

# Subaltern Governance and Indigenous Political Institutions: Re-thinking State Authority in the Tribal Regions of Jungle Mahal, West Bengal

Sano Murmu

Guest Teacher, Department of Political Science (Santali Medium)  
Vidyasagar University, Rangamati, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, India, 721102

## Abstract

This paper critically analyses the relationship between subaltern governance and indigenous political institutions in the tribal district of Jungle Mahal, West Bengal, to reframe the notion of the state. The study adopts a post-modern approach to governance by extending the notion of the state beyond its traditional boundaries, considering it as a pluralistic and negotiated process that is a product of the interaction between state administrative structures and indigenous governance systems. Based on secondary data on tribal governance, such as government records, policy papers, census data, and existing literature, the study examines how disadvantaged tribal groups maintain parallel systems of governance based on customary laws, collective governance and social legitimacy. The research underscores the persistence of indigenous institutions among communities like the Santhal, Munda and Bhumij in regulating social interactions, resolving conflicts and allocating resources. The study suggests that such institutions are not relics but dynamic and effective institutions that are often more legitimate than state institutions in the context of administrative deficiencies and socio-economic marginalization. The research shows a dynamic governance space marked by co-existence, contestation and hybridization of state and non-state institutions. The state in Jungle Mahal is revealed to be not unchallenged or universally acknowledged but in continuous interaction with local practices and socio-cultural processes. The article draws attention to governance from below and contributes to theoretical discussions about legitimacy, decentralization and plural governance, while providing policy-relevant insights on how to better accommodate local contexts and aspirations in administrative reform in tribal areas.

**Keywords:** Subaltern Governance, Jungle Mahal, Tribal Governance, Legitimacy, Marginalization, Hybridization.

## Introduction

The issue of governance in modern political rhetoric has moved more and more beyond the formal frontiers of the state, focusing attention on the various locations and agents where power is created, challenged and reproduced. The notion of subaltern government, in this respect, provides a critical perspective of seeing how the communities of the margin, who tend to be at the fringes of the state power, make and negotiate their own forms of governance. This is most clearly seen in the tribal areas of Jungle Mahal in West Bengal where the native political institutions remain front and center in the organization of the social, political and economic life. In communities like Santhal, Munda, Lodha and Bhumij, the norms of governance are deeply rooted in customary practices, based on collective decision-making, and historically grown institutional forms that exist with, and in some cases contradict, formal state forms of organization. Traditional ways of thinking about political power have largely served to privilege the state as the main and valid source of governance with a centralized control, legal-rational power and bureaucratic management. Nevertheless, these frameworks do not always reflect the dynamics of governance in those areas that are characterized by historical marginalization, socio-economic deprivation, and cultural uniqueness. The state has often been biased in its reach in Jungle Mahal, and mediated by developmental interventions, security apparatuses, and decentralized institutions like Panchayati Raj. However, these institutionalized systems fail to completely overthrow or override native systems of governance. Rather, a multifaceted and pluralized landscape of governance is created, in which formal and informal institutions exist, interrelate and sometimes compete to gain legitimacy and authority.

This paper falls within this wider theoretical and empirical context, and aims to critically analyze the nature and the boundaries of state power against subaltern governance practices. It contends that the state-centric paradigm cannot be applied to governance in Jungle Mahal alone but that it has to be conceptualized as a negotiated and relational process, which is influenced by the agency of indigenous communities and their institutional practices. The old forms of governance such as the village councils, customary dispute resolution, and community-based forms of leadership still enjoy a lot of social legitimacy in most of the ordinary affairs, and at times, their legitimacy is greater than the legitimacy of the formal state institutions. These institutions not only control social order but also express the presence of resistance, adaptation and accommodation to the outside interference of administration. Moreover, the process of state institutions and indigenous political systems interaction demonstrates a complicated dynamic with

conflict, negotiation, and hybridization. As the state tries to expand its power based on policies, legal frameworks, and developmental programs, the indigenous institutions redefine and interfere with them in the local socio-cultural setting. This leads to development of hybrid governance structures, in which strands of formal and informal power are entangled, and to the idea that the state is no longer monolithic and unchallenged. This kind of thinking will force the reconsideration of major notions of legitimacy, sovereignty, and decentralization, especially when it comes to marginalized areas.

