Improved Efficiency of Plasmonic Tin Sulfide Solar Cells

Priyal Jain¹ and Arun P²,a)

¹Department of Electronic Science, University of Delhi, South Campus, Delhi 110 021, India.
²Material Science Research Lab, S.G.T.B. Khalsa College, University of Delhi, Delhi, 110 007, India.

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Solar cells with the structure ITO-PEDOT:PSS-Ag:SnS-Al were fabricated with the active layer of tin sulphide with silver nano-particles (Ag:SnS) grown by thermal co-evaporation. To understand the influence of the silver nanoparticles on the energy conversion process, various cells with varying active layer thicknesses were compared. Results showed that the Ag nanoparticles act as scattering centers, resulting in longer optical path lengths for incident light. This in turn results in more charge carriers being generated and thus enhances the efficiency of the structure as compared to the pristine ITO-PEDOT:PSS-SnS-Al structure. The plasmonic solar cells of SnS showed an improvement of more than 40%. The results are encouraging and suggests more concerted effort needs to be made on SnS.

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Present commercial solar cells are silicon wafer based with standard efficiency around 24.7%.¹ However, using the single crystal wafers cut to micro-meter thicknesses, increases the cost and makes utilization of solar energy economically unattractive. Researchers hence have started looking into organic,²³ and inorganic⁴⁵ materials in thin film state either in amorphous or polycrystalline state.⁶⁷ The hope is to increase efficiency at a lower cost, effectively decreasing the energy conversion cost. The inorganic solar cells have not matched the efficiency of Silicon wafer solar cells as yet, with the best efficiency reported at 16.5% for Cadmium Telluride (CdTe)⁸ film solar cells. However, with concerns on the toxicity of tellurium used, search has moved to other inorganic materials such as Tin Sulphide (SnS)⁹,¹⁰ and lead sulphide (PbS).¹¹

The basic idea of solar cells are to absorb photons and generate charge carriers within the junction which should readily separate and reach their respective electrodes without recombination. To improve efficiency one requires a good absorbing material for the photo-active layer. This can be achieved either by using an active layer of good absorbance or increase its thickness.¹² However, the thickness of the layer is limited by the carrier diffusion length, i.e. the thickness of the active layer should always be less than the carrier diffusion length.¹³ If the thickness of the active layer is larger than the carrier diffusion length, the carriers would recombine before being collected at the electrodes. This would reduce the current in the external circuitry and hence diminish the performance of the cell. Also, increasing the dimension of the absorber layer would raise the cost of the device. Selection of the second layer with opposite charge carriers (n or p type) to that of the semiconducting nature of the photo-active layer (p or n type) also plays an important role. The selection is made in view of matching the conduction and valence energy levels of the two layers such that the separation of the generated charge carriers is encouraged.

¹Electronic mail: arump92@physics.du.ac.in
FIG. 1: Figure shows the structure of our solar cell with layers of ITO/PEDOT:PSS/SnS:Ag/Al. The circles in the figure are the Ag nanoparticles that reside at the top surface of SnS films.

\[ n^-SnS_2 \] quantum dots with PEDOT:PSS on ITO substrate. Both the PEDOT:PSS and \( n^-SnS_2 \) layers were fabricated by spin-coat technique. We were able to fabricate this solar cells by thermally evaporating SnS on PEDOT:PSS-ITO acting as the p-type layer. We shall henceforth refer to this structure (ITO-PEDOT:PSS-SnS-Al) as the pristine solar cell. By modeling the solar cell as a single diode circuit, the cell parameters such as series resistance \( (R_s) \), shunt resistance \( (R_p) \), open circuit voltage \( (V_{oc}) \), Fill Factor (FF), ideality factor \( (n) \) and efficiency \( (\eta) \) were determined. In terms of these parameters, we were able to identically reproduce the solar cell reported by Tan et al\(^{28}\) with a maximum efficiency of 0.21% for a cell whose SnS film thickness was 800 nm and grain size around 17.7 nm.\(^{29}\)

To increase the efficiency of these solar cells, we decided to fabricate plasmonic solar cells of SnS using 20 nm silver nano-particles. Fig 1 shows modifications made in our pristine solar cell device which incorporates oblate metal nanoparticles of Ag residing at the surface of SnS film away from SnS/PEDOT:PSS junction. This article reports the performance of our plasmonic solar cells and compares its parameters with those of pristine SnS solar cells.

I. EXPERIMENTAL DETAILS

Solar cell structures of n-SnS:Ag/PEDOT:PSS were fabricated on etched Indium Tin Oxide (ITO) substrates of low resistivity \((10 – 15 \, \Omega/\text{sq})\). A 200 nm layer of aqueous solar grade PEDOT:PSS \((1.3 \, \%)\) was spin coated on the substrates. Followed by this, composite thin films of Tin sulfide \((\text{SnS})\) and silver \((\text{Ag})\) were grown on the PEDOT:PSS layer. The films were grown at room temperature by thermal evaporation technique using Hind Hi-Vac \((12A4D)\) coating unit at vacuum better than \(4 \times 10^{-5} \, \text{Torr}\). Before evaporation, pellets were made by mixing SnS powder and Ag nano-powder. The SnS powder \((99.99 \, \%)\) was provided by Himedia (Mumbai) and the Ag nano-powder was provided by Nanoshel (USA). For mixing, the \((\text{mass})\) ratio of SnS:Ag taken was in a proportion of 2:1. The thickness of the composite films were measured using Veeco Dektak Surface profiler \((150)\) on films grown simultaneously on glass substrates. Finally, Aluminum electrodes were deposited by thermal evaporation using standard masks. The thicknesses of the SnS:Ag composite films were varied while that of the spin coated PEDOT:PSS was maintained fixed.

