Regulating Interparticle Interactions to Control the Spatio-Temporal Assembly of Gold Nanoparticles

A thesis submitted for the partial fulfillment of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Certificate

This is to certify that the work incorporated in the thesis entitled "**Regulating Interparticle Interactions to Control the Spatio-Temporal Assembly of Gold Nanoparticles**" towards the partial fulfilment of the Integrated PhD dual degree programme at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune represents original research carried out by *Anish Rao* under my supervision. The work presented here or any part of it has not been included in any other thesis submitted previously for the award of any degree or diploma from any other university or institution.

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Dr. Pramod P. Pillai

Thesis Supervisor

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I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where others ideas have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any idea/data/fact/source in my submission. I understand that violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the Institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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Thesis Synopsis

Self-Assembly is nature's preferred 'zero-waste' means of creating animate matter. It typically involves the realization of functional materials from individual building blocks, without the need for any external or human intervention. Researchers are focused on understanding the principles underlying the self-assembly process, so as to form purposeful and useful structures, despite the lack of human intervention. In light of this, the aim of my thesis is to study the effects of finely tuned interparticle interactions in governing the outcomes of both spatial, as well as temporal selfassembly processes. We demonstrate that a control over interparticle interactions can be successfully translated to create systems with fascinating degrees of complexity. This thesis contains a summary of our efforts that show how finely tuned interparticle interactions can (a) improve existing nanoparticle (NP) properties, (b) show the emergence of inherently absent properties, and (c) mimic complex 'life-like' behaviour. Here, the property of our choice was aggregation mediated identification of heavy metal ions, while the behaviour of our choice was the formation of transiently stable self-assembled structures.

With these specific goals in mind, in **Chapter 2**, we designed heterogeneously charged gold nanoparticles ([+/-] AuNPs), where, strengths of different interparticle interactions could be regulated by simply changing the ratio of oppositely charged ligands on the NP surface. We used these NP systems, to balance different attractive and repulsive interparticle interactions and reveal an unprecedented phenomenon of controlled aggregation. These NP systems could *reversibly "arrest"* toxic ions like lead (Pb²⁺) and cadmium (Cd²⁺) through the formation of controlled aggregates,

making them a recyclable trapping and scavenging system. A key advantage of the present system is the simplicity with which the mixed-Self-Assembled Monolayer (m-SAM) on the NPs could be tuned to trap and scavenge different triggers of interest (like Pb^{2+} , Cd^{2+} , H^+ , and citrate). More importantly, we showed that the regulation of interparticle interactions could impart a new function of selectivity towards trapping of toxic ions over biologically relevant ones. These initial signs of selectivity encouraged us to design an identification protocol capable of identifying a specific M^{2+} ion.

With this challenge in mind, in **Chapter 3**, we worked towards introducing the notion of selectivity towards strongly binding divalent metal ions (M^{2+}) , to inherently nonselective carboxylate functionalized gold nanoparticles ([-] AuNPs). Here, we chose the abilities of M^{2+} ions to break the interactions between the oppositely charged AuNPs (in a nanoionic precipitate) as the means of identification, rather than the conventional idea of forming an interaction. We observed that out of all the M^{2+} ions tested, only Pb^{2+} could break the electrostatic interactions in the nanoionic precipitates, and release [+] AuNPs to the solution (turn-on response). Interestingly, both [+] and [-] AuNPs, despite being "blind" in terms of selectivity toward M²⁺ ions, gave rise to an assembled state that showed remarkable selectivity towards Pb^{2+} ions. Furthermore, by tuning the strengths of interparticle interactions, the sensitivity as well as selectivity of our identification protocol could be improved to ~ 4 μ M. Note that traditionally, similar tasks of selective identification are undertaken with the help of analyte-specific ligands, where the property of selectivity is simply 'added on' to the NPs. This work, therefore, showed a conceptually different strategy of identification, where, the self-assembled state shows the emergence of selectivity.

In Chapters 2, and 3, we demonstrate that to create nanosystems with desirable or improved properties, one need not have to come up with novel materials. A careful understanding, and control over different interparticle interactions can help in not only improving the known properties of NPs (Chapter 2), but can impart inherently absent properties to NPs (Chapter 3). These finding motivated us to use our control over interactions to install *life-like* properties to a NP system. More specifically, we thought of creating systems that come into existence only for a limited amount of time (transient self-assembly). In order to mimic the formation of such systems, in Chapter 4, we demonstrate a fundamental discovery of creating self-assembled structures that show transient switching/ shuttling between completely precipitated and redispersed stages of nanoparticles (NPs) - a first of its kind in plasmonic NPs. The chemical trigger driven transient self-assembly was accomplished by using the temporal control over electrostatic attractions between positively charged gold nanoparticles ([+] AuNP) and negatively charged EDTA (chemical trigger). Consequently, some of the desirable feats in the field of transient self-assembly were realized such as easy removal of waste, formation of a transiently stable precipitate state and negligible dampness in redispersion. We also reveal the so far unknown ability of atmospheric components to transform a mundane mixture of chemicals into a dynamically active one -a task usually accomplished with a network of chemical reactions.

In summary, my thesis demonstrates the effectiveness of establishing a control over interactions between the building blocks as a potent way of creating intelligent passive as well as active states.

Summary

This thesis is divided into four chapters, where,

- In **Chapter 1**, we introduce the terminologies, and make a case for using finely tuned interparticle interactions as our design principle.
- In Chapter 2, we show how finely tuned interparticle interactions can improve existing NP properties. It is known in the literature that most of the NP based detection protocols are dependent on precipitation/ aggregation of NPs, and are oftentimes irreversible and nonselective in nature. In this study, we could balance

attractions and repulsions to reveal the formation of controlled aggregates.

- In Chapter 3, we design an identification protocol to carry out selective identification, without the use of any analyte-specific ligand. Here, we utilized the abilities of different M²⁺ ions to break an interaction, as opposed to formation of an interaction as the identification protocol.
- In Chapter 4, we utilize our control over interparticle interactions to choreograph the formation of a transiently stable self-assembled state. Nature routinely employs such states to form create life-like systems.

In my thesis, you would see the principle of finely-tuned interparticle interaction being employed to create systems of increasing complexity.



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Chapter 1

Design Principles to Complex Matter

1.1 Introduction

Interest in the area of nanoscience is slowly transitioning from the design and synthesis of nanoparticles (NPs) with exotic structures and properties, to their assembly into larger systems.¹ This transition is fuelled by the realization that a collective assembly of interacting NPs is responsible for applications in the fields of diagnostics, drug delivery, electronic devices, etc.^{2–5} For instance, carbon atoms, when arranged in two different ways can be either used to make a great conductor (*graphene*), or an insulator (*diamond*). This is a classic example where, two completely contrasting properties can be realized from the same building blocks. This, in turn, demonstrates the importance of relative arrangements of building blocks in deciding the functions associated with an assembled state. Because of this, it has become increasingly important to find ways of controlling and realizing the arrangement of different building blocks in desired and purposeful ways. Most popular and widely used strategies are - a) assisted/ guided assembly (commonly seen in assembly lines), and b) self-assembly (commonly seen in natural systems), see Figure 1.1.

Self-Assembly is the science of things that form on their own. This method

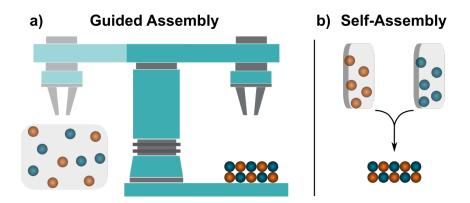


Figure 1.1: Schematics illustrating the formation of an assembled state through two different methods. (a) Assisted/ guided assembly where an external agency (like a robot) is needed to form the assembled state, and (b) self-assembly where the interacting components (here, two types of spherical particles) assemble into the crystalline state on their own. *Schematics adapted from Freepik*.

of making things involve no external agency, as opposed to the guided formation commonly utilized in assembly lines, and therefore have a magic-like promise of assembling useful entities. In particular, the power of self-assembly lies in synthesizing things that are too small or too many in number - a task which is impossibly difficult to be handled robotically. For instance, if the task of forming a 100 μ m NaCl crystal is assigned to a very fast working robot (that can assemble ~ 1 million atoms/second), it will take ~ 1800 years to make one such crystal - a devastatingly long time to get a grain of salt. In real life, evaporation driven self-assembly/ crystallization protocols are set in place, to form salt within a matter of hours to days. In contrast to the way humans work, biological systems typically utilize both guided as well as self-assembly protocols to create useful entities. For instance, living systems utilize guided assembly protocols to link amino acids into a polypeptide chain, a task championed by the ribosome. Once the linear polypeptide chains are formed, using the principles of self-assembly this linear polymeric chain folds into the correct functional state in a matter of milliseconds. In a typical self-assembly process, the organized structures are formed by vigorously shaking the individual components .^{6,7} This picture is deceptively simple and conceals the need of appropriately 'programmed' building blocks.⁷ One needs to master the control over different chemical and physical interactions so as to *code* the positional information onto the building blocks - a crucial task to realize the next generation of complex matter.

There are numerous ways of coding the positional information of individual building blocks in the self-assembled structure. Such a code acts as a selective glue, which becomes sticky only when the building blocks are in their assigned/ desired places. This kind of information can be coded onto the building blocks either by using appropriate molecular glue, such as the idea of complementary shapes (similar to a jigsaw puzzle), chance (entropy), external fields, appropriate molecular coatings, etc. Each one of these ways of coding are outlined in Section 1.2. An appropriate understanding of these gluing techniques is like learning the fundamentals of music theory or understanding the rules of a chess game. The act of playing a good game of chess or composing a musical masterpiece, comprises a different skill of how complex one can go without breaking the rules. A detailed understanding of these design principles can not only help in creating complex structures, but also help in understanding the origins of life. Although a well-accepted definition of complexity is not around, but one can clearly see that some structures are more complex than others. For instance, cells transfer a cargo from one place to another by constructing highways made up of actin filaments. These highways are distinctly different, and are more complex than man-made highways. A key distinction between these two is that the cellular highways are inherently dynamic, and spontaneously dissolve away upon completion of the work. Biological systems, therefore, present an interesting contradiction to the conventional human wisdom, and thus present challenges to design similar complex systems. This Chapter lays out the rules and design principles to create different classes of self-assembly. These design principles will then be used in the subsequent Chapters to create different functional states from a small set of nanoparticle (NP) building blocks.

1.2 Fantastic Structures and How to Make Them

It has been shown by Phillips and co-workers that molecular machines that form the basis of life, operate in regimes where the energy-versus-length curves for a wide

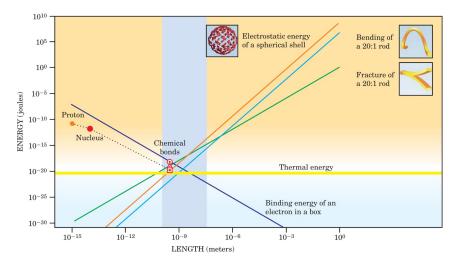


Figure 1.2: Graph illustrating how different deterministic energies like chemical, mechanical, electrostatic interactions as well as non-deterministic thermal energies associated with an object vary as a function of its size. Note the confluence of different deterministic as well as non-deterministic energies as the characteristic object size approaches nanometre regime (shaded in blue) (Reproduced in part with permission from [8] Copyright 2006 AIP Publishing).

variety of phenomena converge. Figure 1.2 shows that at the nanometer lengthscale (shaded in blue), different *deterministic* energies like electrostatic, mechanical and chemical are of comparable strengths to the *non-deterministic* thermal energies. This regime, therefore, allows nature to design complex life-like entities through an interplay of different deterministic and non-deterministic energies.^{8,9} For instance, consider restriction enzymes (proteins that recognize and cut specific nucleotide sequences), which finds the target sequence by searching through millions or billions of base pairs in a genome, at rates inconsistent with simple 1D or 3D diffusion of the enzyme along the DNA. It has been shown that entropic forces, resulting in folding of DNA, and hopping of enzyme from one strand to another is used to speed up the search process.^{8,10} In order for one to design systems capable of similar functions, it is useful to understand how to control different interparticle interactions. The kinds of interactions that can be tuned are given in the following sections.

1.2.1 Molecular Interactions

Ligands are an indispensable component of NP architecture, as they not only impart stability to them, but dictate their interactions with the environment as well.¹³

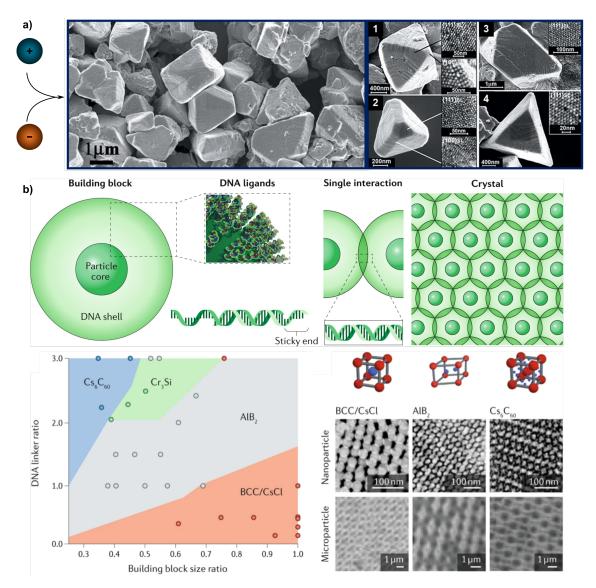


Figure 1.3: a) Schematics showing the use of oppositely charged like-size metallic NPs to form a non-closed packed crystal. A large area SEM image showing the formation of binary crystals obtained from [+] Ag and [-] Au NP precipitates. Different morphologies of the NP crystals (1) octahedron, (2) cut tetrahedron, (3) octahedron with two triangular faces cut, and (4) truncated tetrahedron are also shown (Reproduced in part with permission from [11] Copyright 2006 American Association for the Advancement of Science). (b) Schematics showing the formation of a crystal from building blocks comprising a DNA shell. The phase diagram shows the phase behaviour of crystal obtained from two-component systems containing complimentary DNA strands. Here, the ratio of hydrodynamic diameter of the building block and the number of DNA linkers were used to control/ direct the lattice symmetry. Electron and fluorescence microscopy images showing the generality of the idea for both micro and nanoparticle crystals (Reproduced in part with permission from [12] Copyright 2019 Springer Nature).

In this direction several studies have been undertaken to understand the design rules to form self-assemblies at different length-scales, popular among them is the crystallization of NPs.^{6,13,14} Decades of research in the field of crystallization of micrometre or nanometre sized particles has shown that a dispersion of particles, when evaporated, usually results in the formation of a close-packed assemblies.^{15,16} It is therefore an attractive feat to realize crystals with a wide variety of structures, porosity, and symmetries for various optoelectronic, photonic, and memory storage applications.⁵ In a seminal work, Grzybowski and co-workers showed the formation of a non-close packed diamond like crystal lattice using oppositely charged, nearly equal sized metal NPs (Figure 1.3a).^{11,17} Here, the authors used a mixture of oppositely charged Au and Ag NPs, which precipitate out from the solution at the electroneutrality point, resulting in the formation of nanoionic precipitates.^{11,18} These precipitates were then converted into micrometre-sized and regularly faceted crystals, by first re-dispersing the precipitates in DMSO-water mixture, and slowly evaporating the water. Interestingly, the obtained crystals were diamond-like with coordination number (CN) of 4, as opposed to the commonly observed ones with coordination numbers of 6 or 8. The formation of these open crystals were rationalized based on slight charge asymmetry, as well as considerably high thickness of the screening layer in comparison to the size of NPs (κ^{-1}) .^{11,17} In another class of AuNP crystal engineering, thiolated DNA is used as a ligand to create organized structures of arbitrary shape and complexity.^{12,19–21} The use of DNA as ligand is very attractive as it can be used to design and control the thermodynamics as well as kinetics of crystallization.¹² Here, the bases present at the end of the DNA sequence are unpaired and therefore act as sticky end. These sticky ends can be used to install sequence specific interactions between the NP building blocks, and drive the formation of an ordered crystal (Figure 1.3b). In a landmark study, Mirkin and co-workers developed a model based on a set of rules, that maximizes DNA hybridization events, and could predict the thermodynamically most favoured crystal (complementary contact model, CCM).²¹ They constructed a phase diagram of DNA-driven crystallization, where the ratio of hydrodynamic diameter of the building block and the number of DNA linkers could direct the lattice symmetry, irrespective of the sizes of the building blocks (Figure 1.3b).

1.2.2 Field Dependent Forces

The use of external fields like light, magnetic field, and electric field are attractive strategies for the manipulation of a wide variety of NPs.²² Of particular interest are light and magnetic field, that can be instantaneously delivered, as well as removed from the system. In such cases, these external fields act as a template for the organization of NPs in various complex structures. Here, Klajn and co-workers evaporated a monodisperse dispersion of superparamagnetic magnetite nanocubes in hexane at the liquid-air interface in the presence of magnetic field (Figure 1.4a-c).²³ Under the influence of the applied field, the magnetic dipoles partially aligned with the field, resulting in 1-Dimensional (1D) helical NP chains, with ~ 90 % yield. These observations were rationalized on the basis of a clever interplay between magnetic dipole-dipole interactions, van der Waals interactions, entropic forces and Zeeman coupling.²³ Here, under the influence of a magnetic field, chiral nanocube clusters formed spontaneously, and in order to maximize the packing neighboring helices adopted the same handedness, thereby revealing a novel mechanism for the symmetry breaking and chiral amplification (Figure 1.4a-c). Similar to magnetic field, light can also be used as an external stimulus to direct the formation of appropriately functionalized NPs. In this direction, Grzybowski and co-workers used light controlled dipole-dipole and covalent interactions for the assembly of colloidal crystals and supraspheres (Figure 1.4d).²⁴ They used AuNPs decorated with a mixture of dodecylamine (DDA) and a photo-isomerizable azobenzene dithiol ligand, which reversibly self-assembled under the action of UV light, because of dipole-dipole and crosslinking interactions. Here, the degree of reversibility depended on the strength of dipole-dipole, as well as covalent interactions. For instance, at low dithiol surface coverage, reversible (*metastable*) crystalline assemblies were formed, whereas

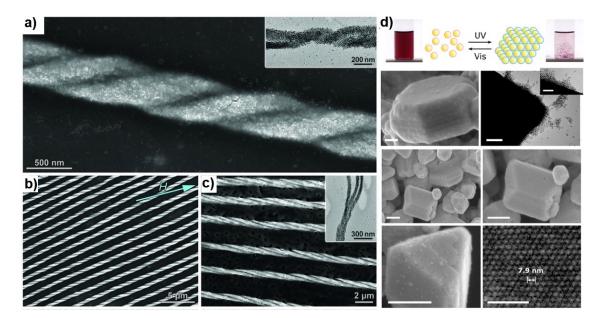


Figure 1.4: Self-assembly of helical 1D nanowires from cubic iron oxide NPs. SEM images showing a well-defined double helix structure in (a) an individual, and (b) large array of single-stranded 1D nanowires. (c) SEM and TEM images showing an array of triple helices (Reproduced in part with permission from [23] Copyright 2014 American Association for the Advancement of Science). (d), (e) Optical photographs, SEM, and TEM images showing the light induced reversible self-assembly of AuNP crystals. (d) Scale bars = 100 nm in main images, 50 nm in inset. (e) Scale bars = 200 nm, and 50 nm in the magnified lower right image (Reproduced in part with permission from [24] Copyright 2007 National Academy of Sciences).

permanent cross-links resulted in the formation of irreversible supraspheres at high dithiol surface coverages.²⁴

1.2.3 Shape-Dependent and Entropic Interactions

As opposed to the other methods of controlling NP organization, where the interactions between the NPs are coded with the help of suitable ligands, assembling interactions can also emerge from the NP core. This alternative recognition mechanism uses shape-complementarity of particles for creating self-assembled structures. Here, the key interaction between the particles is depletion interaction, where it becomes entropically more favourable for the smaller *solute* particles to stay in the bulk solution as compared to staying in between two colloids.²⁷ This results in a net osmotic pressure acting to push the particles together. In a seminal work, Pine and co-workers demonstrated these geometrical interactions by using colloidal spheres

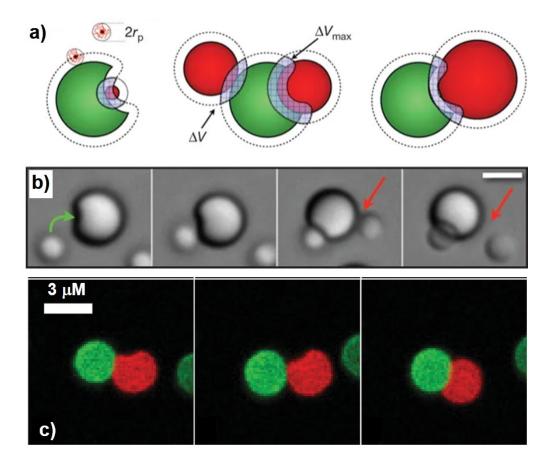


Figure 1.5: (a) Schematics showing the depletion attraction between lock (shown in green), and key (shown in red) colloids, which is proportional to the excluded volume (shown in blue). (b) Snapshots showing the size-specific depletion-driven self-assembly of lock and key colloids. Scale bar is 2 μ m (Reproduced in part with permission from [25] Copyright 2010 Springer Nature). (c) Confocal microscopy images showing the transition from non-specific (middle frame) to specific binding between the lock and key colloids. Scale bar is 3 μ m (Reproduced in part with permission from [26] Copyright 2015 AIP Publishing).

as keys (shown in red, Figure 1.5a) and a buckled colloid as a lock (green sphere in Figure 1.5a).^{25,28} Here, the specific binding occurred only if the size of colloidal key matched closely with the size of the cavity in the colloidal lock (Figure 1.5b). These systems could spontaneously bind to each other via the depletion interaction, resulting in shape complimentary lock-and-key binding. The authors then laid out geometrical rules for creating directional, selective as well as reversible interactions for engineering smart machinery.²⁵ Later, investigations were carried out to understand the kinetics of bond formation between such lock and key colloids. It was found that the bond formation between the colloids proceeded at comparable rates in both specific as well as non-specific interactions.²⁶ Here, the colloids associate directly from the free particles during specific binding, while in the indirect pathway a key particle nonspecifically binds to the lock surface, which after surface diffusion results in a specific bond (Figure 1.5c).

In another landmark study, Glotzer and co-workers demonstrated the formation of ordered self-assembled structures under the influence of chance (*entropy*).^{29–31} Here, the authors performed a systematic and exhaustive modelling of the assembly

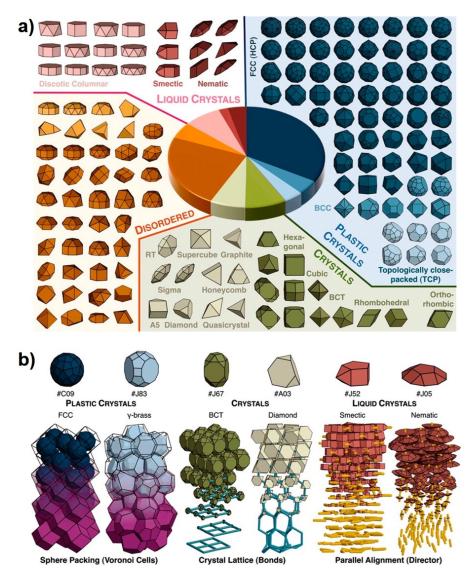


Figure 1.6: (a) Systematic classification of different polyhedral particles into four different assembled organizations. (b) Illustrations of six systems of polyhedra that form either plastic crystals, crystals, or liquid crystals (Reproduced in part with permission from [29] Copyright 2012 American Association for the Advancement of Science).

of polyhedral hard particles upon evaporation (Figure 1.6).²⁹ Note that for hard particles, all the possible conformations are similar due to lack of enthalpic contribution, and therefore are governed only by the maximization of orientational and positional entropy. This entropy maximization rule, for a polyhedral particle, favours organization along the facets, resulting in the formation of an *'entropic bond'*. They observed that the systems assembled in either of the four categories; i.e. crystals, plastic crystals, liquid crystals, or completely disordered structures (Figure 1.6). A design rule was then established depending on the high correlation between the 'coordination number' of the polyhedron in the fluid phase, and the 'isoperimetric quotient' (IQ) which measures the deviation of particle's shape from a sphere. According to this rule, (i) highly faceted particles with high coordination number formed plastic crystals, (ii) low faceted particles having low coordination numbers formed liquid crystals, and (iii) polyhedra with intermediate coordination numbers formed crystals. This study, therefore provided a comprehensive framework allowing one to predict the assembly of particles by simply determining its shape parameter and coordination number in the fluid phase.

1.3 What kinds of Complex Structures?

Having understood the rules that can be used to govern and dictate the outcomes of a self-assembly process, we lay down the design principles for creating complex selfassembled structures. Here, the complexity that is associated with a self-assembled state can be attributed to its position in the Gibbs free energy landscape (Figure 1.7).^{32–36} Although there is no universal definition for complexity that is associated with a system, but it is agreeable that, cells are fairly more complex than crystals, despite both being the products of self-assembly.^{6,37} Several distinctions can be drawn between the two, for instance, a crystal - once formed does not change with time and is plastic in nature, while living cells keep on evolving with time. Furthermore, most crystals do not need a constant supply of energy to stay in the organized state. On the other hand, cells do need a continuous influx of energy

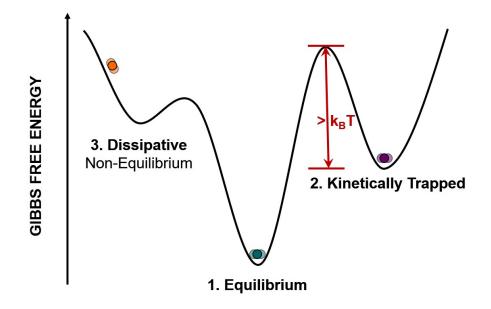


Figure 1.7: Schematic illustration of Gibb's free energy diagram showing different thermodynamic states associated with the outcomes of a self-assembly process.

to stay alive and function as suitable building block for life. Although distinctions between different kinds of self-assembled states is still a matter of inquiry, but some broad distinctions can be made between each of these processes. For instance, the re-configurability of a self-assembled state is dictated by the depth of the interaction potential, where, states that occupy a global minima cannot be reconfigured, while the ones in a local minima can be modified under the action of a suitable stimulus. Broadly speaking, one can classify the self-assembled states in the following three categories:-^{34,36}

- Thermodynamic Equilibrium State Here, the self-assembled state occupies a global minima, and can require some energy to form (say in the form of stirring). Such structures, once formed, does not need any energy to sustain themselves. Most of the research in the field of artificial self-assembly has been focused on this kind of self-assembly.
- 2. Kinetically Trapped State Here, the self-assembled state occupies a local minima, instead of a global minima, and if the energy barrier (marked in red) is higher than the thermal energy (k_bT) , it results in the formation of long lived kinetically trapped states. These states, under the influence of a suitable trigger,

can be modified or re-configured, and can install the much needed property of reversibility and adaptation to a system.

3. Dissipative State - Here, the self-assembled state comes into existence only under a constant supply of energy and/or matter. A key feature of these systems is the necessity of a constant energy supply to sustain the self-assembled state. In this class of self-assembly the interactions that hold the building blocks together come into existence only if the system continuously dissipates energy.

