Customary Governance, Religious Authority, and Institutionalised Exclusion: Rethinking Pluralism in India's Northeast

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Abstract

In parts of Northeast India, social and political life is shaped by an arrangement where constitutional law, customary institutions, and religious authority coexist. This arrangement carries its own internal order. It regulates belonging, authority, and conduct in ways that often extend beyond the reach of formal state institutions. In the Churachandpur District of Manipur, customary governance and church-based authority structures shape everyday life with a degree of continuity that does not depend solely on formal legality. Within this setting, exclusion does not always take the form of overt conflict or legal prohibition. It settles through routine practices, informal sanctions, and collective expectations that define acceptable forms of belief, behaviour, and affiliation. Minority denominations, dissenting voices, and gendered positions encounter these limits in ways that remain largely unaddressed within constitutional frameworks of religious freedom. The language of rights does not fully register the pressures exercised through community-based authority. Drawing on field-based observations and secondary sources to trace how customary norms and religious structures align in shaping these boundaries. Attention is placed on how authority is recognised, how compliance is maintained, and how deviation is managed within local institutional settings. These processes do not appear as exceptional; they are embedded in ordinary governance. This raises questions about how pluralism is understood within India's federal structure. Constitutional provisions that accommodate difference, including those enabling asymmetrical arrangements, create space for local autonomy while leaving internal hierarchies intact. Pluralism, in this sense, operates through layered authority rather than through uniform protection. The paper contributes to debates on legal pluralism and federal governance, and calls

for closer attention to how inclusion and exclusion are produced within institutional arrangements that are often treated as culturally legitimate and politically necessary.

Keywords: Customary Governance, Manipur, Churachandpur, Asymmetrical Federalism, Religious Identity, Legal Pluralism, Northeast India, Federalism.

1. Introduction

India's constitutional order holds together a wide range of religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities within a single legal framework. This arrangement does not operate uniformly across the country. In the Northeast India, everyday governance takes shape through sustained interaction between constitutional law and locally embedded institutions. Customary authority and religious organisation remain central to how social life is ordered (Baruah, 2005; McDuie-Ra, 2016). The presence of the state is uneven. Its authority is encountered alongside institutions that carry their own histories, obligations, and claims to legitimacy.

Legal pluralism anchors the analysis of this setting. Multiple normative systems operate at the same time, each with its own sources of authority and modes of enforcement (Griffiths, 1986). State law functions alongside customary rules, religious institutions, and informal practices that regulate conduct without relying on formal sanction (Merry, 1988). These arrangements organise routine decisions, shape conflict resolution, and define the terms through which belonging is recognised. Authority moves across institutions through recognition, acceptance, and repetition in everyday practice (Galanter, 1981). It does not depend on a single centre.

In Manipur, and particularly in Churachandpur district, this layered order is closely tied to tribal institutions and religious networks where village authority, denominational structures, and community expectations converge in everyday governance. Their influence extends across land relations, dispute settlement, personal conduct, and participation in community life. These domains are not treated as separate spheres. They are held together through shared expectations about conduct and belonging. Institutional authority draws strength from continuity and from the willingness of the community to sustain it.

The paper addresses three research questions:

1. How do customary governance and religious authority converge to structure social regulation in Churachandpur district?
2. What mechanisms sustain exclusion within this institutional arrangement?
3. What are the implications of these dynamics for understanding pluralism within India's federal framework?

This paper argues that the convergence of customary governance and organised religious authority produces an institutional environment in which exclusion is sustained through routine practices, informal sanctions, and collective expectations, raising questions about how pluralism is understood within India's federal structure.

The Constitutional guarantees like equality before law, freedom or religion, etc., that recognises individual rights remain present within this field. Their operation passes through the institutional arrangements that organise social order. The language of rights does not travel easily into these settings. Authority is exercised through expectation and obligation. Social relations carry the weight of enforcement. Reputation, compliance, and belonging remain closely tied.