The structural characterizations of the SnS films were done using a Bruker D8 diffractometer at an operating voltage of 40 KV in the \(\theta - 2\theta\) mode with Cu target giving X-Ray of \(\lambda = 1.5416 \, \text{Å}\). The current-voltage (J-V) measurements were done with a computer monitored Keithley 2400 source meter unit. A solar simulator of 100 mW/cm\(^2\), Air Mass (AM) 1.5 spectrum was used as illumination source. The measurements were made with light incident from the ITO side.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In our previous study\(^{30}\) we showed that Ag nano-clusters embedded in SnS acts as center for light scattering thus increasing the optical path length of light within the active layer. As stated, this is expected to increase the efficiency of the solar-cell. In the following passages we investigate this and compare the photo-voltaic parameters of our plasmonic-device with pristine SnS solar cells.

![J-V Characteristics](image-url)

**FIG. 2:** A comparison of J-V characteristics of SnS and SnS:Ag plasmonic solar cells for active layers of 800 nm.

Fig 2 compares the J-V characteristics of SnS solar cell with that of a plasmonic SnS:Ag solar cell. The curves selected are of cells with 800 nm thick photo-active layer and are representative of all measurements made. An increase in the efficiency of the plasmonic SnS:Ag cell can be judged by the increase in area enclosed by the J-V curve in the forth quadrant. In our study on pristine cells\(^{29}\) we had discussed the properties as a
function of SnS grain size. However, the analysis of our previ-
ous work\cite{30} suggests that Ag nanoparticle’s efficiency to scat-
ter light into the dielectric SnS background depends on the Ag
nanoparticles’s grain size, it would be necessary to compare
conversion efficiencies as a function of a parameter on which both Ag and SnS grain size would depend on. Fortunately,
both SnS grain size\cite{31} and Ag nanoparticle’s grain size (fig 3)
show a linear trend with the active layer’s thickness (within
region of experimental interest).

![Graph showing SnS grain size vs. Ag grain size](image)

**FIG. 3:** The variation in average Ag nanoparticles size with
background SnS grain size.

Hence, in fig 4, we plot the efficiency of SnS thin film solar
cells and SnS:Ag plasmonic Solar cells as a function of the
active layer’s thickness. The conversion efficiency increases
with increasing film thickness. In fact, for an active layer of
thickness \(800\text{nm}\), the conversion efficiency of the device is
enhanced by 42\% when the Ag nanoparticles were introduced
in SnS films. The increase (rate) in efficiency with film thick-
ness can not be explained merely by the insignificant variation
in absorbance with film thickness reported.\cite{31,32}

![Graph showing efficiency vs. film thickness](image)

**FIG. 4:** A comparison of efficiencies of pristine SnS and
SnS:Ag plasmonic solar cells for various active layer’s
thickness.

The increase in efficiency is hence related to the scatter-
ing from Ag nanoparticles. Larger metal nanoparticles re-
results in more scattering. This increases the optical path of
incident light within the cell leading to more charge carriers
being released. A relook at fig 2 shows that the increase in
efficiency of Ag:SnS solar cell is due to the increasing short-
circuit current density, \(J_{sc}\) (point at which J-V curve cuts the
‘Y’-axis) with marginal or no increase in open circuit voltage,
\(V_{oc}\) (point at which J-V curve cuts the ‘X’-axis). Fig 5 shows
a plot between Ag nanoparticle’s grain size and \(J_{sc}\). The trend
confirms that more charge carriers are generated with increas-
ing Ag nanoparticle’s size. A maximum enhancement of 27\%
in the photo-current was measured in SnS:Ag solar cells as
compared to the pristine cells.

![Graph showing short-circuit current density vs. grain size](image)

**FIG. 5:** Variation of the solar cell’s short circuit current, \(I_{sc}\),
with Ag nanoparticle’s average grain size.

### III. CONCLUSION

Plasmonic solar cells of SnS were fabricated by co-
evaporation of silver metal during the fabrication of ITO-
PEDOT:PSS:Ag:SnS-Al structures. A substantial increase in
the conversion efficiency of the device was observed as com-
pared to the pristine (non-plasmonic) ITO-PEDOT:PSS-SnS-
Al structures. The increase in efficiency is shown to be due
to increasing photo-current generated due to increase in light
scattering within the cell due to the Ag nanoparticles. The
results are promising considering that we now can manipu-
late the inorganic, non-toxic SnS solar devices for higher effi-
ciency.

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