1.3.1 Examples of Thermodynamic Self-Assembly

Nature frequently utilizes equilibrium self-assembly mechanisms to reproducibly create a wide variety of functional materials like lipid bilayers, DNA, proteins, virus, enzymes, etc. Furthermore, most of the observed self-assembly processes like formation of micelles, folding of proteins, crystallization, etc. are thermodynamically favoured processes, where the self-assembled state lies at a global minima.⁶ In order to effectively design such equilibrium self-assemblies, the interactions between the building blocks needs to drive the self-assembled state to a thermodynamic minima so as to reproducibly form the desirable structure. In this direction, Stupp and co-

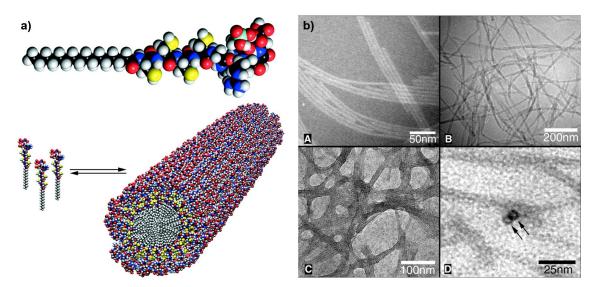


Figure 1.8: (a) Schematic model of the PA and its self-assembled cylindrical micelle. (b) TEM images of the self-assembled nanofibers (Reproduced in part with permission from [38] Copyright 2001 American Association for the Advancement of Science).

workers, in a pioneering example, constructed nanostructured fibrous scaffolds from organic self-assembling building blocks that closely mimics bone (Figure 1.8).^{38–40} Here, they used pH induced self-assembly of peptide-amphiphiles (PAs), where hydrophobic and hydrophilic moieties are attached to a peptide moiety (Figure 1.8). This allowed a reversible enhancement of the structural integrity of the nanofibers through re-configurable cross-linking interactions. After cross-linking, the fibers could direct the mineralization of hydroxyapatite and form a composite material having alignments similar to that observed between collagen fibrils and hydroxyapatite in bones. These polymers were found to be active for in vivo applications and were shown to promote several biological events like regeneration of axons in injured spinal cord, regeneration of cartilage and bone, and growth of blood vessels.^{39–41}

In another class of thermodynamic self-assembly, a solution of NPs was evaporated over a solid or liquid phase so as to form two dimensional (2D) crystals. In order to have maximal domain of such 2D crystals, interactions between the NPs and the support needs to be finely tuned. In this direction, Heinrich and co-workers prepared long-range hexagonal monolayers of dodecanethiol (DDT) capped AuNPs by evaporating a toluene solution of the NP (Figure 1.9a).⁴² In this approach, the early-stage evaporation traps the AuNPs at the liquid-air interface, from which

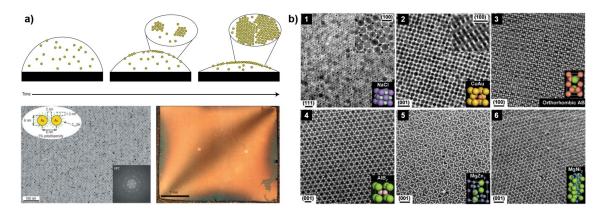


Figure 1.9: (a) Schematic diagram showing the self-assembly of DDT capped AuNPs to form large domains of 2D superlattice at the liquid-air interface. TEM and optical photographs of a typical monolayer produced (Reproduced in part with permission from [42] Copyright 2006 Springer Nature). (b) TEM images of binary NP super-lattices, self-assembled from different nanoparticles, and their modelled unit cells (Reproduced in part with permission from [43] Copyright 2006 Springer Nature).

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nanoparticle islands nucleate and grow to form μ m sized AuNP films (Figure 1.9a). This new drop-drying regime was a robust, simple, and scalable way of creating high quality and long range 2D crystals. Similar experiments have been performed with NPs of various sizes to create a wealth of 2D close packed crystal lattices (Figure 1.9b).^{16,43} In an alternate approach, Klajn and co-workers designed a strategy

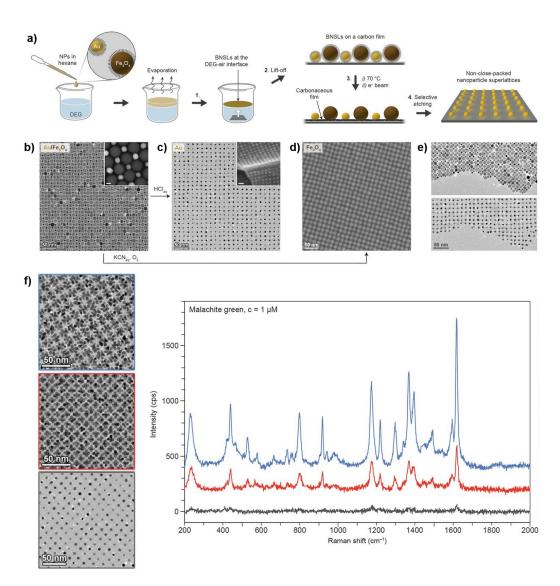


Figure 1.10: (a) Schematic diagram showing the method of formation of a nonclosed packed superlattice. (b) TEM image showing the formation of an AB-type superlattice between Au and Fe₃O₄ NPs. Scale bar of inset = 5 nm. (c) TEM image of a non-closed packed AuNP array formed after selective etching of Fe₃O₄. (d) SEM image of a non-closed packed Fe₃O₄ NP array formed after selective etching of AuNPs. (E) TEM image of a close packed AB-type superlattice before (top) and after (bottom) etching of Fe₃O₄ NPs. (f) SERS spectrum of malachite green, recorded on three different NP arrays (Reproduced in part with permission from [44] Copyright 2017 American Association for the Advancement of Science).

to create non-close packed self-assemblies.⁴⁴ Here, the authors used a mixture of monodisperse Au and iron oxide (Fe_3O_4) NPs, which were assembled at the diethylene glycol-air interface, to initially form a close-packed superlattice (Figure 1.10a, b). These superlattices were then transferred to a suitable substrate like carbon coated TEM grids (Figure 1.10a). The authors then selectively etched either AuNPs, or Fe₃O₄ NPs resulting in non-close-packed arrays with vacancies stabilized by the underlying carbon substrate (Figure 1.10c, d, e). Such non-closed packed assemblies are useful for a wide range of optical, mechanical as well as catalytic properties. For instance, the authors observed that some films were better suited for Surface Enhanced Raman Scattering (SERS) based sensing as they showed superior signal enhancements in the SERS intensity (Figure 1.10f, g). This is because of higher density of electromagnetic hotspots in superlattices with the vacancies of specific shape and size (Figure 1.10f, g). In another class of self-assembly, destabilization of the NPs in the presence of a suitable trigger, can be used to form a self-assembled state. Such destabilization induced assemblies are promising candidates, especially in the field of sensors.² Such sensors, result in the formation of a thermodynaically stable precipitate, and hence can not be re-used again.² A key challenge therefore, is to control the interactions between the interacting components so as to create

1.3.2 Example of Kinetically Trapped Self-Assembly

reversible and re-usable assemblies.

A key characteristic of kinetically trapped self-assembled states is their reversible nature. In order to create such assemblies, the interparticle interactions should guide the assembled state to a local minima, as opposed to a global minima. This will enable the reversal of the self-assembly process under the influence of a suitable trigger. With this principle in mind, several systems have been designed that show reversible transformations in response to a wide variety of signals like solvents, metal ions, temperature, light, magnetic field, biomolecules, etc.^{22,45} In a pioneering study, Liz-Marzán and co-workers have employed solvent as a trigger to assemble a

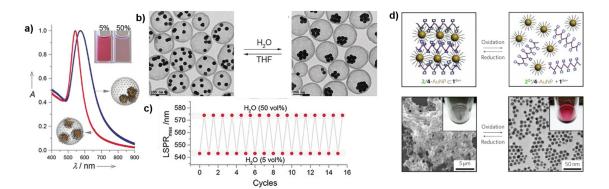


Figure 1.11: (a) UV-Vis. absorption spectrum of the nanocapsules containing hydrophobic AuNPs under low (shown in red), and high (shown in blue) water content. (b) TEM images showing the reversible clusturing of AuNPs. (c) Variation of LSPR maximum for ~15 cycles (figures are reproduced from an open access article [47]). (d) Schematic diagram showing the reversible binding of TTF functionalized AuNP with polymer containing pendant CBPQT⁴⁺ units. SEM image (bottom left) showing the AuNP-polymer complex. TEM image of redispersed AuNPs. Insets show optical photographs of the samples (Reproduced in part with permission from [48] Copyright 2009 Springer Nature).

dispersion of polystyrene (PS) stabilized hydrophobic AuNPs.^{46,47} Here, they used water to trigger the assembly of PS-AuNPs dispersed in tetrahydrofuran (THF). A key challenge in the use of solvent as a trigger is the inevitable dilution of the solution, which affects the extent as well as kinetics of the self-assembly process, resulting in irreproducible aggregation kinetics. In order to resolve this challenge, the authors used a permeable silica nanocapsule to confine the hydrophobic AuNPs, so as to limit the number of particles participating in the aggregation process.⁴⁷ Here, water being permeable to the silica nanocapsule could efficiently trigger the aggregation of PS-AuNPs, resulting in a bathochromic shift in the absorbance spectrum (Figure 1.11a, b). Upon confining these hydrophobic AuNPs, the number of particles participating in the aggregation process could be controlled and preserved, resulting in highly reproducible plasmon band shifts (Figure 1.11c) despite changes in the solvent compositions.

In another class of stimuli responsive self-assembly, NP systems were constructed that could show reversible transformations upon the addition of a redox stimuli. In a classic study, Stoddart and co-workers used redox controlled host-guest complex formation between the electron-rich tetrathiafulvalene (TTF), and a polymer con-

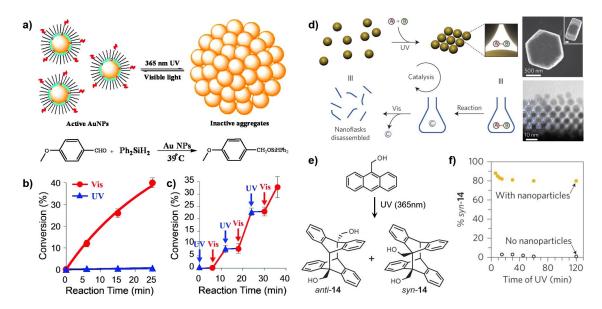


Figure 1.12: (a) Schematic diagram showing reversible photo-switchable AuNP catalysts, where dispersed AuNPs are catalytically active, while the aggregated AuNPs are catalytically inactive for the hydrosilylation reaction. (b) AuNP-catalyzed hydrosilylation of 4-methoxybenzaldehyde with respect to time in visible light (showing in red), and under UV irradiation (shown in blue). (c) Conversion graph showing the photo-switchable catalysis for 3 cycles (Reproduced in part with permission from [49] Copyright 2010 American Chemical Society). (d) Schematics showing the reversible formation of nanoflasks (scale bar in the inset = 200 nm). (e) and (f) UVinduced dimerization of anthracene in the presence and absence of AuNP, showing the stereoselectivity of the reaction to form preferentially *syn*-isomer (Reproduced in part with permission from [50] Copyright 2015 Springer Nature).

taining electron-deficient macrocycle cyclobis(paraquat-p-phenylene) (CBPQT⁴⁺).⁴⁸ Here, AuNPs were functionalized with the electron rich TTF that can form a hostguest inclusion complex with the macrocyle resulting in the aggregation of AuNPs (Figuer 1.11d). In the presence of a mild oxidising agent, TTF could be easily oxidised to TTF^{2+} , resulting in the loss of AuNP's affinity towards the macrocycle, and a release of AuNPs to the solution. In the presence of a reducing agent (ascorbic acid), the complex could be reformed, thereby driving the complexation between AuNPs and the polymer. (Figure 1.11d). After carefully tuning the interactions between the polymer and a range of metallic NPs, the authors demonstrated the use of polymer as a redox controlled *selective sponge* for the capture and release of different metallic NPs (Figure 1.11d).

The reversible nature of such kinetically trapped self-assemblies is key in the design and fabrication of systems with re-usable chemical functionalities. For instance, one can create re-usable sensors for a wide range of chemical, and biological stimuli. Alternatively, one can design catalysts, whose activity can be controlled on demand, thereby imparting the much needed ability of switchability to the system. In a fantastic example, Grzyowski and co-workers used light as a trigger to assemble AuNPs functionalized with azobenzene thiols in a reversible fashion.⁴⁹ The photoswitchable aggregation of AuNPs was later extended to control their catalytic activity towards a hydrosilylation reaction (photo-switchable catalysis, Figure 1.12a). In their study, AuNP catalysts decorated with a mixed self-assembled monolayer (m-SAM) of azobenzene terminated thiols and alkyl amine (DDA), which readily dispersed in a toluene solution containing the p-anisaldehyde and diphenylsilane (reactant molecules for the hydrosilylation reaction). When dispersed, AuNPs could readily catalyze the formation of 4-methoxybenzyloxy-diphenylsilane (product) (see red curve in Figure 1.12b). Upon irradiating the mixutre with UV light, AuNPs aggregated from the solution, resulting in switching-off of the reaction (see blue curve in Figure 1.12b). Furthermore, this photo-modulation of the catalytic activity could be efficiently performed for at least three cycles (see Figure 1.12c). In another seminal study, Klajn and co-workers demonstrated another attractive application of azobenzene-functionalized NPs by utilizing the voids between the NPs in the aggregates as 'nanoreactors' for accelerating various reactions (Figure 1.12d).⁵⁰ These voids, formed between azobenzene functionalized AuNPs contain a high number of polar cis-azobenzene moieties, and therefore, can be used to trap a variety of polar guest molecules during the assembly process. The authors, using this strategy, could trap a range of polar reactant molecules inside these cavities, and demonstrated accelerated reaction rates (Figure 1.12d). This observed acceleration of reactions is possibly because of increased *effective* molarity of the reactant molecules, as well as their pre-organization inside the cavities. Upon completion of the reaction, the nanoflasks could be conveniently disassembled using visible light, thereby releasing the products into the solution (Figure 1.12d). Most fascinatingly, the reactions underwent altered stereoselectivities, when performed in dynamic nanoflasks. For instance, 9-(hydroxymethyl)anthracene dissolved in toluene can be dimerized in the presence of UV light to afford the thermoduynamically favoured *anti* isomer in the solution, whereas, the same reaction when conducted in the nanoflasks results in >80 % syn isomer (Figure 1.12e, f), suggesting substrate preorganization in the nanoflasks. Furthermore, these nanoflasks could be re-used again, thereby demonstrating the potential of using similar kinetically trapped assemblies for different catalytic applications.

1.3.3 Example of Dissipative Self-Assembly

Dissipative self-assembled systems differ noticeably from all the other classes of selfassembly that have been discussed so far, as they come into existence only under a constant influx of matter and/or energy. Because of this constant need of energy and/or matter to sustain the assembled state, these systems are classified as non-equilibrium or out-of-equilibrium systems. Typical examples of such systems include microtubules, which, in biological systems can be used to 'grasp' chromosomes by acting as robotic arms during the cell division, or act as a highway for the transport of molecular cargo within the cell.⁵² Fascinatingly, these structures are transient in nature, and conjure-up only when their function is required by the cell.¹⁰ These systems have captivated the interest, as well as imagination of several

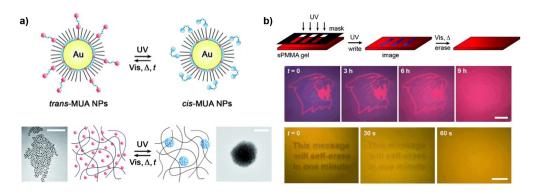


Figure 1.13: (a) Schematics showing the use of light to control the dissipative self assembly of AuNPs. Photo-isomerization of azobenzene thiol with UV light on AuNPs resulting in the onset of aggregation. (b) Self-erasing images created by exposing Au, and AgNP films with UV light through a photomask, scale bar = 1 cm (Reproduced in part with permission from [51] Copyright 2009 John Wiley and Sons).

researchers. A key challenge in the design and realization of such systems is the ability to vary the interparticle interactions in a time-dependent fashion. In this direction, Grzybowski and co-workers used light as a trigger to vary the interparticle interactions and create a dissipative self-assembled state.⁵¹ Here, they used AuNP or AgNP functionalized with a mixed self-assembled monolayers (m-SAM) of dodecylamine (DDA) and a photoswitchable thiol containing azobenzene headgroup (Figure 1.13a). These NPs, because of the low dipole moment of trans-azobenzene (μ = 0 D), readily dispersed in hydrophobic solvents like toluene or hexane. Upon exposure to UV light, however, the thermodynamically more stable trans-azobenzene isometrizes to its metastable cis-configuration, which has higher dipole moment (μ = 4.4 D).²⁴ As a result, AuNPs lose their colloidal stability and starts aggregating, resulting in a distinct colour change (Figure 1.13a). Interestingly, these aggregates were *dissipative* in nature and persisted only under the continuous irradiation of UV light. Once the irradiation was discontinued, the aggregates gradually disassembled, resulting in a spontaneous colour change from blue to red. This strategy was then used to create high contrast, re-writable 'self-erasable' patterns by exposing a film of AuNPs through a photomask (Figure 1.13b). This inspired researchers to routinely employ groups like azobenzene, and spiropyran to skillfully create a range of dissipative self-assembled systems.^{53–55} Such light powered systems, are very attractive because of 'zero-waste' production and almost instantaneous deactivation, but differ markedly from the natural systems which use chemical fuels to drive the dissipative self-assembly process.^{52,56}

In a pioneering example, van Esch and co-workers developed a strategy to create a chemically fuelled dissipative self-assembled system by using triggered esterification, and a spontaneous de-esterificaiton reaction.^{57,59} In their study, they established a control over reaction rates and amounts of chemical fuel, to not only choreograph the formation of a transient gel, but also govern properties like lifetime, stiffness, and self-regeneration capability of the gel state. Here, they used a carboxylate containing molecular gelator (chemical structures given in Figure 1.14a) which is

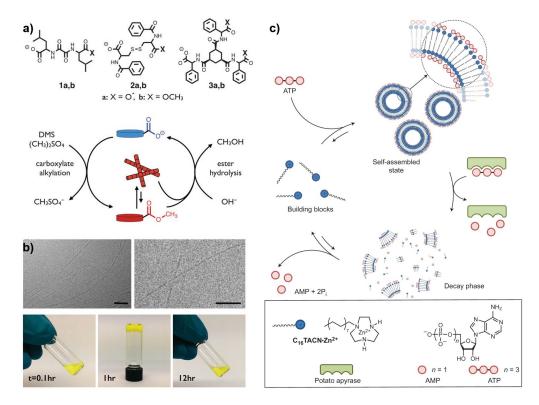


Figure 1.14: Dynamic self-assembly using covalent modification of the precursor. a) Chemical structures of the building blocks. Reaction cycle showing the use of triggered esterification, autonomous de-esterification of the building blocks to show the formation of transient fibres/ gels. (b) Cryo-TEM images of the formed gel (scale bar = 100 nm), and optical photographs showing a typical reaction cycles of transient self-assembly (Reproduced in part with permission from [57] Copyright 2015 American Association for the Advancement of Science). (c) Schematic diagram showing ATP-templated dissipative self-assembly of vesicular nanostructures (Reproduced in part with permission from [58] Copyright 2016 Springer Nature).

readily soluble in water at basic pH, and shows no tendency for assembly because of electrostatic repulsions. Upon addition of the chemical fuel (an esterifying agent - dimethyl sulfate (DMS)), the system loses its charge and gets activated for the self-assembly process. These activated molecules assembled into 1D nanofibers, stabilized with intermolecular H-bonds as well as hydrophobic interactions, ultimately resulting in the formation of self-healing gels at room temperature (Figure 1.14b). These esterified fibres/ gels, reacted with the base present in the system to yield the initial carboxylate gelator, resulting in the autonomous disassembly of the gels (Figure 1.14b). The lifetime, as well as the mechanical properties of the gels could be conveniently tuned by varying the amount of fuel added to the system. Later, this idea of using two competing and opposite reactions was utilized to create a wide variety of dissipative self-assembled systems.^{60–63} In another class of dissipative selfassembly, Prins and co-workers used adenosine triphosphate (ATP) as a chemical fuel for the transient stabilization of vesicles through non-covalent interactions, as opposed to covalent activation.⁵⁸ Here, they used a *'cationic'* surfactant molecule having 1,4,7-triazacyclononane· Zn^{2+} (TACN· Zn^{2+}) head group, whose propensity to self-assemble increased in the presence of ATP, resulting in the formation of vesicles. The presence of an enzyme potato apyrase (capable of hydrolysing ATP) in the system led to the in situ depletion of ATP. This results in the loss of stabilizing interactions and, consequently the formed vesicles undergoes autonomous dissociation. These vesicles could sustain a chemical reaction, where the lifetime of the vesicles dictated the extent of the reaction. The lifetime of the aggregates could be conveniently tuned by controlling the rate of ATP hydrolysis, which was controlled by tuning the amount of enzyme in the system.

In all these examples, the addition of a trigger results in the spontaneous assembly of systems into higher order structures, that are inherently unstable in the reaction conditions. These structures therefore disassemble autonomously once the trigger is removed. This strategy results in the construction of systems with tuneable lifetimes and properties, which can have far reaching impacts. For instance the design and realization polymers with tuneable lifetime, that can spontaneously degrade after the completion of their pre-designed lifetime is attractive to combat the widespread problem of plastic pollution. Furthermore, systems with self-healing, and self—replication capabilities can be used to design products that can self-repair if damaged. The possibilities and promises of these class of materials are endless. Nature has created life by controlling similar self-assembly processes, and we have to wait and see what kind of complex structures mankind will create!

1.4 Conclusion and Outline

The examples highlighted in this Chapter outline the principles involved in the design and synthesis of different self-assembled systems (see Figure 1.15). A key

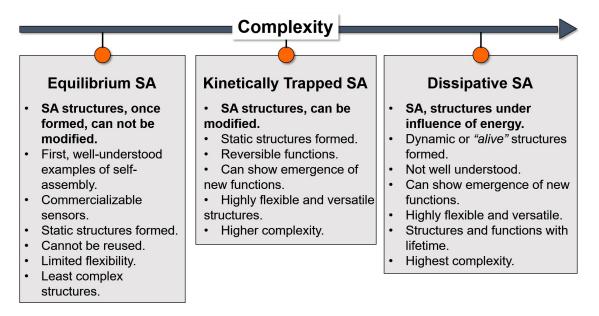


Figure 1.15: Schematics summarizing key characteristics of different self-assembly processes, and the evolution of complexity.

feature in the design and synthesis of self-assembled systems is the ability to program interactions between the building blocks. Several approaches have been shown in Section 1.2 that can be used to design suitable interaction-potential governing the process of self-assembly. In order for nanoscience and self-assembly to be the next technological revolution, design principles governing the formation of complex and useful structures need to be laid out. Some understandings regarding complexity associated with a self-assembled structure is mentioned in Section 1.3. This chapter, therefore projects fine-tuning of interparticle interactions as an versatile tool to create self-assembled states of varying complexity and usefulness.

In light of this, the underlying principle in the present thesis is to investigate the effects of finely tuned interactions between NP building blocks in governing the outcomes of self-assembly in both spatial, as well as temporal domains. More specifically, we studied the effects of finely tuned interparticle interactions as a versatile tool capable of (a) improving existing NP properties, (b) demonstrating the emergence of inherently absent properties, and (c) mimicking of complex *'life-like'* behaviour. The effects of interparticle interaction in governing these spatio-temporal properties are discussed in **Chapter 2** to **4**.

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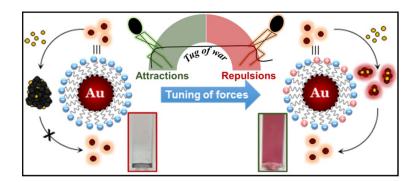
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Chapter 2

Regulation of Interparticle Forces Reveals Controlled Aggregation in Charged Nanoparticles



Making the Unstable, Stable

This chapter has been adapted from the following paper:- **Rao**, **A**, Roy, S., Unnikrishnan, M., Bhosale, S. S., Devatha, G., and Pillai, P. P.*, Regulation of Interparticle Forces Reveals Controlled Aggregation in Charged Nanoparticles. *Chem. Mater.* **2016**, *28*, 2348 – 2355.

2.1 Abstract

The ability to control interparticle forces can not only improve existing nanoparticle (NP) functionalities, but can pave the way for newer properties as well. A proof of concept in this direction is presented here, wherein the regulation of interparticle forces reveals the phenomenon of controlled aggregation, which is successfully translated into trapping and scavenging of toxic ions. A perfect balance between the attractive and repulsive forces is achieved by tuning the [+] and [-] ligands on the surface of heterogeneously charged metal NPs. The NP-ion aggregates are stable for ~2 days, with a visible color change ($\Delta \lambda_{max} = 12$ - 15 nm), which makes them available for scavenging from the site of action. The incorporation of 'potent' forces like repulsions, rather than a mere dilution of attractive forces, is necessary to ensure the formation of controlled aggregates. The net surface charge of NPs is conveniently modified to trap different ions/ molecules irrespective of their charge and binding strengths. More importantly, the regulation of interparticle forces imparts a new function of selectivity toward trapping of toxic ions in a carboxylate functionalized NP system. Thus, the present work introduces a conceptually unprecedented approach to impart long-term stability (~ 2 days) to NP- ion aggregates by controlling the interparticle forces.

2.2 Introduction

The possibility of 'coding' functions onto the surfaces of nanoparticles (NPs) has led to numerous exciting applications in the fields of sensing,¹⁻¹¹ drug delivery,¹²⁻¹⁷ plasmonics,¹⁸⁻²⁰ light harvesting,²¹ and so on. Common methodologies based on H-bonding,^{22,23} electrostatics,^{24,25} and host-guest²⁶⁻²⁸ interactions have been successfully employed to 'style' NP functions in an anticipated manner.²⁹⁻⁴³ In principle, the fine tuning of NP surface chemistry can render a precise control over the magnitudes of different interparticle forces,⁴⁴⁻⁴⁹ thereby improving or even dictating NP functionalities. Such a precise control over forces has led to an outburst

of exciting applications, both at the macroscale (like 'elimination of friction' in maglev fans, trains, etc.), and at molecular level^{50,51} (like development of molecular motors, propellers, shuttles, etc.). At the nanoscale, however, such a careful tweaking of interparticle forces remains a challenging task and thus an emerging area of research. With an objective to judiciously alter the magnitudes of attractive and repulsive forces, thereby revealing the controllable interparticle interactions, we operated with electrostatic, H-bonding, and bridging interactions in charged NPs. As a proof of concept, we wanted to understand how modifications made in the interparticle forces 'add' to already known functions of NPs. For this, trapping phenomena of charged NPs was selected as the model study. In a seminal work, Hupp and co-workers designed a simple colorimetric technique for the identification of 'spectroscopically silent' heavy metal ions. Here, carboxylate functionalized AuNPs ([-] AuNPs) showed a nonselective color change from red to blue in the presence of Pb²⁺, Cd²⁺, and Hg²⁺ ions (Figure 2.1).¹ Later, Mirkin and co-workers used DNA-functionalized AuNPs, and thymidine-Hg²⁺-thymidine chemistry to carry out selective, as well as sensitive identification of Hg^{2+} , over other ions (Figure 2.2).¹¹ A careful survey of literature shows that most of the metal NP based identification/ trapping of toxic ions is achieved through the precipitation of NPs.^{1-7,27} However. their scavenging ability (the ease with which the NPs can be separated out from the system) is questionable as the precipitates of NP- ion aggregates can interfere with

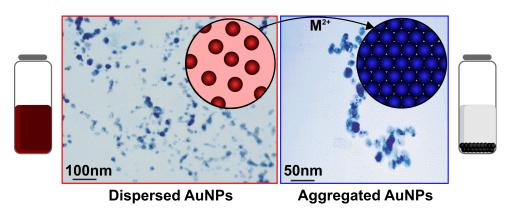


Figure 2.1: Schematic description of red-to-blue colour change and ultimately precipitation of AuNPs in the presence of an aggregating trigger. TEM images of [-] AuNPs, and [-] AuNP - Pb²⁺ precipitates (Reproduced in part with permission from [1] Copyright 2001 American Chemical Society).