This work preempts the practices and institutions of subaltern governance, which makes it a contribution to a growing literature that aims to de-center the state and emphasize plurality of forms of governance. It highlights the need to acknowledge indigenous political institutions as not only as residual or traditional institutions, but as dynamic and responsive systems that still influence the outcomes of governance. Through this, the article intends to offer a theoretical reorientation as well as a policy-relevant framework in the understanding of governance in tribal areas such as Jungle Mahal where the issue of authority is a contested, negotiated and context-specific matter.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

The governance of marginalized and tribal areas can only be understood by moving away traditional state-paradigms to a more relational, plural, and subtle conceptualization. The research is based on an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that unites the notions of subaltern government, indigenous political organization, state power and legal pluralism to examine the complicated processes of power and legitimacy in Jungle Mahal, West Bengal. The central idea of this framework is the notion of subaltern governance, which questions the hegemonic notion, according to which the only form of governance is the state, which is executed through the formal state institutions. Rather, it focuses on how the marginalized communities have agency in developing and maintaining their own systems of rule. In other areas like the Jungle Mahal where the Santhal, Munda, Lodha and Bhumij communities reside, governance is sometimes incorporated in the daily activities and the norms of customary systems and decision making. Those actions are a kind of government by the people, which is not based on the legality but on the social legitimacy and cultural embeddedness. Very closely associated with this is the notion of indigenous political institutions which is the traditional methods of governance that have developed over the course of history and obtained in the tribal societies. They are institutions of village councils, customary courts and community leadership structures that are based on shared norms, kinship relationships and collective responsibility. They can effectively solve the conflicts in the local areas, resource management and social regulation unlike formal state institutions, which are often flexible, participatory and context-sensitive. Their inability to conquer the challenge indicates a shortcoming of the contemporary bureaucratic rule in the complete infiltration and customization of local socio-political reality.

The framework also critically comes into contact with the concept of the state authority and legitimacy. Classical theories tend to depict the state as the supreme and undisputed seat of power in a particular territory. But, in reality, particularly in the periphery, state power is not absolute and widely unanimously acknowledged. It is rather negotiated and disputed on a constant basis, being involved in interactions with local actors and institutions. The legitimacy of the state in Jungle Mahal is commonly negotiated as the state responds to the local demands and corresponds to the native norms. In the areas where it does not do so, other types of authority become dominant. In order to frame this multiplicity of forms of governance, the research opts to take the perspective of legal pluralism and plurality of governance. Legal pluralism acknowledges that there are two or more normative and legal systems in the same socio-political space. In Jungle Mahal, there is a combination of formal state laws and the customary laws to the indigenous communities. This co-existence forms a dynamic and even controversial governance space, in which people move between various systems based on circumstances, need and legitimacy. The framework includes the ideas of power, resistance, and agency to evaluate the way of interaction and reaction of subaltern groups to the state structures. Instead of having a passive relationship with the governance, tribal communities negotiate, resist and redefine the state interventions. It is this dynamic interaction which results in hybrid forms of governance where aspects of formal and informal power are blended together resulting in new and situational forms of governance.

Overall, this theoretical framework and conceptual approach go beyond binary oppositions of state versus non-state or formal versus informal. Rather, it imagines governance in Jungle Mahal as a negotiated, multi-layered and relational process, which is predetermined by the ongoing dialogue between the institutions of the state and indigenous political systems. This method is not only effective to gain a more profound insight into the issue of governance in tribal areas but also to add to general discussions on the topics of decentralization, democracy, and restructuring of state power in modern political theory.

