

# Single-Pot Synthesis of $\langle 001 \rangle$ -Faceted N-Doped $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$ /Reduced Graphene Oxide Nanocomposite for Efficient Photoelectrochemical Water Splitting

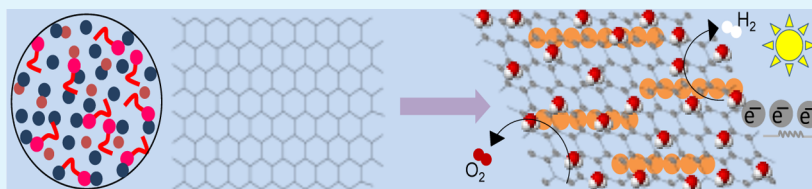
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## Supporting Information



**ABSTRACT:** Due to exciting catalytic activity and selectivity, tailoring of nanocatalysts consisting of preferred crystal facets and desired structural properties remains at the forefront of materials engineering. A facile one-step nonhydrolytic solvothermal synthesis of a nanocomposite of reduced graphene oxide and one-dimensional nitrogen-doped  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  (N-NbO $x$ ) with exposed  $\langle 001 \rangle$  facet is described. Triethylamine performed the dual role as nitrogen source and capping agent to control the size and unidirectional growth of  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  nanocrystallites. The nanocomposite showed efficient visible-light-mediated ( $\lambda > 420$  nm) water splitting in a photoelectrochemical cell. A plausible mechanism for the formation of N-NbO $x$  nanorods and improved photoelectrochemical efficacy in terms of their oriented growth is proposed.

**KEYWORDS:** solvothermal, nonaqueous synthesis, semiconductor photocatalyst, water splitting, sunlight

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Due to unique physicochemical properties, nanostructured semiconductor photocatalysts are the subject of exhaustive investigation for a number of photocatalytic applications such as water splitting,<sup>1,2</sup> water decontamination,<sup>3,4</sup>  $\text{CO}_2$  reduction,<sup>5,6</sup> and so forth. Since semiconductor-mediated photocatalysis is a surface phenomenon, the latter plays a crucial role in the process. It has been well established that the photocatalytic activity is an artifact of the light absorption capabilities, redox rate, and the availability of exciton (electron–hole pairs) on the surface, among others.<sup>7–11</sup> One popular approach to endow surfaces with enhanced catalytic activity is to increase the number of active sites, which is achieved by controlling various parameters such as size, composition, interfacing, porosity, shape, and so forth. Interestingly, shape-tailoring at the nanoscale further is an evolving concept to induce improvement in the catalytic activity and selectivity in nanostructured materials.<sup>12–15</sup> The shape-controlled nanocrystals possess well-defined geometry and morphology, both of which cooperatively enhance their functionality, selectivity, and chemical reactivity. For instance,  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanocrystals with high fraction of  $\langle 101 \rangle$  facets show enhanced photocatalytic hydrogen generation from methanol.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Yang et al. found that truncated octahedral  $\text{TiO}_2$  with  $\langle 001 \rangle$  facets were more reactive than the  $\langle 101 \rangle$  facets

for the dissociative adsorption of reactants.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the  $\langle 100 \rangle$   $\text{CeO}_2$  nanocubes exhibited superior catalytic activity for CO than the truncated octahedral nanocrystals of  $\text{CeO}_2$  enclosed by six  $\langle 100 \rangle$  and eight  $\langle 111 \rangle$  facets.<sup>17</sup>

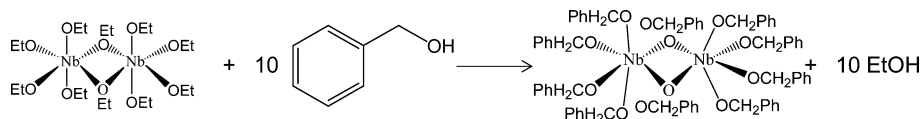
$\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  is an n-type semiconductor used extensively in acid catalysis, gas sensing, energy storage, and other applications.<sup>18–20</sup> Recently, the activity of  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  was shown to be closely associated with its shape and surface structure.<sup>21–25</sup> In particular, nanorods of  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  were prepared and shown to possess superior properties in various applications including as humidity sensors,<sup>21</sup> powerful catalysts for vanadium redox flow batteries,<sup>22</sup> high performance dye-sensitized solar cells,<sup>23</sup> biosensors,<sup>24</sup> and so forth. However,  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  nanocrystals remain less explored as a photocatalyst presumably due to their rather wide band gap that makes them active in the UV region alone, therefore restraining the practical use of  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  to  $\leq 5\%$ . Although Tsang and co-workers studied the shape-dependent acidity and photocatalytic activity of  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  nanocrystals, and found that  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  nanorods have higher activity than nanospheres,<sup>25</sup> the nanorods showed feeble absorption in the visible region, and the study was

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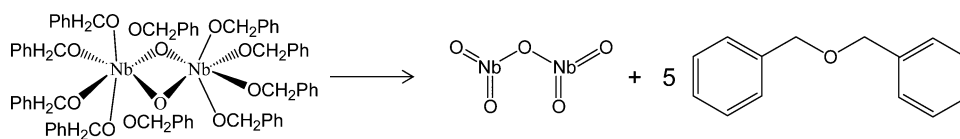
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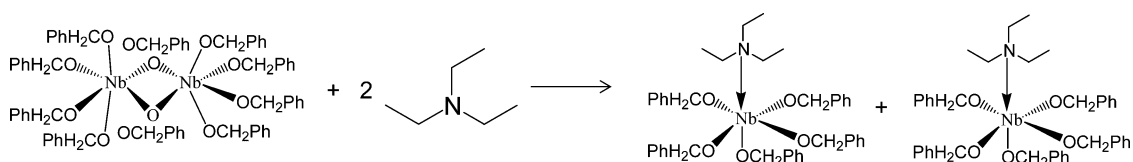
Scheme 1