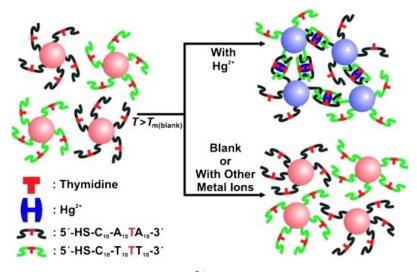


Figure 2.2: Colorimetric detection of Hg²⁺ using DNA functionalized AuNPs exploiting thymidine-Hg²⁺-thymidine coordination chemistry (Reproduced in part with permission from [11] Copyright 2007 John Wiley and Sons).

the system under study. For instance, precipitates clogging the water filters during water decontamination process. Thus, an ideal trapping and scavenging system should be able to 'arrest' the toxic ions without any compromise on the colloidal stability of aggregates. For realization of such a system, one needs to picture the observed NP behavior in terms of a 'tug of war' between different interparticle forces. On addition of a trigger, the attractions should result in the formation of aggregates followed by either a decrease in attractions or an increase in repulsions. Such an interesting interplay between attractions and repulsions can lead to the 'arrest' of aggregation triggers without precipitation (Figure 2.3).

We envisaged the use of heterogeneously charged NPs, where a simple change in the ratio of oppositely charged ligands regulates the strengths of different interparticle forces. The heterogeneously charged gold nanoparticles (AuNPs) functionalized with mixtures of (11-mercaptoundecanoic acid, MUA [-]) and (N,N,N-trimethyl(11mercaptoundecyl)ammonium chloride, TMA [+]) were able to 'arrest' and 'release' the aggregation trigger on call (Figure 2.3b). The present NP design 'arrests' toxic ions like lead (Pb²⁺) and cadmium (Cd²⁺) through the formation of controlled aggregates, which on disassembly enabled the release of ions, making them a recyclable trapping and scavenging system. One of the main advantages here is the simplicity with which the mixed self-assembled monolayer (m-SAM) on NP can be tuned to trap and scavenge different triggers of interest (like Pb^{2+} , Cd^{2+} , H^+ , etc.). Our studies also show that '*potent*' forces like repulsions, rather than a mere dilution of attractive forces are crucial to ensure the formation of controlled aggregates, especially with stronger triggers. Also, a reversal in NP net surface charge translates into the trapping of negatively charged molecules like trisodium citrate. More importantly, the regulation of interparticle forces imparts a new function of selectivity toward trapping of toxic ions in carboxylate functionalized NP system.

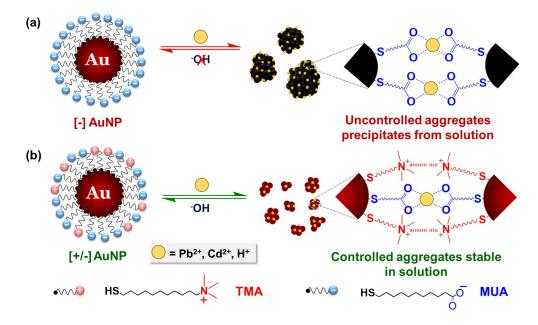


Figure 2.3: Concept of regulating interparticle forces to achieve controlled aggregation in charged NPs. The interactions of (a) [-] and (b) [+/-] AuNPs with triggering ions results in the formation of unstable and stable AuNP-ion aggregates, respectively. The colloidal stability of [+/-] AuNPs is retained in the aggregates due to the electrostatic repulsions experienced from the like charged head groups on adjacent NPs.

2.3 Experimental Section

2.3.1 Synthesis of Charged AuNPs

The primary aim of the present work is to show the effects of finely tuned interparticle interactions, *primarily electrostatics*, on the self-assembly properties of AuNPs. For this, we chose positively and negatively charged ω -functionalized thiols having around ~ 11 carbon chains. It has been shown in the literature that ligands with smaller chain lengths oftentimes result in unstable AuNP dispersions, because of strong van der Waals attractions at small interparticle separations.⁵² The use of longer chain lengths helps in overcoming van der Waals interactions, thereby imparting *long-term stability* to AuNP dispersions.^{46,52} Furthermore, the place exchange protocols and kinetics have been well studied for TMA and MUA ligands.⁵³ Also, similar ligands have been routinely utilized by several researchers to prove different hypothesis in a wide range of processes like self-assembly, sensing, targeting and drug-delivery, etc.^{25,54,55} Based on all these considerations, we chose TMA and MUA as ligands of our choice. Heterogeneously charged AuNPs were prepared using a place exchange reaction method. First, dodecylamine (DDA)-coated AuNPs were synthesized using a modified literature procedure.^{56,57} We used tetrachloroaurate trihydrate (HAuCl₄ \cdot 3H₂O) instead of AuCl₃ as the gold salt and a mixture of hydrazine monohydrate $(N_2H_4 \cdot H_2O)$ and tetrabutylammonium borohydride (TBAB) as the reducing agent instead of anhydrous hydrazine (N_2H_4) . Briefly, a toluene solution (7 mL) of HAuCl₄· $3H_2O$ (24 mg) containing 222 mg of dodecylamine (DDA) and 277 mg of (Di-n-dodecyl)dimeth-ylammonium bromide (DDAB) was prepared. The solution was sonicated for ~ 5 min for completely solubilizing the Au(III) salt. This was followed by a rapid injection of another toluene solution (containing 58 mg of TBAB and 111 mg of DDAB in 3 mL toluene) to ensure the reduction of Au(III) salts. The resulting DDA-AuNP solution (seed solution) was aged for ~ 24 h. These NP seeds were then grown to form ~ 6.0 nm sized DDA-AuNPs. Here, a growth solution containing 1 g of DDAB, 2.6 g of DDA, 224 mg of HAuCl₄· $3H_2O$, and 10 mL of seed was prepared in 60 mL of toluene. Next, the growth solution was reduced by dropwise addition (in ~ 30 min) of 22 mL of toluene containing 300 μL of N₂H₄·H₂O and 3.5 mg of TBAB. The slow stirring was continued overnight to yield monodisperse 6.0 ± 0.7 nm sized DDA-AuNPs. All the steps were carried out at room temperature. Next, we employed a place exchange protocol to synthesize charged AuNPs (Figure 2.4a). For this, DDA-AuNPs (20 mL) was quenched with 50 mL of methanol to yield a black precipitate and the supernatant containing excess of ligand was decanted. The precipitate was then redissolved in 20 mL of toluene, to which, a mixture of TMA ([+]) and MUA ([-]) (dissolved in 10 mL of dichloromethane, DCM) was added. The solution was kept undisturbed for ~15 h to equilibrate. Next, the supernatant solution was decanted, and the precipitates were extensively washed with DCM (3 × 50 mL) followed by acetone (1 × 50 mL). The precipitate was then dried, redispersed in water, and 20 μ L of TMAOH was added to deprotonate all the carboxylic acid groups in the [-] ligands. A ~40 fold molar excess of ligands was added during the place exchange to confirm the complete removal of DDA. Similarly, various ratios of [+] and [-] were used during the place exchange reaction to synthesize heterogeneously charged [+/-]_n AuNPs (n_{soln} = $\frac{[-]}{[+]}$ = 9, 4, 3... etc.). The prepared AuNPs showed a characteristic absorption peak in the visible region at ~520 nm (Figure 2.4b), because of surface plasmon resonance (SPR). This strong absorbance imparted a brilliant wine-red colour to

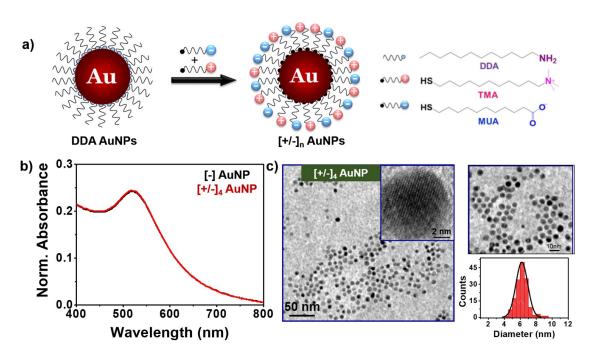


Figure 2.4: Synthesis and characterization of AuNPs. (a) Schematic representation of place exchange reaction. Here, $[+/-]_n$ AuNPs are prepared by replacing DDA ligand with a mixture of [+] and [-] charged ligands. (b) UV-Vis. absorption spectra of [-]AuNP and $[+/-]_4$ AuNP. (c) TEM images and size distribution of 6 ± 0.7 nm $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs. The size distribution was estimated from ~ 350 NPs.

the NP solution. The average size of the nanoparticles thus synthesized were 6.0 \pm 0.7 nm, as estimated from TEM analysis (Figure 2.4c).

2.3.2 Characterization of AuNPs

In order to verify the presence of both surface ligands on the same AuNP surface (formation of $[+/-]_n$ AuNPs), rather than the presence of a mixture of [+], and [-] AuNPs, we performed a series of control experiments (Figure 2.5a). Firstly, we added ~10 μ L of HCl, and NaOH to test the stability of the prepared AuNPs in acidic and basic media respectively. The rationale being that if the solution contained a mixture of charged AuNPs, under acidic conditions, [-] AuNPs will lose their stability and ultimately precipitate out from the solution. This will result in a decrease in absorption intensity under acidic conditions, while both homogeneous, and heterogeneously charged AuNPs will retain their stability under basic conditions. As can be seen from Figure 2.5a, there is negligible change in the absorption intensity of AuNPs under both acidic and basic conditions, indicating the presence of both [+] and [-] ligands on the same NPs (formation of heterogeneously charged [+/-]_n AuNPs). Furthermore, a gradual variation in the zeta potential of AuNPs from completely -ve to completely +ve values, with varying fraction of [+] ligands during the place exchange prove our control over the functionalization of AuNP

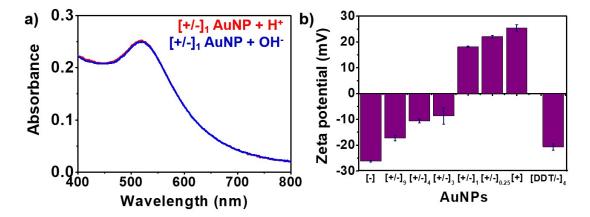


Figure 2.5: Characterization of AuNPs. (a) Negligible changes in the UV-Vis. absorption of [+/-] AuNPs in the presence of acid and base. (b) Plot showing the variation of ζ potential with m-SAM composition at pH ~ 11. The error bars correspond to standard deviations based on three different sets of experiments.

surface (Figure 2.5b).

The exact composition of the [+] and [-] ligands on the surface of [+/-] AuNPs was determined by ¹H NMR experiment. In a typical experiment, before performing NMR investigation, gold cores of the NPs were etched with molecular I₂, using the reported literature procedure.⁵⁸ Excess of I₂ was removed by washing with methanol and drying at 65^oC. The thiol mixtures were then dried under vacuum for ~15 h to remove the traces of water and methanol. The purified thiol mixtures were dissolved in deuterated DMSO and ¹H NMR spectrum was taken on a 400 MHz Bruker apparatus. A typical spectrum of $\frac{[-]}{[+]}$ thiol solution ($\alpha_{soln.} = n = 4$) in d⁶-DMSO is shown in Figure 2.6. The composition of the mixture was estimated as follows:-

$$\frac{[-]^{surf}}{[+]^{surf}} = \frac{\text{Mixed Peak} - [-]^{surf}}{[+]^{surf}}$$
$$= \frac{[+]^{surf} - [-]^{surf}}{[+]^{surf}}$$
(2.1)

The mixed peak corresponds to methylene protons next to thiol (-CH₂-S-) from both [+] and [-] ligands (at $\delta \sim 2.7$ ppm). In order to calculate the α_{surf} , all the peaks were integrated with respect to the reference peak at $\delta \sim 3.26$ ppm (corresponding to (-CH₂—N⁺(CH₃)₃). The integration values corresponding to the mixed peak ([+] + [-]) at $\delta \sim 2.69$ ppm) and [+] peak at $\delta \sim 3.03$ ppm (recalculated for single methyl proton in —N⁺(CH₃)₃) were substituted in equation 2.1 to get α_{surf} to be 3.0. The α_{surf} value obtained here is in accordance with the literature values.^{53,57}

2.3.3 Trapping and Binding Experiments

Trapping experiments were performed with different AuNP ratios (differing in the magnitudes of surface charges) in the presence of varying concentrations of aggregation triggers. In a typical trapping experiment, aqueous solution of [-] AuNP (3 mL) was prepared such that the optical density was ~ 0.25 (~ 5 nM in terms of AuNPs),

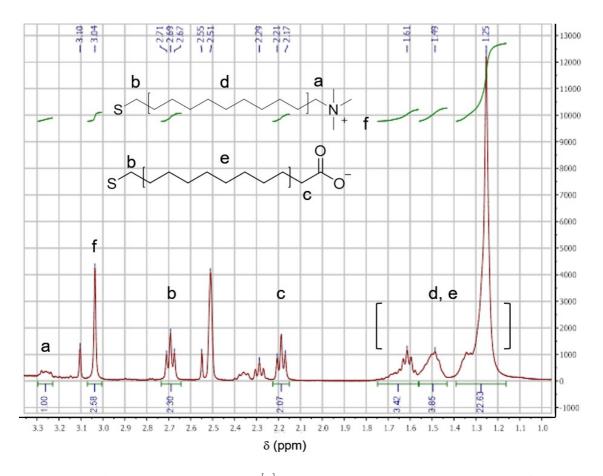


Figure 2.6: ¹H NMR spectrum of $\frac{[-]}{[+]}$ thiol solution ($\alpha_{soln.} = n = 4$) in d⁶-DMSO after etching the Au cores.

followed by the addition of 1 mM of Pb²⁺. The progress of trapping was monitored by UV-Vis. absorption, Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS), Zeta potential and microscopy (Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM), Atomic Force Microscopy (AFM) and Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM)) studies. Spectral changes were followed by monitoring the UV-Vis. absorption spectrum for at least 2 days. DLS measurements were performed for ~3 h so as to gain insight on the variation of hydrodynamic diameter of AuNPs with time. Microscopy experiments were carried out by drop casting ~100 μ L of AuNP-Pb²⁺ aggregate solution (after 3 h of incubation in Pb²⁺) on the respective substrates. The drop was subsequently removed with a tissue paper after ~10 min so as to minimize the 'drying effect'.

2.3.4 Reversibility Studies

The reversibility experiments were performed on $[+/-]_9$ AuNP because the spectral responses were faster, and $[+/-]_9$ AuNP-Pb²⁺ aggregates were stable for ~7 h. Sodium hydroxide (NaOH) and hydrochloric acid (HCl) were used as the disassembly and reassembly triggers, respectively. The addition of 1 mM $\rm Pb^{2+}$ to $[+/\text{-}]_9$ AuNP resulted in the formation of AuNP-Pb²⁺ aggregates. For the disassembly of the aggregates, 10 μ L aliquots of 1 M NaOH were added to the solution. Here, NaOH reacted with Pb^{2+} to form insoluble lead hydroxide ($Pb(OH)_2$), which is further converted into soluble plumbate (PbO_2^{2-}) .⁵⁹ The added NaOH, thus removes all the Pb^{2+} from the NP-ion aggregates as is evident from the complete reversal of plasmon band to its initial position. This was followed by the addition of 10 μ L aliquots of 1 M HCl, which caused the release of Pb^{2+} from plumbate (PbO_2^{2-}) to the solution, resulting in the reassembly of aggregates. The addition of acid first neutralized the excess base present in the system and then dissociated the PbO_2^{2-} to $Pb(OH)_2$ and ultimately releasing the Pb^{2+} . The free Pb^{2+} then chelates with the carboxyl group resulting in the reassembly of NPs. The retrapping of $\rm Pb^{2+}$ was confirmed by performing control experiments with AuNPs and HCl in the absence of Pb^{2+} .

2.4 Results and Discussion

The present work focuses on regulating the interparticle forces in NPs and investigates how it 'adds' to the existing NP functionality. For this, we selected NP's ability to trap toxic ions as the model study, which has been used in numerous sensing applications.^{1–10} Frequently, NP-based sensing methods utilizes carboxylic acid groups as a targeting moiety,^{1–4,22,27} and hence, we chose carboxylic acid as the headgroup in our NP design. AuNPs functionalized with MUA ligands, [-] AuNPs, having a core diameter of 6.0 ± 0.7 nm, were synthesized using a modified literature procedure^{56,57} (see Figures 2.4, 2.5), and systematic Pb²⁺ binding studies were car-

ried out. Homogeneously charged [-] AuNPs (~ 5 nM in terms of NPs) precipitated in the presence of 1 mM Pb^{2+} with a visible color change from wine red to blue and finally to black, over a period of 3-4 h (see Figures 2.3a, 2.7, 2.8a, c, d, 3.17). Such a system serves as good trapping agent but fails to cater to the need of an ideal scavenger, owing to the instability of NP-ion aggregates. In order to achieve the stability, attractive bridging interactions were diluted by incorporating hydrophobic ligands (dodecanethiol, DDT) into the SAM of [-] AuNPs using place exchange reaction (see Section 2.3.1 in the Experimental Section). $[DDT/-]_4$ AuNPs (where $\alpha_{soln} = \text{ligand feed radio during place exchange} = \frac{[-]_{sol}}{[DDT]_{sol}} = 4)$ also precipitated in the presence of 1 mM Pb^{2+} similar to [-] AuNPs (Figure 2.7). It has been shown that dilution of m-SAM with ethylene glycol ligands (inert ligand) can improve the stability of the AuNP-Eu³⁺-ion aggregates.²⁶ However, our study indicates that incorporation of more '*potent*' forces like repulsions rather than a mere dilution of attractive forces is required to accomplish controlled aggregation phenomenon. Accordingly, we introduced positive charges into the SAM of [-] AuNPs and a series of heterogeneously charged [+/-] AuNPs were prepared by adopting modified literature procedure.⁵⁷ The composition of [+] and [-] in m-SAM was systematically varied to generate heterogeneously charged NPs with different magnitudes of surface charge $([+/-]_n$ where $n = \alpha_{soln} = ligand$ feed ratio during place exchange $= \frac{|-|}{|+|} = 9, 4,$ 3 etc.). All the AuNP systems were well characterized using UV-Vis. absorption, TEM, and zeta potential studies (Figure 2.4, 2.5). The addition of 1 mM Pb^{2+} to 5 nM of $[+/-]_9$ AuNPs resulted in an immediate bathochromic shift in the plasmon band followed by precipitation (Figure 2.7). Interestingly, the kinetics of precipitation in $[+/-]_9$ AuNPs was slower than that of [-] and $[DDT/-]_4$ AuNPs (Figure 2.7a). Hence, incorporation of a small percentage of positive charges in the SAM proved to be vital in slowing down the NP precipitation. Consequently, systematic $\rm Pb^{2+}$ induced aggregation studies were carried out with [+/-] AuNPs system to impart long-term stability to NP-ion aggregates (Figure 2.7).

The screening of charges on the NP surface by the addition of Pb^{2+} resulted in

scenarios where either attractive/repulsive interactions were dominating or were of comparable strengths. For instance, the addition of Pb²⁺ to $[+/-]_9$ AuNPs resulted in NP precipitation indicating the dominance of attractive forces. Motivated by the slower kinetics of precipitation for $[+/-]_9$ AuNPs in Pb²⁺, the [+] charges in the m-SAM were increased to see its effect on interparticle forces. No appreciable shift in the plasmon band was observed for $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs in 1 mM Pb²⁺, which indicated a complete dominance by repulsive interactions (Figure 2.7). The magnitude of interparticle attractive forces was then gradually raised, to balance the repulsive forces, by increasing the concentration of Pb²⁺ in solution (Figure 2.7b). It was found that $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs in 35 mM of Pb²⁺ exhibited a shift of 12-15 nm without undergoing precipitation, and remained stable for ~2 days (Figures 2.7b, 2.8b, c). A further increase in the concentration of Pb²⁺ resulted in a greater spectral response but compromised on the stability of the aggregates (Figure 2.7b). For instance, 100 mM addition of Pb²⁺ resulted in a bathochromic shift of ~20 nm and the $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs precipitated over a period of 7-8 h. This by itself was interesting as the

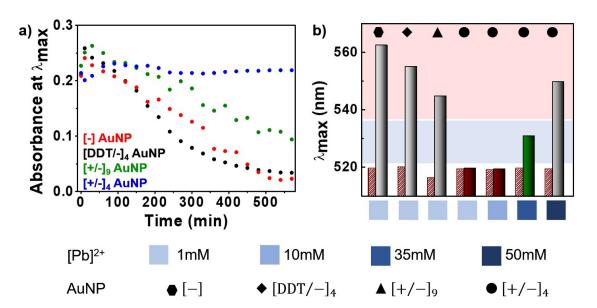


Figure 2.7: Optimization of controlled aggregation phenomenon in charged AuNPs. (a) Representative UV-vis measurements showing the variation of absorbance at λ_{max} with time for [-], [DDT/-]₄, [+/-]₉ and [+/-]₄ AuNPs upon the addition of 1 mM Pb²⁺. (b) A plot summarizing the variation of λ_{max} in various charged AuNP systems as a function of Pb²⁺ concentration. Based on the initial screening studies, [+/-]₄ AuNPs in 35 mM Pb²⁺ was selected as the working system for studying controlled aggregation phenomenon.

NP aggregates were stable for an appreciable period, providing the time to scavenge them out of the system. As the focus was on the long-term stability (~ 1 day) of NP-ion aggregates, we chose $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs in 35 mM Pb²⁺ as the working system.

The interaction of [-] and $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs with 1 mM and 35 mM Pb²⁺ resulted in an instantaneous increase in λ_{max} (~40 nm and ~12 nm, respectively; Figure 2.8). The observed bathochromic shift was due to the formation and increase in size of NP aggregates driven by the chelation between carboxylate groups on adjacent NPs and Pb²⁺. The decrease in interparticle distance enables '*talking*' between the plasmons of adjacent NPs, which resulted in a red-shift in the absorption maxima.²⁹⁻³¹ A

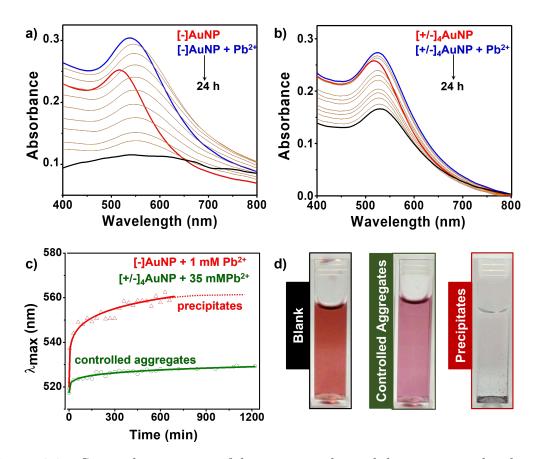


Figure 2.8: Spectral responses of homogeneously and heterogeneously charged AuNPs in the presence of Pb²⁺. Changes in absorption spectra of (a) [-] and (b) $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs in the presence of 1 mM and 35 mM Pb²⁺, respectively. (c) Variation of λ_{max} with time for [-] and $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs in 1 mM and 35 mM Pb²⁺, respectively. (d) Photographs of solutions of $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs in the absence (left) and presence (middle) of 35 mM Pb²⁺. A visible color change is observed upon the addition of 35 mM Pb²⁺ to $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs solution. The image on the right is the photograph of [-] AuNPs in the presence of 1 mM Pb²⁺, showing complete precipitation (see the black precipitate at the bottom of the vial). All the photographs were taken after 1 day.

 λ_{max} shift of ~40 nm was observed for [-] AuNPs with a collateral decrease in the absorption intensity. However, $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs showed an initial increase in both the absorbance and λ_{max} value (typical of aggregation),⁵³ followed by a decrease in absorbance. This decrease in absorbance ceased after ~ 90 min, confirming the arrest of aggregation process. Other than differences in the λ_{max} shifts, these two NP systems also differed in the stabilities of the aggregates formed. As depicted in Figure 2.8a, b, c, the [-] AuNPs sedimented within 4 h whereas $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs exhibited stability for ~ 2 days. The time scan and optical photographs of NP aggregates emphasizes the divergent optical behavior of [-] and $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs in the presence of Pb^{2+} (Figure 2.8c, d). The spectral responses thus obtained were well-complemented by Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) studies (Figure 2.9). The hydrodynamic diameter of [-] AuNP-Pb²⁺ aggregates increased uncontrollably with time (up to $\sim 1.2 \ \mu m$, Figure 2.9a), and ultimately, they sedimented from solution. On the contrary, a controlled increase in hydrodynamic diameter was observed for $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs upon addition of Pb²⁺ and remained constant ~50 nm (Figure 2.9b). The repulsions arising from the quaternary ammonium groups on $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs

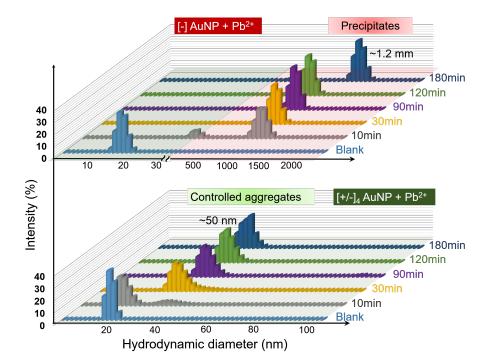


Figure 2.9: Comparative DLS plot corresponding to (a) [-] and (b) $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs in the presence of 1 mM and 35 mM Pb²⁺, respectively.

eventually controlled the increment in the size and imparted stability to the NP-Pb²⁺ aggregates.

The size and morphology of the Pb²⁺-trapped aggregates formed in [-] and $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs were investigated using microscopy studies. Transmission Electron Microscope (TEM) and Atomic Force Microscope (AFM) studies established the formation of large uncontrolled aggregates (several microns in size) when 1 mM Pb²⁺ was added to [-] AuNPs (Figure 2.10a). On the contrary, $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs formed many small controlled aggregates in the range of 30-50 nm (Figure 2.10a-e) upon addition of 35 mM Pb²⁺. The 2D and 3D AFM height images clearly demarcate the boundaries between the individual NPs constituting the aggregates (bright lines and ripples in

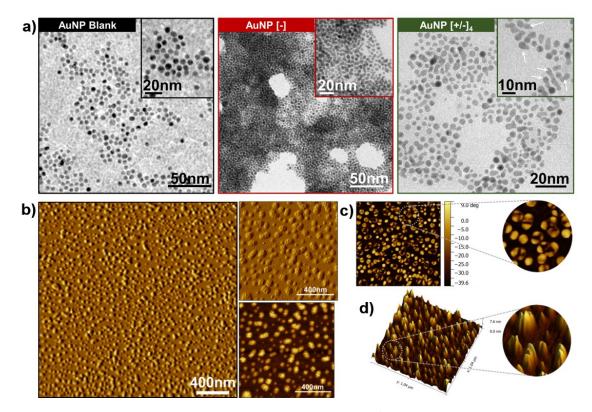


Figure 2.10: Microscopic characterization of NP-Pb²⁺ aggregate formation. (a) TEM images of 6.0 ± 0.7 nm sized AuNPs in the absence and presence of Pb²⁺. [-] AuNPs formed large networks of uncontrolled aggregates in the presence of 1 mM Pb²⁺ (middle image). Interestingly, smaller aggregates comprising fewer NPs (mostly <5) were observed for [+/-]₄ AuNPs in the presence of 35 mM of Pb²⁺ (right image). A few of these smaller aggregates are highlighted with white arrows in the inset. (b-e) AFM images of [+/-]₄ AuNPs at different magnifications in the presence of 35 mM Pb²⁺. (b) Height, (c) phase, and (d) contrast images of [+/-]₄ AuNPs aggregates showing the boundaries between the individual NPs constituting the aggregates (bright and dark lines, respectively).