This paper examines how these conditions shape the evolution of exclusion. When customary governance and organised religious authority converge, they generate a stable order that regulates conduct with considerable force. The effects are uneven. Minority denominations, dissenting individuals, and women encounter limits that are widely understood within the community and rarely stated in formal terms. These limits are sustained through everyday practices, through participation and anticipation of sanction. They remain durable because they are embedded in institutions that organise ordinary life. The analysis engages debates on federalism, multiculturalism, and legal pluralism by examining how authority is distributed within communities, how it is maintained, and how it structures access to participation. The case of Churachandpur district of Manipur provides a setting in which local institutions retain strong legitimacy while the reach of the state remains uneven. It advances an account of pluralism that attends to the organisation of authority within communities and to the ways in which that organisation shapes the conditions under which exclusion persists (Baxi, 2002; Tamanaha, 2021).

2. Literature Review

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Legal pluralism shifts attention away from the state as the sole site of law. Early work draws focus to the coexistence of multiple normative systems within the same social field, each carrying its own authority and mode of regulation (Griffiths, 1986). Law, in this sense, is encountered through institutions, practices, and expectations that extend beyond formal legal structures. Its presence is woven into everyday life. It is sustained through repetition, recognition, and acceptance within communities.

Subsequent work turns to how individuals engage with these overlapping systems. Movement across normative orders depends on context, familiarity, and consequence (Merry, 1988). This movement is uneven. It reflects position within the social structure and the risks attached to non-compliance. Engagement with plural systems, therefore, does not rest on open choice. It is shaped by constraint, by exposure to sanction, and by the anticipation of social response. These conditions draw attention to the uneven distribution of legal capacity within plural settings.

Studies grounded in the Indian context extend this line of inquiry by situating plural legal arrangements within a wider institutional field. Conflict resolution frequently takes place outside formal courts, within community-based structures that operate through their own procedures and expectations (Galanter, 1981). These arrangements form part of the legal order as it is experienced in practice. Their persistence rests on accessibility, familiarity, and the authority they command within local contexts. Their operation also raises questions about how authority is recognised and how it is sustained outside formal institutions.

Critical work brings the question of power into sharper focus. The coexistence of multiple normative systems does not imply equal standing among them. Authority accumulates unevenly. It aligns with established hierarchies and is reinforced through everyday practice. This perspective shifts attention from multiplicity to distribution. It foregrounds the conditions under which some norms acquire force while others remain marginal. Constraint, pressure, and the costs of deviation become central to understanding how plural systems operate (Tamanaha, 2021).

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In India, these concerns are tied to a longer history of governing diversity through institutional design. Colonial arrangements formalised distinctions through personal law, linking legal regimes to religious identity. This structure continues to shape contemporary legal practice. Formal law operates alongside locally embedded systems that retain strong social authority (Galanter, 1989; Baxi, 2002). These systems provide accessible forms of governance and organise everyday life in ways that are often more immediate than formal institutions. Their persistence raises questions about how constitutional guarantees are interpreted, mediated, and experienced in specific contexts.

Debates on multiculturalism engage with the recognition of group identity within political frameworks. Recognition carries significance for both individual and collective identity (Taylor, 1994). Group-differentiated rights have been advanced as a means of addressing historical disadvantage and securing cultural continuity (Kymlicka, 1995). These approaches address the accommodation of difference within liberal frameworks. Less attention is directed toward the organisation of authority within groups and the ways in which that authority shapes participation, expectation, and compliance.

Work that engages with internal differentiation brings this concern into focus. Cultural frameworks organise belonging while also structuring hierarchy and obligation. Access to participation, authority, and resources is uneven within communities. These patterns are sustained through everyday practices that define who speaks, who decides, and who is expected to comply. Efforts to recognise cultural claims often leave these internal arrangements intact. Questions of accountability and regulation emerge at this point (Bhargava, 2008), though they remain difficult to address within existing frameworks of autonomy.

Debates on ethnic versus territorial federalism in Northeast India have examined these dynamics take shape within a federal structure that accommodates variation in governance. Constitutional provisions recognise customary practices and local institutions, creating space for regionally specific arrangements. These provisions support the continued presence of non-state authority in everyday governance (Baruah, 2005). The reach of

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formal institutions varies across contexts. Local actors organise social life, resolve disputes, and maintain order through institutions that draw legitimacy from proximity and shared experience.

