

# Caste and Colourism: Analysing Social Meanings of Skin Colour in Dalit and Savarna Discourses

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## Abstract

We know little about how skin colour is used to discriminate and dehumanise Dalits in everyday language. Thus, the construction of fairness and darkness of skin colour in savarna perception and the qualities attributed need to be understood through the lens of caste identities. Drawing on an ethnographic study in Nallapadu Palle Scheduled Caste Colony in Andhra Pradesh, this article aims to understand how various qualities are attributed to the skin and colour of Dalits and savarnas using Qualia, linguistic registers and indexicalities. The Telugu linguistic forms “*Nalupu*” (Dark) and “*Telupu*” (Fair), when used in registers, are analysed to understand the qualities indexed with these forms. It is essential to examine the process of caste manifestation in language through colour, which indexes several qualities through a specific linguistic form, varying its social meaning when attributed to a savarna and a Dalit. The study found that the social meanings of *Nalupu* and *Telupu* used in everyday conversations differed for savarnas and Dalits. When spoken in the context of Dalits in Palle, it indexed qualities to discriminate and re-establish caste. It is argued that these attributes lead to the creation of caste hierarchies. The article calls for examining the connection between colourism and caste discrimination further.

## Keywords

Dalits, caste, qualia, linguistic registers, skin colour, colourism in India

## Introduction

In the Telugu everyday language, one can notice that the word “*Chandala*”, which is a community that has traditionally been assigned the occupation of dealing with the disposal of corpses, is used to mean “disgusting/ugly”. It is so deeply assimilated

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into the language that most people do not realise the deep-rooted casteist origin of the term and use it in the context of undesirable. Rani (2018) explains how caste, through the medium of language, demonises and dehumanises Dalits: “Caste Hindus have humiliated Dalits with individual caste names such as Pallars, Paraiyars, Sakkiliars and some common names such as Dasa, Rakshasa, Asura, Avarna, Panchama, Chandalas, Untouchables and Harijans”. The portrayal of Dalits as “less or no human” through the social myths associated with them often manifests itself through language, psyche and popular culture. Normalised Malayalam utterances like “*‘Poyi kullikku, parayachi polle undu’* (‘Go take a shower, you look like Paraya girl) and *‘ayyo- ithu Pella karippu aanu’* (Oh no- this is Pulaya Black)” reflect these portrayals (Geetha 2022). Not only through the casteist slurs but as Das (2021) writes, the expressions “*You dress so well, you don’t look like Dalit*”... “*I could never imagine you are Dalit*”, etc., are also casteist and discriminatory in nature. Jogdand (2023) shows how these comments constrain Dalits to an upper-caste<sup>1</sup> gaze, leading to their humiliation. It is important to ask oneself what stereotypical expectation or casteist associations one reproduces through this language. Do these statements associate Dalits with being dark, ugly, and dirty? If so, the process of attributing qualities to Dalit skin and colour in everyday language to reinforce caste needs to be analysed to understand the underpinning savarna<sup>1</sup> perception.

Colourism within the context of caste plays a crucial role in discriminating against Dalits. Feminist author Alice Walker defines colourism as prejudicial or preferential treatment of individuals from the same racial group based on their skin colour (Norwood 2015). Colour as an attribute is routinely employed to assess an individual’s worth in Indian society. While Dalit bodies are read and judged in every sphere of life, it is a critical aspect through which they are stigmatised. Geetha (2022) has put this eloquently:

“We are all guilty of reading the bodies of the people we meet, especially in the context of their skin colour. We decide the degree of their attractiveness, innocence, status, power, hygiene, and criminality from the tinction of their skin”.

There is a clear impact of colour in the expression of caste dynamics in both private settings, like marriages, where darker-skinned people often face rejection and public spaces, like cinemas, where depictions of Dalits tend to promote caste-based preconceptions by showing them with darker complexions, unhygienic, less groomed looks, and filthy. Colour plays a significant role in establishing and maintaining social stratification in these cultural and social contexts and is read and expressed through language. Colour semiotics look at the psychological perception of colour as it is manifested in language and how the sensation influences the meaning of signs that an observer feels when they see the colour of those signs, influencing thought. The stereotypical associations of those mentioned above and other qualities with colour

<sup>1</sup>The term savarna refers to the privileged caste-communities in the Hindu social order.

can be understood through the semiotics of colour, as the association of meanings are conveyed through colour as a sign. The Dalits, who are at the bottom of the hierarchy, their skin, colour and culture are termed impure by savarnas. This article tries to link speech, experience, and perception to understand how qualities are associated with skin and colour and how they are manifested in the savarna language or speech through Dalit experiences of caste.