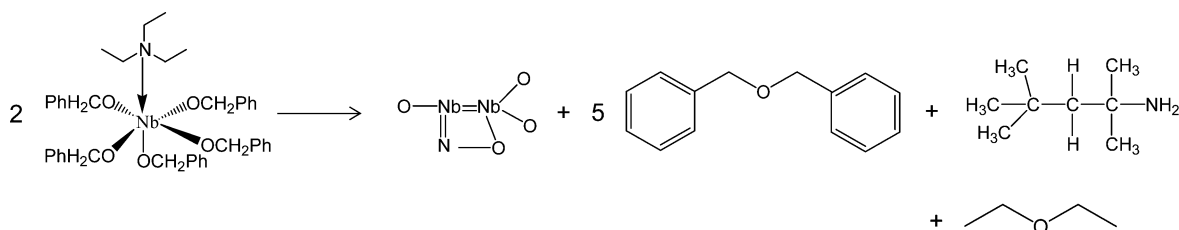
Scheme 2



Scheme 3



Scheme 4



conducted under ultraviolet radiation. Thus, the development of 1-D  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  endowed with absorption in the visible region offers an attractive possibility. Among various approaches, nitrogen-doping has proved to be one of the most effective ways to attune photocatalysis to be more visible-light-driven.<sup>26,27</sup> In addition, N doping has significant impact on various physicochemical properties such as the oxidation stability, the conductivity and the electrochemical behavior, the adsorption capabilities, the basicity, and so forth, which affect the performance of the resulting catalysts. Although attempt has been made to extend the absorption threshold of mesoporous  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  from UV to visible by nitrogen doping, nanoparticles were made by heating  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  and urea at 400 °C, resulting in particles of irregular shapes.<sup>28</sup> While the shift of absorption threshold is crucial for efficient utilization of the solar spectrum, tailoring the particle shape is also important for photoactivity enhancement.

Here, we report for the first time, a facile low temperature solvothermal method for the preparation of a nanocomposite consisting of N- $\text{NbO}_x$  nanorods and reduced graphene oxide (RGO) in benzyl alcohol using triethyl amine (TEA), with the latter as a nitriding precursor as well as a capping agent. A plausible mechanism for the formation and isotropic growth of highly ordered N- $\text{NbO}_x$  nanorods along the (001) plane is proposed. Optical measurements indicate that the N- $\text{NbO}_x$ /RGO absorbs visible light, the extent of which shows strong dependence on the extent of nitrogen doping, which was precisely controlled by adjusting the molar ratio of Nb to N precursors during synthesis. Photoelectrochemical (PEC) study under visible ( $\lambda > 420$  nm) and UV-visible light ( $\lambda = 300$ –600 nm) showed enhanced activity; a correlation between the

photocurrent, amount of RGO, and nitrogen in  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  was also established.

## 2. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

**2.1. Materials Synthesis.** Details of materials synthesis and PEC measurements are given in the [Supporting Information](#). Briefly, N- $\text{NbO}_x$  was synthesized as follows: 0.03 mol of niobium ethoxide was added to 20 mL of benzyl alcohol solvent followed by the addition of desired molar ratio of triethyl amine (TEA). The resulting clear solution was transferred into a 45 mL Teflon reactor and heated at 250 °C for 3 days in a Parr autoclave. For the preparation of N- $\text{NbO}_x$ /RGO composite, graphene oxide was first dispersed in benzyl alcohol followed by niobium ethoxide and TEA addition.

**2.2. Photoelectrocatalytic Activity.** The PEC activity was studied in a three-electrode cell assembly connected to a potentiostat. A 0.1 M sodium sulfate solution was used as the electrolyte. Saturated calomel electrode and coiled platinum wires were used as the reference and counter electrode, respectively. The working electrode was prepared from a homogeneous suspension of Nafion and the catalyst in ethanol by sonication and deposited on an ITO substrate. A 300 W xenon lamp with a cutoff filter to obtain radiation of  $\lambda > 420$  nm was used. The light intensity was measured to be 300 mW/cm<sup>2</sup>.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nb(V) ions are known to form facile coordination complexes virtually with all types of donors: neutral as well as anionic. In some instances, this stems from the ability of Nb(V) compounds to act as Lewis acid. In the absence of any additional surfactants or reagents, the solvothermal reaction between niobium ethoxide and benzyl alcohol occurs in two steps. This involves ligand exchange reaction followed by ether elimination. Metal-ethoxy bridging renders the chemical formula of niobium ethoxide as