Research on the region points to the role of identity in structuring these arrangements. Ethnic and religious affiliations intersect with political and economic processes, shaping access and exclusion (Das, 2009). Non-state institutions take on functions associated with governance. Their authority rests on familiarity, continuity, and collective acceptance (McDuie-Ra, 2016). These conditions sustain their influence. They also shape how norms are enforced, how expectations circulate, and how deviation is managed within communities.

Religion occupies a central position within these settings. It informs identity, guides conduct, and structures community life. Its institutional presence extends into domains of regulation and organisation. Norms associated with religious practice carry social weight through their alignment with community authority. They shape expectations and define acceptable forms of behaviour. Those who fall outside these expectations encounter limits that are sustained through social mechanisms and collective response.

Feminist scholarship directs attention to how these arrangements shape the position of women. Customary and religious norms organise access to authority and decision-making in ways that privilege male leadership. These patterns persist within plural legal settings. They structure participation, representation, and control over resources. Their effects are reproduced through everyday practices that assign roles, distribute voice, and regulate presence within institutional spaces. Engagement with pluralism, therefore, requires attention to how power operates within institutions and how it is sustained through routine interaction.

Across these strands, a consistent concern emerges around the organisation of authority within plural settings. Legal pluralism accounts for multiplicity. Multicultural frameworks address recognition. Federal arrangements explain institutional variation. These approaches leave open the question of how authority is structured within communities and how that structure shapes

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access, participation, and constraint. The present study takes up this question through the case of Churachandpur district of Manipur, examining how customary governance and religious authority converge in ways that organise social life and sustain patterns of exclusion.

3. Research Gap

Existing work on legal pluralism, multiculturalism, and federalism has established the persistence of multiple normative systems within shared political frameworks. It has traced how these systems are sustained through institutional design, historical arrangements, and claims to recognition. In the Indian context, this body of work has clarified how formal law operates alongside customary and community-based institutions, and how diversity is accommodated within a differentiated constitutional structure. These accounts explain how plural orders endure and how they are reproduced across regions marked by uneven state presence.

What receives less sustained attention is how authority is organised within these arrangements in the course of everyday life. The question is not only that multiple systems exist, but also how they acquire force in practice. Authority is recognised, enacted, and maintained through institutions that draw on familiarity, obligation, and shared expectation. The organisation of authority within communities shapes who participates, who withdraws, and who is compelled to comply. This dimension remains unevenly developed in existing work, particularly in studies that focus on institutional coexistence without examining how authority circulates within these systems.

In studies of Northeast India, the persistence of customary institutions and the role of non-state actors are well documented. These accounts describe how governance is carried out through local structures that retain social legitimacy and operate in close proximity to everyday life. At the same time, the intersection between these institutions and organised religious authority has not been examined in sufficient depth. The ways in which these domains align, reinforce each other, and structure social regulation remain underexplored. This intersection is central to understanding how authority is consolidated and how expectations are stabilised within communities.

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Exclusion within plural settings also requires closer attention. Existing work recognises hierarchy and inequality, yet offers fewer detailed accounts of how exclusion evolved and sustained through institutional arrangements. In many contexts, exclusion does not depend on formal prohibition. It takes shape through routine practices, through expectations that define acceptable conduct, and through forms of compliance that are embedded in social relations. These processes are sustained through anticipation of sanction, through reputational consequences, and through the internalisation of norms. Their effects are durable because they are woven into institutions that organise everyday life.

This study takes up these concerns through an examination of Churachandpur district in Manipur. The focus rests on how customary governance and organised religious authority converge in the course of everyday governance, and how this convergence shapes the conditions under which participation, belonging, and exclusion are organised. Attention is directed toward the internal dynamics of these institutions: how authority is recognised, how it is maintained, and how it structures the terms of engagement within the community. By grounding the analysis in a specific setting, the study brings into view the ways in which plural governance operates in practice and how its internal organisation sustains patterned forms of exclusion.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive design to examine how customary governance, religious authority, and exclusion take shape in Churachandpur district of Manipur. The inquiry centres on the organisation of authority within everyday institutional settings. These processes unfold through practices, expectations, and forms of compliance that do not register through measurement. They take shape through interaction, through repetition, and through the anticipation of response within a shared social field.