### **Historical Evolution of Governance in Jungle Mahal**

The political system of Jungle Mahal, a traditionally marginalized and mostly tribal area of West Bengal, is the result of a lengthy and intricate historical development shaped by the changing patterns of power, authority and resistance. In order to see the modern dynamics of subaltern governance and native political institutions in this region, it would be necessary to examine the historical processes of how these systems have been constituted, transformed and reproduced. The history of Jungle Mahal governance is an intricate intertwining of pre-colonial independence, colonial interference, and postcolonial growth of the state, in which the local

institutions have been incredibly resilient and adaptable. During the pre-colonial era, the Jungle Mahal was mainly a decentralized system of governance that was community based and rooted in traditional norms. Indigenous institutions, which were well-established based on the kinship structures, shared responsibility and moral authority, arranged the socio-political existence of tribal communities like the Santhal, Munda, and Bhumij. These systems were not just administrative systems but formed an over all system of governance which included dispute resolution, resource management and social regulation. The power in such systems was neither enforced by force but based on social legitimacy and agreement, and was participatory and egalitarian. These systems of governance guaranteed high level of autonomy so that communities would govern themselves without interference of other parties. The coming of the colonial regime was a pivotal break to this native order. The British colonial rule tried to include Jungle Mahal within a centralized system of governance whose major intention was the collection of revenue and the control of the territories. This entailed the establishment of new legal and administrative systems that have radically changed the existing socio-political relationships. Settlement of land, forest laws, and the establishment of individual property rights disrupted the old patterns of collective ownership and utilization of resources, weakening the power of indigenous institutions. The colonial state tried to establish its power and control over these territories, but was mostly opposed, and in the most notable, the Santhal Rebellion that represented the statement of the native independence against the influence of foreign power. Regardless of this opposition, the colonial rule was able to produce a parallel structure of power which existed in an uneasy coexistence with the old structures and thus resulted in a disjointed and disputed governance space.

The postcolonial Indian state became the inheritor of this complicated past and tried to assimilate tribal territories such as Jungle Mahal into the national system by the means of policies of development, welfare, and democratic decentralization. The introduction of systems like the Panchayati Raj system was aimed to enhance participatory rule and to take administrative systems nearer to the population. Nevertheless, the adoption of such policies did not always take into consideration the socio-cultural peculiarities of tribal communities. Therefore, state institutions were often remote, inefficient and unrecognized by the locals. The transformative capabilities of state interventions were constrained by structural inequalities, lack of efficiency at the bureaucracy, and a top-down form of governance. Meanwhile, state authority was not able to eliminate indigenous political institutions. Rather, they were able to adjust to the evolving conditions, and remained important local government machinery. They were relevant in these institutions as they responded to the daily concerns, solving conflicts, and social cohesion in a manner that formal state structures frequently failed to do. This continuity points to the poverty of a state-centric conception of governance and the need to acknowledge the multiplicity of institutional forms that determine the politics of such areas. The late twentieth and early twenty first centuries have seen Jungle Mahal being defined by increased struggles over the rule with problems of underdevelopment, political instability and a challenge to the state. The area has experienced bouts of war and rebellion, which is a manifestation of long-standing frustrations regarding land dislocation, absence of economic prospects and felt neglect by the government. The state has in turn responded with a mix of security action and development programs to restore order and legitimacy. Nevertheless, such attempts have yielded both positive and negative results, being in some cases reinforcing the disjunction between formal governance frameworks and local realities. In this regard, there has been the development of a hybrid type of governance that involves the co-existence and interaction of the state institutions and the native political institutions. This hybridization is indicative of a negotiating and adapting process, in which the aspects of formal and informal authority are selectively merged to meet particular needs and challenges. The indigenous institutions still enjoy high social legitimacy, mediating the application of the state policies in most cases and influencing their consequences. Concurrently, they interact with the state structures in a manner that challenges and accommodates outside authorities, leading to a dynamic and changing governance environment.