The article is organised into four main sections. The first section of this article addresses the ongoing discussion regarding caste and colourism. It emphasises why it is essential to explore the complexities of colourism within the caste system using psychological and linguistic perspectives. The second section discusses the concepts of linguistic registers, indexicalities, and qualia. These conceptual frameworks serve as analytical tools for understanding the experiences of Dalits in the framework of caste, with a particular focus on colourism. The third section of the article shifts its attention to the crucial elements of the study area, author positionality, and research methodology. The last and final section provides a thorough analysis of the linguistic processes of attributing qualities to skin colour that have a complex relationship with caste. This part examines the attribution of specific qualities to fair and dark skin within both the Dalit and savarna communities to understand the deep-rooted casteist ideologies that contribute to the perpetuation of caste-based social hierarchy.

## **Fair and Beautiful in Opposition to Dark and Ugly**

An individual's skin tone is a noticeable physical characteristic that others immediately observe throughout social encounters and utilise to make judgements (Maddox & Gray 2002). In his essay "Dating like a Savarna", Kisana (2023) writes that "Caste is not just a secret language of aesthetics; it is also the code to classify bodies as legitimate or illegitimate". The Dalit skin is often seen as impure and polluting and perceived as undesirable in a casteist society. Growing up, my mother always used to say, "You and your dad are fair; people will think you are brahmins, you will not face casteism like me." My mother, who has a dark complexion, experienced significant prejudice and discrimination in society, which regards fairness as beautiful. She wanted to marry my father to protect her children from the trauma of being a Dalit with a dark complexion. This has become deeply rooted in me, and I thought being fair is the key to earning love, opportunities, and, most importantly, respect. However, this perception of my fairness by my family was short-lived, as the savarna world did not share the same view. I hated myself for not being able to look fair and flawless like my savarna classmates; for them, I was dark, and it was visible and evident in me, which made them understand that I was not one among them. Indian society is obsessed with fair skin, which fits the brahmanical standards of beauty, employing skin tone as a marker of caste. Dark skin is seen as an indicator of caste and inferiority (Philips 2004). There is a debate on caste and colour, and research shows that the caste system's social structure significantly impacts skin pigmentation. Ayyar & Khandare (2013) discuss

the historical interplay of colourism, the caste system, and economic status in Indian society. Historically, oppressed castes were poor and uneducated; they were forced to do manual labour, mostly outdoors in the sun. However, oppressor castes had more income and education and avoided outside occupations, which eventually led to the association of dark skin with oppressed castes and fair skin with oppressor castes (see Zhao et al. 2023). A Genotype-phenotype-based study with various caste groups in North India also amply demonstrates the profound impact of rigid marriage customs and multi-layered endogamy, contributing to the variation in skin tone (Mishra et al. 2017). This gives us an insight into the persisting influence of historical practices like the caste system and contemporary practices like the inclination towards fair skin, thereby implicating an implicit caste-related dimension within prevailing aesthetic standards.

Skin colour is an important dimension that affects decision-making in Indian matrimony. The marriage advertisements, newspapers and preferences clearly show a social and cultural inclination towards fair skin while simultaneously displaying discriminating attitudes towards darker skin tones (Ayyar & Khandare 2013). However, even a fair Dalit undergoes caste-based discrimination, bringing out caste as a complex web of coded qualities. Gidla (2018) points out that caste is not a simplistic construct to understand just by looking at one's skin colour. It is complex, and savarna lives represent a constructed set of qualities termed pure by themselves when associated with savarna bodies. I always used to ask myself, "If fairness is the marker of savarnas, why is a dark brahmin still seen with respect and a fair Dalit not?". This question has led me to this journey to understand how savarnas perceive fairness and darkness on Dalit and savarna bodies as Dalits experience them. It emphasises the process of qualities attribution to skin colour on Dalits and savarnas through language and argues that it leads to the creation of hierarchies, thus re-establishing caste.

Caste is a social and psychological construct that fundamentally originated and evolved in the savarna mind (Ambedkar 1936). It is the deciding factor in South Asian society, and the caste system has been moulded to the benefit of savarna and exploitation of avarna. Jogdand (2023) shows how savarnas stereotypically portray and label Dalits to discriminate against them irrespective of how they look physically. As Gorur and Forscher (2023) discussed, stereotyping occurs when people use characteristics that are visible to establish their initial views of others, but caste is something that cannot be just seen. The conventional tests of bias that employ visual stimuli are insufficient to research casteism as caste is constructed in relation to other markers to form an image of caste as it is perceived. Language then becomes crucial for understanding caste-related biases. Applying psychological and linguistic lenses, this article uses the concepts of qualia, linguistic registers and indexicalities to understand the process of attributing qualities to Dalit skin and savarna skin to make caste concrete as it is perceived and experienced as a lived reality. This lens is essential as it allows one to understand how qualities are associated and perceived by savarnas and experienced by Dalits, centring caste as the foundation to construct meaning out of language and Dalit experiences in Nallapadu.