Figure 2.10c, e respectively) - an observation which is seen as dark boundaries in the phase contrast image (Figure 2.10d). The image analysis done on >1000 NPs shows the preference among the $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs to participate in the formation of '*n-particle*' aggregates (where n < 10), instead of huge aggregates or remaining as individual NPs (Figure 2.10f). Spectroscopic and microscopic data thus confirmed the formation of stable and controlled aggregates between heterogeneously charged NP and Pb²⁺.

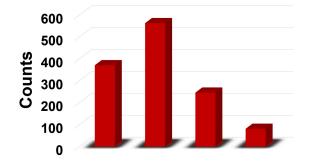


Figure 2.11: Image analysis done on >1000 NPs confirm that most of the $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs prefer to participate in the formation of aggregates constituting <10 NPs.

2.4.1 Role of Interparticle Forces

The major forces responsible for controlling the interparticle interactions in [+/-]AuNPs are (i) electrostatic repulsions among carboxylate [-] or quaternary ammonium [+] groups, (ii) electrostatic attractions between quaternary ammonium and carboxylate groups, (iii) H-bonding attraction between carboxylic acid groups (a few of the carboxylate groups are protonated at the pH under study, ~7), and (iv) Pb²⁺ mediated bridging interactions. The phenomenon of stable aggregation can be understood by observing how the strengths of these interparticle forces evolves with time. The exact composition of the [+] and [-] ligands on the surface of [+/-]4 AuNPs was determined by ¹H NMR experiments⁶⁰ and found to be $\alpha_{surf} = \frac{[-]_{surf}}{[+]_{surf}}$ = 3 (see Figure 2.5c, and Section 2.3.2). The α_{surf} obtained is lower than the ligand feed ratio used during the place exchange reaction, which is in accordance with previous reports.^{23,57} Due to the relatively smaller number of [+] in the m-SAM of [+/-]4 AuNPs, the electrostatic attractions between [+] and [-] on adjacent NPs are not strong enough to overcome the stronger electrostatic repulsions between two [-] ligands. $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs exhibited a zeta potenial of -8.0 ± 1.2 mV in the absence of Pb²⁺ (Figure 2.12c top). The aggregation of NPs in the presence of Pb²⁺ can occur either due to bridging interactions^{1-7,26,27,61} or desoprtion of thiolates from the NP surface.⁶² Control experiments, where $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs showed no aggregation with Pb²⁺ (at acidic pH values) overruled the desoprtion of thiolates from the NP surface (Figures 2.12a, 3.18). With the addition of Pb²⁺ into [+/-] AuNP system, bridging interaction comes into picture and the initial electrostatic repulsions between [-] ligands transformed to attractions— a phenomenon usually referred to as '*charge inversion*'. As the interparticle distance reduced, the electrostatic repulsion arising from the [+] started to dominate and the kinetics of assembly process slowed down. This is clearly evident from the reversal of zeta potential from -8.0 ± 1.2 mV to +14 ± 1.5 mV upon binding of Pb²⁺ (Figure 2.12b, c). The presence of [+]

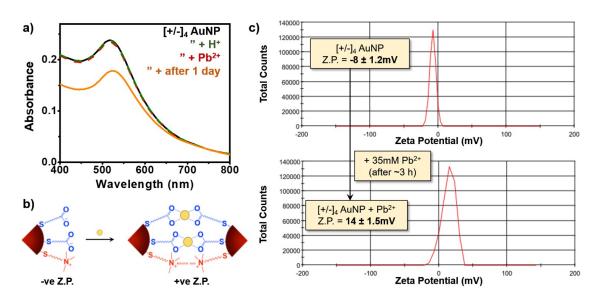


Figure 2.12: Control experiments for understanding mechanism of aggregation. (a) Interaction of Pb²⁺ with $[+/-]_4$ AuNP at acidic pH. The insignificant change $(\Delta \lambda_{max} \sim 2 \text{ nm})$ witnessed in the absorption spectrum after the addition of 35mM of Pb²⁺ to an acidic solution of $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs. This validates the necessity of carboxylate group at the NP surface for interaction with Pb²⁺. (b) Schematics showing the effect of addition of Pb²⁺ on Zeta Potential of $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs. (c) The ζ plots for $[+/-]_4$ AuNP in the absence (top) and presence (bottom) of 35 mM Pb²⁺. The negative ζ value indicates the presence of excess negatively charged ligands on the surface of untreated $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs. Interestingly, there is a reversal in ζ value (from $-8 \pm 1.2 \text{ mV}$ to $14 \pm 15 \text{ mV}$) upon addition of Pb²⁺ which confirms that the stability in $[+/-]_4$ AuNP-Pb²⁺ is imparted by positively charged [+] ligands in the m-SAM.

in the m-SAM, not only diluted the attractive forces by decreasing the amount of [-] but also introduced repulsive interactions. Thus, an elegant interplay of surface chemistry by careful adjustment in the number of [+] and [-] ligands resulted in the formation of stable aggregates in heterogeneously charged AuNPs.

2.4.2 Reversibility

Our next objective was to check the reversibility of controlled aggregation in [+/-]AuNP system. As chelation of Pb^{2+} is responsible for the onset of interparticle aggregation, their removal should then in principle result in the disassembly of NP-ion aggregates. The use of ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) as the disassembling trigger resulted in a partial release of Pb^{2+} , which is in accordance with previous studies. Alternatively, NaOH (1M) and HCl (1M) were used to disassemble and reassemble the NP-ion aggregates, respectively (Figure 2.13, 2.3, 3.19). NaOH reacts with Pb^{2+} to form insoluble lead hydroxide ($Pb(OH)_2$), which is further converted into soluble plumbate $(PbO_2^{2-})^{59}$ (see Section 2.3.4 for detailed discussion on formation and disappearance of turbidity as a function of NaOH addition). The added NaOH, thus removed all the Pb²⁺ from the NP-ion aggregates as is evident from the complete reversal of plasmon band to its initial position (Figure 2.13a, blue curve in 2.13c). The reassembling of NP-ion aggregates was achieved by releasing the Pb²⁺ from PbO_2^{2-} using 1 M HCl. The addition of acid at first neutralizes the excess ^-OH present, then dissociates the PbO_2^{2-} to $Pb(OH)_2$ and ultimately releases the Pb^{2+} (Figure 2.13b, red curve in 2.13c). The free Pb^{2+} then chelates with the carboxyl group resulting in the reassembly of NPs. The reversibility of the assembly disassembly was carried out for at least three cycles and is reflected in the shuttling of λ_{max} between 518 and 528 nm corresponding to the unaggregated and aggregated states, respectively (Figure 2.13b). We performed similar reversibility experiments with [-] AuNPs in 1 mM Pb²⁺ and failed to observe complete reversal in λ_{max} , even after addition of excess NaOH (see Figure 2.19). This indicated that Pb^{2+} are perhaps trapped too tightly between the [-] AuNPs, and addition of ⁻OH failed to release

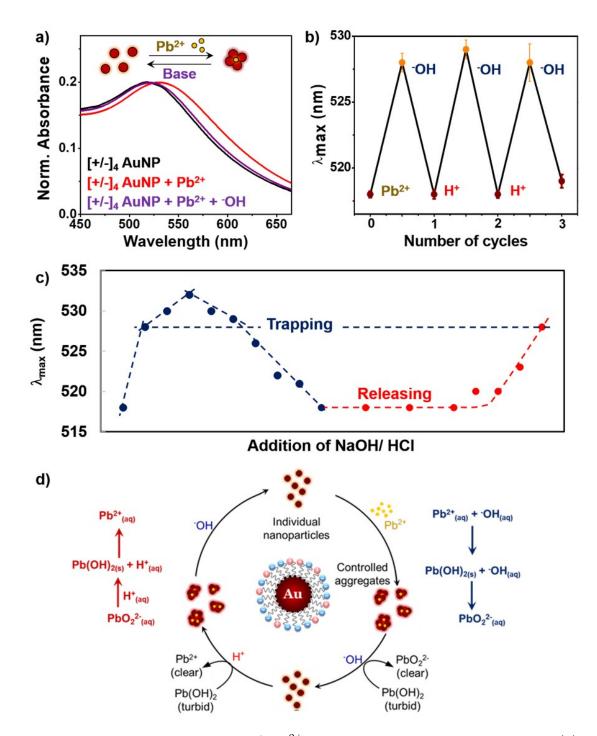


Figure 2.13: Reversible trapping of Pb²⁺ by heterogeneously charged NPs. (a) Normalized absorption spectra of $[+/-]_9$ AuNPs showing the shuttling of λ_{max} from monodisperse (black) to aggregated (red) and back to monodisperse (blue) NPs upon sequential addition of Pb²⁺ and $^-$ OH. (b) Three complete cycles of assemblydisassembly process monitored with UV-vis spectroscopy. The error bars correspond to standard deviations based on three different sets of experiments. (c) A plot showing the variation of λ_{max} upon the addition of $^-$ OH (shown in blue) and H⁺ (shown in red) during a single assembly-disassembly cycle. Each point in the plot corresponds to 10 μ L addition of 1 M $^-$ OH or H⁺. (d) Schematic representation of the changes occurring during a single assembly-disassembly cycle (Section 2.3.4).

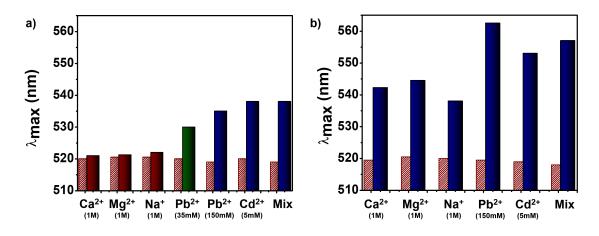


Figure 2.14: Selectivity of $[+/-]_4$ and [-] AuNPs toward the trapping of toxic ions. Variation in $\lambda_{max.}$ of (a) $[+/-]_4$ and (b) [-] AuNPs upon addition of different ions. In contrary to [-] AuNPs, $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs exhibited a preference in binding toward Pb²⁺ and Cd^{2+} in the presence of interfering cations. Thus, the inclusion of [+] ligands in the m-SAM imparts a new function of selectivity toward trapping of toxic ions in the carboxylate functionalized NP system.

them from the chelation. Here again, the presence of [+] charges in the m-SAM is an added advantage as the electrostatic repulsions in heterogeneously charged NPs decrease the COO⁻-Pb²⁺ attractions, thereby facilitating the reversible scavenging of ions.

2.4.3 Flexible Trapping and Selectivity

The formation of stable NP-ion aggregates is not only limited with Pb^{2+} but was also observed for 0.1 mM Cd^{2+} as well (Figure 2.15a). Further, $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs demonstrated a preference in binding toward Pb^{2+} and Cd^{2+} in the presence of commonly found cations like Ca^{2+} , Mg^{2+} , Na^+ , and so on, emphasizing their suitability under physiological conditions (Figure 2.14a). However, [-] AuNPs failed to exhibit selectivity toward Pb^{2+} and Cd^{2+} in the presence of interfering cations (Figure 2.14b). The preference of $[+/-]_4$ Au NPs in trapping of Pb^{2+} and Cd^{2+} can be attributed to the stronger binding strengths of heavy metal ions compared to other divalent and monovalent ions.⁶³ Thus, the selectivity of charged AuNPs toward toxic ions is improved by the incoprporation of [+] ligands in the m-SAM. We also performed controlled aggregation studies in the presence of relatively weaker aggregation trig-

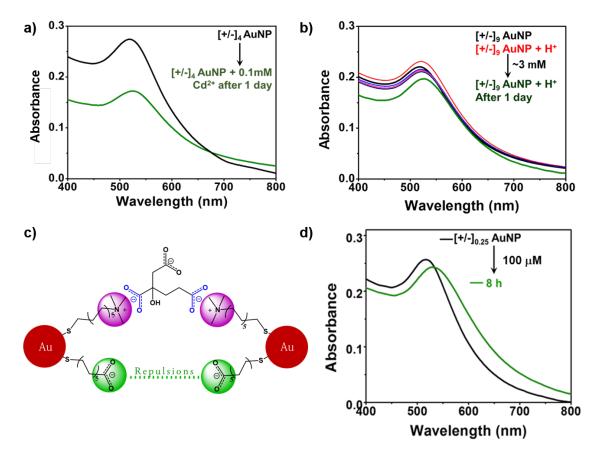


Figure 2.15: Flexibility of trapping different analytes of interest. (a) Controlled aggregation in $[+/-]_4$ AuNP with Cd²⁺. UV-Vis. spectral changes of $[+/-]_4$ AuNPs in presence of 0.1 mM Cd²⁺. A bathochromic shift of ~ 7 nm was observed without any compromise on the colloidal stability. (b) UV-Vis. spectral changes of $[+/-]_9$ AuNPs in presence of 3.3 mM H⁺. A bathochromic shift of ~ 8 nm was observed without any compromise on the colloidal stability. (c) A schematic representation of citrate mediated bridging in $[+/-]_{0.25}$ AuNPs. (d) UV-Vis. spectral changes of $[+/-]_{0.25}$ AuNPs and [+] AuNPs in presence of 0.1 mM citrate ions at pH ~ 11. A bathochromic shift of ~ 8 nm was observed in the case of $[+/-]_{0.25}$ AuNPs without any compromise on the colloidal stability.

gers, like H⁺. Interestingly, the controlled aggregation phenomenon in the presence of H⁺ was observed only after reducing the magnitude of repulsive forces in [+/-] AuNPs system. For this, the protonation studies were carried out with [+/-]₉ AuNPs having lower percentage of [+] ligands (Figure 2.15b). The superiority of [+/-] AuNPs over other NP systems lies in the ease with which the necessary surface chemistry can be '*fitted in*' to perform analyte-specific binding, with either stronger or weaker triggers. To demonstrate the generality of our work further, we studied the interaction of [+/-]_{0.25} AuNPs (the net surface charge is positive at the pH under study) with negatively charged citrate ions. Remarkably, citrate ions too behaved in a similar way as positively charged ions, and the $[+/-]_{0.25}$ AuNP-citrate aggregates exhibited improved stability compared to [+] AuNP-citrate aggregates (Figure 2.15c,d). Here, the citrate ions chelate with the positively charged quaternary ammonium groups initializing the aggregation process. The [-] ligands on adjacent NPs provided the necessary repulsions required to achieve the perfect balance between the interparticle forces, thus stabilizing the aggregates.

2.5 Conclusion

The regulation of interparticle forces in heterogeneously charged NPs resulted in the phenomenon of controlled aggregation, which was successfully translated into reversible trapping and scavenging of toxic ions. The ratio of [+] and [-] ligands in the m-SAM was systematically tuned to achieve the formation of stable NP aggregation, in contrast to the conventionally observed phenomena of precipitation, upon the addition of charged analytes. One of the charges on the NP surface accounted for the trapping of ions of interest, whereas the other was responsible for imparting the much required repulsive forces for stabilizing the aggregates. With this strategy in mind, we were able to show the reversible trapping of Pb^{2+} ions, where the NPion aggregates were stable for ~ 2 days, making them available for scavenging from the site of action. More importantly, the regulation of interparticle forces imparted a new function of selectivity toward trapping of toxic ions in a carboxylate functionalized NP systems. A rational outgrowth of these initial studies on controlled aggregation phenomenon can lead to a NP-based system capable of carrying out *in-vivo* scavenging of biologically toxic analyte molecules. The impact of controlling the interparticle forces at the nanoscale can be envisioned beyond the trapping and scavenging phenomena such as in self-assembly, optoelectronics, biotargeting, and catalysis.

2.6 Future Directions

In the present chapter, we demonstrate that by fine-tuning interparticle interactions, one can improve the existing properties of nanomaterials. Here, by working with heterogeneously charged AuNPs, and concentrations of Pb^{2+} (an aggregating trigger), we could balance attractions and repulsions and reveal the formation of controlled aggregates. This allowed us to overcome the inherent limitations of an aggregation process; i.e. instability of the aggregates, lack of reversibility, and nonselectivity. One of the immediate limitations of the present system that needs to be improved is the sensitivity of [+/-] AuNP system towards an analyte. Furthermore, we note that the present NP system could not distinguish between Pb^{2+} and Cd^{2+} . Traditionally, such levels of selectivity are imparted to a system by functionalizing the NPs with an analyte specific agent. Our next challenge was to find ways of introducing selectivity to a NP system without the use of an analyte-specific ligand.

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2.7 Appendix

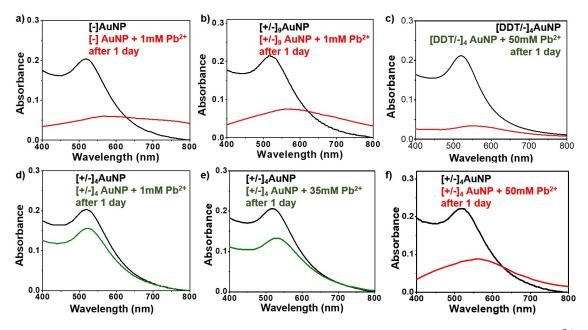


Figure 2.16: Screening of charged AuNPs for finding out the stable AuNP - Pb^{2+} aggregate system. Absorption studies of charged AuNPs in the presence of varying amount of Pb^{2+} . Details about the AuNPs and Pb^{2+} concentrations are given in the respective figures

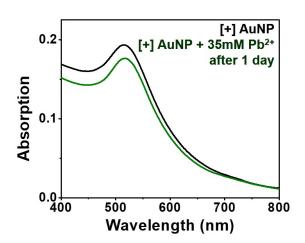


Figure 2.17: Interaction of Pb²⁺ with [+] AuNPs. The negligible change ($\Delta \lambda_{max.} \sim 1 \text{ nm}$) is observed in the absorption spectrum of [+] AuNPs upon addition of 35 mM Pb²⁺.

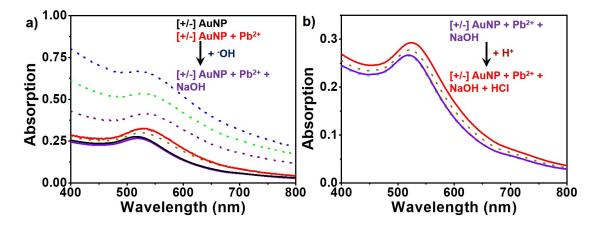


Figure 2.18: Assembly-disassembly-reassembly studies in [+/-] AuNP-Pb²⁺ system. Variation in UV-Vis. absorption spectra of [+/-] AuNPs upon (a) assembly disassembly and (b) reassembly processes. The assembly and disassembly processes were carried out by the addition of Pb²⁺ and ⁻OH ions, respectively. The reassembly process was carried out by the addition of HCl.

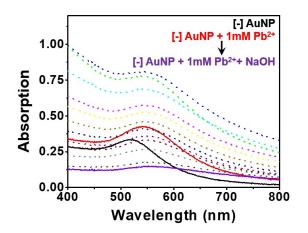
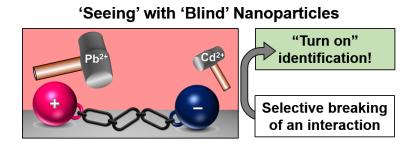


Figure 2.19: Reversibility experiment with [-] AuNP in 1mM Pb²⁺. UV-Vis. absorption changes in [-] AuNP-Pb²⁺ upon the addition of 1 M NaOH. The decrease in the absorption intensity of [-] AuNP-Pb²⁺ (purple curve) is due to the dilution effect caused by the addition of excess NaOH (~ 2 mL).

Chapter 3

Turn-On Selectivity in Inherently Nonselective Gold Nanoparticles for Pb²⁺ Detection by Preferential Breaking of Interparticle Interactions



On the Origins of Selectivity

This chapter has been adapted from the following paper:- **Rao**, **A.**, Kumar, G. S., Roy, S., Ajesh, T. R., Devatha, G., Pillai, P. P.*, Turn-On Selectivity in Inherently Nonselective Gold Nanoparticles for Pb^{2+} Detection by Preferential Breaking of Interparticle Interactions, *ACS Appl. Nano Mater.* **2019**, *2*, 5625 – 5633.

3.1 Abstract

Establishing a 'precise' control over different interparticle interactions holds the promise of introducing inherently absent properties to nanosystems. In this direction, our aim is to introduce the notion of selectivity in inherently nonselective ('blind') carboxylate-functionalized gold-nanoparticles ([-] AuNP), towards strongly binding divalent metal ions (M^{2+}) . The present system designed from such 'blind' nanoparticles is able to discriminate between various M^{2+} ions (capable of 'seeing'), by using differences in their abilities to break interparticle interactions. This is in stark contrast with the commonplace idea of forming an interaction between NPs and M^{2+} ions, as the means of identification, leading to the formation of precipitates. Among different ions tested. Pb^{2+} is able to break the electrostatic interactions in [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates and displace [+] AuNP to solution, turning on the plasmonic wine-red color. The dominance of interaction energy for [-] AuNP - Pb²⁺ complexation over the inter-nanoparticle interactions is accountable for the selective discrimination of Pb^{2+} from other M^{2+} ions. A precise variation in strengths of different interparticle interactions helped in tuning both the selectivity and sensitivity of our identification protocol.

3.2 Introduction

Development of strategies to improve and impart newer properties to existing materials, without the aid of new components, is one of the future directions in modern nanoscience.^{1,2} In this regard, strategies to control forces and interparticle interactions at the nanoscale³⁻¹⁵ are emerging as an effective and widely accepted approach.¹⁶⁻²⁸ The present work demonstrates the decisive role of forces in introducing the notion of selectivity in inherently nonselective carboxylate-functionalized gold-nanoparticles ([-] AuNP) toward strongly binding divalent metal ions (M²⁺). Overcoming nonselectivity is one of the long-standing and, thereby, well-studied challenges in the area of [-] AuNP sensors:^{12,26,27,29} a case analogous to the *solvent*

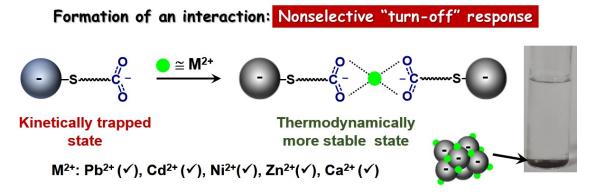


Figure 3.1: The kinetically trapped [-] AuNPs coordinate with various M^{2+} ions uniformly to reach the thermodynamically more stable precipitate state, resulting in the inherent nonselective turn-off response.

leveling effect where the solvent fails to discriminate between different strong acids or bases.³⁰ The leveling in [-] AuNP arises because of the strong abilities of M^{2+} ions to bridge the carboxylate groups (Figure 3.1).^{12,26,27,29} The strong bridging interaction triggers the nonselective aggregation and plasmon coupling in NPs causing a rapid color change, ultimately leading to precipitation.^{12,26,27,29} Essentially, a dispersed solution of NP is an example of a kinetically trapped state because of the large number of high energy surface atoms with unsatisfied valences.³³ The number of contacts between the NP increases during the process of aggregation/precipitation, which leads to a decrease in the number of high-energy surface atoms with unsatisfied valences.³³ Thus, the aggregated state of NP is thermodynamically more stable when compared to the dispersed state. Introduction of external stimuli (like M^{2+} ions) can thus uniformly trigger the thermodynamically favorable process of precipitation, imparting the nonselectivity to [-] AuNPs (Figure 3.1). Most of the available protocols overcome such nonselectivity by replacing the carboxylate groups on [-] AuNPs with analyte-specific ligands.^{31,32,34–39} In a seminal work, Grzybowski and co-workers used AuNP crystals, stabilized with chemically cleavable dithiol moieties. Addition of a suitable trigger (cross-linker specific) cuts, and 'punctures' the crystals, giving rise to a selective colour change. (see Figure 3.2a, b).³¹ In another approach, Lu and co-workers used DNAzymes for the selective identification of Pb²⁺ ions. Here, out of different M²⁺ ions tested, only Pb²⁺ ions catalyzed the hydrolysis of AuNP-DNAzyme aggregates, resulting in the disassembly of AuNPs (see Figure 3.2c).³² On the contrary, we report here an alternate strategy to achieve the selective turn-on identification of heavy metal ions with AuNPs that are deprived of any analyte-specific ligands. Our approach is to explore the differences in the abilities of

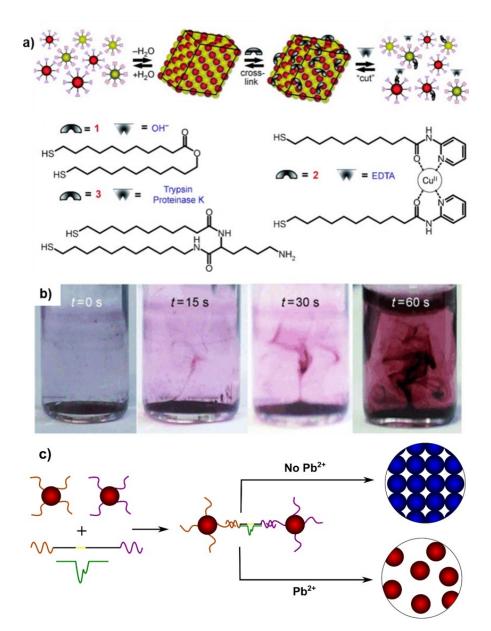


Figure 3.2: (a) Schematic diagram showing the design of crystals, cross-linked with cleavable dithiols for amplified chemical sensing. Chemical structures of the dithiol cross-linkers, and the analytes are shown in (a). (b) Optical photographs showing the dissolution/ release of NPs from the crystals upon addition of a suitable analyte (Reproduced in part with permission from [31] Copyright 2010 John Wiley and Sons). (c) Schematic illustration of a colorimetric sensor based on the disassembly of DNAzyme labelled AuNPs in the absence and presence of Pb²⁺ (Reproduced in part with permission from [32] Copyright 2003 American Chemical Society).

 M^{2+} ions to interact with a thermodynamically stable³³ inter-nanoparticle precipitate containing [+] and [-] AuNPs (Figure 3.3). Here we emphasize that both [+] and [-] AuNPs, independently, were nonselective ('*blind*') toward M²⁺ ions. Remarkably, a system composed of such nonselective nanoparticles was able to discriminate (capable of '*seeing*') between the hard-to-distinguish pair of Pb²⁺ and Cd²⁺ ions.^{12,26} The rationale is that only the strongest of strongly binding ions will be able to break the interactions in nanoionic precipitates (thermodynamically more stable state)³³ and disperse them back to the solution (kinetically trapped state).