The historical evolution of governance in Jungle Mahal therefore indicates continuity and change whereby indigenous political institutions have not only endured but have also influenced the outlines of governance through the time. Since pre-colonial independence to colonial interference and postcolonial assimilation, all these stages have led to developing a complex and pluralistic system of government. The historical view disputes the idea that the state is the exclusive or preminent agent of authority and emphasizes the necessity to theorize the process of governance as a negotiation and contingent process. By so doing, it offers a critical premise on reconsidering the state power in the tribal areas and the long-term importance of subaltern government in the construction of political and social life.

### **Indigenous Political Institutions in Jungle Mahal**

Indigenous political institutions in Jungle Mahal form a pillar of a fundamental governance in the tribal areas of West Bengal and a system of authority that is deeply rooted and is in existence, co-existing with modern systems of governance. These are not just remnants of tradition but dynamic and adaptive structures by which tribal societies control social order, conflict and govern common life. Such institutions offer another and more likely legitimate form of rule that is based on cultural norms and collective involvement and social legitimacy in a region that has long been characterized by marginalization and uneven penetration by the state. Within communities, like the Santhal, Munda, and Bhumij, governance is structured, with well-established customary systems, that indicates a holistic system of political, social and moral authority. These systems are normally decentralized (that is they are village based) and in them the headmen and council members are charged with responsibility of keeping order,

adjudicating over conflicts and protecting community interest. However, unlike more formalized bureaucratic structures, power in these situations does not come with codified law or outside enforcement but rather with common values, norms and the consensus of legitimacy by members of the community.

The fact that such indigenous political institutions are based on customary law is a distinguishing characteristic, as customary law regulates a gamut of social relations such as land use, marriage, inheritance and conflict resolution. Such laws are not written, but they are well ingrained in society and are held in great esteem. They can be interpreted contextually and thus the institutions are able to react appropriately to various circumstances because of this flexibility. The dispute resolution mechanisms in particular focus more on reconciliation and restoration as opposed to punishment and thus enhance the social cohesion and reduce protracted conflict. This healing process is in opposition to the formal legal systems that are usually adversarial and procedural. It is also important that these institutions are participatory in nature. The process of decision-making is usually participatory, and includes consultations with the community members and the development of a feeling of ownership to the results. Such participatory culture promotes the validity of decisions and empowers the community ties. Nonetheless, one should also consider the fact that the participation is not always evenly distributed and the traditional gender roles and the principles of hierarchy may restrict the participation of some groups, especially women and younger people, who make up the population. However, one can see the first signs of change, as more people start to be more aware and change towards more inclusive practices gradually.

This interplay between the indigenous political structures and formal state structures further complicates the political environment of Jungle Mahal. These systems are not in isolation but usually work in parallel with other institutions like Panchayati Raj institutions and administration departments. This coexistence then leads to some kind of institutional pluralism whereby people maneuver among various bases of authority as per the need and situation. In most cases, indigenous institutions are mediators, who translate the state policies into practices that make a sense in the local context as well as expressing the concerns of the community to the outside world. This mediating aspect highlights their still being relevant in modern day governance. Indigenous political institutions in Jungle Mahal have shown incredible resilience despite the forces of modernization, expansion of its administration and socio-economic change. They have been able to adjust by taking only what suits them (by incorporating a bit of formal rule and maintaining cultural values) and as a result they have been able to stay viable and legitimate to local communities. Meanwhile, they are subject to chronic predicaments, among them, the encroachment of the external politics, the undermining of traditional norms, and the difficulties of adapting to legal regulations.