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An interpretive orientation follows from this focus. Within plural settings, law is encountered through lived experience rather than formal codification alone. It operates through institutions, relationships, and expectations that structure conduct in ways that are often implicit (Merry, 1988). Understanding these dynamics requires attention to how individuals and communities engage with overlapping normative systems and how authority is recognised in practice.

The study proceeds through a case-based approach centred on the Churachandpur district of Manipur. The case is selected for the density of its institutional life: customary governance remains active, religious authority is organised, and the reach of the state varies across contexts. This combination makes it possible to examine how plural governance operates where multiple sources of authority are sustained in close proximity. The case provides a setting in which broader questions of participation, belonging, and exclusion can be examined through grounded institutional dynamics (Yin, 2018).

4.2. Analytical Approach

The analysis draws on a socio-legal orientation informed by political sociology. Attention is directed toward how law operates beyond formal institutions and how authority moves across customary, religious, and state-based frameworks. Norms are examined in terms of how they acquire force, how they are maintained, and how they shape conduct within everyday settings.

Authority is approached as a social relation. It is sustained through recognition, expectation, and compliance, and it acquires stability through repetition within institutional contexts. This focus allows for an examination of how participation is structured and how the conditions of inclusion and exclusion take shape within communities.

Normative concerns enter the analysis through questions of autonomy and rights as they are encountered in practice. These are examined within settings where authority is locally organised and mediated through institutional arrangements. The analysis, therefore, attends to how cultural frameworks and individual claims intersect within the organisation of everyday governance.

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4.3. Positionality Statement

The authors' positionality as scholars based in institutions within the Northeast India region informs their familiarity with the social and institutional environment examined in this study. While this familiarity enables nuanced interpretation of local dynamics, it also requires reflexive attention to how assumptions and perspectives may shape analysis. The authors have maintained analytical distance by grounding interpretations in observable practices and institutional processes, and by cross-checking observations against multiple sources. The authors are not members of the communities studied, and have sought to represent local perspectives with care and accuracy.

4.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed an interpretive approach, with field notes and interview transcripts coded thematically. Codes were developed iteratively, drawing on both existing theoretical frameworks and emergent patterns from the data. Themes were refined through discussion between the authors and cross-checked against secondary sources to ensure analytical consistency.

4.5. Data and Sources

The study draws on a combination of secondary source and contextually grounded knowledge through field-based observations. The secondary source includes published documents like- books and journal articles on legal pluralism, federalism and Northeast India, alongside constitutional provisions and policy documents. These materials provide the conceptual and institutional context within which the analysis is situated.

The study is also informed by familiarity with the social and institutional environment of Churachandpur District in Manipur. This includes knowledge of village authority structures, church-based governance, and community practices that organise everyday life. This familiarity informs the interpretation of institutional processes, particularly in contexts where authority is exercised through expectation, obligation, and informal sanction

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rather than explicit rule. The analysis maintains analytical distance while remaining attentive to the specificity of these institutional settings.

4.6. Analytical Orientation

The analysis follows how multiple normative systems, community formation, and institutional authority intersect within everyday practice. These elements do not operate as separate layers. They converge in the organisation of social life, shaping how norms are enforced, how expectations circulate, and how participation is structured.

Attention remains on how authority is recognised and maintained, and on how this organisation shapes the conditions under which exclusion persists. The aim is to trace how plural governance operates through institutional arrangements that stabilise expectations and regulate conduct within communities.

4.7. Scope and Limitations

Churachandpur district in Manipur provides the geographical setting for this study, located within India's Northeast along the international border with Myanmar. The district forms part of a wider borderland region marked by sustained movement, cultural interaction, and political negotiation. This selection rests on the density of its institutional and social composition and it is characterised by a high degree of ethnic heterogeneity, with over thirty communities, the majority of whom belong to the broader Zo ethnic groups, alongside smaller Naga and other populations (Churachandpur District Administration, n.d.). This diversity is accompanied by multiple customary institutions that organise governance at the community level, regulating access, resolving disputes, and structuring participation through norms embedded in local social relations.