## Caste Through Linguistic and Visual Perception

Experiencing caste is a complex phenomenon often manifested in the savarna language and perceptions; hence, it needs to be deconstructed by analysing the association of the word with the several qualities and images as it is perceived. This analysis of language provides a detailed understanding of how colourism is ingrained in linguistic expressions and reproduces caste hierarchy. Linguistic registers, which is the cultural model of speech, linking speech to the typification of the speaker, the relationship of the speaker to that of the listener and the people involved and the conduct (Agha 2006) is significant to understanding the contextual meanings of speech. This article will help us look at how these registers vary in social meanings as they get associated as qualities with Dalit and savarna skin. The social meanings of these qualities are understood through the concept of Indexicalization, which is crucial to my study as it is the process whereby signs acquire social indexicalities (Jaffe 2016). Indexicality acts as a basis for understanding speech and stereotypes. It helps to understand the relationship between linguistic forms and conventional images, further leading to the social meanings associated with them (Jaffe 2016). Keisling (2009) says it is context-creating and context-sensitive. The process of indexicalization is complex, and one linguistic form can have levels or orders of indexes and are projected from one order to the other order (Silverstein 2003). Indexes appear as contiguity to the objects and point them to something within a framework. Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2000) say that contrasting registers each index a different persona, where the similarities are constructed in the context of differentiation (Gal 2016). Registers, which seem like indexes, can also act as icons in the process of rhematization (Gal 2016). Susan Gal says that using a lexicon of sensual attributes, speakers identify the opposing poles in axis differentiation as speech can be experienced ontologically to various phenomena like food or clothing (Gal 2016). Through this, it is possible to examine how a phenomenon such as caste can be indexed through the speech registers of savarnas, further pointing to different qualities for Dalits and savarnas.

The qualities, like colour, roughness, dirt, filthiness, and pollution, are often associated with Dalits in speech. Hence, it becomes essential to understand how these are attributed through the concept of qualia, which are the perceptions or experiences of sensual elements like visual aspects of colours and textures, sense of hearing like sounds, and sense of touch and experiencing feelings such as anger, anxiety and other emotions (Chumley & Harkness 2013; Naidu 2018). The Dalits, who are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, their appearance, habits and way of life are termed impure, dirty, etc., and these are manifested in the savarna language or speech, which becomes a means of discrimination against the Dalits. Through this lens of experiencing the abstract qualities through senses, the anthropological theory, Harkness and Chumley use qualia to methodologically discuss how qualities are experienced as a reality of socially and culturally constructed life (Chumley & Harkness 2013). This can be extended to understand the qualities associated with Dalit fairness, Dalit darkness, savarna fairness, and savarna darkness to experientially understand caste through the

sense of sight. While these qualities, real-life objects or linguistic forms themselves do not possess caste, they are associated with specific practices of Dalits to perpetuate caste. These practices or objects then serve as “quali signs”, which are signs to experience abstract qualities (Gal 2016). This association often leads to discrimination in the context of my study. In addition, exploring some research gaps in the earlier literature encouraged me to view caste from the lens of qualitative experience, perception and language. Qualia, in my study, has become one of the interesting means of concretising the experience of caste.

Nancy Munn (1986) placed a strong emphasis on the connection between qualities and value. One of Munn’s most important findings from her ethnographic work in Gawa, an island in Papua New Guinea, is that a significant cultural quality like lightness, which is “*gagaabala*” in the Gawan language, is felt through a variety of sensory objects, such as the slippery and slime nature of the fish, wet quality and expanse of the water in the sea or the fluttering wings of the birds and gives many such examples for the same quality. Nancy Munn analysed the qualitative experience, and her analysis was based on the concept of iconicity explained by Pierce, which states that some qualities can connect objects with people as they are placed similarly. This resemblance makes the person iconic to the object and quality, which is rhematization (Gal 2016). Specific qualia allow for the perception and knowledge of the abstract nature of qualities. Qualia refers to some individual or group for some quality in some or the other means or capacity and represents a quali sign (Chumley & Harkness 2013). These signs of qualia or quali sign are conventionalised. This nature of becoming conventional enables social actors to identify specific individuals (and objects) as having specific qualities.

In a study, Harkness (2013) shows how the relatively “soft” or “hard” gustatory qualities of Korean soju serve as the foundation for more comprehensive frameworks of sensation and sociality. Just as they are connected to qualic experiences, hierarchies and orders are symbolic through indexing and figuratively, i.e. iconically related to the body. Metaphors using food’s qualities also become prominent when describing a group of people. Susan Gal examined what is referred to as the qualia of conversation through food and pastry in a town in Hungary, which framed the narratives examining people’s behaviour before and during World War II (Chumley & Harkness 2013). These studies show how people use memories of olfactory experience embedded in socio-cultural inequalities to categorise a community by how the smell of leather, which, more so than the smell of the leather itself, is the smell of the chemicals used to treat leather sensed and stays in the nose. In his study of interpersonal interactions in Russia, Lemon demonstrates how qualities play a role in society’s structure and the nature of sociality concerning the significance of a community’s qualitative experiences (Chumley & Harkness 2013).