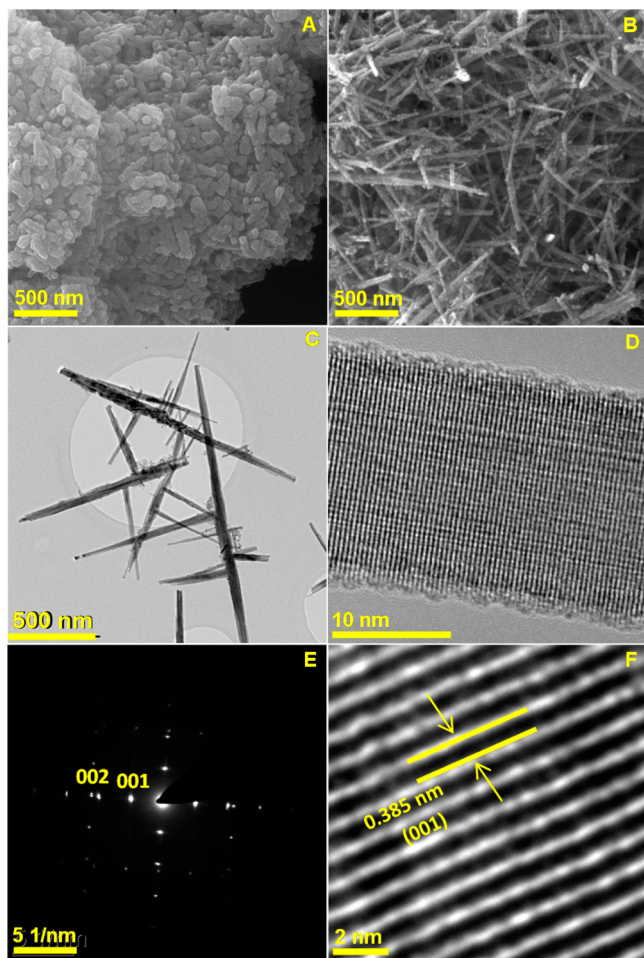
$\text{Nb}_2(\text{OC}_2\text{H}_5)_{10}$ , in biocuboidal arrangement as is the case with most of the alkoxides of such metals. The reaction of niobium ethoxide with benzyl alcohol to form niobium(V) oxide can be represented by the following schemes.<sup>29,30</sup> First, the ethoxy group is exchanged with the benzyl group, forming benzyl alkoxide via ethanol elimination (Scheme 1).

Such a ligand exchange is quite facile and can occur even at room temperature (often indicated by color change). Next, the alkoxy moiety undergoes condensation reaction to form the M–O–M bond, releasing the corresponding aromatic ether (Scheme 2):

TEA is endowed with a lone pair of electrons on the nitrogen atom; it also acts as a capping agent. It forms an adduct with niobium benzyl alkoxide by virtue of coordination bond between metal cation in the alkoxide and nitrogen in the TEA molecule by electron pair donation (Scheme 3):

The N-coordinated niobium complex is highly steric and labile, first undergoing rearrangement and then decomposing to yield a nitrogen-substituted niobium oxide (Scheme 4):

The FE-SEM images shown in Figure 1 highlight the transformational variation in the shape, morphology, and homogeneity of pure  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  (A) and N-NbO<sub>x</sub> (B). As evident, pure  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  grains have almost uniform, near-spherical shape with size in the range of 60 to 80 nm. In the presence of TEA, however, the morphology undergoes drastic change leading to

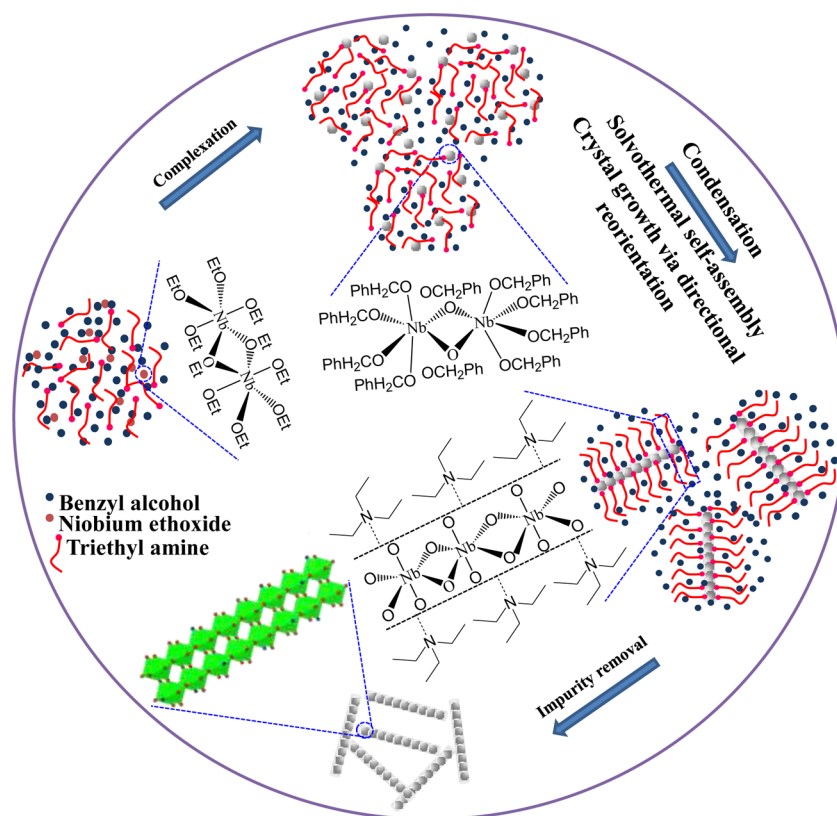


**Figure 1.** FE-SEM images of (A)  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  nanoparticles and (B) N-NbO<sub>x</sub> nanorods, (C,D) TEM images of N-NbO<sub>x</sub>, (E) SAED patterns, and (F) HR-TEM of N-NbO<sub>x</sub> nanorods.