The religious composition further structures this institutional landscape. According to the Census of India (2011), Christians constitute approximately 93.01 per cent of the population, alongside smaller Hindu, Muslim, and other communities (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). The institutional presence of religions extends beyond spiritual life

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into the regulation of conduct, the organisation of collective activity, and the articulation of moral expectations. Religious authority intersects with customary governance in ways that shape everyday social norms. This combination of ethnic diversity, institutional plurality, and religious dominance renders Churachandpur district of Manipur an instructive site for examining legal pluralism in practice. Customary governance and religious authority operate in close proximity, reinforcing one another in regulating behaviour and structuring participation.

The study is therefore confined to examining how these institutional arrangements interact within this specific context. Attention is directed toward the convergence of customary governance and dominant religious authority, and the ways in which this convergence shapes the conditions under which inclusion, exclusion, and participation are organised. The analysis remains grounded in this institutional configuration, using it to engage broader questions concerning plural governance and the organisation of authority.

5. Theoretical Framework

The analysis proceeds through a set of interrelated concepts that bring into focus how authority operates within plural institutional settings. Legal pluralism situates law across multiple normative orders that coexist within the same social field. These orders intersect through everyday practices and shape the conditions under which conduct is regulated. Their presence establishes multiplicity, yet multiplicity alone does not account for how authority acquires force. The question shifts to how particular norms come to structure behaviour and how they are sustained within institutional arrangements.

Within plural settings, authority is unevenly distributed across normative systems. Its force depends on recognition and on the capacity of institutions to sustain expectation and compliance. Engagement with overlapping norms reflects constraints embedded in social relations. Movement across these systems takes place within conditions shaped by obligation, familiarity, and the anticipation of sanction (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988). Authority,

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therefore, operates through patterns of recognition that stabilise conduct and limit the space available for deviation.

Critical approaches bring attention to the consolidation of authority within these arrangements. Normative systems do not carry equal weight. Authority accumulates within institutions that align with existing hierarchies and is reproduced through routine practices (Tamanaha, 2021). Where customary governance and organised religious authority operate in close alignment, this accumulation produces a dense field of normative control. The capacity to dissent is shaped by the organisation of these relations and by the costs attached to non-compliance, which are borne within the community rather than imposed from outside it.

Debates on multiculturalism introduce the question of recognition within plural societies. Recognition informs identity and belonging, and it shapes how individuals locate themselves within institutional frameworks (Taylor, 1994). Approaches that support group-differentiated rights attend to the accommodation of cultural difference (Kymlicka, 1995). These accounts leave open the organisation of authority within groups. The internal distribution of power and the ways in which it structures participation and expectation remain less developed. This gap becomes significant where recognition operates alongside institutional arrangements that regulate conduct through established hierarchies.

This concern extends to approaches that address the relationship between autonomy and regulation. Institutional recognition of cultural practices takes place within broader political frameworks that require engagement without absorption. The idea of principled distance captures this tension by emphasising a calibrated relationship between state authority and community institutions (Bhargava, 2008).

Federal arrangements provide the structural conditions within which these dynamics unfold. In India, asymmetrical federalism accommodates regional variation and recognises customary practices within specific institutional settings. These arrangements create space for locally organised authority while shaping the reach and presence of the state (Baruah, 2005). The

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resulting configuration sustains multiple forms of governance with uneven oversight, allowing institutional authority to operate through proximity, familiarity, and continuity.

These strands converge in the concept of institutionalised exclusion. Exclusion is approached as a process embedded within the organisation of authority. It emerges through the alignment of normative systems, through the circulation of expectations, and through the regulation of participation within institutional settings. Its operation rests on routine practices that define acceptable conduct, on forms of compliance sustained through social relations, and on the anticipation of sanction. Exclusion persists because it is reproduced through institutions that organise everyday life, rather than through formal acts that can be easily identified or contested.

This framework draw a direct attention to how plural governance operates in contexts such as Churachandpur district in Manipur. It centres the convergence of customary governance and organised religious authority and examines how this convergence structures participation, belonging, and exclusion. The focus remains on how authority is recognised, how it is maintained, and how its organisation sustains patterned forms of exclusion within the community.