We worked with the nanoionic precipitates having oppositely charged [+] and [-] AuNPs stitched together through electrostatic and van der Waals attractions, developed by Grzybowski and co-workers.⁴⁰ The concept of preferential breaking of interactions in [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates by M^{2+} ions led to the displacement and leaking of [+] AuNPs, providing the desired turn-on selectivity (Figure 3.3). Only the Pb²⁺ ion was capable of breaking the electrostatic interactions in [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates, among other M^{2+} ions including the Cd²⁺ ions. The sensitivity and selectivity of nanoionic precipitates were tuned by controlling the strength of electrostatic interactions between the NP constituents. The sensitivity of Pb²⁺ ions improved from 1 mM to 20 μ M by reducing the electrostatic attractions in the nanoionic precipitates formed from heterogeneously charged [+/-]₉ and homogeneously charged [+] AuNPs. More importantly, 3 mM Cd²⁺ ions were also able to

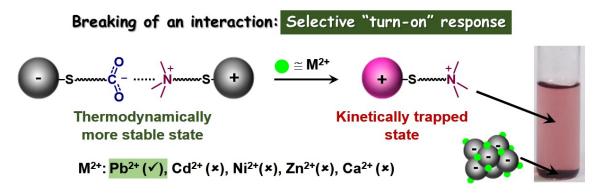


Figure 3.3: Schematics for selective turn-on response with [-] AuNPs. Our hypothesis to explore differences in the abilities of M^{2+} ions to break an interaction as the means of discrimination rather than the conventional idea of forming of an interaction.

break the electrostatic interactions between $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates, proving the tunability in M^{2+} ion detection (sensitivity and selectivity) as per the demand.

3.3 Experimental Section

3.3.1 Synthesis of AuNPs

AuNPs were synthesized according to a modified literature procedure.^{12,41,42} We used tetrachloroaurate trihydrate (HAuCl₄.3H₂O) as the gold precursor and a mixture of tetrabutylammonium borohydride (TBAB) and hydrazine monohydrate (N₂H₄.H₂O) as the reducing agent for our AuNP synthesis. Briefly, a toluene solution (7 mL) of HAuCl₄.3H₂O (23 mg, 0.058 mmol) containing 222 mg of dodecylamine (DDA) (1.2 mmol) and 277 mg (0.6 mmol) of di-n-dodecyl)dimethylammonium bromide

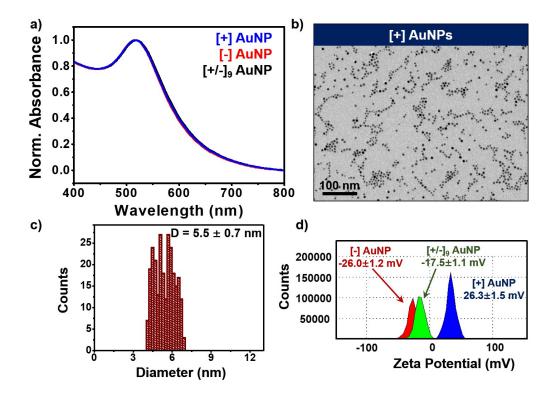


Figure 3.4: (a) UV-Visible absorption spectra of [+] (shown in green), [-] (shown in red) and $[+/-]_9$ AuNPs (shown in black). (b) Representative TEM image of [+] AuNPs with their size distribution histogram shown in (c). (d) Zeta potentials of [+], $[+/-]_9$, and [-] AuNPs were 26.3 ± 1.5 mV, -17.5 ± 1.1 mV, and -26.0 ± 1.2 mV, respectively.

(DDAB) was prepared. The solution was then sonicated for ~5 min to completely solubilize the Au(III) salt. This was followed by a rapid injection of another 3 mL of toluene solution (containing 0.22 mmol of TBAB and 0.24 mmol of DDAB) to ensure the complete reduction of the Au(III) salt. The resulting DDA-AuNP dispersion (seeds) was aged for ~24 h. These NP seeds were then grown to form $5.5 \pm$ 0.7 nm sized DDA-AuNPs. For this, a growth solution containing 1 g of DDAB (2.2 mmol), 2.6 g of DDA (14 mmol), 224 mg of HAuCl₄.3H₂O (0.57 mmol), and 10 mL of seed were prepared in 60 mL of toluene. Then, the growth solution was reduced by the dropwise addition (in ~30 min) of 22 mL of toluene solution containing 300 μ L of N₂H₄.H₂O and 3.5 mg of TBAB. The solution was stirred overnight to yield monodisperse 5.5 ± 0.7 nm sized DDA-AuNPs (Figure 3.4a, b, c). The detailed procedure for the place exchange of DDA on AuNPs with different charged ligands is given below.

3.3.2 Place Exchange of AuNPs

DDA-AuNPs (20 mL) were first purified by quenching the reaction in methanol (50 mL), yielding a black precipitate. The DDA-AuNPs precipitate was then redissolved in 20 mL of toluene followed by the addition of 10 mL of dichloromethane solution of MUA (equal to the moles of Au(III) in the solution). The dispersion was kept undisturbed for ~15 h to equilibrate. Next, the supernatant solution was decanted, and the precipitates were washed with dichloromethane (3 × 50 mL) followed by acetone (1 × 50 mL). The precipitate was then dried and redispersed in water, and 20 μ L of TMAOH (25 wt % in water) was added to deprotonate the carboxylic acid groups in MUA. The average size of the Au nanoparticles thus synthesized was 5.5 ± 0.7 nm, as estimated from TEM analysis (~300 NPs were counted for the preparation of [+] AuNPs with TMA as the ligand. For the preparation of [+/-]₉ AuNPs, a mixture of [+] and [-] ligands in the molar ratio of 1:9 was fed during the place exchange reaction (Figure 3.4).

3.3.3 Synthesis of [+] - [-] Au Nanoionic Precipitates

The nanoionic precipitates composed of oppositely charged AuNPs were prepared according to the literature reports.^{40,43} We prepared stock solutions of similar sized [+] and [-] AuNPs. In a typical precipitation experiment, dispersion of [+] AuNPs (~80 μ M in terms of Au atoms) was titrated in a stirred vial by adding aliquots (~0.15 equiv) of [-] AuNP dispersion. After each addition, the dispersion was allowed to equilibrate for 15 min and was then transferred to a UV-Vis. cuvette for absorption measurements (see Figure 3.5). The addition continued until the AuNPs got precipitated (the precipitation occurred after the addition of ~65 μ M [-] AuNPs).

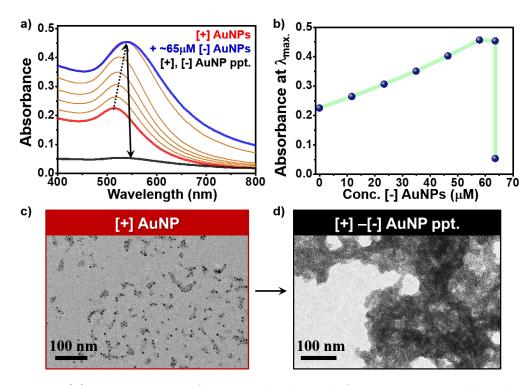


Figure 3.5: (a) Precipitation of oppositely charged AuNPs monitored by changes in the UV-Vis absorption spectrum of AuNPs. The curve shows the changes in the absorption spectrum of [+] AuNPs (shown in red), upon addition of aliquots of [-] AuNPs (shown by orange and blue curves), which leads to the formation of aggregates. This is accompanied by a gradual and continuous bathochromic shift in the λ_{max} from 515-555 nm, followed by an abrupt loss of plasmon band (shown in black). This is due to an ionic like sharp precipitation of [+] and [-] AuNPs at the charge neutrality ($\Sigma Q_{[+]} + \Sigma Q_{[-]} = 0$), confirming the formation of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates. (b) Variation in the surface plasmon band intensity of [+] AuNP at λ_{max} upon addition of different concertation of [-] AuNPs. The spectra show the sharp nature of precipitation of charged AuNPs from the solution. (c) TEM images of individual [+] AuNPs and [+] – [-] Au nanoionic precipitate.

A similar procedure was followed for the preparation of $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates. Here, ~80 μ M [+/-]₉ AuNP (in terms of Au atoms) was titrated with aliquots (~0.15 equiv) of [+] AuNP dispersion. The sharp precipitation occurred after the addition of ~55 μ M of [+] AuNPs. Approximately 70 % of [+] AuNPs was sufficient to form the [+] - [+/-]₉ Au nanoionic precipitates compared to [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates, confirming the decrease in the strength of electrostatic attractions in [+] - [+/-]₉ Au nanoionic precipitates.

3.3.4 Response of [+] - [-] Au Nanoionic Precipitates in the Presence of Different M^{2+} Ions

The response of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates in the presence of different strong binding M²⁺ was monitored using UV-Vis. absorption studies. Here, we monitored the absorption spectrum of displaced [+] AuNPs upon addition of different amounts of M²⁺ ions. In a typical experiment, small aliquots (10-20 μ L) from 50 mM stock solution of different M²⁺ were added, and the absorption spectrum of the redispersed [+] AuNPs was recorded. The limit of detection (LOD) corresponds to the point where a plasmonic wine-red color is clearly visible through the naked eye (corresponds to a change in absorbance of ~0.05). For identification studies in high ionic strength solutions, the supernatant of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates was replaced with a freshly prepared solution of 300 mM NaNO₃.

3.3.5 Titration Experiments for Estimating Binding Affinities

To ascertain the binding affinities of different aggregating triggers with [-] AuNPs, we performed a series of titration experiments. The minimum amount of the aggregating trigger needed to precipitate [-] AuNPs (transition point) was estimated, which is inversely related to their binding affinities. In a typical experiment to ascertain the binding affinity between [-] AuNPs and Pb²⁺, the λ_{max} shifts of [-] AuNPs (~80 μ M, in terms of gold atoms) were plotted against concentrations of Pb²⁺. Briefly, we added a particular concentration (say 1 μ M) of Pb²⁺ to a dispersion of [-] AuNPs and allowed it to equilibrate for ~1 day, followed by recording the UV-Vis. spectrum. Similar experiments were performed for other concentrations of Pb²⁺ (10, 25, 50, 100, 150, 200, 300, and 500 μ M). The λ_{max} values taken from each spectrum was plotted as a function of concentration of Pb²⁺. The data were fitted with a sigmoidal fit to get the transition point (midpoint of the sigmoidal curve), which represents the minimum amount of Pb²⁺ required to precipitate [-] AuNPs. Similar experiments were performed with Cd²⁺, Ca²⁺, and [+] AuNPs for estimating the transition points.

3.4 Results and Discussion

3.4.1 Selective Turn-On Response towards Pb²⁺

The AuNP systems with a core diameter of 5.5 ± 0.7 nm and varying surface chemistries were prepared by adopting a modified literature report (see Figure 3.4).^{12,41,42} Nonionizable TMA ([+]) and ionizable MUA ([-]) ligands were functionalized on AuNPs to impart positive and negative surface charges, respectively (see Figure 3.4). The aggregation process of different AuNP systems in the presence of various M²⁺ ions was monitored by using time-dependent UV-Vis. absorption studies. As reported previously, [-] AuNPs complexed and ultimately precipitated out with different M²⁺ ions, confirming their inherent nonselectivity (Figure 3.6).^{12,26,27} To overcome this, our approach was to use the abilities of different M²⁺ ions to break the interactions in inter-nanoparticle precipitates (*thermodynamically more stable state*)³³ and disperse them back to the solution (*kinetically trapped state*), see Figure 3.3. Accordingly, the inter-nanoparticle precipitates containing [-] AuNPs were prepared from an equimolar mixture of [+] and [-] AuNPs (Figure 3.5 and Figure 3.7a), as reported by Grzybowski and co-workers.⁴⁰ The addition of small aliquots (~0.15 equiv) of [-] AuNP to [+] AuNP triggers the aggregation and plasmon cou-

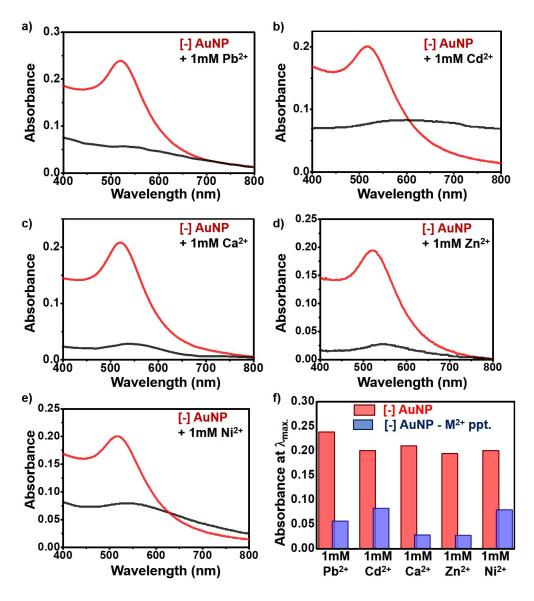


Figure 3.6: UV-Visible spectra of [-] AuNPs, before (shown in red) and after (shown in black) the addition of (a) 1 mM Pb²⁺, (b) 1 mM Cd²⁺, (c) 1 mM Ca²⁺, (d) 1 mM Zn²⁺, and (e) 1 mM Ni²⁺. (f) Variation in the absorption intensity at λ_{max} of [-] AuNPs in the presence of different M²⁺ ions. The disappearance of plasmon peak after the addition of different M²⁺ (black spectrum) indicates precipitation of [-] AuNPs (turn-off response). [-] AuNPs complexed and ultimately precipitated with different M²⁺ ions uniformly, confirming their inherent nonselectivity.

pling phenomena through the strong electrostatic attraction. This is accompanied by a gradual bathochromic shift in the λ_{max} from 515 to 555 nm, followed by an abrupt loss of plasmon band (Figures 3.5). This is due to an ionic-like sharp precipitation of [+] and [-] AuNPs at the charge neutrality (i.e., when $\Sigma Q_{[+]} + \Sigma Q_{[-]} = 0$), confirming the formation of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates.⁴⁰ The nanoionic precipitation occurred, under stirring, well beyond the threshold values as reported by Istvan and co-workers.⁴⁴

The ability of various strongly binding M^{2+} ions to break the nanoionic precipitates was systematically studied (Figure 3.7). It was observed that the addition of Pb^{2+} ions to [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates resulted in the revival of plasmon color to the solution (Figure 3.7b). For instance, a clear reappearance of wine-red color was observed after the addition of ~ 1 mM of Pb^{2+} ions (we define the limit

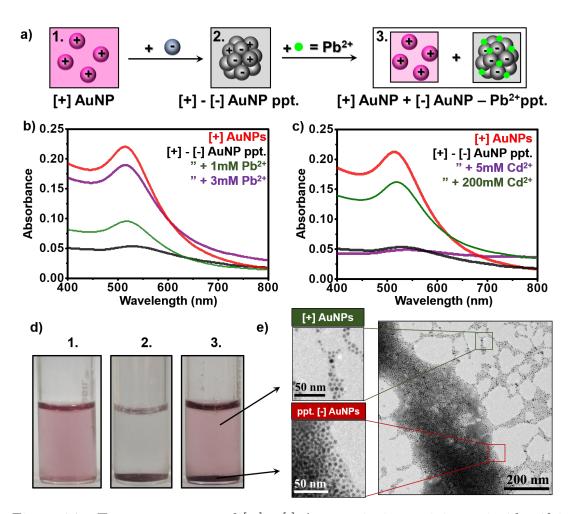


Figure 3.7: Turn-on response of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates in identifying Pb²⁺ ions. (a) Schematics for the preparation of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates and the turn-on detection of Pb²⁺ ion. Variation in the absorption of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates in the presence of (b) Pb²⁺ and (c) Cd²⁺ ions. An ~85% revival of plasmon band was observed upon the addition of 3 mM Pb²⁺ (with LOD = 1 mM, green spectrum), whereas even 3 mM Cd²⁺ ions failed to break the [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates. (d) Photographs of the vials corresponding to stages 1, 2, and 3 in part (a). (e) A representative TEM image of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitate after the addition of 3 mM Pb²⁺ ions. The enlarged TEM images on the left show the selected portions corresponding to dispersed [+] AuNP and [-] AuNP-Pb²⁺ precipitate.

of detection, LOD, as the point where a clear wine-red color can be visually seencorresponding to $\Delta A \sim 0.05$, which is equivalent to 25% of initial plasmon intensity of [+] AuNPs, green spectrum in Figure 3.7b), while ~85% of revival in the plasmon intensity was observed upon the addition of ~3 mM of Pb²⁺ ions (purple spectrum in Figure 3.7b). The redispersed solution contained black precipitates corresponding to [-] AuNP-Pb²⁺ aggregates as well. The photographs of the solution at each stage are presented in Figure 3.7d, which clearly shows the revival of plasmon color and

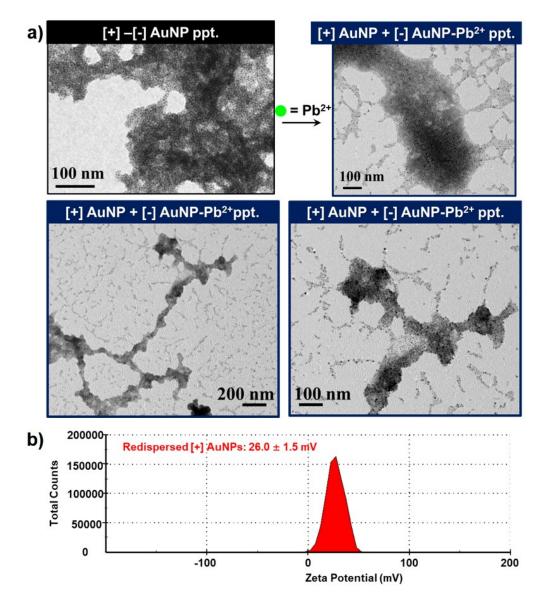


Figure 3.8: (a) TEM images of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitate before and after the addition of 3 mM Pb²⁺ ions. The presence of displaced [+] AuNPs and [-] AuNP - Pb²⁺ precipitate is clearly visible.(b) Zeta Potential of redispersed AuNPs upon addition of 3 mM Pb²⁺ to [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates.

the sedimented precipitates. The transmission electron microscope (TEM) images prove the leakage of [+] AuNPs from nanoionic precipitates, where both individual [+] AuNP and [-] AuNP-Pb²⁺ precipitates are clearly visible (Figures 3.7e, 3.8, 3.17). Interestingly, all the other M^{2+} ions (Cd²⁺, Ni²⁺, Zn²⁺ and Ca²⁺), despite being capable of coordinating with individual [-] AuNPs, failed to revive the plasmon color under similar conditions, proving the selectivity of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates toward Pb^{2+} ions (Figures 3.7c, 3.11a, 3.18, 3.19). Even a mixture of other M^{2+} ions (interfering ions: Cd^{2+} , Ni^{2+} , Zn^{2+} and Ca^{2+}) was unable to break the interparticle interactions in [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates (Figure 3.11a). On the other hand, a revival of plasmon band was observed when 3 mM Pb^{2+} ions were included in the mixture (Figure 3.11a). The other important ions like Hg^{2+} and Sn^{2+} were not included in this study due to their inappropriateness with the [+] - [-] Au nanoionic systems (see Section 3.7.2). In addition, a high concentration of Cd^{2+} (~200 mM) was able to break the electrostatic interactions in [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates (green spectrum in Figure 3.7c). In comparison with Pb^{2+} ion, ~ 200 times excess of Cd²⁺ ion was required to revive $\sim 50\%$ of plasmon color to the solution. This confirms that the nature as well as the strengths of interaction between [-] AuNP and M^{2+} ions forms a key step in our identification protocol. A similar selectivity toward Pb^{2+} was obtained with [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates that were aged for 2 weeks, with a lower revival in the plasmon intensity (see Figure 3.9a, b). Furthermore, the system retained its selectivity towards Pb^{2+} ions over Cd^{2+} even when bigger AuNPs (11.4 \pm 1.2 nm) were used to prepare the [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates (see Figure 3.9c-f). This confirms that preferential breaking of interactions can work well with larger AuNPs (having higher van der Waals interactions) as well, demonstrating the generality and flexibility of our identification protocol.

The identification strategy presented in our work uses the abilities of M^{2+} ions to carry out displacement of [+] AuNPs from a nanoparticle precipitate. The identification protocol, therefore, not only relies on how well M^{2+} can complex with [-]

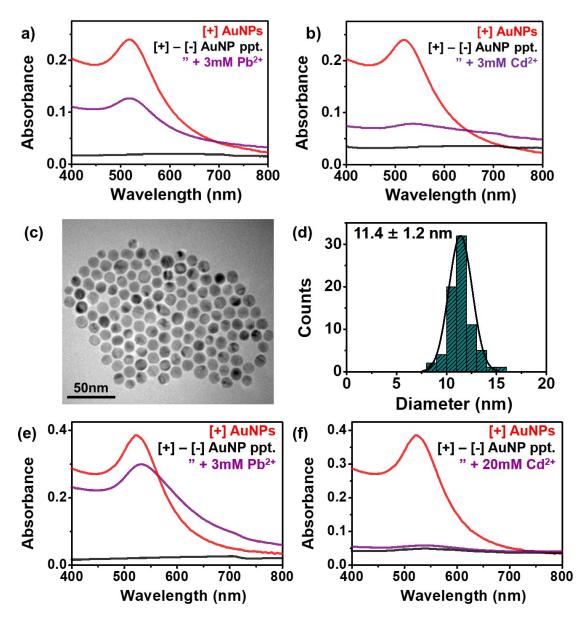


Figure 3.9: UV-Vis. absorption studies showing the revival of plasmon colour when [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates (aged for 2 weeks) were exposed to (a) 3 mM Pb²⁺ and (b) 3 mM Cd²⁺ ions. (c) Representative TEM image of [+] AuNPs with their size distribution histogram shown in (d). Variation in the absorption of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates, formed from 11.4 ± 1.2 nm AuNPs, in the presence of (e) Pb²⁺ and (f) Cd²⁺ ions. A plasmon revival of ~70 % was observed, as opposed to ~85 % (with 5.5 nm AuNPs), upon addition of 3 mM Pb²⁺ ions. A possible reason for the lower plasmon revival could be the increase in the van der Waals attractions in nanoionic precipitates formed from 11.4 ± 1.2 nm AuNPs, making it difficult to break. More importantly, the system retained its selectivity towards Pb²⁺ over Cd²⁺ ions even with higher van der Waals, demonstrating the generality and flexibility of our identification protocol.

AuNPs, but with how well can they displace [+] AuNPs from [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates (*'breaking of interactions'*). Figure 3.10a and b shows that neither [+]

nor [-] AuNPs possess selectivity towards M^{2+} ions. However, [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitate composed of such nonselective AuNPs demonstrate a selective turn on response (Figure 3.10c) towards Pb²⁺ over other M²⁺ ions used. This result was exciting and unprecedented because most of the protocols available in literature fail to differentiate between Pb²⁺ and Cd²⁺ without the use of analyte specific ligands.

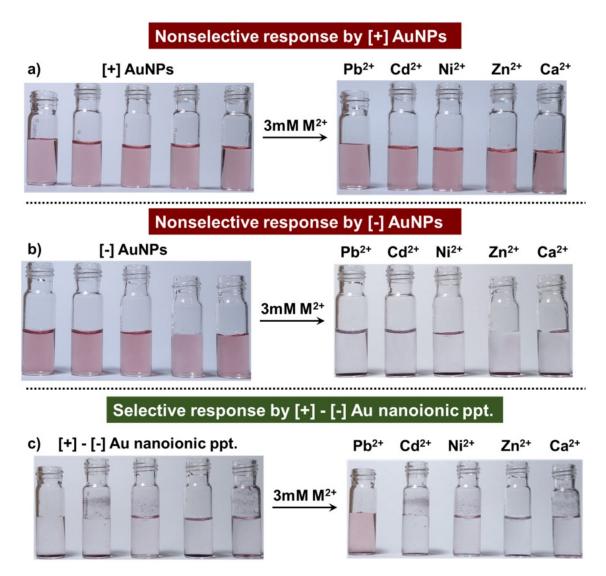


Figure 3.10: Optical photographs demonstrating the selectivity aspect of our identification protocol. Photographs showing the lack of ability of (a) [+] AuNPs, and (b) [-] AuNPs to selectively identify M^{2+} ions. [+] AuNPs demonstrate no color change in response to the addition of M^{2+} ions, while [-] AuNPs demonstrate a nonselective turn off response by invariably precipitating out from the solution, as shown in (b). (c) Nanoionic precipitates made from nonselective [+] and [-] AuNPs demonstrate selectivity towards Pb^{2+} ions by showing the release of plasmonic color (turn on response). In some of the vials, the precipitates are sticking to the sides of the vials.

3.4.2 Origins of the Selective Response

According to our hypothesis, the selectivity toward Pb²⁺ ions originates from the relative differences in the interaction strengths between [-] AuNPs and M²⁺ ion. To ascertain this, we have estimated the binding ability of various M²⁺ ions with [-] AuNP through two independent studies. First, titration experiments were performed between [-] AuNP and aliquots of different aggregation triggers ([+] AuNP, Pb²⁺, Cd²⁺, and Ca²⁺; Figures 3.11, and 3.20). Figure 3.11b shows the variation in λ_{max} of [-] AuNP as a function of concentration of various aggregation triggers. The transition point (τ) that is estimated from the midpoint of the transition window signifies the minimum amount of titrant required to precipitate [-] AuNPs. The

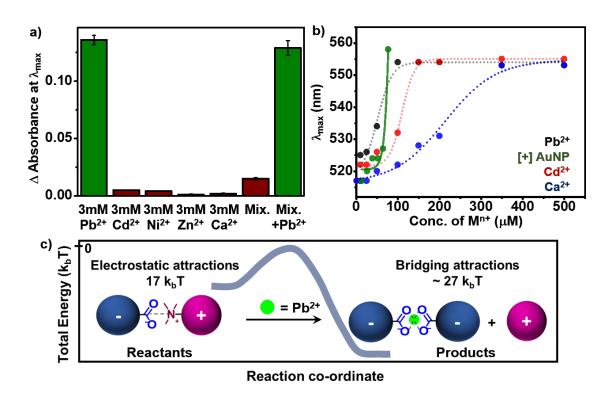


Figure 3.11: Selectivity of [+]-[-] Au nanoionic precipitates in identifying Pb²⁺ ions. (a) Effect of different M²⁺ ions and mixture of ions on the absorbance of [+]-[-] Au nanoionic precipitates. A revival of the plasmon band (~85%) was observed only upon the addition of 3 mM Pb²⁺ ions, confirming the selective turn-on response. (b) Variation in the λ_{max} of [-] AuNP as a function of concentration of different aggregating triggers. The markers correspond to the experimental data, while the solid/dotted lines show the sigmoidal fits for the data. (c) Schematics showing the variation in energies of nanohybrid systems before and after the exposure to Pb²⁺ ions.

 τ value describes the affinity between two interacting species, which is inversely proportional to (at least qualitatively) the magnitude of interaction energy.⁴⁵ The τ values for different aggregation triggers were estimated to be in the following order: $\tau(Pb^{2+}) \sim 50 \ \mu M < \tau([+] AuNP) \sim 80 \ \mu M < \tau(Cd^{2+}) \sim 110 \ \mu M < \tau(Ca^{2+}) \sim$ 215 μ M. The interaction energies between [-] AuNPs and M²⁺ ions, therefore, follow the reverse order: Pb²⁺ > [+] AuNP > Cd²⁺ > Ca²⁺. This series can now be read as a reactivity series, which is often used to summarize outcomes of a displacement reaction. The superior binding interactions between [-] AuNP and Pb²⁺ ions favor the displacement of [+] AuNP from nanoionic precipitates by Pb²⁺ ions, confirming our hypothesis. On the contrary, Cd²⁺ and Ca²⁺ ions failed to displace [+] AuNP from the nanoionic precipitates due to the higher τ values (and lower interaction energies). Even though there is an appreciable difference in the binding abilities of M²⁺ ions, the [-] AuNPs by itself fail to discriminate them. Interestingly, this difference in the binding abilities is good enough to preferentially break the [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates, emphasizing the importance of our protocol.

