It is a commonplace of academic and popular discourses in contemporary India that populations described variously as tribes, scheduled tribes, adivasis, vanvasis, and indigenous peoples are locked in perpetual combat with the modern state. Indeed, some even argue that if the state in India represents the forces of modernity, adivasis represent an amodern, counter-modern or even pre-modern social formation. As a consequence, adivasis are sometimes believed to exhibit the “elementary aspects” of rural insurgency in colonial India (Guha 1983) as quintessential subaltern radicals defending older, nobler ways of life in “arcadian spaces” with “visions of alternative moralities” (Shah 2010: 190). At other times, adivasis are simply taken to be the hapless victims of state-directed development, dispossession, and “everyday tyranny” (Padel 2009; Nilsen 2010; Kela 2012). Moreover, those seeking to critique modernity and its forms in India have found adivasis “good to think with” in Claude Levi-Strauss’ terms, calling into question the ways of states, archives, and the public sphere all at once (Visvanathan 2006; Banerjee 2006a; Chakrabarty 2011). None of the above ought to be seen as peculiar to present-day India: the prose of otherness associated with the seductive figure of the tribal or indigene has its origins in the colonial past (Chandra 2013a), and its imprint on the modern social sciences is widespread (see, for example, Lévi-Strauss 1969; Clastres 1987; van Schendel 2002; Scott 2009).

At the same time, the politics of representing adivasis in contemporary India speaks to a wider conundrum that students of indigeneity now face globally (Jung 2006; Li 2010; Hodgson 2011; Chandra 2013b). The “strategic essentialisms” (Spivak 1988) on which indigenous activism rely are, as Renée Sylvain (2014) has recently argued, at least as limiting as they are enabling. On the one hand, activists and scholars rallying around the indigenous acknowledge the hardnosed instrumental actions that prove necessary to achieve their ends. Yet, on the other hand, the same defenders of indigenous rights are compelled to speak in the explicitly non-instrumental and affect-laden language of authenticity and belonging. As Adam Kuper (2003) perceptively noted a decade or so ago, indigeneity talk in today’s world has revived racialized notions of the primitive Other from a bygone era, and the “return of the native” can hardly be regarded as an unproblematic matter (Béteille 1998; Mamdani 2013). Writing about indigenous or adivasi politics thus turns to be fraught with many dangers, of which racial
stereotyping, essentializing, and speaking for silent subalterns are among the most common. In fact, a number of social scientists have recently asked whether discourses of indigeneity, deployed strategically or not, are actually part of a global neoliberal regime of “hypermarginality” that makes the so-called indigenous even more vulnerable than they were earlier (Hale 2004, 2005; Muehlmann 2009; McCormack 2012; Bessire 2014).

In interrogating adivasi politics in contemporary India, this Talk departs sharply from dominant representations of adivasi politics today. It does so by challenging the easy binary between the modern state and adivasis in India based on three years of doctoral research on the relations between colonial and postcolonial states and rural adivasi communities in the forest state of Jharkhand in eastern India since the late eighteenth century. In my doctoral dissertation, I show how the “state” and “tribe,” paradoxically, constitute each other over time in the margins of modern India. The “state” here is both an idea and a set of governmental practices (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1991) just as the “tribe,” too, is an ideological as well as material formation. My argument here is, briefly, that the two are isomorphic, and that subaltern resistance, whether violent or peaceful, is best understood as the negotiation, not negation, of modern state power.

This argument necessarily runs against a dominant strand of scholarship on South Asia that regards adivasis as subalterns par excellence and identifies adivasi politics as primarily one of negating or opposing modern state structures (see, for example, Guha 1983; Bhadra 1985; Skaria 1999; Mayaram 2003). Yet, it also stands in solidarity with other scholars who have, in their distinctive ways, questioned these dominant logics of representing adivasi politics visa-vis the modern Indian state (Béteille 1974; Guha 1999; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Prasad 2003; Chatterjee 2013). The two case studies in this paper zoom in on intergenerational and gender divides within rural adivasi communities, and highlight how these intra-community divides mirror divisions within modern state imaginaries. I rely here on my fieldwork in contemporary Jharkhand as well as a critical reading of secondary sources on Jharkhand and other “tribal” regions in India and beyond. Might the apparent opposition between “state” and “tribe,” I ask, be better characterized as an intimate antagonism? If so, what might be the implications of such a characterization of adivasi-state relations for global debates over indigeneity and its futures?