Furthermore, qualia are pragmatic indexes that manifest remarkably in human behaviour as sensual qualities (Harkness 2015). Qualia are socio-cultural events of “qualic” orientation and evaluation rather than just subjective mental experiences, and Pierce’s “Semiotic trichotomies” (1955) is a seminal work for the understanding

of qualia. He claims that quality is a conventional and consequently experienceable form of abstract qualities. (Gal 2016). Quale, which is singular for qualia, is a Latin word that forms the base of the theory of qualia. Sensations are qualia's culturally conceptualised channels. In this philosophical tradition, "quality" and "property" refer to the physical characteristics of things in the world. Qualia have cultural value, whether good or bad.

The semiotic idea of qualia is helpful for anthropologists studying issues with the senses, embodiment, and aesthetics. Qualia is expressed through linguistic forms as a quali sign to perceive the sensory realms. This can be a means to understand linguistic registers as they are perceived to display the attribute of the stereotyped speaker (Gal 2016). Pierce also studied sign relations, where a sign provokes hypotheses of what it stands for, which links the assumed sign with the object (Gal 2016). However, not the linguistic form which expresses, nor the object pointed to, but the attributed qualities act as a Quali sign. Sense of sight is experienced through real-life things concretely with the help of quali signs, and it plays a crucial role in indexing caste via language. This study aims to understand the manifestation of caste in the language and perceptions of the savarnas by analysing the concepts of qualia, indexicalization, and linguistic registers. Qualia explores the experience of caste through visual sense and perception of colour, which are employed to discriminate against Dalits. Further, by analysing the Dalit experiences of caste and colourism, the research aims to elucidate the casteist association between words and qualities using registers and the concept of indexicality to demonstrate how linguistic expressions reinforce caste hierarchies.

## **Ethnographic Exploration in Nallapadu, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh**

We discussed how the linguistic construction of caste and skin colour in savarna perception through Dalit experiences of caste unveils the lived realities of Dalits and the oppressive caste system. To understand this more clearly, I discuss parts of an ethnographic study I conducted in December 2022 in Nallapadu Palle Scheduled Caste Colony (henceforth *Palle*, a Telugu term used by locals for segregated space in Nallapadu where Dalit families live) situated 3 km. inside the main centre in Nallapadu, Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. The main centre is densely populated towards either side of the Hyderabad National Highway with all the facilities like markets, worship places, groceries, shops, Sachivalayam offices, banks and mart. However, Palle is excluded from the centre, and the connecting road is kaccha road (mud or dirt road), with fields on either side and Nallapadu railway station acting as a border towards the North. Nallapadu Palle merged with the municipal corporation in 2012 and is home to two prominent Dalit communities in Andhra Pradesh, Mala and Madiga, which comprise 27.26 per cent of the population in Nallapadu, according to 2011 census data. Upper castes such as brahmin, kamma and reddy also stay in the Nallapadu palle, who are Hindus. Guntur district, also known as the hub of education among locals, has seen some brutal massacres of Dalits, like the Tsundur massacre in 1991. Andhra Pradesh recorded the highest crime cases against scheduled castes in



South India in 2021 (NCBI). Hence, it was essential to understand how skin colour and caste function in these Telugu spaces. Even now, families from the Mala community of the Palle work in the savarna fields, and the work is passed on to them by their grandparents and parents. The Madiga population here to date lives in poverty and struggles to make a living. Many Dalits here are auto drivers, wine shop cleaners, lorry drivers, sanitation workers and hardworking daily wage labourers. I was introduced to my study area by Daavidhu, a Mala auto driver I met through mutual connections between my family and his family back in 2014, and he then introduced me to other interested people. Even though there was no monetary compensation, people came forward to contribute to this study.