6. Results and Discussion of the Research

Governance in Churachandpur district of Manipur is organised through overlapping authority structures that do not operate on equal terms. Customary institutions, religious organisations, and state structures coexist within the same social field, yet their roles are neither clearly separated nor uniformly distributed. Everyday regulation takes place through institutions that draw legitimacy from social acceptance, continuity, and proximity to community life rather than from formal enforcement. The presence of the state remains uneven, and its authority is encountered alongside institutional arrangements that are embedded within local social relations. What emerges is not a fragmented system but a layered configuration in which authority is organised through recognition, expectation, and sustained participation.

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Customary governance occupies a central position within this arrangement. Village authorities and chiefs continue to organise decision-making processes and regulate access to land, resources, and community membership. Their authority rests on continuity and on the extent to which they remain woven into everyday life. Conflict resolution within this setting does not depend on formal adjudication. It proceeds through processes that seek to restore social balance and maintain cohesion within the community. The effectiveness of these institutions depends on their ability to mobilise shared expectations and to sustain participation across generations. Their authority is not imposed externally; it is reproduced through routine engagement and collective acceptance.

The operation of customary governance becomes clearer when attention is directed toward its mechanisms of enforcement. Regulation is carried out through informal processes that do not rely on formal coercion. Social pressure, reputational consequences, and the possibility of exclusion from community life function as powerful forms of control. These mechanisms derive their authority from the close relationship between individual identity and collective belonging. Non-compliance does not trigger legal sanction in a formal sense; however, it produces consequences that are experienced within social relations. Individuals who deviate from expected norms encounter isolation, reduced recognition, and diminished participation.

Religious institutions operate alongside customary governance, yet their role extends beyond spiritual practice into the organisation of social life. Religious function as structured centres of authority that shape conduct, regulate behaviour, and organise participation. Their influence is visible in the mediation of disputes, the coordination of collective activities, and the articulation of moral expectations that guide everyday interaction. Their authority is reinforced through institutional presence and through their capacity to define the boundaries of acceptable conduct. Religious norms do not remain confined to belief; they enter into the regulation of behaviour and into the organisation of community life as well.

For example, in one village observed during the fieldwork, a woman who had joined a minority denomination reported being excluded from community

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decision-making processes. She was no longer invited to participate in village council meetings, and her views were not solicited on matters affecting the community. This exclusion was not formally declared; it operated through gradual withdrawal of recognition and participation. When asked about the situation, community members explained that her decision was "her choice," but that her absence from collective processes was a "natural consequence" of not being part of the dominant church.

In another instance, a young man who had expressed dissenting views on a community matter was subject to social pressure through avoidance, reduced participation in community events, and reputational consequences that affected his family's standing. The mechanisms of sanction operated through collective expectation rather than formal rule. These practices were understood within the community as normal forms of social regulation rather than as acts of exclusion.

Church-based governance structures were observed to extend beyond spiritual life into the regulation of everyday conduct. In one community, church leadership played a decisive role in mediating a land dispute, and its authority was accepted by both parties. In another, a church council's decision on membership criteria effectively determined who could participate in community festivals and collective activities. These decisions were not subject to appeal beyond the church structure, and their authority rested on the alignment between religious legitimacy and community expectation.

Norms associated with religious practice acquire force through their alignment with collective expectations. They shape decisions related to conduct, association, and participation. Compliance is secured through internalisation and through the anticipation of social response rather than through formal enforcement. Behaviour is guided by the need to remain within the bounds of accepted practice, and deviation carries consequences that are experienced through social relations. Regulation operates through discipline embedded in everyday life, where individuals adjust their conduct in response to expectations that are widely recognised within the community. The interaction between customary governance and religious authority produces a convergence of normative systems. These institutions reinforce

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one another in ways that stabilise expectations and strengthen the regulation of conduct. Customary norms draw legitimacy from cultural continuity, while religious norms derive force from moral authority. Their alignment produces a dense field of authority in which deviation becomes difficult to sustain over time. The distinction between cultural obligation and moral expectation becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, as both operate together in shaping behaviour. Authority is not situated in a single institution; it is distributed across aligned structures that together regulate participation and define the boundaries of belonging.