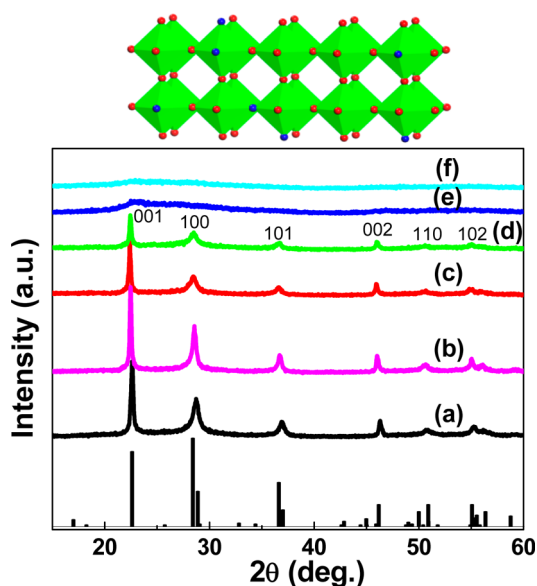
the formation of a large number of nanorods. Thus, TEA appears to be bifunctional in the present case: (1) it served as a capping agent, restricting the lateral growth and facilitating the one-dimensional propagation of the  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  crystals, and (2) it acted as a nitrogen source, leading to the formation of N-NbO<sub>x</sub>. Change in morphology with respect to various Nb to TEA (or Nb to N) molar ratio is illustrated in Figure S1. Further in-depth characterization was carried out by TEM technique. In the case of N-NbO<sub>x</sub>, the diameter of the nanorods was in the range of ~10–20 nm while the length ranged from submicron to a micron (Figure 1C). Figure 1D depicts a perfectly ordered assembly of large number of individual particles stacked together along the (001) direction. The electron diffraction and the HR-TEM microscopy images (Figure 1E and F) of N-NbO<sub>x</sub> show high degree of crystallinity. The interplanar distance for the [001] zone axis was computed to be 0.385 nm, in good agreement with 0.392 nm based on XRD data. The highly ordered morphological growth in N-NbO<sub>x</sub> suggests that while the early nucleation of nanoparticles is synchronous with ethanol elimination and condensation steps, subsequent orientation and texturing is greatly influenced by TEA and the organic species formed in situ. This, together with the perfectly uniform stacking (Figure 1D), reveals pseudosingle crystal nature of the nanoplatelets, thus supporting the notion of systematic addition of identical platelets in succession, subsequent to the fusion of several small crystallite on the host platelet. Thus, a given platelet acts like a substrate by itself, allowing the subsequent crystals to nucleate and grow in the preferred direction of the host structure. The absence of a significant level of lattice mismatch (or nonalignment) either among the primary building blocks or subsequent additive layers, that could otherwise result in major stacking faults and other defects (such as dislocation) leading to not-so-perfect modular structure is noteworthy. Thus, instead of individual particles, a perfectly homogeneous supercrystalline nanostructure results. This indicates that the alcohol in the reaction mixture in hyperstoichiometric ratio aids the ethanol elimination; the mesomerism in benzyl alcohol (akin to resonance effect in inorganic compounds) also plays a role in causing inductive effect. The nonuniform electron charge distribution at the terminal groups in the molecule assists stabilization of transition states through which ethanol is eliminated. The presence of  $\pi$ – $\pi$  bonding and significant steric effect in aromatic compounds is also operative in holding the Nb-complex together, from which  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  is eventually formed. Interestingly, in the presence of TEA, formation of N-NbO<sub>x</sub> nanorods was observed, which could be attributed to the capping effect of the amine. In addition to suppressing the abnormal growth of the  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  particles, the amine molecules, due to significant steric hindrance, also tend to align themselves in a linear fashion with respect to the metal and the ligand. This would terminate the lateral growth of the particles, resulting predominantly in the formation of 1-D structure, as illustrated in Figure 2. Finally, the elimination of byproducts leads to the formation of highly crystalline nanorods of pure N-NbO<sub>x</sub>.

The XRD patterns of pure and doped  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  are shown in Figure 3 which conform to that for orthorhombic  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  (T-phase; JCPDS 30-0873). The diffraction peaks at 22.41°, 28.48°, 36.65°, and 45.99° ( $2\theta$ ) could be indexed as (001), (100), (101), and (002), respectively. It is worth pointing out that, despite the use of rather mild and moderate synthesis parameters, the XRD signatures are indicative of compound formation in highly crystalline state. Moreover, the (001) reflection is the strongest, suggesting that the preferred growth was along the (001) plane.





**Figure 2.** Illustrative sequence of the formation, crystallization, and self-assembly scheme in N-NbO<sub>x</sub> nanorods.



**Figure 3.** XRD patterns of Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> by nonaqueous route with Nb to N molar ratio of (b) 1:1, (c) 1:2, (d) 1:3, (e) 1:4, and (f) 1:5. Spectrum (a) is for the undoped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>. The standard pattern for orthorhombic (T-phase) Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> is shown at the bottom whose skeletal motif of the T-phase Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> with possible arrangement of oxygen (red), nitrogen (blue), and niobium (within the polyhedron) is also included.

The calculated lattice parameters were  $a = 6.175$ ,  $b = 29.175$ , and  $c = 3.930$  Å, and the crystallite size estimated from Scherrer equation was 40 nm.<sup>31</sup> In the presence of TEA, noticeable changes in the morphology and crystallinity were observed. For a given amount of benzyl alcohol, the crystallinity decreases

progressively with increasing mol/mol ratio of TEA/Nb<sub>2</sub>(OEt)<sub>10</sub>. Beyond an optimal concentration of TEA (Nb/N > 1:4 mol/mol), the crystallization kinetics become sluggish and even reversed, resulting in the formation of N-NbO<sub>x</sub> as an amorphous phase, whose microstructural features (Figure S1) indicated the coexistence of nanorods and nanoparticles.