I established good relationships with my interlocutors because of my positionality as a Telugu Dalit woman born into a Hindu Dalit family who attends church. The majority of the Dalits in this Palle are Hindu Scheduled Castes on paper but Christians by faith and believe that the love of God is the liberation from all miseries and hatred like casteism. In the homes of Hindu Dalits who worship Hindu deities, local deities' photos, such as *Poleramma*, *Gantalamma*, *Maredamma*, and *Puttamma*, were seen. With the connections I made earlier in life and built during my previous visits to the study area and snowball sampling, I conducted qualitative interviews with 9 Dalits belonging to Mala (5) and Madiga (4) who were residents of the Palle and were above 18 years old. The savarnas in Palle primarily worship Shiva, Hanuman, Krishna and other local deities, which are savarna deities. There was an equal proportion of males and females, and this article uses the knowledge and experiences shared by the Dalit interlocutors to understand the savarna perception through the caste experiences of Dalits. As I re-introduced myself and asked them to share about themselves, their occupation, and how many years they had been living in the Palle, my interlocutors talked about their socio-economic conditions and the conditions of their physical and social geography. I asked open-ended questions to allow more sharing of narratives and counter-narratives. Introductory questions like "Can you share your experiences of growing up in Palle?" and "Can you describe the social and cultural environment in your community and "Other" community?" were asked to start the conversation, and questions like "How do you see yourself and how others see your identity?", "How does caste influence day-to-day interactions in Palle?" "Can you share specific events where you have experienced, observed or seen caste-based discrimination?" were used as guiding questions of the discussion. Each interview ranged from one and a half hours to two hours and was mostly semi-structured and unstructured, as the experiences of caste are very personal and emotional. Consent was taken before the phone recording of the interview to further hand transcribe.

I wanted my study's interlocutors to take the lead and tell me their understanding and feelings about casteism and colourism. Hence, I used qualitative data collection methods like semi-structured and unstructured interviews and participant observation, which helped me get a holistic view of society (Jodhka 1998). I have not used any online software or AI tools to transcribe or conduct thematic analysis to protect my interlocutors' privacy and security. Especially for the qualitative methods, staying in



the study area for a long time is required to build rapport, observe in-depth for a more extended period, and establish oneself as trustworthy. Moreover, the experiences of caste for the marginalised are often disturbing. During these interviews, my Dalit interlocutors were often emotional, as these experiences are integral to the community. Because of my identity, they were comfortable crying and sharing the trauma of caste with me. As I had questions, they also had questions for me, and this approach of sharing and learning rather than “noting down the data” helped me establish myself as a “community member” more than a researcher. Below, I discuss some critical insights developed through this fieldwork. This is primarily a thick description of my analysis and understanding.

### **The Brahmanical Standards of Beauty in the Palle: Fair Skin of Savarna vs Fair Skin of Madiga**

Colour discrimination against Dalits can be seen in savarna speech and their jokes in the Telugu language. “The Dalits are referred to as *Karri mandha*” (dark flock), said Bhaskar, a farm labourer working in a reddy field. Be it the fair or the dark Dalits in the Palle, everyone admitted skin tone to be one attribute through which caste is experienced every day. A dark Dalit became a conventional image of a lower caste identity. Varna, a term from Sanskrit that refers to the societal division of labour and qualities, is frequently translated as “category” or “class.” However, it can also be explained as “colour” as an innate quality or attribute (Ayyar & Khandare 2013). Many Dalits feel discriminated against based on their appearance and colour. Skin colour is one attribute that needs to be understood through the lens of caste identities, as dark skin points out the inferior social status, thus pointing to a lower caste identity leading to discrimination (Ayyar & Khandare 2013).

Most of the Dalit interlocutors complained and narrated incidents when they were easily identified through their appearance, especially the colour of their skin and were called out and ridiculed. The complexion of the Dalits, in contrast to the complexion of a savarnas whose fair skin is seen as pure, is seen as dirty and impure. This contrast and comparison between a bundle of qualities, attributes or speech through a single principle of contrast (for example, the distinction of fair vs dark with the principle of colour is known as the axis of differentiation (Irvine 2022)). From eating practices to everyday life, the savarnas attribute qualities that are seen as filthy when used for a Dalit on an axis of differentiation. Without the idea of purity, an impurity cannot exist, and the savarna language, practices and lifestyle, everything has been put on the top tier of the caste hierarchy.

From a Mala perspective, fairness in a broader sense is more appealing and termed pure, which passes quickly in society without many hustles. A fair Dalit can have the edge over a dark Dalit and easily enter the elite spaces that are not open for the Dalits. However, it does not mean that a fair Dalit does not get discriminated as skin colour is one attribute among the bundle of qualities that lead to discrimination.

There is an understanding of the difference between the fairness of savarnas and Dalits in the Palle. Dalits said that the savarnas and the Dalits themselves could recognise the markers of a fair Dalit and a fair savarna, as it appears in speech, and they are socialised in that manner. In the Palle, there are fair-skinned Madigas as well as dark-skinned Madigas and Malas. Gidla writes, “Everyone thinks all untouchables are dark, but many of them, especially Madigas, are as light skinned as brahmins” (Gidla 2018: 83). Skin tone is one attribute through which Malas distinguish themselves from the Madigas and the savarnas. When asked about the idea of a brahmin, all the Dalits’ conceptions had the image of pure artistic fairness for a brahmin. To understand this specific attribute of the fairness of a brahmin, it is essential to understand Pierce’s trichotomies. Fairness can only be experienced when the abstract quality of fairness occurs in real-time and through conventional objects (Gal 2016). Hence, it is essential to analyse the quality of artistic pure skin tone and its association with a conventional object or quali sign occurring through qualia. Talking about the complexion of savarna women (brahmins and reddys), Ruthu and Vasanthamma said:

“*Vallu pichi Telupu kaadhu Maadigolla la*” meaning they look different than the Madhigas, whose whiteness is not good.