Second, the interaction energies between NPs and M^{2+} ions were estimated using theoretical modeling of different interparticle interactions. In this model, we compared total energies of the nanohybrid systems before and after the exposure to different M^{2+} ions (Figure 3.11c).^{14,46,47} The key forces holding the [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates (reactants) are electrostatic and van der Waals interactions. Similarly, bridging and van der Waals interactions are the key forces responsible for [-] AuNP-M²⁺ complex formation (products). The detailed information about the process of modeling these interactions is given in section 3.7.3. Briefly, van der Waals attraction between two AuNPs in contact was modeled by using the Hamaker integral approximation¹⁴ and was estimated to be $\sim 1.5 \times 10^{-21}$ J or $\sim 0.36k_b$ T. The electrostatic interactions between charged AuNPs in ionic solution (c_s $\sim 1 \text{ mM})^{47}$ were estimated by solving the electrostatic potential (ϕ) via thermodynamic integration.⁴⁷ We then solved the Poisson-Boltzmann equation (while accounting for 'charge regulation') for two interacting spheres,^{14,48} and the electrostatic attraction energy between oppositely charged AuNP pair was estimated to be $\sim 6.2 \times 10^{-20}$ J or $\sim 17k_bT$. This is in close agreement with the values reported by Grzybowski and co-workers.^{14,49} The magnitude of the bridging interaction in the [-] AuNP-M²⁺ complex was estimated by modifying a reported equilibrium model of the cross-linking interactions⁴⁶ and using reported values for binding constants of Pb²⁺ and Cd²⁺ ions with acetate groups.^{50,51} Based on the modeling studies, Pb²⁺ ions have the highest interaction energy with [-] AuNP ($\sim 1.1 \times 10^{-19}$ J or $\sim 27k_bT$) followed by [+] AuNP ($\sim 6.2 \times 10^{-20}$ J or $\sim 17k_bT$) and Cd²⁺ ions ($\sim 1.8 \times 10^{-20}$ J or $\sim 4.34k_bT$). The estimated energy values reiterate superior interaction of Pb²⁺ ions with [-] AuNP and their ability to displace [+] AuNP from nanoionic precipitates, resulting in the desired selectivity.

3.4.3 Versatile and Tunable Identification Protocol

Next we discuss the versatility and tunability in the identification ability of Au nanoionic precipitates. The selectivity stems from the preferential breaking of electrostatic interactions in [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates. Thus, a variation in the strength of electrostatic forces can, in principle, tune the selectivity and sensitivity for different analytes of interest. Moreover, the presence of [-] AuNP - $\rm Pb^{2+}$ precipitate in the final solution is undesirable, and can be circumvented by decreasing the strength of bridging attractions in the complex. Accordingly, the nanoionic precipitates were prepared by using heterogeneously charged [+/-] AuNP instead of homogeneously charged [-] AuNP (Figure 3.12a). The heterogeneously charged $[+/-]_9$ AuNP were synthesized by a place exchange reaction with 1:9 mixture of [+]and [-] ligands. The on-NP ratio of [+]:[-] was estimated to be 1:7 by using previously reported relative binding affinities of [+] and [-] ligands $\left(\frac{K_{[+]}}{K_{[-]}}=1.2\right)$. Here $K_{[+]}$ and $K_{[-]}$ are the equilibrium constants for the adsorption of [+] and [-] ligands onto AuNP, respectively.^{12,29} Similar to the titration behavior of homogeneously charged AuNPs, the mixture of $[+/-]_9$ and [+] AuNPs precipitated sharply at the charge neutrality (Figures 3.12b, c). Interestingly, $\sim 70\%$ of [+] AuNPs was sufficient to form the $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates compared to [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates. This confirms the decrease in the strength of electrostatic attractions in $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates. Consequently, the LOD for Pb²⁺ ion was improved to ~20 μ M with $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates (green curve in

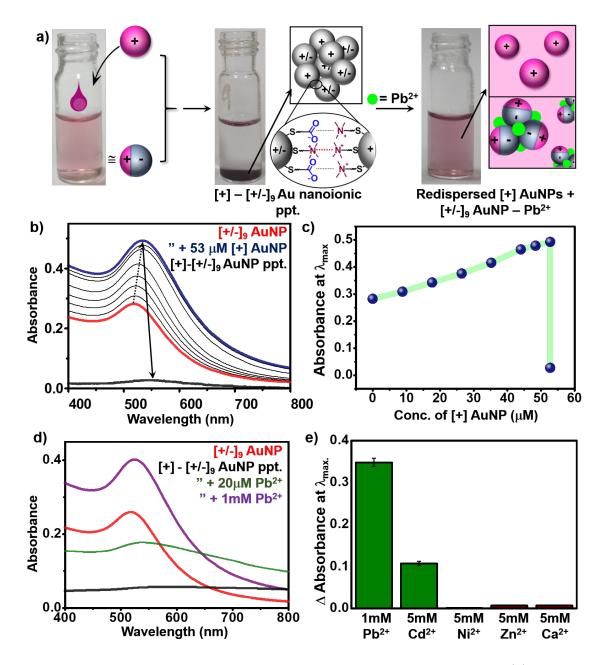


Figure 3.12: Versatility and tunability of Au nanoionic precipitates. (a) Scheme for the formation of [+] and $[+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates and amplification in the selective turn-on detection of Pb²⁺ ion. Variation in the (b) absorbance and (c) absorbance at λ_{max} of $[+/-]_9$ AuNP upon addition of [+] AuNP. (d) Redispersal of [+] and $[+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates in the presence of 1 mM Pb²⁺ ion (with LOD of 20 μ M, green spectrum). (e) Selectivity of $[+]-[+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates in identifying Pb²⁺ and Cd²⁺ ions.

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Figure 3.12d). The sensitivity of $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitate is comparable to or even better than other reported NP systems with analyte nonspecific ligands (Figure 3.13). More importantly, the plasmon intensity of the redispersed nanoionic precipitates was higher than both of the individual $[+/-]_9$ and [+] AuNPs (close to the additive intensity; purple spectrum in Figure 3.12d). This confirms the complete redispersal of $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates in contrast to the partial redispersal of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates, which is an important requisite for an ideal detection system. In addition, 3 mM Cd²⁺ ions was also able to break the electrostatic interactions in $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates, with an ~50% revival of plasmon band (Figure 3.12e). The decrease in the strength of the electrostatic tethers in $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates results in a turn-on response for Pb²⁺ and Cd²⁺ ions, demonstrating the tunability in the selectivity of toxic ions as per the demand. However, even 3 mM Ni²⁺, Zn²⁺, and Ca²⁺ ions failed to break the

M ²⁺	Nanoparticle System	Optical	Reference
		Sensitivity	
Pb ²⁺	MUA – AuNPs	400 μM	Nano Lett. 2001, 1, 165–167
Pb ²⁺	MUA – AuNPs	>50 μM	Anal. Methods 2016, 8, 7232–
			7236
Pb ²⁺	Gallic Acid – AuNPs	5 -150 μM	J. Phys. Chem. C 2007, 111,
			12839–12847
Pb ²⁺	MUA – AuNPs	10 μM	Sensors 2012, 12, 9467–9475
Pb ²⁺	MUA – AuNPs (Amino	2 - 50 μM	ACS Appl. Mater. Interfaces
	Acids)		2014, 6, 18395–18400
Pb ²⁺	[+] – [-] Au nanoionic	1 mM	Present work
	precipitate		(ACS Appl. Nano Mater. 2019,
			2 , 5625 - 5633)
Pb ²⁺	[+] – [+/-] ₉ AuNP	20 µM	Present work
	nanoionic precipitate		(ACS Appl. Nano Mater. 2019,
			2 , 5625 - 5633)

Figure 3.13: Fine-tuning of electrostatic interactions in the nanoionic precipitates leads to the improvement in the Pb^{2+} ion detection. Table comparing the sensitivity towards Pb^{2+} by AuNP systems with analyte non-specific ligands.

electrostatic interaction in [+] and $[+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates (Figures 3.12e, 3.21). It is worth mentioning that there are previous reports on the selective detection of Pb²⁺ and Cd²⁺ using metal NPs bearing analyte specific ligands.⁵² However, the present work is conceptually different as it relies on the preferential breaking of electrostatic interactions in nanosystems deprived of analyte specific ligands.

The process of breaking of electrostatic interactions in $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates by Pb²⁺ ions was further monitored by using atomic force microscopy (AFM) and dynamic light scattering (DLS) studies. The presence of small and controlled AuNP aggregates (60-180 nm) was clearly visible in the AFM images presented in Figure 3.14. The 3D AFM height image shows the ripples demarcating the boundaries between the individual NPs constituting the aggregates (Figure

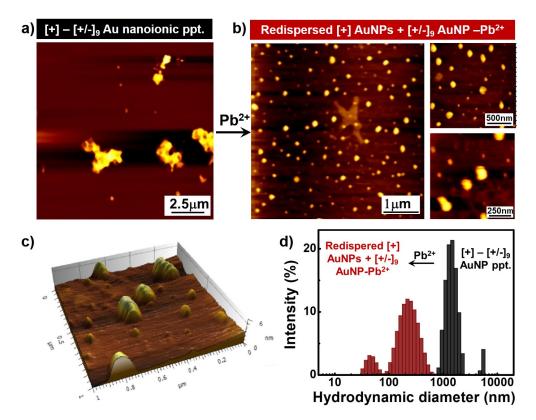


Figure 3.14: AFM and DLS studies for the breaking of electrostatic interactions in $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates by Pb²⁺ ions. AFM images of $[+]-[+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates (a) before and (b) after the addition of 1 mM Pb²⁺ ions. (c) 3D AFM height image showing the ripples demarcating the boundaries between the individual NPs constituting the aggregates. (d) DLS data showing the decrease in the hydrodynamic diameter from a few micrometers to 60–180 nm upon the addition of Pb²⁺ ions.

3.14c). The AFM results were well complemented by DLS studies, which confirms the breaking of $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates by Pb²⁺ to smaller aggregates (Figure 3.14d). Moreover, an ~10 nm bathochromic shift in the λ_{max} of the redispersed sample confirms the formation of controlled aggregates between $[+/-]_9$ AuNP and Pb²⁺ ions (Figure 3.12d). Thus, the stability and dispersion of $[+/-]_9$ AuNP-Pb²⁺ complex is attributed to the perfect balance between attractive and repulsive interactions in the controlled aggregates, as reported previously.¹²

3.5 Conclusions

This work presents a straightforward, yet effective strategy to transform the commonly observed nonselective turn-off response of [-] AuNP into an attractive selective turn-on response for the identification of heavy metal ions. The difference in the abilities of various M^{2+} ions to break the interactions between the oppositely charged AuNPs (nanoionic precipitates) was chosen as the means of discrimination rather than the conventional method of forming an interaction. Among various M^{2+} ions tested, Pb^{2+} was solely able to break the electrostatic interactions in [+]- [-] Au nanoionic precipitates. The displaced [+] AuNPs imparted the characteristic wine-red color to the solution, resulting in a turn-on response. The favorable interaction energy for [-] AuNP-Pb²⁺ complexation is accountable for the discrimination of Pb^{2+} from other M^{2+} ions, including the Cd^{2+} ions. The fine-tuning of electrostatic interactions in the nanoionic precipitates helped in enhancing the Pb²⁺ ion sensitivity along with a complete redispersal of both the sets of AuNPs. The flexibility and tunability of identification were demonstrated by extending the selectivity toward the Cd^{2+} ion using $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates. The ability to control the electrostatic and bridging interactions was crucial in imparting selectivity to a nanohybrid system composed of constituents that are inherently nonselective. Despite having a lower sensitivity compared to the reported literature with analyte specific AuNPs, the present work demonstrates a unique strategy of selectively identifying heavy metal ions. The concept of breaking 'known' strengths of interactions through displacement reaction can help in ascertaining the strengths of 'unknown' interactions, which can find far-reaching applications in fundamental as well as applied areas of nanoscience. In addition, the present demonstration of emergence of an inherently absent functionality in a system of interacting NPs will be of interest in the new emerging areas of out-of-equilibrium self-assembly and systems chemistry.

3.6 Future Directions

In the present chapter, we demonstrate that our fundamentally unique approach of using breaking of interactions as an identification protocol, could impart remarkable selectivity towards Pb^{2+} to a system, deprived of any analyte specific ligand (*emergence of a new property*). Furthermore, this strategy allowed us to transform a traditionally turn-off way of identification into a much more attractive turn-on means of identification. Also, a judicious control over the interparticle interactions allowed us to tune both the selectivity and sensitivity of our identification protocol. One can use this strategy of breaking known interactions to ascertain the strengths of unknown ones. After having demonstrated the potency of a control over interparticle interactions, and (b) inherently absent properties. We wanted to study whether a control over interactions can be used to create systems with '*life-like*' properties.

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3.7 Appendix

3.7.1 Calculation of Concentrations of AuNPs

Concentration Calculation of [+] AuNPs

Absorbance of [+] AuNPs in cuvette: $\sim 0.20 - 0.24$

We have, through ICP-MS studies, estimated that a solution having an absorbance of ~ 0.61 , has a concentration of ~ 0.2 mM (in terms of Au atoms). Similar values are established in the literature as well.¹

Concentration of [+] AuNPs in cuvette: $\sim 80.0 \ \mu M$ (in $\sim 3 \ mL$)

Concentration Calculation of [-] AuNPs

For the titration experiments, we added a total of $\sim 55 \ \mu LL$ of [-] AuNPs in different aliquots (from a~10 times diluted solution) to get the nanoionic precipitate.

Concentration of diluted [-] AuNPs stock solution: ~ 3.6 mM

Total volume of [-] AuNPs added to the cuvette: 55.0 μ L

Concentration of [-] AuNPs in the cuvette: $\sim 65.0 \ \mu M$ (in $\sim 3 \ mL$)

3.7.2 Effect of Hg^{2+} Salts and Sn^{2+} Salts

 Hg^{2+} ions are well known to desorb the thiols from the surface of NPs, leading to their precipitation.² Additionally, salts of Hg^{2+} (HgCl₂, Hg(NO₃)₂) and Sn²⁺ (SnCl₂, SnSO₄) require high amount of acid to achieve stable dispersion in water (pH 2-4).

Experiments Performed with Hg^{2+} Salts

It should be noted that an appreciable amount of acid was required to prepare the stock solution of $Hg(NO_3)_2$ in water. The addition of 3 mM of $Hg(NO_3)_2$ to [+] - [-] AuNP nanoionic precipitate resulted in the revival of plasmon band (magenta curve in Figure 3.15a). A closer examination revealed that the pH of the solution changed to ~2 upon addition of 3 mM of $Hg(NO_3)_2$. A similar breaking of electrostatic forces in [+] - [-] AuNP nanoionic precipitate was observed when a control experiment was performed by adding equivalent amount of acid (green curve in Figure 3.15a). This proves that the nanoionic precipitates are not stable at pH ~2, as mentioned before. Thus, the studies with $Hg(NO_3)_2$ failed to provide any conclusive evidence for the detection of Hg^{2+} ion by the nanoionic precipitates. Further, we used $HgCl_2$ as the source of Hg^{2+} ions. A lower amount of acid was required to solubilize $HgCl_2$ in water as compared to $Hg(NO_3)_2$. No appreciable revival of plasmon band was

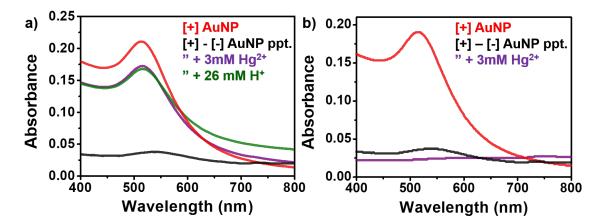


Figure 3.15: (a) Variation in the absorption of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates in the presence of 3 mM Hg(NO₃)₂ (magenta curve), and in the presence of equivalent amount of acid (green curve). (b) Absorption spectra of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates in the absence (black curve) and presence of 3 mM HgCl₂ (magenta curve).

observed upon the addition of 3 mM of HgCl₂ to [+] - [-] AuNP nanoionic precipitate (magenta curve in Figure 3.15b). The addition of 3 mM of HgCl₂ shifted the pH to ~ 4 , at which [+] - [-] AuNP nanoionic precipitate was found to retain its stability. Thus, it can be concluded that Hg²⁺ ions fail to break the electrostatic attraction in the [+] - [-] AuNP nanoionic precipitate.

Experiments Performed with Sn^{2+} Salts

The stock solution of SnSO_4 was prepared in water by the addition of ~ 250 mM sulfuric acid. We also performed experiments with SnCl_2 , which did not require addition of any acid for dissolution. But upon dissolution in water, SnCl_2 gives rise to the formation of HCl leading to a drift in the pH of the solution to ~2.4. As in the case of Hg(NO₃)₂, we saw a revival in the plasmon color of the solution upon addition of 3 mM SnSO_4 and SnCl_2 to [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates (magenta curves in Figure 3.16). Control experiments performed in the plasmon color, which again confirms the instability of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates under highly acidic condition. The studies with SnSO_4 and SnCl_2 failed to provide any conclusive evidence for the detection of Sn^{2+} ion by the nanoionic precipitates.

All the Hg^{2+} and Sn^{2+} salts that were available to us were unsuitable as they

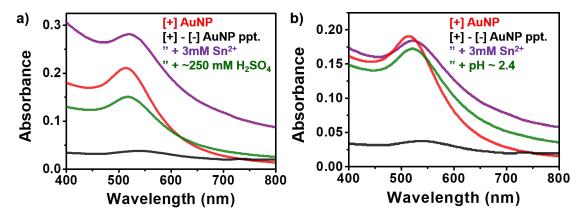


Figure 3.16: Variation in the absorption of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates in the presence of (a) 3 mM SnSO₄ (magenta curve), and in the presence of equivalent amount of acid (green curve). (b) 3 mM SnCl₂ (magenta curve), and in the presence of equivalent amount of acid (green curve).

shifted the pH of the solution to \sim 2, at which the nanoionic precipitates were unstable.

3.7.3 Theoretical Model for the Origin of Selectivity

In order to rationalize the trends in the abilities of different M^{2+} ions to displace [+] AuNPs from the [+] – [-] Au nanoionic precipitates, stuck together by electrostatic tethers, we worked with well- established models for different interactions between NPs.^{3–5} Specifically, the process of leaking out of [+] AuNPs from the nanoionic precipitates upon exposure to M^{2+} ions can be visualized to be stemming from van der Waals, electrostatics, and 'cation-specific' bridging interactions. Here, the release of [+] AuNPs is similar to a displacement reaction, where M^{2+} tries to displace [+] AuNPs from the [+] – [-] Au nanoionic precipitates. In this model, we compare the total energies of NPs at contact before (energy of reactants) and after (energy of products) exposure to M^{2+} ions. We compute electrostatic and van der Waals interactions between [+] and [-] AuNPs to estimate the energy of the reactants and compare it with van der Waals as well as bridging interactions between [-] AuNPs and M^{2+} ions (energy of products). The detailed information about the process of modelling these interactions is described below:-

van der Waals interactions

The van der Waals (U_{vdW}) interactions originating from electromagnetic fluctuations due to ceaseless movements of positive and negative charges within the material is approximated using the Hamaker Integral Approximation.^{3,5} In this approach, the interaction between the macroscopic objects (composed of many atoms/molecules) is estimated as a pairwise summation of the molecular interactions throughout the volumes of the two bodies.^{3,5} According to this approach, the U_{vdW} between two spheres of radii R_c, separated by a distance d (where, d = $2(R_c+\delta)$ and δ is the length of the ligands :1.63 nm for [-] and 1.90 nm for [+]) between the two centres is calculated by using the following equation:^{3,5}-

$$U_{vdW} = -\frac{A}{3} \times \left[\frac{R_c^2}{d^2 - 4R_c^2} + \frac{R_c^2}{d^2} - \frac{1}{2}\ln\left(1 - \frac{4R_c^2}{d^2}\right)\right]$$
(3.1)

Here, $A = 4 \times 10^{-19} \text{ J}^{5,6}$ is the Hamaker constant for gold across water. Upon

substituting the values of different parameters, the van der Waals energy (U_{vdW}) for [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates (reactants) is summarized in the following table:-

Parameters	Value
А	$4.0 \times 10^{-19} \text{ J}$
R_c	$3.0 \times 10^{-9} \text{ m}$
$\mathbf{d} = 2(\mathbf{R}_c + \delta)$	$9.45 \times 10^{-9} \text{ m}$
\mathbf{U}_{vdw}	-1.5×10 ⁻²¹ J (\sim 0.36 k _b T)

In order to calculate van der Waals energy (U_{vdW}) in products, where the gold cores are separated by d' = 2 × $(R_c + \delta + \lambda)$. Here, λ = length of COO⁻ — Pb²⁺ and COO⁻ — Cd²⁺ ~ 0.25nm.^{7,8} Substituting the appropriate values in eqn. (9.1.1), van der Waals interaction between two [-] AuNPs bridged with Pb²⁺/Cd²⁺ions, 2 λ lengths apart, is:-

Parameters	Value
А	$4.0 \times 10^{-19} \text{ J}$
R_c	$3.0 \times 10^{-9} \text{ m}$
$\mathbf{d} = 2(\mathbf{R}_c + \delta)$	$9.7 \times 10^{-9} \text{ m}$
\mathbf{U}_{vdw}	-1.55×10 ⁻²¹ J (\sim 0.38 k _b T)

Electrostatic Interactions

Electrostatic interaction energies between two NPs, which are in equilibrium with an electrolyte are derived from the appropriate electrostatic potentials, ϕ , via thermodynamic integration^{9,10} and account for '*charge regulation*' at the NPs' surfaces; that is, for the equilibrium between counterions adsorbed onto the charged surfaces and those '*free*' in solution.³ Briefly, the electrostatic potential around the NPs or the substrate is well approximated by the linearized Poisson-Boltzmann (PB) equation,

$$\nabla \varphi = \kappa^2 \varphi \tag{3.2}$$

Here, $\kappa^{-1} = \left(\frac{\epsilon_0 \epsilon k_b T}{2c_s e^2}\right)^{\frac{1}{2}}$ is the screening constant or Debye length, c_s is concentration of the monovalent ion, e is the fundamental charge of electron, ϵ_0 is the permittivity of vacuum, ϵ_0 is the dielectric constant of the solvent, k_b is Boltzmann's

constant, and T is the temperature. The adsorption equilibrium at a positively charged surface (here, TMA-coated NPs) presenting N_T positively charged groups, A^+ , in a solution containing negatively charged counterions, B^- , is determined by the following equation

$$\frac{N_{A^+}c_{b^-}}{N_{AB}} = \left(\frac{1}{K_+}\right)exp\left(\frac{e\varphi_s}{k_bT}\right) \tag{3.3}$$

Where, N_{A^+} and N_{AB} are the numbers of counterion-free and counterion-bound surface ligands $(N_{A^+} + N_{AB} = N_T)$, c_{b^-} is the mole fraction of counterions in solution, K_+ is the free energy of ion dissociation in the absence of any external fields, and φ_s is the electrostatic potential at the surface. From this relation, the surface charge density, σ , may be expressed as,

$$\sigma = \frac{e\Gamma}{1 + \left(\frac{c_s}{K_+}\right)exp\left(\frac{e\varphi_s}{k_bT}\right)} \tag{3.4}$$

Where, $\Gamma = \frac{N_T}{4\pi R^2}$ is the surface density of charged headgroups $\sim 4.7 \times 10^{18} \text{ m}^{2.11}$ Considering that the dielectric constant of the SAM ($\epsilon_p \sim 2$) is small compared to that of the solvent ($\epsilon \sim 80$ for water), the surface charge is related to the potential at the NP surface by,^{3,6}

$$\sigma = -\epsilon_0 \epsilon \nabla \varphi \tag{3.5}$$

Equating the two relations, 3.4 and 3.5, for σ provides the necessary boundary condition for a positively charged NP. The boundary condition for negatively charged NPs is derived in a similar fashion, where it is assumed that the free energy of ion desorption, $K_{-} = K_{-}$, (i.e., MUA⁻/NMe₄⁺ and TMA⁺/Cl⁻ have similar interaction. energies)^{12,13}

To obtain an analytic form for the interaction energy, it is necessary to make two additional simplifying assumptions. In addition to linearizing the PB equation (appropriate for dimensionless potentials, $\left(\frac{e\varphi_s}{k_bT} <= 2\right)$, the boundary conditions at the NPs' surface are linearized about the potential of an isolated particle φ , such $that,^{6,14}$

$$-\epsilon_0 \epsilon \nabla \varphi = S - C \varphi_\infty \tag{3.6}$$

Where, $S = \sigma(\varphi_{\infty}) - (\frac{\partial \sigma}{\partial \varphi})_{\infty} \varphi_{\infty}$, and after some algebra, the electrostatic interaction energy between two like-charged NPs can be derived as¹⁴-

$$U_{es} = \pi \epsilon_0 \epsilon R(\frac{(\varphi_2^{\infty})^2 + (\varphi_1^{\infty})^2}{2\Delta} ln(1 - \Delta^2) + \frac{2\varphi_2^{\infty}\varphi_1^{\infty}}{\Delta} atanh(\Delta))$$
(3.7)

Where, the coefficient $\Delta = \frac{C - \epsilon_0 \epsilon \kappa}{C + \epsilon_0 \epsilon \kappa}$ depends on $C = -(\frac{\partial \sigma}{\partial \varphi})_{\infty}$, which is the derivative of surface charge with respect to the potential of an isolated NP.

The substitution of appropriate values for different parameters in 3.7, gave us the magnitude of electrostatic attractions between [+] and [-] AuNPs, and is summarized in the following table-

Parameters	Value
K ₊	$0.06 {\rm mM^{6}}$
c_s	$1 \mathrm{~mM^{13}}$
φ	\sim -50 mV
U_{es} (+/-)	-6.2×10 ⁻²⁰ J (~17 k_bT)

It must be noted that the interaction energy of $\sim 17 \text{ k}_b\text{T}$ between [+] and [-] AuNPs is in close agreement with the reported values.^{3,13}

Bridging Interactions

Irrespective of the specific nature of the linker molecule, the magnitude of crosslinking depends on the concentration of linkers in solution and on the energy of the bonds formed during crosslinking. These effects can be captured in a simple equilibrium model of the crosslinking interaction between two surfaces. In dilute solution, chemical potential of M^{2+} is given by,

$$\mu_s = \mu_s^0 + k_b T ln(\chi) \tag{3.8}$$

Where, k_bT is the thermal energy, μ_s^0 and χ are the standard chemical potential

and mole fraction of M^{2+} ions respectively. The chemical potential, μ_1 , of M^{2+} ions adsorbed onto a single AuNP surface, can be approximated using the following Langmuir-type isotherm^{3,4}-

$$\mu_1 = \mu_1^0 + k_b T ln(\frac{\theta_1}{1 - \theta_1})$$
(3.9)

here, θ_1 is the fractional coverage of adsorbed M²⁺ ions on the surface.