Indigenous political institutions in Jungle Mahal are a crucial and sustainable model of governance that opposes the supremacy of state-centric models. They represent a locally based system of authority, participatory and embedded in culture that can provide a valuable insight into alternative forms of governance. These institutions are critical in understanding and reaching out to them to formulate more inclusive and context-based strategies of administration in the tribal areas. They are not there to impede development but have to be seen as complementary systems that may help to achieve a more plural, responsive, and equitable system of governance.

### **Subaltern governance in practice**

Practical subaltern governance can be understood as the ways in which the marginalized population creates, negotiates and maintains forms of governance outside of (or alongside) formal state institutions. For the tribal communities of Jungle Mahal, West Bengal, it is not a theoretical construct but a practice that is deeply rooted in social practices, cultural norms and collective decision-making. It reflects the capacities of communities who, despite their historical exclusion and marginalization and the state's limited reach, are able to organize and govern their socio-political sphere through their own institutional structures. In the case of Jungle Mahal, subaltern governance is manifest in the operation of indigenous political institutions among communities like the Santhal, Munda and Bhumij. These are found at the village and community level, where traditional councils and leaders are central to maintaining social order, resolving conflicts and managing resources. Contrary to the formal state institutions, which are based on codified laws and bureaucratic processes, these systems are based on customary practices, oral heritage and democratic processes. They draw their legitimacy from social acceptance and cultural acceptance, and are more accessible and responsive to local concerns. A central aspect of subaltern governance is the existence of informal justice systems. Acquiring access to formal justice in many parts of Jungle Mahal is limited by geographical, economic and procedural factors. Instead, people draw on informal modes of dispute resolution, which priorities conciliation, consensus and harmony. Such processes are generally quicker, cheaper and culturally relevant to formal legal processes, thus preserving the legitimacy of local institutions.

Subaltern governance is also crucial in the delivery of development and social welfare. Although the state may have a range of schemes and policies to promote socio-economic development, what happens at the local level is shaped by subaltern actors and institutions. Local elites and networks interpret and negotiate these interventions, and sometimes adapt them to fit their local needs. This mediation underscores the subaltern actors' active participation in governance, showing that they are not just the passive recipients of interventions but active agents of governance. A further key characteristic of subaltern governance is its dynamic nature. Native institutions are dynamic and responsive to social, economic and political change. They may introduce elements of

modern governance, while still adhering to their fundamental principles of participation and collective responsibility. This allows them to remain relevant in a rapid changing environment, despite changes in the local context brought about by state policies, market and political mobilizations. But there are also challenges to the practice of subaltern governance. Intra-community inequalities, such as gender and age, impact participative decision-making. The presence of multiple governance systems can also result in overlaps and tensions of power, resulting in confusion and contestability. Extraneous political pressures and growing state intervention also threaten indigenous autonomy. Not with standing these challenges, subaltern governance in Jungle Mahal is a vibrant and resilient form of governance that is still practiced today. It overturns the traditional understanding of governance as an exercise of power from the top and highlights the complex and multiple nature of authority and governance itself, which is produced and re-constructed in local practices and encounters. By centering the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups, the idea of subaltern governance in practice offers important lessons on other forms of more participatory, inclusive and responsive governance.

Subaltern governance in practice, is not a response to the shortcomings of the state but a form of governance in and of itself. It is crucial to acknowledge and work with these practices to create effective and equitable governance. It requires a rethinking of the relationship between the state and society, and the importance of collaboration, recognition and respect for local institutions in the quest for democratic and inclusive governance in tribal regions such as Jungle Mahal.