“*Kala untadi mohamlo, mahalakshmi kala antaru vallu*”, meaning the savarna women glow in their faces; they call it the goddess Mahalakshmi’s glow.

Here, one can see that the fairness of the Madigas is also differentiated from the savarnas through what Ruthu and Vasanthamma are trying to say. Though Madigas are fair, she says this fairness is not seen as equal to savarna fairness by society as the Madigas do not have the Lakshmi glow, which only the savarna women have. The “*Telupu*”, or the whiteness on a brahmin face, is of the highest quality of whiteness in the Palle and denotes spirituality, which is one reason they equate it to the goddesses’ skin and aura. They call the whiteness on their faces “*Kala*”, the artistic glow. The *Telupu* also points out the brahmin’s vegetarian and dairy eating habits. Rojimary, while explaining her struggle as a Dalit dancer in the space of an upper-caste art form like Kuchipudi, has said that many of her upper-caste colleagues eat and suggest eating cow ghee and drinking cow milk for their healthy skin. Getting that glow on the face is a beauty habit for the savarnas, even in their families. The purity and the glow here are explained as the fairness of the cow, getting into the clarified and purified cow products (traditionally available in upper-caste homes), which are lighter in colour. Hence, when eaten by an upper caste, their fair skin colour is also recognised as pure and glowing due to the co-occurring feature of fairness. Even though the co-occurring features have different modalities like the animal (cow), food product (ghee, milk), and savarna (Human), the speaker, while speaking about brahmin fairness, still perceives them as naturally belonging together in some aspects resembling one another which gives the attribute of purity to the upper-caste through the colour of the skin (Gal 2016). People in the Palle believe that for the Dalits, the cow has never been a part

of the household and treating it like a daughter and rearing it was a savarna activity. As the brahmins consumed purified cow products, the purity of the cow, which is attributed to it by the religion, appears in their skin as the artistic glow of “*Kala*” as a form of glow and whiteness.

This association is also due to the relationship of cows with gods and goddesses. This innocence of the fair skin colour on a savarna face is appealing as it comes from the sacred cow. Motherliness and godliness are also associated with the colour of the brahmin’s skin. Fair-skinned savarna women are called with goddesses’ names by their families when they look beautiful and are born white. One such example is this typical attire of how an upper-caste woman should look according to the savarnas told by Rutu: “*malle pulu pettukuni Lakshim talli, kalaga udali antaru*”, meaning a brahmin woman should look like a beautifully adorned mother Lakshmi with jasmine flowers in her hair and a glow on her face.

The linguistic form *Telupu* has a different connotation when a savarna speaks of a Dalit from a Dalit perspective. The fairness of the Madiga is associated with their beef-eating practice, and the word *Telupu* points them to the food they consume. The savarnas believe that the fairness of a Madiga is of the least quality, which should not be encouraged in society. The fairness of a Madiga is deceiving and gives them pride, according to the savarnas. Hence, in Palle, the Madiga’s fairness is seen as less valued as it is associated with other things like less expensive clothes, body odour, and occupation, making fairness lower in quality. Rayanna, a wine shop cleaner, has said that Dalits also get ostracised at their workplaces due to their skin colour, and if they are fair in a savarna space, they are seen as flaunting pride. On his experience as a fair Madiga, at his workplace, when he got into an argument with his savarna owner, Rayanna said,

“*Emanna annamu anuko endhi jitalu ivatle anni, arustadu ma owner tellagunnav ani talapogarara niku ani*” (Even if we cross talk sometimes with our owner when he denies salaries, he shouts at me saying that I am prideful and ill-mannered because of my slightly fair skin tone)

He says that fairness on a Dalit is seen as something that is being exploited and misused to reach savarna status. Rayanna’s entire family of six is fair-skinned, and he says that his daughter, who works at a supermarket, cannot be recognised as Dalit at first instance as she has long hair, fair skin and keeps a big round red sticker like a vermilion dot, on her forehead. His daughter believes that sometimes, with other savarna cultural aspects like costly cotton sarees, vermilion dot on forehead, thick kajal and hair adorned with jasmine flowers with fair skin, Madiga women can fool the savarnas by not giving them a chance to pass casteist and racist slurs but often with aspects like language one gets identified as a Dalit. If a fair Madiga gets identified as a Dalit, the fair skin in this context also denotes the cunning nature of the Madigas, as it is unconventional for a Dalit to be fair as they are not spiritually associated with the cows. Historically, Dalits are forced to eat dead cattle, and the skin colour associated