This model assumes ideal solution behaviour and Langmuir-type adsorption equilibrium (no co-operative effects). At equilibrium, the chemical potentials for both, free M^{2+} ions in the solution as well as M^{2+} ions adsorbed onto the AuNP surface are equal, $\mu_s = \mu_1$, such that,

$$\frac{(\theta_1)^{eq}}{\chi(1-(\theta_1)^{eq})} = exp(\frac{-\epsilon}{k_bT})$$
(3.10)

Here, $\epsilon = \mu_1^0 - \mu_s^0$ is the energy of adsorption – assumed to be equal to the strength of one bond between COO⁻ and M²⁺ (For Pb²⁺, ϵ (Pb²⁺ - COO⁻) = 2.21×10⁻²⁰ J,¹⁵ while for Cd²⁺, ϵ (Cd²⁺ - COO⁻) = 1.61×10⁻²⁰ J.¹⁶ The free energy per unit area, f₁, of this model system may be calculated by thermodynamic integration from the reference state (θ =0) to the equilibrium state (θ = θ_{eq}).

$$f_1 = \Gamma \int_0^{\theta^{eq.}} (\mu_s - \mu_1) d\theta = -\Gamma k_b T ln (1 - \theta_1^{eq})$$
(3.11)

Where, Γ is the maximum surface density of linkers adsorbed onto the surface, which will be equal to the number of [-] on AuNP surface (e.g., $\Gamma \sim 4.7 \text{nm}^{-2}$ for thiols on gold).¹¹

To derive the free energy of crosslinking of two surfaces, we assume that the adsorbed M^{2+} binds to both surfaces, with fractional coverage θ_2 and chemical potential, μ_2 . The chemical potential of the COO⁻ - M^{2+} crosslink joining two AuNPs is given by-

$$\mu_2 = \mu_2^0 + k_b T ln(\frac{\theta_2}{1 - \theta_2}) \tag{3.12}$$

Thus, the free energy of formation (per unit area) for two cross-linked surfaces is given by-

$$f_1 = -\Gamma k_b T ln(1 - \theta_2^{eq}) \tag{3.13}$$

and the free energy of crosslinking, Δf , may be expressed as,

$$\Delta f = 2f_2 - f_1 = \Gamma k_b T ln(\frac{1 - \theta_2^{eq}}{(1 - \theta_1^{eq})^2})$$
$$= \Gamma k_b T ln(\frac{(1 + \chi exp(\frac{-\epsilon}{k_b T}))^2}{1 + \chi exp(\frac{-2\epsilon}{k_b T})})$$
(3.14)

with $\mu_2^0 \sim 2 \ \mu_1^0$ (i.e., two bonds for each bound linker molecule).

Here, the second equality is derived directly from Equation 3.10. In the limit of very dilute linkers, such that $\chi \ll exp(\frac{-2\epsilon}{k_bT})$, this expression simplifies to $\Delta f \sim$ $-\Gamma k_b T \theta_2^{eq}$, in other words, the free energy is proportional to the number of crosslinker bridges formed at equilibrium. Equation 3.14 may then be used to estimate the free energy of the crosslinking, U_c, between two spherical particles (radii a₁ and a₂) using the Derjaguin approximation,^{3,5}

$$U_c = \frac{2\pi a_1 a_2 \lambda}{(a_1 + a_2)} \Delta f \tag{3.15}$$

Here, λ is a characteristic length scale of molecular dimensions over which the crosslinking molecule can stretch (or compress) when bridging the two curved surfaces. Upon substituting the values of different parameters in eqn. 3.14 and 3.15, the magnitudes of U_c are summarized in the following table-

Parameters	Value
r	$3.0 \times 10^{-9} \text{ m}$
δ	$2.5 \times 10^{-10} \text{ m}$
$\mu(Pb^{2+})$	$2.21 \times 10^{-20} \mathrm{J}^{15}$
$\mu(Cd^{2+})$	$1.61{ imes}10^{-20}~{ m J}^{16}$
$U_{bridging} (Pb^{2+})$	-1.12 $ imes$ 10 $^{-19}$ J (\sim 27 k $_b$ T)
$\mathrm{U}_{bridging}~(\mathrm{Cd}^{2+})$	-1.8 $ imes$ 10 $^{-20}$ J (\sim 4 k $_b$ T)

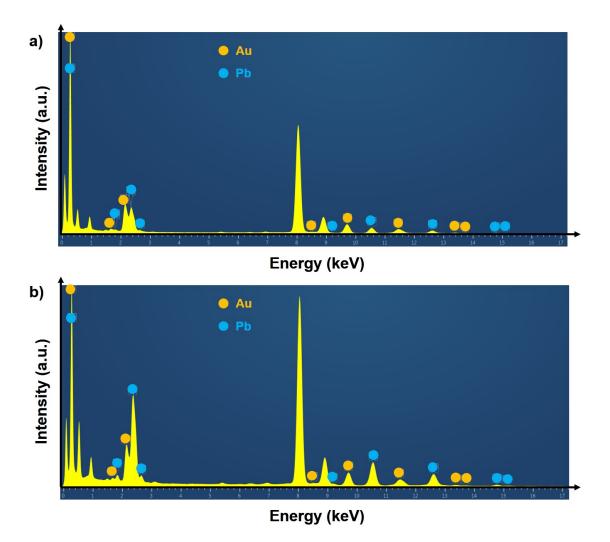


Figure 3.17: EDAX data (from TEM studies) showing the presence of both Au and Pb peaks in (a) the supernatant and (b) [-] AuNP - Pb^{2+} precipitates, after the breaking of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates by Pb^{2+} ions. The presence of Pb was observed in supernatant as well, which is due to the excess amount of Pb^{2+} ions that was used for the studies.

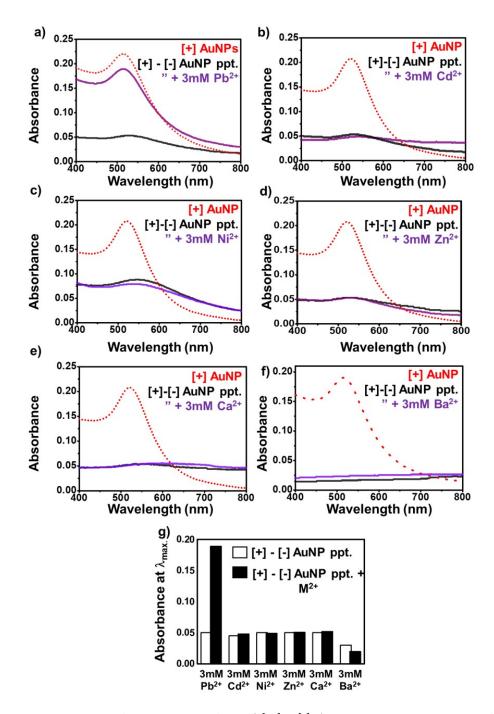


Figure 3.18: UV-Vis. absorption studies of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitate before (shown in black) and after (shown in purple) the addition of (a) 3 mM Pb²⁺, (b) 3 mM Cd²⁺, (c) 3 mM Ni²⁺, (d) 3 mM Zn²⁺, (e) 3 mM Ca²⁺ (f) 3 mM Ba²⁺. The negligible change in the absorption spectra shows the inability of these ions break the electrostatic attraction in [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates, confirming the selectivity towards Pb²⁺ ions. The dotted spectra correspond to the plasmon band of the starting [+] AuNP solution, before forming the nanoionic precipitates. (g) Variation in absorbance at λ_{max} upon addition of different M²⁺ ions to [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates. The appearance of plasmon peak after the addition of different M²⁺ (black spectrum) indicates redispersal of [+] AuNPs (turn-on response).

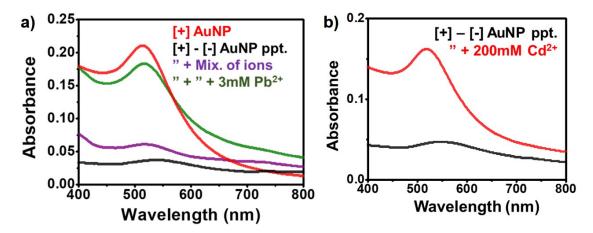


Figure 3.19: (a) Variation in the absorption of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitates in the presence of mixtures of ions, with (shown in magenta) and without (shown in green) Pb²⁺ ions. (b) UV-Vis. absorption spectra of [+] - [-] Au nanoionic precipitate, before (shown in black) and after (shown in red) the addition of 200 mM of Cd²⁺ ions.

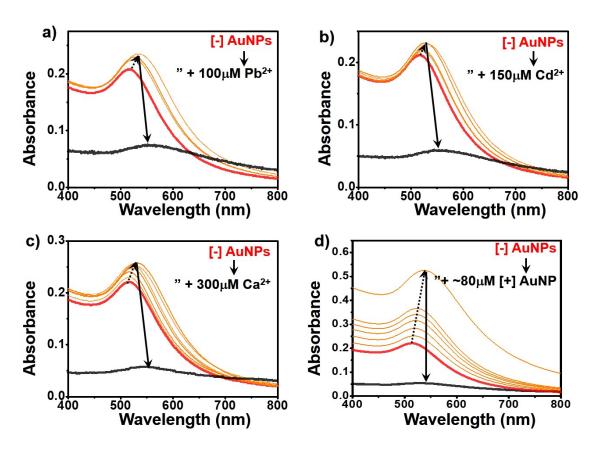


Figure 3.20: Variation in the UV-Vis. absorption spectrum of [-] AuNPs in the presence of different concentrations of (a) Pb^{2+} , (b) Cd^{2+} , (c) Ca^{2+} , (d) [+] AuNPs. The direction of variation is shown by arrows.

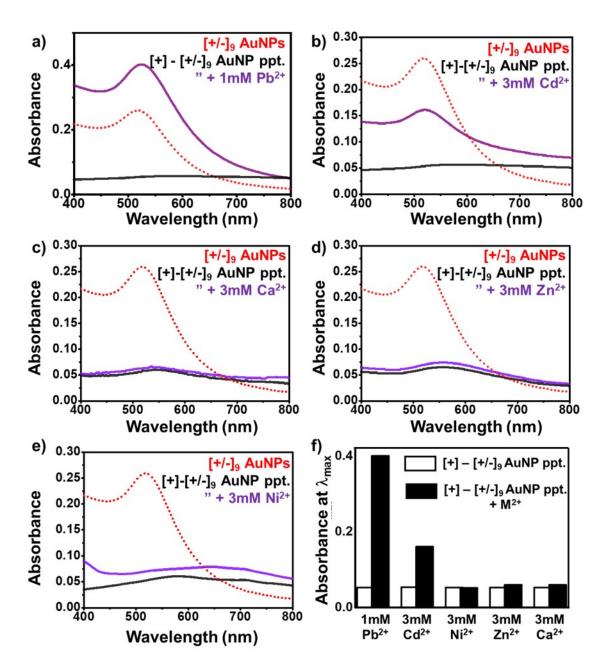


Figure 3.21: Variation in the UV-Vis. absorption spectra of $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitate (shown in black) upon addition (shown in blue) of (a) 1 mM Pb²⁺, (b) 3 mM Cd²⁺, (c) 3 mM Ca²⁺, (d) 3 mM Zn²⁺, (e) 3 mM Ni²⁺. The dotted spectra correspond to the plasmon band of heterogeneously charged $[+/-]_9$ AuNP before forming the nanoionic precipitates. (f) Variation in absorbance at $\lambda_{max.}$ upon addition of different M²⁺ ions to $[+] - [+/-]_9$ Au nanoionic precipitates. The appearance of plasmon peak after the addition of different M²⁺ (black spectrum) indicates the turn-on response. Out of the several ions tested, a revival of the plasmon band was observed upon the addition of both 1 mM Pb²⁺ and 3 mM Cd²⁺ ions.

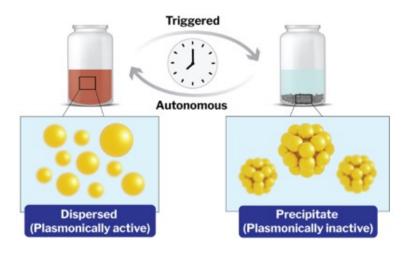
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Chapter 4

Temporal Fluctuations in Interparticle Interactions Drive the Formation of Transiently Stable Precipitates



The answer is blowing in the wind

This chapter has been adapted from the following paper:- Rao, A., Roy, S., Pillai,
P. P.*, Temporal Fluctuations in Interparticle Interactions Drive the Formation of
Transiently Stable Precipitates, *Manuscript Submitted*

4.1 Abstract

Installing dynamic and transient behaviour in self-assembled systems is a promising strategy to give more 'life-like' character to materials. Present work explores the pH dependence of electrostatic interactions to introduce temporal fluctuation in the strengths of interparticle forces, and choreograph a transient self-assembly response in plasmonic gold nanoparticles (AuNPs). The assembly process was triggered by the electrostatic attraction between positively charged AuNPs and an aggregating agent, ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA). The disassembly step was based on the less explored ability of atmospheric components to transform a mundane mixture of chemicals into a dynamic, and active one. Under the influence of atmospheric CO_2 , the autonomous changes in the pH and ionic strength of the solution weaken the aggregating ability of EDTA, thereby initiating the complete disassembly of [+] AuNP - EDTA precipitates. Thus, an uncommon observation of transient switching between complete precipitated and redispersed stages of plasmonic NPs is realized. The use of a non-destructive mode of autonomous disassembly, as opposed to the common way of chemical degradation, generates minimum amount of waste during the transient self-assembly process. Consequently, our strategy helped in achieving some of the desirable feats in the field of transient self-assembly like easy removal of waste, formation of a transiently stable precipitate state and negligible dampness of the redispersion response. These results demonstrate an original chemical strategy capable of introducing transientness to a system, which can act as a generic tool in creating the next generation of *complex matter*.

4.2 Introduction

Living systems have an extraordinary ability of creating *life* from simple precursors, by using highly reconfigurable and adaptive structures (active assemblies).^{2,3} These assemblies are transient in nature, and are crucial for driving various cellular functions including those of microtubules and actin filaments.⁴ Such structures have inspired researchers to develop artificial systems with similar reconfigurability. A key strategic challenge in the construction of such active assemblies is the ability to introduce autonomous fluctuations in the strength of interparticle interactions.^{5–15} Decades of research in the field of self-assembly has equipped chemists with the ability to regulate the interactions between molecular components in a pre-designed manner.^{16–21} This skilful control over interactions has enabled researchers in the realization of intricate structures with fascinatingly complex design and functions.^{16–21} Such structures, although interesting, are primarily static in nature, and hence differ noticeably from naturally occurring transient self-assemblies.^{esch, 3,5,12} In order to push the field of self-assembly beyond the static domain, in a pioneering work, Grzybowski and co-workers used light as a trigger to introduce fluctuations in interparticle interactions for the transient assembly of gold nanoparticles (AuNPs) (see Figure 4.1).¹ Light is a 'neat' trigger as it inflicts minimal chemical modifications, resulting in 'zero waste generation'. Inspired by this, light was extensively used as

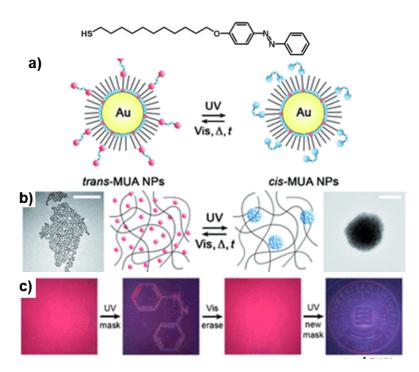


Figure 4.1: Light-driven dynamic self-assembly of AuNPs. (a) Schematic diagram showing the use of UV light to activate AuNPs capped with azobenzene thiol for the transient self-assembly process. (b) TEM images and schematic representation of dispersed and assembled AuNPs. (c) Optical photographs of gel containing light-responsive AuNPs showing sequential writing and erasing cycles (Reproduced in part with permission from [1] Copyright 2009 John Wiley and Sons).

a trigger to impart temporal response to many molecular and nanoparticle systems, thereby taking the field of self-assembly beyond the static domain.^{22–25} Another approach of creating active assemblies utilize chemical triggers to drive the formation of a transient self-assembly.^{3,11–13}

In this direction, van Esch and co-workers have elegantly demonstrated the use of triggered esterification and autonomous de-esterification reactions to drive the formation of transiently stable molecular nanofibers (see Figure 4.2a).^{26,27} This concept was later extended to different chemical triggers (like EDC, anhydride, redox reactions etc.) to drive transient self-assembly in several systems like polymers, colloids, gels etc.^{28–33} In another class of transient self-assembly, the templating effects of a biofuel (ATP) was used to drive the formation of transiently stable structures like vesicles and 1-D supramolecular helixes (see Figure 4.2b).³⁴⁻³⁶ In a seminal work, Prins and co-workers developed a strategy where adenosine triphosphate (ATP) acted as a template to drive the self-assembly of a cationic surfactant into vesicles. The presence of potato apyrase in the system - an enzyme that catalyzes the hydrolysis of ATP – drove the gradual but spontaneous disassembly of vesicles that were stabilized by ATP. In another elegant strategy, George and coworkers utilized a well-known viologen redox chemistry for redox mediated transient morphological transitions. They employed, redox-mediated conformational changes in an amphiphilic foldamer (comprising viologen-pyranine charge transfer pair), to giving rise to two different nanostructures (see Figure 4.2e, f).³¹ In an alternate approach, Walther and co-workers developed a generic protocol to drive a transient self-assembly response by using two antagonistic signals: a fast promoter (for speedy assembly) and a dormant deactivator (for sluqgish disassembly).³⁷ The upcoming challenge in the field is to translate similar chemically triggered transient assemblies to plasmonic nanoparticles for the effective realization of a transient functionality. Recent studies have used EDC and hydrazine based chemistries to drive the transient self-assembly of silicon and gold nanoparticles.^{38–40} Noticeably, most of the reported studies involve the chemical degradation of activated monomers to drive

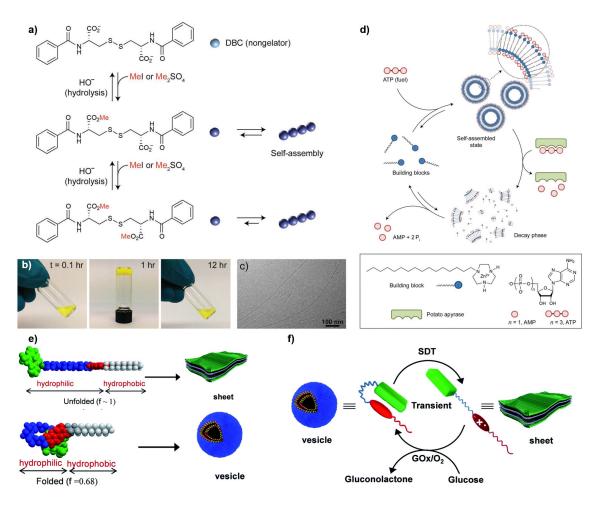
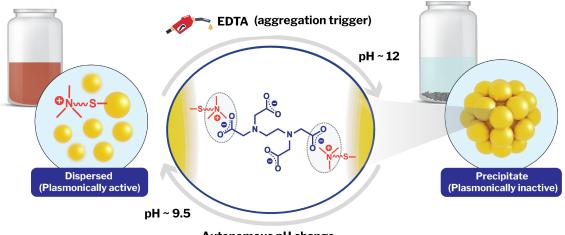


Figure 4.2: (a) Dynamic Self-Assembly by a covalent modification of the precursor. Here, methylation of a molecular gelator containg carboxylates is used for triggered self-assembly, and autonomous hydrolysis of the esters results in the formation of transient gels (adapted from [12, 27]). (b) Photographs of the solution showing the formation of transient gels. (c) cryogenic transmission electron microscopy (cryo-TEM) image of the assembled nanofibers (Reproduced in part with permission from [12] Copyright 2018 John Wiley and Sons). (d) Overview of ATP-driven dissipative self-assembly of vesicles. The schematic diagram shows the use of ATP to activate the assembly of a cationic surfactant, and potato apyrase for the deactivation, resulting in the formation of dynamic self-assembled vesicles (Reproduced in part with permission from [35] Copyright 2016 Springer Nature). (e) Schematic design of the amphiphilic foldamer in the folded and unfolded conformations, and their corresponding assemblies. (f) Schematic representation for the transient conformational response of the foldamer driven by a chemical trigger (figures are reproduced from an open access article [31]).

the disassembly process, resulting in an accumulation of waste that can adversely influence the transient self-assembly response.^{7,12} One of the open challenges in the field is to develop new chemistries that produce minimum, or easily removable waste. Despite the rapid developments made in this area, most of the NP based systems do not display the ideal and 'sought-after' response of transiently switching between plasmoncially active and inactive states, with minimum dampness. It should be noted that, such a response has been realized with the help of light as a trigger.²³ A possible reason is the lack of formation of waste during light-triggered transient selfassemblies. However, the deactivation step during a chemical triggered self-assembly process, oftentimes results in the generation of waste. New chemistries, therefore, need to be developed where a transient self-assembly response can be realized with easily removable, or minimal waste production. A possible way of removing the interference by waste is its easy separation from the system. In this direction we thought of designing a protocol where NPs could precipitate out from the solution resulting in easy separation of the waste, amd improvements in the redispersion response.

In this regard, the present work exploits the temporal fluctuations in electrostatic interactions to drive the dynamic self-assembly of plasmonic AuNPs, ultimately resulting in the formation of transiently stable precipitates (see Figure 4.3). The assembly process was triggered through the electrostatic attraction between



Autonomous pH change

Figure 4.3: Schematics showing the concept of pH dependent temporal fluctuations of electrostatic interactions in driving the dynamic self-assembly in plasmonic [+] AuNPs. EDTA was used as the chemical trigger to bridge between [+] AuNPs and trigger the formation of NP precipitates at a high pH value (pH 12). An autonomous change in the pH and ionic strength of the solution resulted in the complete disassembly of [+] AuNPs - EDTA precipitates, and installed transientness in the self-assembly process.

positively charged AuNPs (bearing quaternary ammonium headgroup) and an aggregating agent EDTA (bearing carboxylate groups). The disassembly occurred due to the autonomous changes in the pH and ionic strength of the solution, under the influence of atmospheric CO_2 . Both of these effects resulted in the complete breaking of electrostatic attractions that glued the [+] AuNP – EDTA precipitates. This is in stark contrast with most of the reported transient self-assembly systems, where a chemical degradation of the activated monomers is essential to drive the disassembly process.^{7,11,13,41} Whereas, our strategy of non-destructive disassembly allowed the minimal accumulation of waste as well as a transient switching between completely precipitate and redispersed stages of plasmonic NPs. This paved way for the easy removal of waste generated, leading to the complete reversibility in transient self-assembly cycles without any noticeable loss of plasmon intensity (i.e. negligible damping). Our studies therefore, reveal the so far unknown ability of atmospheric components, to transform a mundane mixture of chemicals into a dynamically changing one -a task usually accomplished with a network of chemical reactions.

4.3 Experimental Section

4.3.1 Synthesis of AuNPs

We synthesized AuNPs according to an adapted literature protocol.^{42–44} We have used HAuCl₄.3H₂O as the gold precursor and a mixture of hydrazine monohydrate (N₂H₄.H₂O) and tetrabutylammonium borohydride (TBAB) as the reducing agent for AuNP synthesis. In a typical synthesis, we used a toluene solution (\sim 7 mL) of HAuCl₄.3H₂O (23 mg, 0.058 mmol) containing 222 mg of DDA (1.2 mmol) and 277 mg (0.6 mmol) of DDAB. In order to completely solubilize the Au (III) salt, we sonicated the solution for \sim 5 min (Solution A). We prepared another toluene solution (\sim 3mL) containing 56 mg of TBAB (0.22 mmol) and 110 mg of DDAB (0.24 mmol) (Solution B). Solution B was then rapidly injected to A, so as to ensure the complete reduction of Au (III) salt. The resulting DDA-AuNP seeds were aged for ~24 h. These NP seeds were then grown to form 5.5 ± 0.8 nm sized DDA-AuNPs. For this, we added 1 g of DDAB (2.2 mmol), 2.6 g of DDA (14 mmol), 224 mg of HAuCl4·3H2O (0.57 mmol), and 10 mL of seeds in 60 mL of toluene. This solution was reduced by the drop-wise addition (in ~30 min) of 22 mL of a toluene solution containing 300 μ L of N₂H₄.H₂O and 3.5 mg of TBAB. The solution was left for overnight stirring to yield monodisperse 5.5 ± 0.8 nm sized DDA-AuNPs (Figure 4.4). DDA ligands were then place exchanged with TMA using the place exchange protocol given below.

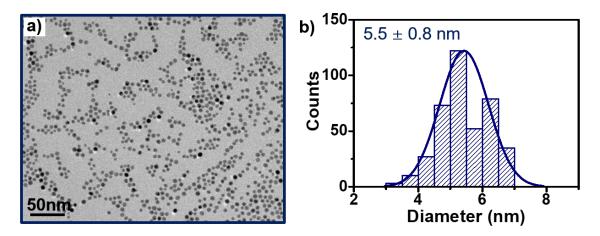


Figure 4.4: (a) Representative TEM image and (b) Size distribution histogram of [+] AuNPs. The average size was estimated to be 5.5 ± 0.8 nm. The size distribution was estimated from ~ 400 NPs.

4.3.2 Place Exchange of AuNPs

In order to purify the prepared DDA capped AuNPs, ~ 20 mL of the AuNP solution was quenched with ~ 50 mL of methanol. This resulted in the formation of a black precipitate. The solution was then decanted and the DDA-AuNP precipitates were re-dissolved in 20 mL of toluene. We then added 10 mL of dichloromethane solution containing TMA (equal to the moles of Au (III) in the solution) to the toluene solution of DDA-AuNPs. This resulted in immediate precipitation of AuNPs, indicative of a successful place exchange of hydrophobic DDA with hydrophilic TMA ligand. This solution was kept undisturbed for ~ 15 h for equilibration. Next, the supernatant solution was decanted and the precipitates were washed with dichloromethane $(3 \times 50 \text{ mL})$ followed by acetone $(1 \times 50 \text{ mL})$. The precipitates were then dried, and re-dispersed in water to get [+] AuNPs (Figure 4.5).

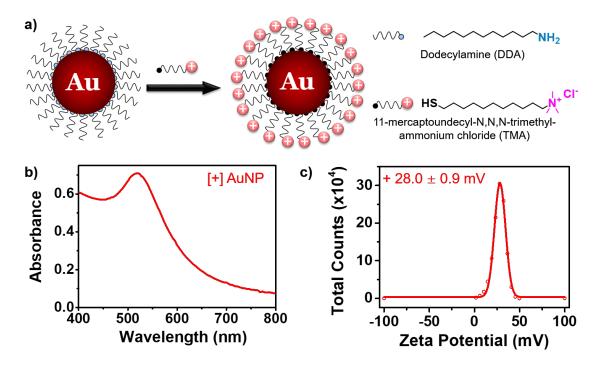


Figure 4.5: (a) Schematic illustration showing the place exchange of DDA ligands with TMA ([+]) to synthesize positively charged AuNPs ([+] AuNPs) (b) UV-Vis. absorption spectrum of [+] AuNPs showing the characteristic surface plasmon resonance peak at \sim 520 nm (c) Zeta potential of [+] AuNPs confirming the positive surface charge.

4.3.3 Protocol for the Transient Self-Assembly of [+] AuNPs

All the transient self-assembly experiments were performed in an open vial, unless mentioned otherwise. Here, we used EDTA as a trigger for the self-assembly of [+] AuNPs, and atmospheric CO₂ for the spontaneous disassembly process. In a typical experiment, 10 μ M EDTA was added to a dispersion of [+] AuNPs (~60 μ M in terms of Au atoms) and the system was left undisturbed for the formation of [+] AuNP- EDTA precipitates; triggered aggregation. These precipitates were then left exposed to the atmosphere for the autonomous redispersion cycle. Both the aggregation and redispersion responses were monitored with time dependent UV-Vis. absorption measurements. For the reversibility experiments in Figure 4.13, we used ${\sim}7~\mu{\rm M}$ of EDTA as the trigger since it showed faster transient self-assembly response.

