AgCl)	

316

317

Table-1: Comparison of our photoelectrochemical results with literature

318

319 **4. Conclusion:**

320 In summary, surface functionalization of TNRs was achieved using the simple, room temperature
321 atmospheric pressure plasma treatment technique. The effect of APP treatment on the structural,
322 optical, and PEC properties of TNRs was established. A four-fold enhancement in the photocurrent
323 was observed after the He-APPJ treatment of TNRs, and this performance is on par with the best
324 in the literature using the conventional hydrogen plasma-treated ALD grown planar TiO₂. The
325 improvement in the PEC performance could be correlated with our observations on (i) the
326 availability of surplus surface area of TNRs to interact with the electrolyte, (ii) the increase in the
327 crystalline size, accompanied by the possible formation of more intrinsic defects in TNRs and (iii)
328 reduction in the bandgap which improved the UV-visible light absorption.

329

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343 **6. Data availability statement**

344 The raw/processed data required to reproduce these findings cannot be shared at this time as the
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