Nitrogen incorporation in the Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> lattice was investigated by XPS of pure as well as the N-NbO<sub>x</sub> samples. Atom % of nitrogen with respect to Nb to N molar ratio was measured to be 0.0, 0.65, 1.62, 2.96, 3.12, and 3.15 for 1:0, 1:1, 1:2, 1:3, 1:4, and 1:5, respectively. Respective elemental spectra for pure Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> sample are shown in Figure 4, while those in the case of a representative doped sample (Nb/N ratio 1:3) are shown in Figure 5. XPS analysis confirmed the nitrogen insertion in the Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> lattice. The binding energy peaks at 207.2 and 209.8 eV belong to the Nb 3d<sub>5/2</sub> and Nb 3d<sub>3/2</sub> spectral line, respectively; these are in good agreement with those reported in the literature for Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>.<sup>32</sup> The peaks at 530.3 and 531 eV represent O coordinated with Nb and, with either H (in OH) or N, respectively. The peaks at 284.6 and 286 eV for C 1s belong to the contaminant carbon (C–C) and C–O or C–OH binding in benzyl alcohol.<sup>33</sup> In the case of nitrogen, the somewhat diffuse peak at 395.1 eV could be ascribed to the substitutional N bonding (or β-N) in N-NbO<sub>x</sub>; the peak ~396 eV has been identified as due to the substitution of β-N for O in metal oxide lattice.<sup>34</sup> The second rather strong peak at 401.6 eV is likely due to anionic N (or γ-N) in the O–Nb–N ring.<sup>35</sup> This is supported by the fact that the amount of anionic N increased with increase in amine level in the mixture, suggesting γ-N substitution in the Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> lattice. Thus, it is reasonable to infer that in the presence of triethyl amine, N is effectively incorporated into the matrix of Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> (Schemes 3 and 4) via β-N and/or γ-N substitution. It is

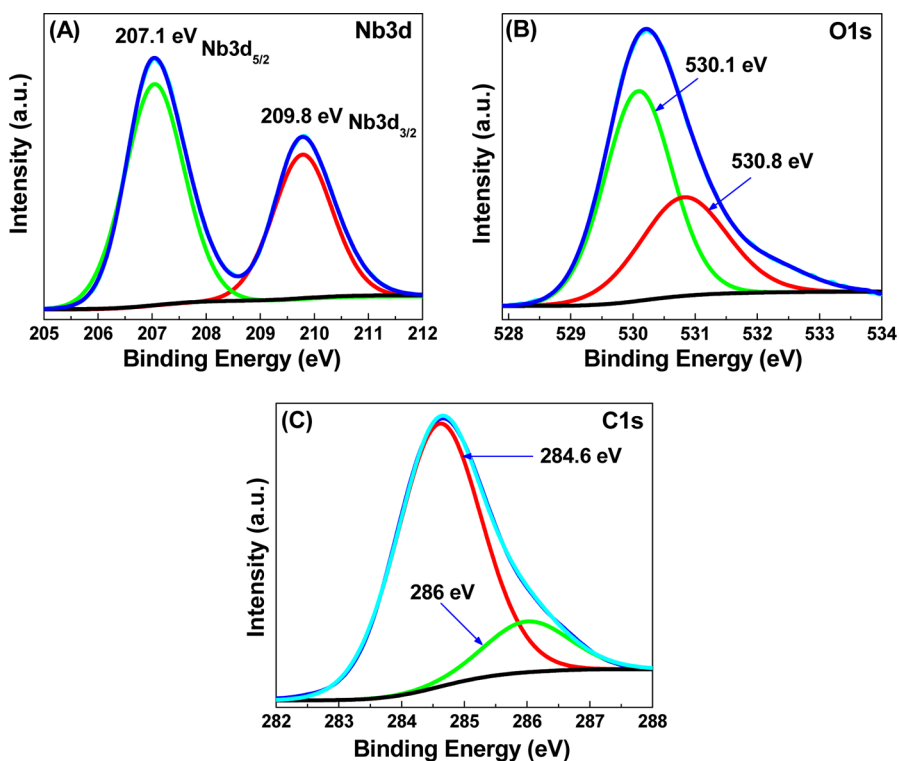


Figure 4. XPS signatures of pure  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$ : (A) Nb 3d, (B) O 1s, and (C) C 1s.