### **State vs Indigenous Institutions: Conflict, Negotiation and Coexistence**

State-indigenous political relations in Jungle Mahal are a dynamic landscape of governance that is characterized by conflict, negotiation and transformation. Far from being independent and autonomous, these two forms of governance are intimately related, resulting in a hybrid and dynamic space of conflict, negotiation and co-existence that underpins governance. This relationship is important for reimagining the state in tribal areas. On one hand, it is conflictual as a result of inherent differences in institutional rationale, legitimacy and practices. The state's institutions are rooted in formal legality, bureaucratic practices and centralized control, while indigenous systems are rooted in customary law, participation in the community, and social legitimacy. In areas such as Jungle Mahal, where indigenous groups like the Santhals, Mundas and Bhumij have robust governance systems, the application of state legislation and administrative systems can cause tensions. Land, forest management and conflict resolution are often focal points of dispute, as state policies might not recognize or respect traditional practices and autonomy. This mismatch not only undermines the efficacy of government programs and policies, but also creates a crisis of legitimacy, with state power seen as imposed. But the engagement between these regimes cannot purely be seen as conflict. There is also a process of negotiation, whereby state and indigenous institutions negotiate their interactions. In many ways, negotiations between local communities and the state are an essential part of the governance process in Jungle Mahal. Indigenous chiefs might negotiate with bureaucrats to ensure access to social welfare and development funds, and officials might turn to indigenous leaders to implement policies and keep the peace. This process is a pragmatic response by the state to its limited influence, and by the indigenous institutions to engage strategically with formal institutions to serve their purpose. Such engagement illustrates that sovereignty is always in the making, and power relationships are dynamic.

Conflict and negotiation are only part of the story of governance in Jungle Mahal; the other part is that of coexistence. In this context, there is a coexisting relationship between state and indigenous institutions that tackle different aspects of social and political organization. For example, while formal courtrooms and government offices manage some aspects of legal and administrative processes, local councils and customary laws prevail in managing disputes, social relations and resources. This results in a type of institutional pluralism, in which people navigate across different systems of governance, based on factors such as convenience and legitimacy. The growth of state institutions has not replaced indigenous institutions, but rather has created a dual governance system where both formal and informal systems are important. Crucially, this often leads to hybrid governance arrangements, incorporating both formal and informal aspects. Indigenous institutions might adopt elements of state law and state actors might also adapt their practices to local norms and practices. These hybrid forms reflect an adaptive process, and lead to more socially embedded and responsive forms of governance. But hybridity also results in complexities such as blurriness of authority, multiple jurisdictions and potential power asymmetries. The dynamic between state and indigenous institutions in Jungle Mahal is best characterized as lying on a spectrum of conflict, accommodation and co-existence rather than one of opposition. This relationship highlights the shortcomings of seeing the state as the sole and dominant authority and the need to understand governance as a complex, multiple, contextualized and negotiated practice. Recognizing the legitimacy and effectiveness of indigenous political institutions allows for more participatory and responsive governance that connects formal state modes of governance with the local.

### **Re-thinking State Authority in Tribal Lands**

The problem of state authority in tribal areas like Jungle Mahal calls for a re-thinking of traditional political-administrative structures. The state has long been understood as the ultimate and unifying source of authority, and it enforces its authority through

institutional, legal and bureaucratic means. Yet, this state-centric approach becomes problematic when applied to marginal and culturally different regions where politics and governance is not only codified in formal institutions, laws and bureaucracies, but is largely shaped by local social relationships, norms and indigenous institutional arrangements. For example, in areas inhabited by people like the Santhal, Munda and Bhumij, the power of the state is not uncontested. Rather, it is always in conversation with indigenous political institutions that enjoy high levels of legitimacy in the community. These institutions, based on customary rules and collective decision making, are the main Centre's of governance. Consequently, the state is not a single, monolithic actor but one of a number of actors in a diverse field of governance. This shift in focus from the state as a top-down authority to state as a negotiated governance relationship calls for a re-imagining of state authority. State authority is not just top-down, it is built and maintained through its capacity to engage with local institutions and meet local needs. When the state does not fit with the local socio-cultural context, its authority is undermined, opening the way for a plurality of governance practices to emerge. On the other hand, state legitimacy and efficacy can be increased when it integrates indigenous practices.