with eating dead cows is seen as low in Palle. The famous quote among the Telugu states and the Palle is that never one should believe a dark *baepan* (brahmin) and a fair Dalit, says Vasanthamma, a Mala Christian who heard it from her reddy landlords. When associated with a Dalit, fairness indexes a deceitful nature. The Malas in the Palle believe it is easy for a fair Madiga to get absorbed into the savarna society due to their fair skin, but only when the identity is kept private. Rege (2006) writes that the very famous Dalit women autobiographers Shantabai Dani and Kumud Pawde express how fair skin acts as a token, is exclusive in society, and enables one to enjoy higher social status within the community (Ayyar & Khandare 2013).

In conventional ideas, a savarna is the token of purity associated with fair skin tone. When a Dalit has it, the attribute points out the not-so-usual occurrence of fairness; hence, it is seen as a threat and attains negative connotations. Samrajyam says,

“If a Madiga is fair, people assume him/her to be prideful and taunt them that they have *pogaru* (head weight). The reddy call them “*ey pogarupotha*” (hey, arrogant).

The fairness of a Madiga also shows the person’s arrogance for being perceptually savarna. In this context, though *pogaru* means arrogant in the first order of the index, in the second order, it indexes Dalit fairness, which is unconventional. In the third order, it indexes jealousy due to the quality of fairness on a Dalit when an upper caste uses it in this context, addressing a Madiga. Through these different meanings of *Telupu* for a Madiga and a savarna, one can understand that it is not the linguistic form in itself nor the individuals who are inherent of fair skin. However, the quality attributed acts as a sign (Chumley & Harkness 2013; Gal 2016). The quality attributed to brahmin is the fairness of a cow, and it is experientially similar to the skin tone of an upper caste; hence, it becomes a quali sign for the savarna through language and the purity of the cow is also attributed to the skin tone. The association of the cow with purity and softness is given to the brahmins, who are seen as soft, especially the fair brahmin women, who are said to be delicate and chaste. Historically, in India, colour and physical characteristics were among the several factors that define moral and social categorisation (Philips 2004). Fairness has become a gatekeeping technique, especially in matrimony, to prevent the Dalits from mixing with the savarnas as it is often said in the Telugu states, “Kodalu nalupaithe, kulamantha nalupe”, meaning if a daughter-in-law is dark, the entire caste is dark. The Dalits and savarnas are connected to cows, but in different ways, connecting savarna fairness through the consumption of ghee and milk, which is seen as pure and connecting Madiga fairness through the consumption of beef, which is termed impure. Hence, the sensorial metaphor of fair cow, seen as pure, is not attributed to the Dalit skin or the other qualities attributed to the Dalits. Within these multiple indexes associated with the skin colour of a person

of a specific caste, whiteness derives its meaning. Hence, it becomes a colour beyond just what is visibly perceived.

## The Dark Skin of Savarna vs the Dark Skin of Dalit

The Palle also has dark-skinned reddy men and white-skinned reddy men. The kamma men and women are mostly fair-complexioned. However, when asked about the discrimination based on the colour the reddy dark-skinned men might face, the Dalits believed that with the darkness a savarna man has with his gold ornaments and the glow, he would not be discriminated. Dark skin is, in fact, seen as a marker of royalty on a savarna in this context. Paying attention to the conversation about the complexion of different castes in Palle, one keen observation was made that the Dalits described the Dalits' dark complexion, in Telugu as "*Nalupu*" (Black), and they stressed the syllable "lu" and higher intonation was observed while pronouncing it. The stressing of this particular syllable also points out the disgust one experiences with the quality of darkness on a Dalit. While talking about the sensorial attributes and qualia, Gal mentions that the softness of a consonant or vowel can seem experientially similar to the softness of a pillow or a tone (Gal 2016). Hence, the pronunciation of the linguistic term *Nalupu* can also refer to the attribute and how it is experienced. However, when *Nalupu* is used in the context of a reddy man's dark complexion, no higher intonation is observed as it is a positive attribute on them and does not matter to them as well as the rest of the Palle. The dominant castes' darkness here is associated with spirituality, again referring them to dark-complexioned gods like Krishna or Ram and the royalty they possess. This was one common notion in Palle about the reddy's skin tone. On reddy's skin tone, Stalin said,

*"reddla nalupu Moratalla undadhuantaru, kalaga gambhiramga untaru"*  
means that the reddy darkness is not termed as barbaric but has an artistic glow and royalty.