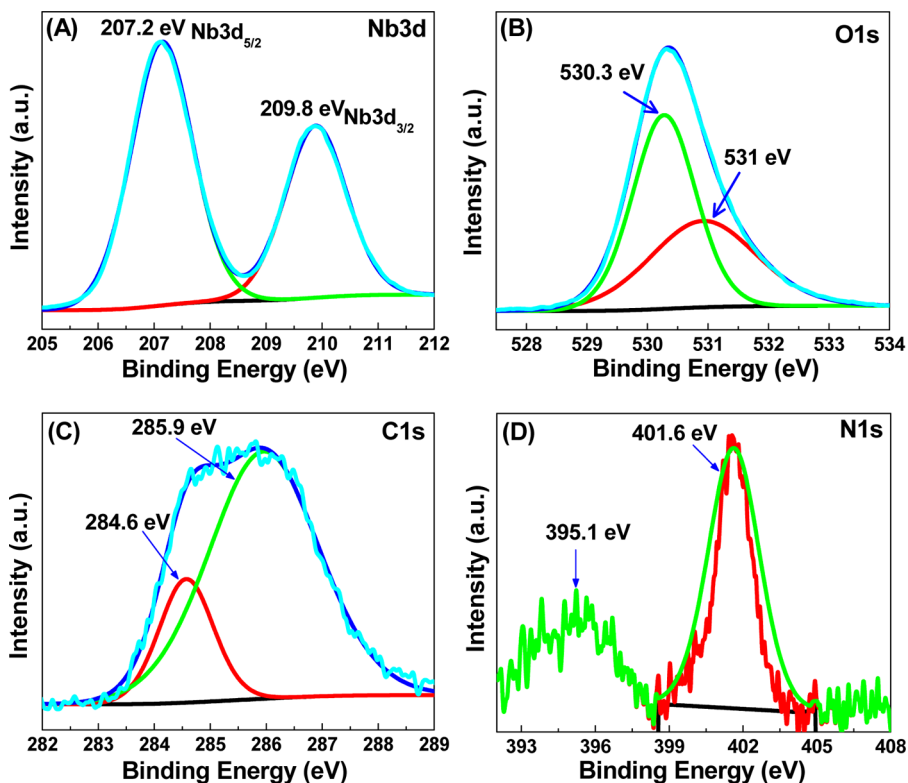
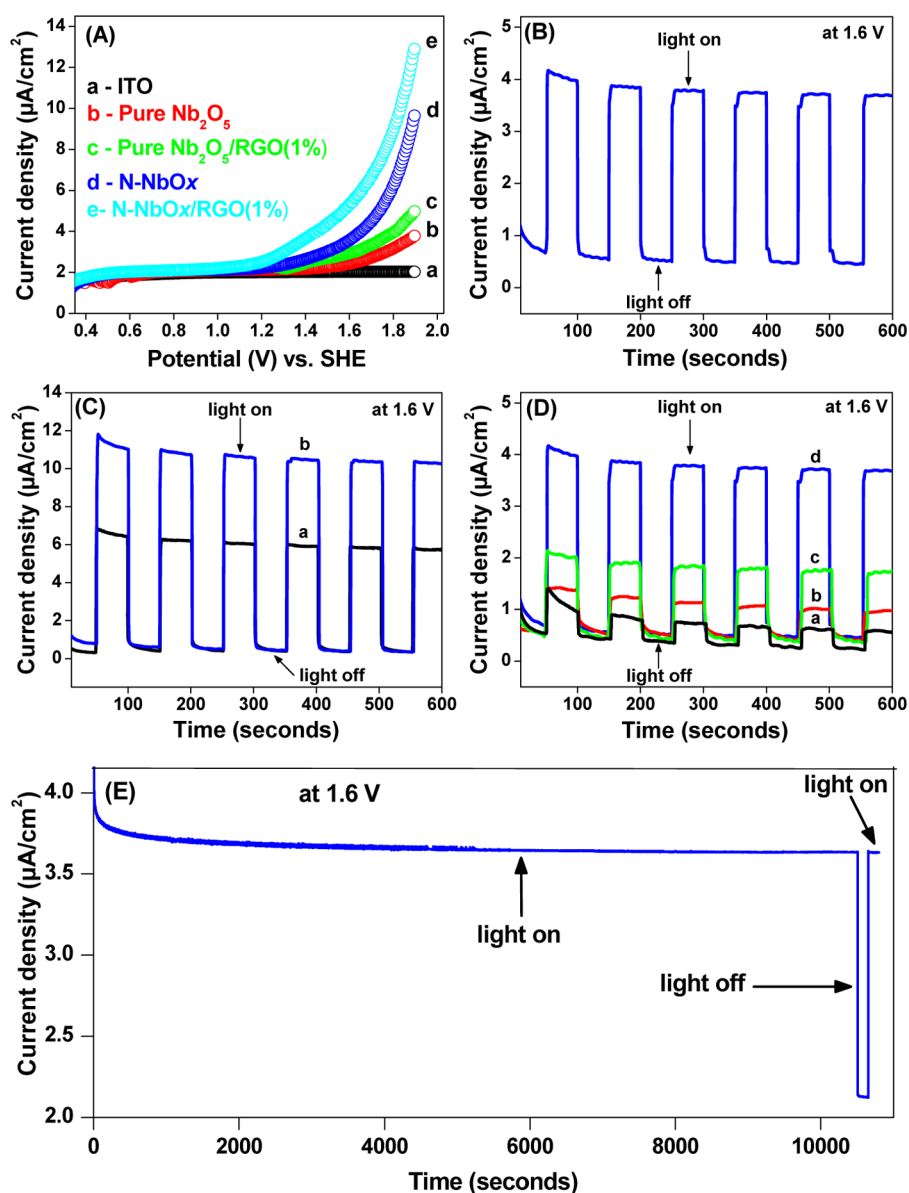


Figure 5. Binding energy spectra of N- $\text{NbO}_x$  nanorods with Nb/N molar ratio 1:3: (A) Nb 3d, (B) O 1s, (C) C 1s, and (D) N 1s.

worthpointing that no nitrogen peaks were present in the XPS of pure  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  (Figure 4).