A key aspect of this shift is to recognize the plurality of governance. Governance in Jungle Mahal is marked by co-existence of formal state and informal indigenous governance, with multiple layers of governance. This raises questions about the need for legal and administrative uniformity for effective governance. Rather, it implies that localised and varied arrangements might be more effective in dealing with the challenges of the local context. Tribal political institutions, characterised by participation, consensus building, and social accountability, provide lessons for other modes of governance that may be more participatory and responsive. Moreover, a recasting of state power also involves overcoming the problem of legitimacy that often plagues the state in tribal areas. Past experiences of neglect, underdevelopment and coercive actions by the state have fostered a view of the state as "foreign". To redress this, the state needs to move away from an interventionist and top-down approach to governance, towards a participatory and dialogic one. This requires not just decentralisation but also involving indigenous institutions in governance. Acknowledging indigenous laws, valuing indigenous knowledge systems and promoting community involvement are crucial in gaining trust and legitimacy. Also, the emergence of hybrid governance systems, where state and indigenous systems are combined to forge more effective and responsive systems, is another consideration. These models represent a pragmatic governance strategy, which recognises the merits of formal and informal institutions. But the creation of hybrid systems also needs to consider issues related to power, representation and accountability to ensure that they do not perpetuate unequal power relations. Re-imagining state power in tribal areas such as Jungle Mahal is about reframing notions of domination, uniformity, and exclusion in terms of negotiation, diversity and inclusion. It involves understanding governance as a multifaceted and dynamic relationship between different actors, institutions and norms, rather than a linear process. In doing so, policymakers and academics can adopt a more sophisticated and effective approach that acknowledges the capacity of marginalised communities and enhances the legitimacy and responsiveness of the state. The recasting of state authority in tribal areas does not mean a reduction of the state but its redefinition in a manner that is more in sync with local and democratic values. It's about a shift from a remote to a participatory state, one that can work with local institutions and bring about a more inclusive, participatory and responsive political system.

## Conclusion

The above analysis of subaltern governance and indigenous political institutions in Jungle Mahal of West Bengal suggests a drastic rethink about the state, governance and politics. This study has demonstrated that governance in this tribal region needs to be understood from a multi-perspectival and non-state-centric perspective. Instead, it is inextricably linked to a network of state and indigenous structures and institutions of power. This is a multi-faceted governance space that shows power is not the exclusive domain of the state but is located in multiple sites, and is being negotiated, fluid and in motion in everyday practices and relations. For instance, the enduring nature and efficacy of indigenous political institutions of the Santhal, Munda and Bhumij communities have been shown in the past. Including customary laws, collective behavior and social acceptance, these institutions still regulate social order, conflict and resources in more relevant and responsive ways than the state institutions. Their persistence is not an indicator of "backwardness" but rather, their fit and adaptability to the socio-cultural milieu.

While their existence indicates resilience, the interactions between the state and informal institutions also demonstrate contestation, negotiation, co-existence and integration. This highlights the failure of a rigid and centralised mode of governance, and the emergence of hybridity and the blurring of formal and informal forms. This hybridity questions the notion of the state as a monolithic and unquestioned entity, and suggests that legitimacy is contextual, relational and contingent, emerging out of encounters with local actors. More importantly, the study also highlights the issue of legitimacy in the authority of the state in marginal regions. Experiences of exclusion, unequal development and bureaucratic indifference in the past have created a distance between the state and its citizens. This requires more participatory, inclusive and context sensitive governance mechanisms, which integrate indigenous knowledge and systems.

Finally, to regain power in Jungle Mahal the state needs to take a plural, negotiated and contextual approach to governance. It calls for a policy and practice shift from the top-down to the engagement and partnership between the state and indigenous systems. This will not only result in better and more legitimate governance, but also a more just and democratic state. By recognising the

agency of the subaltern, this study offers a critical but theoretically enriching, and practically relevant perspective on governance that is important for addressing the problem of administration in tribal areas.

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