4.4 **Results and Discussion**

4.4.1 Transient Self-Assembly of [+] AuNPs

The electrostatic interactions between quaternary ammonium and carboxylate group have been explored for a variety of self-assembly and sensing applications.^{42,45,46} We aimed to explore the pH dependent fluctuations in such electrostatic attractions for the realization of a transient self-assembly in plasmonic AuNP system. Accordingly, 5.5 ± 0.8 nm sized AuNPs functionalized with non-ionizable 11-mercaptoundecyl-N,N,N-trimethyl-ammonium chloride ligands (TMA, [+]) were prepared using a place exchange protocol (see Figure 4.4, and 4.5).^{42–44} Ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) bearing four carboxylate groups was used as the aggregating trigger to study the assembling properties of [+] AuNPs (see Figure 4.6a). The addition

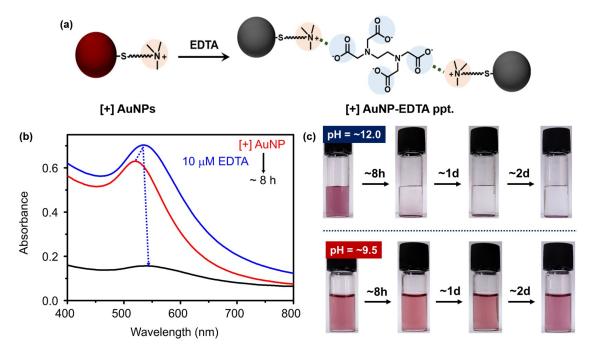


Figure 4.6: (a) Schematics and optical photographs showing the efficient bridging ability of EDTA at high pH values (\sim 12), resulting in the precipitation of [+] AuNPs. Optical photographs showing the (a) efficient, and (b) inefficient bridging ability of EDTA at higher (\sim 12) and lower pH values (\sim 9.5), respectively.

of 10 μ M EDTA to 60 μ M [+] AuNPs (in terms of Au atoms) resulted in an immediate bathochromic shift of ~ 15 nm. This along with a corresponding colour change from wine-red to blue confirms the plasmon coupling and aggregation of [+]AuNPs (blue curve in Figure 4.6b). The aggregates gradually precipitated from the solution, and ultimately settled at the bottom of the cuvette in ~ 8 h (black curve in Figure 4.6b). It should be noted that EDTA could efficiently precipitate [+] AuNPs from the solution only at high pH values (pH \sim 12). Whereas, no noticeable aggregation of [+] AuNPs was observed at lower pH values (pH ~9.5), even after ~ 2 days (see Figure 4.6c, 4.9a). This differential aggregation response is possibly because of the electrostatic repulsions between quaternary ammonium groups on [+] AuNPs and protonated amine on EDTA at lower pH values.⁴⁷ Having established that aggregation, and hence the stability of [+] AuNP – EDTA precipitates depend on the pH of the solution, we looked for autonomous ways of acidifying the solution. Such a decrease in the solution pH will destabilize the precipitates by deactivating the aggregating ability of EDTA, and resulting in an efficient release of [+] AuNPs from the precipitates (Figure 4.3). In our pursuit to autonomously acidify the solution, a serendipitous discovery was made where [+] AuNPs redispersed completely in ~ 3 days, when kept in an open vial (see the green spectrum in Figure 4.7a, c). The redispersion of [+] AuNPs was accompanied with a decrease in the solution pH from ~ 12 to ~ 9.5 , thereby confirming the decisive role of pH in breaking the [+] AuNP-EDTA precipitates. The transient switching between plasmonically active and inactive NP states was apparent from the changes in the optical photographs of the solution (optical photographs in Figure 4.7c). The UV-Vis changes associated with the triggered aggregation and autonomous disassembly were well complemented with Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) studies. Here, the hydrodynamic diameter of [+] AuNPs increased from ~ 8 nm to micron size upon the addition of 10 μ M EDTA (Figure 4.7b), confirming the formation of [+] AuNP precipitates. The hydrodynamic diameter reverted to its initial value when the system autonomously redispersed after ~ 3 days. Interestingly, there was no persistence of

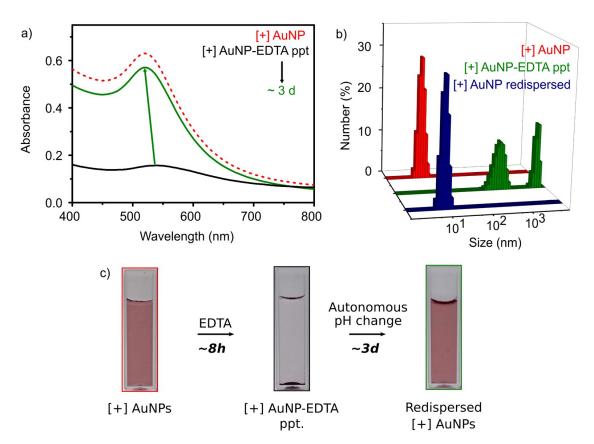


Figure 4.7: Transient self-assembly of plasmonic [+] AuNPs. (a) Variation in the absorption of ~60 μ M [+] AuNPs in the presence of ~10 μ M EDTA. (b) DLS plots confirming the assembly-disassembly process in [+] AuNPs. The hydrodynamic diameter of [+] AuNPs (shown in red) increased upon the addition of EDTA (shown in green), followed by an autonomous reversal to the initial value after ~3 days (shown in blue). (c) Optical photographs of dispersed [+] AuNPs, sedimented [+] AuNP-EDTA precipitates and completely re-dispersed [+] AuNPs, during a single transient self-assembly cycle.

aggregates in the solution, indicating a complete redispersal of the [+] AuNPs from the precipitates (blue spectrum in Figure 4.7b). The generality of our approach was proved by demonstrating similar transient self-assembly process in plasmonic NPs of varying size (\sim 11 nm AuNP) and core (\sim 5 nm [+] AgNPs (Figure 4.8). To the best of our knowledge, such a response of transiently switching between plasmonically active and inactive stages is scarce in the literature. In support of this, very recently, Boekhoven and co-workers witnessed the propensity of AuNP precipitates, once formed, to fall into a kinetically trapped state and become incapable of showing any transientness.³⁹

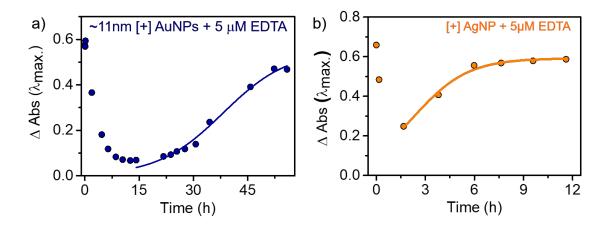


Figure 4.8: Variation in Δ Abs. at λ_{max} with time for (a) ~11 nm [+] AuNPs, and (b) ~5 nm [+] AgNPs upon the addition of ~5 μ M EDTA (trigger).

4.4.2 Mechanism of Transientness

In order to elucidate the mechanism of transientness, we performed a series of experiments under different conditions. Firstly, we tested the necessity of an open vial for the autonomous redispersion of [+] AuNPs. For this, the solution containing [+] AuNP – EDTA precipitates were incubated in a closed cuvette, and the redispersion process was monitored for several days. Surprisingly, no signs of re-dispersion of [+] AuNPs were observed even after ~ 2 weeks, and the pH of the solution remained basic (~ 12 ; Figure 4.9a). Upon performing similar experiments in an open vial, as mentioned in the previous section, the solution pH lowered to ~ 9.5 and the precipitates redispersed within ~ 3 days (Figure 4.9a). This indicates the necessity of components from the atmosphere for triggering the disassembly step, and to complete the transient self-assembly cycle. Later, we systematically exposed the solution containing [+] AuNP- EDTA precipitates to different atmospheric gases, and monitored the redispersion using UV- Vis. absorption studies. Within ~ 15 mins of purging, CO_2 could completely break the [+] AuNP- EDTA precipitates and redipserse the plasmonic NPs to the solution (Figure 4.9b). On the contrary, other major atmosphere gases like N_2 , O_2 , and Ar failed to disassemble the precipitates even after ~ 1 h of continuous purging (Figure 4.9b). The exclusivity of CO_2 to disassemble [+] AuNP-EDTA precipitates can be understood from its ability to acidify an aqueous solution by forming carbonic acid (H_2CO_3) .^{48,49} Under these acidic conditions, the amine group on EDTA gets protonated and loses its ability to glue the [+] AuNPs together in the precipitate, thereby resulting in the spontaneous disassembly of the precipitates (*vide supra*).

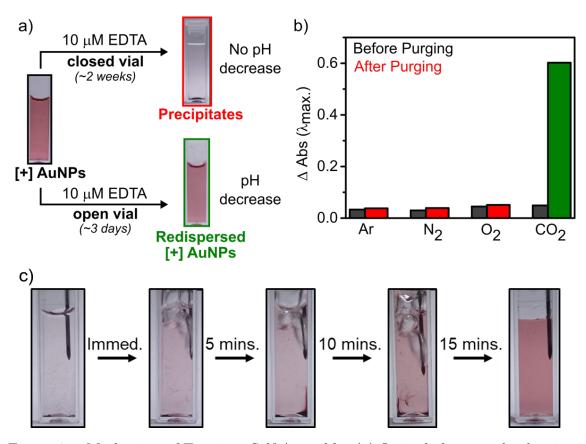


Figure 4.9: Mechanism of Transient Self-Assembly. (a) Optical photographs showing the necessity of open vial for the autonomous redispersion of [+] AuNPs from the precipitates. (b) Bar diagram showing the effect of bubbling of different atmospheric gases (for 1h) on the absorption of solution containing [+] AuNP-EDTA precipitates. Disassembly of [+] AuNP-EDTA precipitates and complete redispersal of plasmonic NPs was observed within ~15 min of purging with CO₂. (c) Optical photographs clearly showing the redispersion of [+] AuNPs, upon purging a solution of [+] AuNP – EDTA precipitates with CO₂ for ~15 mins.

In an unanticipated finding, contrasting outcomes were witnessed upon the exposure of [+] AuNPs to the same amount of chemical trigger through two different pathways. Specifically, we compared the responses of [+] AuNPs when 10 μ M EDTA was added through single and multiple batches (4 × 2.5 μ M). Care was taken during multiple additions so that each aliquot of EDTA trigger, on its own, didn't initiate the aggregation of [+] AuNPs. As shown before, the addition of 10 μ M EDTA at

once resulted in the instantaneous decrease of the absorption intensity, followed by the complete precipitation of [+] AuNPs - assembling pathway (red curve in Figure 4.10). On the other hand, [+] AuNPs retained their colloidal stability when the same amount of EDTA was added through four aliquots of 2.5 μ M each – nonassembling pathway (see blue curve in Figure 4.10). This intriguing observation can

be rationalized by understanding the differential responses of precipitated and unaggregated AuNPs towards the changes introduced by atmospheric CO₂. Under the action of atmospheric CO₂, EDTA consistently loses its aggregating ability because of the decrease in pH as well as an increase in the ionic strength of the solution. Both these factors hamper the activity of freshly added batch of EDTA, since the bridging is most potent at high pH (~12) and low ionic strengths (as discussed in previous sections). As a consequence of these combined effects, the freshly added EDTA in batches fails to initiate the aggregation of [+] AuNPs. In order to validate the necessity of atmospheric CO₂ for installing the observed pathway dependence, multiple aliquots of EDTA (4 × 2.5 μ M) was added to [+] AuNPs in a closed vial (so as to isolate the system from the effects of atmospheric CO₂). Interestingly,

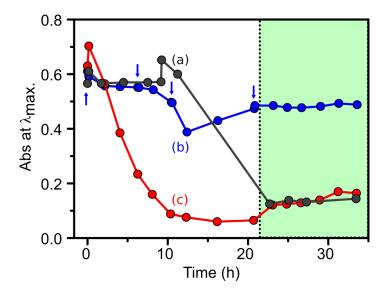


Figure 4.10: Pathway dependence in the transient self-assembly of [+] AuNPs. Variation in the absorbance of [+] AuNPs upon addition of 10 μ M EDTA in (a) one batch (shown in red), (b) multiple batches in an open vial (shown in blue), and (c) multiple batches in a closed vial (shown in black). The green shaded portion corresponds to the same of EDTA in all the three systems, and arrows mark the addition of each aliquot additon.

the [+] AuNPs uniformly precipitated out of the solution similar, when multiple additions of EDTA were performed in a closed vial (curve green in Figure 4.10). These experiments further validate the necessity of atmospheric CO_2 in installing transientness to the system.

4.4.3 Tuneable Lifetime and Reversibility

A detailed understanding of various factors involved in the assembly-disassembly steps allowed us to tune the lifetime and reversibility of the transient self-assembly process. The weakening of the bridging ability of EDTA, upon autonomous pH change, was the key in the disassembly process. Hence, a variation in the amount of EDTA can be conveniently used to control the rate of disassembly, and ultimately the lifetime of AuNP precipitates. With this in mind, [+] AuNPs were exposed to varying concentrations of EDTA and the assembly-disassembly steps were monitored using UV-Vis studies (Figure 4.11). Addition of a small amount of EDTA (1 μ M) failed to activate sufficient [+] AuNPs for the self-assembly process, as can be seen from the stagnant nature of the absorption intensity (red curve in Figure 4.11). Upon increasing the concentration of EDTA to 5 μ M, an instantaneous decrease in

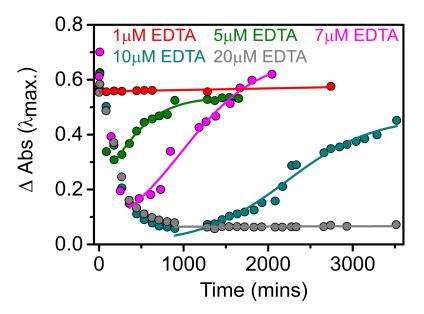


Figure 4.11: Variation in Δ Abs. at λ_{max} with time for [+] AuNPs upon the addition of different amounts of EDTA (trigger).

the absorption intensity was observed, indicating the onset of aggregation (green curve in Figure 4.11). This decrease in the absorption intensity ceased after ~ 3 h and the system disassembled completely in ~ 15 h, as it is clear from the reversal of absorbance to the original intensity. It should be noted that these aggregates, despite retaining their colloidal stability, exhibited noticeable differences in the absorption behaviour during the transient self-assembly cycle (Δ Abs. at $\lambda_{max.} = \sim 0.25$). A further increase in the amount of EDTA (~7 μ M) resulted in the formation of complete precipitates in ~ 6 h, which disassembled completely in ~ 34 h. Thus, the time taken to disassemble [+] AuNP-EDTA aggregates could be conveniently tuned from ~ 3 days to ~ 15 h by decreasing the amount of EDTA (Figure 4.11). Further, we could not only tune the lifetime but also the extent of assembly: formation of small aggregates vs precipitates. Alternatively, the lifetime of [+] AuNP- EDTA precipitates was reduced by increasing the surface area of the dish containing the precipitates. The rationale being that the redispersion of [+] AuNPs (deactivation) occurs under the influence of atmospheric CO_2 , and an increase in the surface area of the container should enhance the dissolution of CO_2 . Accordingly, the precipitates of [+] AuNPs were prepared with 10 μ M EDTA and transferred to a petri-dish (~3.5 cm in diameter). A dramatic reduction in the redispersion time from ~ 3 days (in an open vial) to ~ 4 h was observed when the disassembly step was carried out in a petri dish (Figures 4.12a, b).

Next we discuss the repeatability of the transient self-assembly process. Since the disassembly process was caused by an autonomous decrease in the pH and protonation of EDTA, a mere increase of pH back to ~12 is expected to trigger the next cycle of aggregation. However, no signs of aggregation were observed by increasing the pH of the solution. Similarly, fuelling with a fresh batch of basic solution of EDTA (~7 μ M) also failed to trigger the aggregation process. To our surprise, the aggregation and precipitation of [+] AuNPs was only observed after the addition of higher amounts of EDTA (~ 1.5 times more compared to the first cycle). The disassembly process occurred similar to the first cycle, with a plasmon recov-

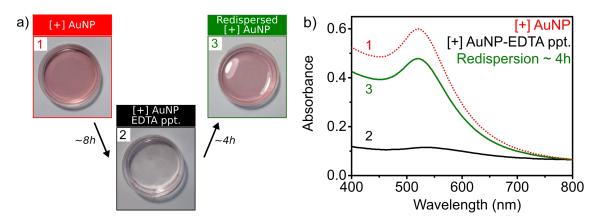


Figure 4.12: (a) Optical photographs of the petri-dish containing [+] AuNPs, [+] AuNP – EDTA precipitate, and redispersed [+] AuNPs marked as 1, 2, and 3 respectively. (b) Variation in the absorption of [+] AuNPs in the presence of 10 μ M EDTA. Here, the redispersion process was carried out in a petri-dish, resulting in the faster disassembly of [+] AuNP – EDTA precipitates (in ~4 h).

ery of ~95 % (Figure 4.13). It was also observed that the concentration of EDTA had to be continuously increased for each subsequent cycle to efficiently carry out reversibility studies (Figure 4.13). This curious observation of demand for higher trigger for each cycle can be rationalized in the following fashion. The aggregation between EDTA and [+] AuNPs is primarily through electrostatic attractions, and the strength of which will depend on the ionic strength of the solution. In the present system, spontaneous acidification and decrease in pH of the solution was observed during the autonomous disassembly of [+] AuNP– EDTA precipitates. The

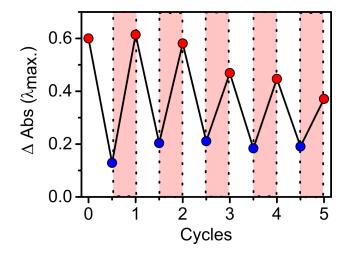


Figure 4.13: Five complete cycles of transient self-assembly of [+] AuNPs with increasing concentrations of EDTA for each subsequent cycle. We observe a consistent dampening of the redispersion response due to interference from the waste

produced carbonic acid can react with the base already present in the solution to form a salt (NaHCO₃), thereby increasing the ionic strength of the solution.^{17,50,51} Consequently, the electrostatic attractions will be weaker in the next assembling cycle, demanding for higher amounts of EDTA. In a similar way, the presence of high salt affects the disassembly process as well. Here, for subsequent cycles, noticeable losses in the absorption intensity of redispersed [+] AuNPs was observed (only ~60 % of plasmon intensity was retained at the end of the 5th cycle; Figure 4.13). It has been established in literature that the waste generated during the process of transient self-assembly interferes with the redispersion process, resulting in a damped response – a longstanding challenge in the field.^{7,12} An obvious way out is to separate the waste from the disassembled monomers, without affecting the transientness.

4.4.4 Easy Removal of Waste

The next objective was to minimize the interference of the waste produced during the disassembly step, and overcome the damped response observed during the re-

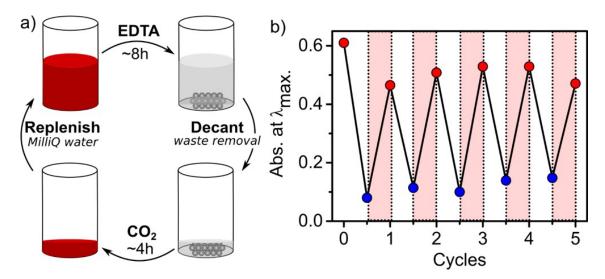


Figure 4.14: Easy waste removal and improved reversibility. (a) Schematics showing the sequence of steps undertaken to study the effect of solution volume on the disassembly of [+] AuNP-EDTA precipitates. The formation of complete precipitate allowed the easy removal of waste through simple de-cantation. (b) Five complete cycles of transient self-assembly of [+] AuNPs, where the redispersion was undertaken in a smaller volume (~100 μ L). Lowering of the solution volume resulted in a faster disassembly of [+] AuNP – EDTA precipitates (~4 h), along with minimal loss of plasmon intensity during each cycle.

versibility studies. In the present system, salt (NaHCO₃) is the main waste produced that adversely affects the transient self-assembly process in subsequent cycles. To our advantage, the complete sedimentation of NP precipitate (formed during the assembling stage) allowed the possibility of easy removal of waste through a simple decantation of the supernatant (Figure 4.14a). Moreover, lowering the solution volume of NP precipitate also helped in minimizing the amount of salt (waste) produced in subsequent autonomous disassembly step. In a typical recyclability experiment, the redispersion of [+] AuNP precipitates was performed in lower volumes by decanting the supernatant solution. A dramatic decrease in the lifetime of [+] AuNP precipitates was observed from ~ 3 days (in 3 mL solution) to ~ 4 h, when the redispersion was performed at a lower volume (~100 μ L). This is because lower amounts of CO₂ will now be required to change the pH of a $\sim 100 \ \mu L$ solution and switch off the electrostatic attractions, compared to that of 3 mL solution. In order to perform the next cycle of transient self-assembly, the redispersed [+] AuNPs was replenished with MilliQ water to the initial volume of 3 mL, and refuelled with $\sim 10 \ \mu M$ EDTA. It is worth mentioning that exactly the same of amount of EDTA, as used in the first cycle, was enough to get an immediate aggregation of [+] AuNPs in subsequent cycles (Note: no noticeable aggregation was observed with similar concentrations of EDTA, when the recyclability experiment was performed without removing the waste from the system). The aggregated [+] AuNPs then subsequently precipitated from the solution, indicating negligible interference from the waste on the triggered assembly process. Again, the volume of [+] AuNPs precipitates was reduced by decantation to minimize the waste generated from the second cycle of redispersion. Furthermore, the redispersed [+] AuNPs showed negligible losses in the plasmon intensity, indicating minimal interference from the waste during the autonomous disassembly process. Similar reversibility cycles were performed for at least 5 times, without much dampening in redispersion response ($\sim 95\%$ of plasmon intensity was retained in each cycles) -a feat scarcely seen in literature (Figure 4.14). Thus, our original chemical strategy of transiently switching between dispersed and completely precipitate states allowed us to conveniently isolate the activated AuNPs from the excess trigger and waste, without compromising the dynamic self-assembly process.

4.5 Conclusion

The pH and ionic strength dependence of electrostatic interactions was explored to introduce temporal fluctuations in the strengths of interparticle interactions and choreograph a transient self-assembly response in plasmonic NPs. The bridging and aggregating ability of EDTA with quaternary ammonium groups was used to trigger the aggregation in [+] AuNP. The observation of pH dependent aggregation of [+]AuNP with EDTA was decisive, as it revealed the factors influencing the stability of NP precipitates and hinted towards an autonomous pathway for the disassembly process. The autonomous changes in the pH and ionic strength values, under the influence of atmospheric CO_2 , resulted in the complete breaking of electrostatic attractions that glued the [+] AuNP - EDTA precipitates. This is in stark contrast with most of the reported transient self-assembly systems, where a chemical degradation of the activated monomers is required to drive the disassembly process. Strikingly, the present use of temporal fluctuation in electrostatic interactions allowed the realization of transient switching between completely precipitate and redispersed stages of plasmonic NPs. The self-assembly process in [+] AuNP – EDTA system exhibits all the key characteristics of transient behaviour like triggered assembly, autonomous disassembly, tuneable aggregate lifetime (from days to hours), and pathway dependence in aggregation. On top of this, our strategy of using nondestructive ways for disassembly helped in achieving some of the desirable feats in the field of dynamic self-assembly like easy removal of waste, formation of a transiently stable precipitate state and negligible dampness of the redispersion response. The next logical step will be to impart distinct NP functionalities to such temporal self-assembly process, for which the capability of forming transiently stable NP precipitates will be advantageous.

4.6 Future Directions

In the present chapter, we demonstrate a new strategy to control over interparticle interactions to choreograph a transient self-assembly response. Here, we reveal the *so-far-unknown* ability of atmospheric components to transform a mundane mixture of chemicals into a dynamically changing one - a task usually accomplished with a network of chemical reactions. In future, one can couple functions like catalysis to the two distinct states so as to realize dynamic functions.

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List of Publications

Included in thesis

- <u>Rao, A.</u>, Roy, S., Unnikrishnan, M., Bhosale, S. S., Devatha, G., and Pillai,
 P. P., Regulation of Interparticle Forces Reveals Controlled Aggregation in Charged Nanoparticles. *Chem. Mater.* **2016**, *28*, 2348 – 2355.
- Rao, A., Kumar, G. S., Roy, S., Ajesh, T. R., Devatha, G., Pillai, P. P., Turn-On Selectivity in Inherently Nonselective Gold Nanoparticles for Pb²⁺ Detection by Preferential Breaking of Interparticle Interactions, ACS Appl. Nano Mater. 2019, 2, 5625 – 5633.
- <u>Rao, A.</u>, Roy, S., Pillai, P. P., Realization of Transiently Stable Precipitates in the Fuel-Driven Dynamic Self-Assembly of Plasmonic Nanoparticles, *Manuscript Submitted*.

Not included in thesis:

- Devatha, G., Roy, S., <u>Rao, A.</u>, Mallick, A., Basu, S., Pillai, P. P., Electrostatically Driven Resonance Energy Transfer in 'Cationic' Biocompatible Indium Phosphide Quantum Dots. *Chem. Sci.* **2017**, *8*, 3879 – 3884.
- Roy, S., <u>Rao, A.</u>, Devatha, G., Pillai, P. P., Revealing the Role of Electrostatics in Gold – Nanoparticle – Catalyzed Reduction of Charged Substrates. *ACS Catal.* 2017, 7, 7141 – 7145.
- Xavier, J. A. M., Devatha, G., Roy, S., <u>Rao, A.</u>, Pillai, P. P., Electrostatically Regulated Photoinduced Electron Transfer in 'Cationic' Eco-friendly CuInS2/ZnS Quantum Dots in Water. J. Mater. Chem. A 2018, 6, 22248 – 22255.
- 4. Roy, S., Roy, S., Rao, A., Devatha, G., Pillai P. P., Precise Nanoparticle –

Reactant Interaction Outplays Ligand Poisoning in Visible–Light Photocatalysis. *Chem. Mater.* **2018**, *30*, 8415 – 8419.

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- Devatha, G., <u>Rao, A.</u>, Roy, S. Pillai, P. P., Förster Resonance Energy Transfer Regulated Multicolor Photopatterning from Single Quantum Dot Nanohybrid Films. ACS Energy Lett. 2019, 4, 1710 – 1716.

List of Conferences Attended

- Presented a poster titled "Regulating Interparticle Forces Reveal Phenomenon of Controlled Aggregation in Charged Nanoparticles" in International Conference on Nanoscience and Technology (ICONSAT) held at IISER-Pune in March 2016.
- Attended DST School on Nanoscience and Nanotechnology at CeNS Bengaluru from 23rd October to 3rd November 2017.
- Attended the Conference Innovations in Frontier Chemistry (IFC) 2018 held at IISER Pune from May 8th – 9th.
- Gave a talk titled "Emergence of Selectivity in Inherently Nonselective Gold Nanoparticles by Controlling Interparticle Interactions" in Chemsymphoria (in-house Symposium) at IISER Pune in July 2018.
- Attended Indo-US Workshop on Soft Matter (IUWSM-2018) at IIT Roorkee from December 9 - 11, 2018.
- Presented a poster as well as short 90 second talk at Alexander von Humboldt (AvH) Kolleg titled "Regulating Nanoscale Forces to Control Macroscale Functions" from January 31 to February 2, 2019 at Kashid.
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