This convergence shapes the conditions under which exclusion takes place. Exclusion does not appear as an explicit or formally declared process. It is embedded within the organisation of institutional life and sustained through routine practices. Individuals who do not conform to dominant norms encounter limits that are widely understood and rarely articulated in formal terms. These limits take shape through reduced participation in decision-making processes, diminished influence within community structures, and the gradual withdrawal of social recognition. The processes through which this occurs remain implicit, yet their effects are consistent and cumulative.

Minority religious denominations, dissenting individuals, and women encounter constraints that reflect the organisation of authority within this institutional arrangement. Their participation is shaped by expectations that define acceptable roles and behaviour. These constraints do not arise from isolated acts. They are reproduced through everyday practices that regulate access to decision-making spaces, define the terms of engagement, and structure the distribution of voice within the community. Exclusion, in this sense, is not episodic. It is patterned, sustained, and embedded within the functioning of institutions that organise social life.

Power within this system is distributed across multiple actors, yet it is not evenly held. Tribal leadership, religious authorities, and community elites occupy positions that allow them to shape norms and regulate participation. Their influence rests on their ability to define expectations, to organise institutional processes, and to mobilise collective recognition. Authority operates through influence rather than formal command, and its continuity

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depends on the extent to which it is accepted and reproduced within everyday practice. These forms of power are sustained through networks of recognition that bind institutional authority to community life.

The broader federal context shapes the conditions under which this arrangement persists. The uneven reach of state institutions creates space for local systems of governance to organise everyday life. Customary and religious institutions fill gaps in formal governance by providing accessible mechanisms for regulation and conflict resolution. This unevenness does not simply allow these systems to persist; it shapes the conditions under which authority consolidates without sustained external challenge. Internal structures of authority continue to operate with limited oversight, reinforcing patterns of regulation that shape participation and exclusion within the community.

Taken together, these dynamics point to a configuration in which pluralism operates through the organisation of authority within institutional settings. The coexistence of multiple normative systems does not produce an open field of choice. It produces a structured environment in which expectations are stabilised, and behaviour is regulated through aligned institutions. The convergence of customary governance and religious authority consolidates normative control and shapes the conditions under which individuals engage with community life.

The dynamics observed here clarify how institutionalised exclusion is produced within plural governance. Exclusion is sustained through the alignment of normative systems, through the circulation of expectations, and through the regulation of participation within institutional frameworks. Its persistence lies in its integration into everyday practices rather than in formal structures. In this setting, plural governance does not simply accommodate diversity. It organises authority in ways that stabilise norms and sustain patterned forms of exclusion within the community.

7. Conclusion

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The interaction of customary governance and religious authority in Churachandpur district of Manipur brings into focus a form of pluralism organised through the distribution of authority within everyday institutional life. Governance does not operate through a single system, nor through clearly separated domains. It takes shape through overlapping structures that draw legitimacy from cultural continuity, collective recognition, and proximity to community life. These institutions regulate conduct, organise participation, and sustain social order in contexts where the presence of the state remains uneven. What emerges is not simply coexistence, but a structured arrangement in which authority is embedded in institutions that operate through expectation, recognition, and routine participation.

The combination of customary governance and religious authority produces a dense normative environment in which expectations are stabilised, and behaviour is regulated through shared frameworks. This convergence strengthens the capacity of institutions to organise social life, yet it also narrows the space available for deviation. Authority, once consolidated across these domains, acquires durability through repetition and through its integration into everyday practices. Within this setting, exclusion does not arise as an external disruption but as an outcome of institutional organisation itself. It is sustained through routine practices, through the circulation of expectations, and through mechanisms of social regulation that rarely require formal articulation.

These processes are grounded in the way authority is exercised within closely organised communities. Informal mechanisms of enforcement, including social pressure, reputational consequences, and restricted access to participation, carry significant force. Their effectiveness rests on the relationship between identity and belonging, where compliance is shaped by the need to remain within recognised boundaries. The regulation of conduct does not depend on formal sanction. It operates through internalisation and anticipation, where individuals adjust behaviour in response to expectations that are widely understood yet seldom codified. In this sense, authority is neither distant nor abstract; it is immediate, relational, and sustained through everyday interaction.