The results of DRS examination conducted on pure and N- $\text{NbO}_x$  samples show systematic variation in the material properties in term of monotonic variation in their optical

properties as a result of doping. As shown in Figure S3, clearly there are spectral shifts toward higher wavelength concomitant with the increase in the dopant level. This is elegantly manifested in the systematic decrease in the indirect band gap energy with increase in the dopant level. A correlation between the



**Figure 6.** (A) Comparative potentiodynamic ( $I$ - $V$ ) response of various formulations; (B) reproducible variation of photocurrent under intermittent visible light illumination of the N-NbOx nanorods; (C) comparative photocurrent profiles of (a) pristine Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanoparticles and (b) N-NbOx nanorods under intermittent UV-visible light illumination; (D) comparative photocurrent profiles of (a) pristine Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanoparticles, (b) pristine Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanorods, (c) N-doped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanoparticles, and (d) N-NbOx nanorods under intermittent visible light illumination; (E) evidence of stability and reproducibility of the photocurrent in the case of N-NbOx nanorods. The molar ratio of Nb/N in the N-NbOx nanorods was 1:3.

theoretical molar ratio of the niobium precursor and triethyl amine and, the calculated band gap is shown in Figure S4. The atom % of nitrogen in each of the doped samples was determined by XPS and is also presented in Figure S4. Moreover, the band positions of pristine and N-doped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> samples were calculated by following the below empirical formulas<sup>36</sup> and the values are listed in Table S1.

$$E_{CB} = X - E_c - 1/2E_g$$

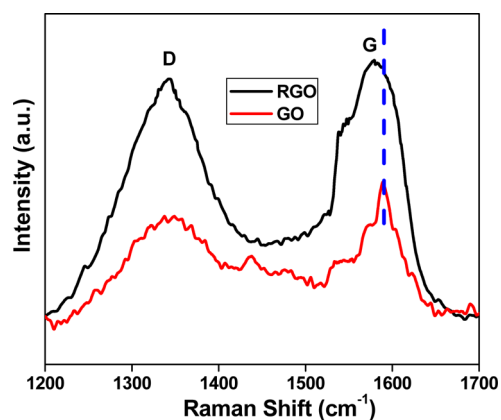
$$E_{VB} = E_{CB} + E_g$$

where  $E_{CB}$  = the conduction band,  $X$  = the absolute electronegativity of the atoms, expressed as the geometric mean of the absolute electronegativity of the constituent atoms, which is defined as the arithmetic mean of the atomic electron affinity and the first ionization energy,  $E_c$  = the energy of free

electrons of the hydrogen scale (4.5 eV),  $E_g$  = the band gap, and  $E_{VB}$  = the valence band.

The anodic polarization (photoelectrocurrent density vs potential) profiles for pure Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>, Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>/RGO, N-NbOx, and N-NbOx/RGO nanocomposite, in the presence of visible light, are shown in Figure 6A. As can be seen, during the voltage sweep (5 mV/s), the current density was approximately 4  $\mu\text{A cm}^{-2}$  at 1.9 V<sub>SHE</sub> for pure Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> (Figure 6A), which was slightly increased when composited with RGO. However, photocurrent was increased to  $\sim 10 \mu\text{A cm}^{-2}$  in the case of N-NbOx with Nb/N molar ratio of 1:3. Such response amelioration could be attributed to the combined effect of morphology and enhanced light absorption as a result of shift in absorption threshold to lower energy end caused by nitrogen doping. This notion is strengthened by the DRS studies (Figure S3) in terms of systematic decrease of the energy band gap. Further improve-

ment ( $\sim 1.3$  fold) in the photoelectrocurrent densities during the anodic polarization experiments was achieved by making nanocomposites of the N-NbO<sub>x</sub> with reduced graphene oxide, where RGO acted as a solid-state electron mediator (Figure 6A). The N-NbO<sub>x</sub>/RGO nanocomposite achieved approximately 3.4 fold improvement in the respective photoelectrocurrent density values, compared to those for the undoped and uncomposited pure Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>. Since, both nitrogen and RGO seem to be responsible in modifying the photoelectrochemical behavior of Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>, their respective effects were quantified in terms of photoelectrocurrent density, and the results are shown in Figures S5 and S6, respectively. The RGO in the present work is derived from graphene oxide (GO) which we speculate was partially reduced in situ to RGO in the presence of benzyl alcohol which has strong reducing attributes. In order to substantiate this speculation about the role of benzyl alcohol in the chemical reduction of GO into RGO, GO alone was thoroughly dispersed in benzyl alcohol via ultrasonication followed by heating in a Teflon autoclave at 250 °C for 3 days (mimicking the experimental conditions of Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> synthesis). The Raman spectrum of the product shown in Figure 7 indicates a small