Stalin further explains that the savarnas believe that even the exceptional dark-skinned savarna women have the *laksim talli kala* (motherly goddess glow) on their faces, though they are dark-skinned. The surface of this sentence explains a common stereotypical understanding of savarna darkness to a Dalit and puts savarnas on a pedestal, though they are dark. However, the word "*Nalupu*", when used in different contexts, can refer to various social meanings. *Nalupu*, when used for a savarna as discussed above, does not connote a negative meaning or impact them much due to the other aspects like the ironed clothing, neatly combed hair and the gold chains and rings, which is a conventional idea of a reddy-Naidu man. However, the darkness in the Dalit skin is very different for the Dalits, implying their lack of hygiene and cleanliness. *Nalupu* does not just mean blackness when used for Dalits. It is paired with "*Karri*" (dark), at a second order index, which points out the association between skin colour and the tough jobs, historically and at present, as well the jobs the Dalits

are forced into (sanitation and manual scavenging) and at the third order of index the sweat, dirt associated with the jobs as they involve in their jobs. While the Dalits interact with the kamma castes, who are primarily fair, they are referred to as “*Karri*”, meaning utterly black and nasty looking.

Working in the wine shops, a Dalit man said that he was called by his upper-caste owner as *Karri Kaki* (ugly black crow) once in a funny way. He said that the Mala community is sometimes referred to as *Barre* (buffalo) and *Karri mandha* (black flock). The buffaloes and crows, which are dark, become indexical icons for sharing the quality of darkness, and Dalits are animalised due to their complexion and seeming resemblance with these. Daavidhu recalls an incident at his workplace, a wine shop run by a reddy, where his owner called him saying, “*Karrimohanni piluvu, table tudavali*”, meaning call that *Karri* and ask him to clean the table. The skin tone inherently here for Daavidhu represented not only his darkness but also the darkness, which was not just black but filled with dirt and disgust. Dalit dark skin, the “*Nalupu*”, also points out to *moratu* (Barbaric) when used for Dalits, especially for Dalit men, as it implies the skin tone as an effect of the Dalit’s relationship with the “barbaric jobs”. The dark skin on them also indexes the smell of disgust associating the historically coerced Dalit occupations with the Dalit skin. However, Dalits in the Palle, talking about their dark skin, believe that apart from geographic location, their complexion is due to the tough jobs they were coerced to do because of their caste, which had more prolonged exposure to the sun, leading to darkness. The complexion for them is an outcome of the hardships they face due to the caste system. However, inherently, skin colour becomes a visible aspect through which Dalits get discriminated against daily.

## Conclusion

This article shows the interplay between language, caste and colourism and analyses how colour acts as a means of degrading Dalits. Crucially, it surpasses the oversimplified dichotomy of fair and dark skin, revealing the presence of caste-based ideologies that humiliate Dalits regardless of their skin colour. This highlights the pressing requirement to examine deeply rooted discriminatory systems. The article argues that the caste system in Indian society has established standards for beauty, and it plays a crucial role in shaping the psychological and social connotations of colour through language. The study’s findings imply that the attribution of various qualities with the Dalit and savarna skin and colour essentially occurs in the context of caste society. Hence, there is no strict construction of what *Nalupu* (Dark) or *Telupu* (Fair) mean as a colour, excluding the caste.

The concepts of darkness and fairness within the framework of Palle are deliberately shaped by the savarnas to further their interests and maintain the caste system in everyday conversations. The ideals of beauty upheld by the savarnas are intrinsically linked to a light complexion and the glow observed on a savarna individual’s face, which is perceived as pure and appealing. However, the dark complexion of an individual belonging to the savarna caste is also associated with

desirable qualities like royalty and the qualities of Hindu gods, which makes it socially acceptable. Within a society that practices caste discrimination, a Dalit individual with a darker complexion is dehumanised and regarded as dirty, stinky and polluted. In contrast, even the Dalits with a lighter complexion are often perceived as deceitful and arrogant. This illustrates that caste discrimination is observed through different frames of reference, revealing how colour as a feeling/quality is ascribed to numerous other attributes by associating it with the culture and caste, hence leading to diverse social meanings specific to caste.

Some limitations must be noted. This study only explored the experiences of caste and colourism from a Dalit perspective in a brief qualitative study. More work is required to understand the perceptions of colour and caste as they are experienced through the qualities associated with colour in language, making them a concrete, sensorial experience (Qualia) that can be experienced through quali signs. With a relevant theoretical focus and employing a set of quantitative and qualitative methods, future research needs to critically explore the connection between colourism and caste discrimination further.

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## **Endnotes**

1. In this article, a deliberate choice has been made to employ lowercase letters when referencing terms such as 'savarna,' 'brahmin,' 'reddy,' and 'kamma'. These terms, typically capitalised in academic discourse, are rendered in lowercase here as part of an effort to recalibrate language and dehegemonise the dominance associated with terminology when addressing majority groups within the scope of this study.
2. Hierarchical terms like 'upper' or 'lower' are used in reference to a caste-stratified society, and the author does not encourage them.