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The broader federal context shapes the conditions under which these dynamics persist. Asymmetrical arrangements accommodate diversity while leaving space for locally organised authority to operate with limited external oversight. This configuration sustains plural governance while allowing internal structures of authority to consolidate. The uneven reach of the state does not merely permit the persistence of customary and religious institutions; it shapes the conditions under which they acquire and maintain authority. The effects are visible in the organisation of participation, in the distribution of influence, and in the ways exclusion is reproduced within community life.

The findings engage directly with debates on legal pluralism and multiculturalism by directing attention to the organisation of authority within communities. Frameworks that emphasise recognition and diversity do not fully account for how power operates within institutional settings or how it is reproduced through everyday practices. The analysis supports critical perspectives that locate inequality within the structure of plural arrangements, showing how authority, once aligned across institutions, stabilises norms that regulate participation unevenly. Pluralism, in this sense, cannot be understood solely in terms of coexistence or accommodation. It must be examined in relation to the distribution of authority and the conditions under which it is exercised.

At the same time, the persistence of customary and religious institutions reflects their embeddedness within local contexts and their role in organising social life. These institutions provide forms of governance that are immediate, accessible, and responsive to community needs. The question, therefore, is not one of displacement, but of location- how their operation is situated within a framework that remains attentive to participation, accountability, and justice. This requires a reworking of pluralism that engages with internal dynamics of authority while maintaining sensitivity to cultural and institutional contexts. Such an approach must attend not only to the recognition of difference, but also to the conditions under which participation is structured, and voice is distributed within communities.

Pluralism operates as an ongoing negotiation shaped by the organisation of authority and the distribution of participation within institutional life. The

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case of Churachandpur district of Manipur makes visible how this negotiation unfolds in practice, where the convergence of normative systems sustains both social order and patterned exclusion. These outcomes are not incidental. They are produced within the structure of plural governance itself. Any engagement with pluralism must therefore begin from this recognition, and from an awareness that the organisation of authority within communities remains central to the possibilities of inclusion and justice.

8. Answers to Research Questions

The analysis yields the following answers to the research questions. First, customary governance and religious authority converge in Churachandpur district through overlapping institutional structures that regulate conduct, organise participation, and stabilise expectations. Village authorities and church leadership operate in close alignment, with each drawing legitimacy from the other and reinforcing norms through shared enforcement mechanisms. Second, exclusion is sustained through routine practices that do not rely on formal prohibition. Social pressure, reputational consequences, and the gradual withdrawal of participation operate as effective mechanisms of regulation. These processes are embedded in everyday institutional life and are reproduced through anticipation of sanction rather than explicit rule. Third, these dynamics raise questions about how pluralism is understood within India's federal framework. Constitutional provisions that accommodate difference create space for local autonomy while leaving internal hierarchies intact. Pluralism, in this sense, operates through layered authority rather than uniform protection, and the organisation of authority within communities shapes the conditions of inclusion and exclusion in ways that existing frameworks do not fully address.

9. Limitations

This study is subject to certain limitations. The analysis is confined to Churachandpur district and may not capture the full range of variation in customary-religious convergence across Northeast India. The reliance on field observations and secondary sources, while appropriate for the research

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design, does not include extensive survey data or longitudinal analysis. The research does not include systematic interviews with all affected groups, particularly minority denominations and women, whose perspectives would enrich understanding of exclusionary processes. The rapidly evolving political and institutional context of Manipur means that the findings reflect a specific historical moment. Future research should address these gaps through broader comparative and longitudinal designs.

10. Policy Implications

The findings raise questions for governance and policy in contexts where customary and religious institutions exercise significant authority. First, constitutional mechanisms for oversight of non-state institutions should be developed without undermining their legitimate functions. Second, provisions for representation and participation within customary and religious institutions should be strengthened, particularly for women and minority groups. Third, forums for inter-community dialogue on norms of belonging and exclusion could facilitate greater accountability. Fourth, legal literacy initiatives could enable individuals to understand their rights within plural institutional settings. Fifth, state institutions should engage with customary and religious authorities in ways that respect autonomy while ensuring that fundamental rights are protected.

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