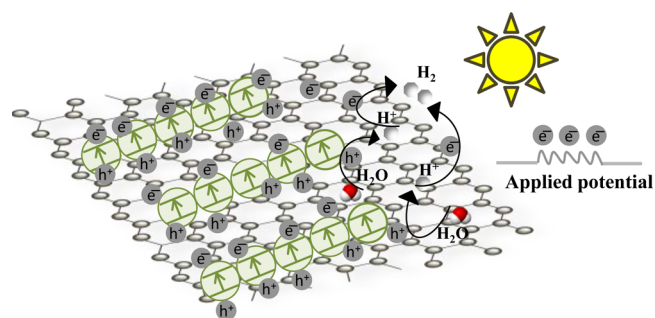


**Figure 7.** Raman signatures of graphene oxide (GO) and reduced graphene oxide (RGO).

blue-shift of the G-band, which signals partial reduction of graphene oxide. Moreover, the (D-band/G-band) intensity ratio was also slightly higher than that of pristine GO, indicating a decrease in the sp<sup>2</sup> hybridization due to the reduction of exfoliated GO.<sup>28,37</sup> In-situ formation of RGO layers in the nanocomposite is also substantiated by the microscopic images (Figure S7). Since the photoelectrodes may show a certain degree of current drift over a time scales of 5–10 min and hence creates ambiguity between photocurrents under illumination and currents under dark. Figure 6B shows the variation of photocurrent (under illumination and dark conditions) of N-NbO<sub>x</sub> (Nb/N = 1:3) by switching the light on and off for  $\sim 10$  min at a constant applied load of 1.6 V. The photocurrent generated instantaneously upon illumination and reached a steady state while very low current was observed under dark, even at high applied potential (1.6 V). The PEC of the pure as well as N-doped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> (with the above-mentioned Nb:N molar ratio) was also examined under UV–visible radiation (Figure 6C). Evidently, the photoelectrocurrent was significantly enhanced in both the cases as a result of the presence of high energy photons generated by UV light. Furthermore, the current in the case of N-NbO<sub>x</sub> nanorods was  $\sim 1.5$  times greater than that in the case of pure Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanoparticles. The data summarized in Figure 6D,

compares the photoelectrochemical attributes of pure and doped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> of different morphologies (nanoparticles vs nanorods) under visible light. These were synthesized by different methods as described in literature<sup>25,28</sup> (see the Supporting Information). As can be readily seen, pristine Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanorods showed slightly higher photocurrent than the nanoparticles. A similar trend was observed in the case of N-doped samples; the N-NbO<sub>x</sub> nanorods showed relatively higher photocurrent as compared to that by pure Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanorods or N-doped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanoparticles. This could be attributed to the synergy brought by effective nitrogen incorporation and the resulting 1-D morphology in the case of N-NbO<sub>x</sub>. Figure 6E depicts the stability of N-NbO<sub>x</sub> (change in photoelectrocurrent with respect to time) under applied experimental conditions. Initially, the photocurrent was slightly declined and then remained constant up to 3 h. As evident, the photocurrent dropped significantly under dark and again generated instantaneously upon illumination and reached a steady state. This clearly indicated the good stability of N-NbO<sub>x</sub> under visible light irradiation and constant applied potential.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, the mechanistic aspects of the improved photoelectrochemical performance of the N-NbO<sub>x</sub>/RGO nanocomposite are summarized in Figure 8. Briefly,



**Figure 8.** Plausible mechanism for water splitting in the presence of N-NbO<sub>x</sub>/RGO under photoelectrochemical stimuli.

when energized by light of energy that is either equal to or greater than the band gap energy of N-NbO<sub>x</sub> ( $>420$  nm in this case), electrons are promoted from the valence band ( $e^-_{vb}$ ) to the conduction band ( $e^-_{cb}$ ), leaving behind an electron hole in the valence band ( $h^+_{vb}$ ). If the charge separation is maintained, the electron–hole pair would migrate to the catalyst surface where they participate in redox reactions with sorbed species. The  $h^+_{vb}$  radical would react with surface-bound H<sub>2</sub>O or OH<sup>−</sup> to produce hydroxyl radical (OH<sup>•</sup>), which upon oxidation produce O<sub>2</sub>; the  $e^-_{cb}$  is scavenged by H<sup>+</sup> ions to produce H<sup>•</sup> and subsequently H<sub>2</sub>. One of the overriding limitations and energy-wasting step involved in photocatalytic processes is the recombination of the  $e^-_{cb}$  and  $h^+_{vb}$  pair. Presence of RGO in the nanocomposite is likely to create a heterojunction that disallows recombination, thus facilitating the preferential transfer of  $e^-_{cb}$  from interfacial region from photocatalyst to the RGO surface. This mitigates the undesired recombination, thereby improving the photoelectrochemical performance.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, a facile solvothermal route was developed for the synthesis of a highly homogeneous and uniform nanocomposite of reduced graphene oxide and low-dimensional N-doped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> with preferred crystallization in the  $\langle 001 \rangle$  plane in the presence of triethyl amine; TEA performs dual functions, both as a



nitrogen source and, a capping agent. The nanocomposite was shown to be an efficient photoelectrochemical agent for water splitting under both visible as well as UV–visible light. A mechanism for the formation and directional growth of N-doped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> and its enhanced photoelectrochemical activity has been proposed. The unique acicular morphology of N-doped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> compound together with the benign effect of RGO on the photoelectrochemical water splitting process suggests that such nanocomposites are likely to find numerous applications in other applied areas, such as lithium ion batteries, gas sensing, electrochromics, microelectronics, and others.

## ■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### ■ Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/acsami.5b04667.

Synthesis of pure Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>, N-NbO<sub>x</sub>, graphene oxide (GO), N-NbO<sub>x</sub>/reduced graphene oxide (RGO) nanocomposites, N-doped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanoparticles, Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanorods, photoelectrochemical characterization, change in morphology (SEM images) with respect to Nb/TEA molar ratio, HR-TEM images, diffuse reflectance spectroscopy (DRS), systematic band gap variation with atom % of nitrogen, band edge positions, effect of Nb to N molar ratio and RGO content on photocurrents, FESEM and TEM images showing the presence of transparent RGO layers in the composite, and SEM, XRD, and DRS of N-doped Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanoparticles and Nb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> nanorods (PDF)

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The manuscript was written through the contributions of all authors. All authors have given approval to the final version of the manuscript.

### ■ Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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