Raj Darbhanga and the National Movement: Elite Power, Colonial Policy, and the Politics of Recognition

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Abstract

Raj Darbhanga was one of the largest and most powerful zamindaris in colonial India, exercising immense economic and cultural influence across north Bihar. Yet, despite its scale, wealth, and aristocratic authority, the estate remained outside the fold of recognised princely states. This paper examines the role of Raj Darbhanga in the national movement, focusing on the shifting relationship between zamindari power, colonial governance, and Indian nationalism. Drawing upon estate records, administrative reports, and recent historiography, it traces how successive rulers of Darbhanga engaged in a politics of both collaboration and opposition. Their patronage of education, culture, and nationalist organisations complicates the conventional view of zamindars as collaborators. At the same time, the denial of princely status, despite Darbhanga's princely stature in practice, illustrates the colonial state's suspicion of estates that leaned towards nationalist politics. By situating Darbhanga within wider debates on feudalism, elite politics, and anti-colonial struggle, this paper argues for a more nuanced understanding of the role of landed elites in India's transition to independence.

Keywords: Raj Darbhanga, National Movement, Colonialism.

Introduction

The history of zamindars in colonial India has often been narrated in terms of loyalty to the Raj. Large estates were seen as pillars of colonial authority, their wealth and prestige secured under the Permanent Settlement, and their political role largely one of collaboration. Yet such generalisations obscure important exceptions. Among them, the case of Raj Darbhanga stands out. One of the largest zamindaris in northern India,

Darbhanga commanded immense landed wealth, patronised learning and culture, and exercised significant influence in colonial Bihar. At the same time, its rulers became associated with reformist politics, public causes, and strands of the national movement.

This paradox, that a great landed estate could simultaneously embody the privileges of colonial order and articulate elements of nationalist dissent, raises important questions about the nature of elite politics in late colonial India. Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh, who inherited the estate after its management under the Court of Wards, became an important patron of education and a supporter of moderate nationalist organisations in the late nineteenth century. His successors continued to fund cultural and political initiatives, complicating the image of zamindars as mere collaborators.[xxiii]

Equally striking is the colonial state's attitude toward Raj Darbhanga. Despite its wealth and aristocratic stature, it was never accorded princely recognition, unlike smaller states with far less influence. This denial was not simply a matter of legal distinction between zamindari tenure and princely sovereignty. It also reflected the colonial government's unease with Darbhanga's association with reformist and nationalist causes, which made it an unreliable partner in the architecture of indirect rule.[xxiii]

By tracing the economic base, political engagements, and cultural patronage of Raj Darbhanga, this paper re-examines the role of zamindari elites in the national movement. Rather than reinforcing a binary of collaboration versus opposition, it shows how the estate occupied a liminal space, both indispensable to colonial governance and increasingly entangled with nationalist politics.

The Economic and Cultural Power of Raj Darbhanga

The Darbhanga estate was among the most powerful landed properties in colonial India. By the mid-nineteenth century, it encompassed vast tracts of north Bihar, with revenues rivalling those of recognised princely states. The Court of Wards' management from 1860, following the minority of Lakshmishwar Singh, not only stabilised the estate's finances but also

consolidated its administrative machinery. By the 1870s, Darbhanga had emerged as a major political and economic force in the region.[xxiii]

The estate's influence, however, extended well beyond land and revenue. Darbhanga became a hub of cultural patronage. The Raj invested heavily in Sanskrit learning, established schools, and later supported institutions such as the Sanskrit College at Darbhanga and, eventually, the Darbhanga Sanskrit University.[xxiii] This patronage reinforced both a regional Maithili identity and a broader Hindu cultural revival. As Pankaj Jha has argued, the Raj's cultural investments functioned as a 'hegemonic project' that sought to bind the peasantry to elite authority through cultural legitimacy.[xxiii]

At the same time, Darbhanga's economic base underpinned its political importance. The estate's immense landholdings provided not only rents but also a network of dependent tenants and local officials whose allegiance enhanced the Maharaja's authority.[xxiii] Such influence enabled Darbhanga to intervene in both colonial and nationalist politics, making it indispensable to the political history of Bihar.

Darbhanga and Colonial Governance

The relationship between Raj Darbhanga and the colonial state was mediated above all by the Court of Wards. Following the death of Maharaja Maheshwar Singh in 1860, the estate passed under the Court of Wards administration because his heir, Lakshmishwar Singh, was a minor. During this period, detailed reports recorded both the scale of indebtedness, which stood at seventy lakhs of rupees in 1860, and the subsequent recovery, with revenues reaching twenty lakhs annually by the mid-1870s.[xxiii] These reports, preserved in the *Proceedings of the Bengal Government* and cited in later estate histories, underscore the degree of bureaucratic oversight under which Darbhanga operated.

The Court of Wards management also illustrates the ambiguous status of the estate. On the one hand, its finances were stabilised and its authority reinforced through colonial supervision. On the other hand, such supervision constrained the Maharaja's autonomy, binding the estate

closely to the bureaucracy.[xxiii] As Jha notes, the Darbhanga rulers often clashed with officials over revenue collection, jurisdiction, and estate management, reflecting the tension between colonial control and landlord power.[xxiii]

This tension was visible in public controversies as well. For instance, when Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh emerged as a patron of reformist causes in the 1880s, colonial officials privately expressed concern about his 'political reliability.' Reports in the *Bengal District Gazetteers* noted both his philanthropy and his political associations, a combination that marked him out as distinct from other zamindars.[xxiii]

Thus, while Darbhanga was indispensable to colonial administration in Bihar, its rulers occupied a liminal space: empowered by colonial law, yet treated with suspicion whenever they aligned with Indian nationalist politics.

Raj Darbhanga and the National Movement

The stereotype of zamindars has often overshadowed the role of Raj Darbhanga in the Indian national movement as loyalists of the colonial state. Yet, from the late nineteenth century onward, the Darbhanga rulers demonstrated a strikingly different trajectory. The most prominent figure was Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh (1858–1898), whose brief but influential reign symbolised a new kind of landlord politics: one that combined cultural patronage, philanthropy, and cautious but explicit support for nationalist causes.

Lakshmishwar Singh's political engagements must be situated against his personal background. Educated under the supervision of the Court of Wards, he inherited a financially stabilised estate in 1879. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, he used his wealth for extensive public benefactions. He funded the establishment of schools, hospitals, and libraries, earning him recognition not only in Bihar but also in Bengal's intellectual circles.[xxiii] In 1888, the *Indian Mirror* described him as 'the most enlightened landlord in India,' a title reflecting his growing prominence in public life.[xxiii]

Equally significant was his association with the Indian National Congress and other reformist organisations. Lakshmishwar Singh contributed funds to the Indian Association and was an early supporter of Congress meetings in the late 1880s. His correspondence with Surendranath Banerjee and Anand Mohan Bose reveals a sympathy for moderate constitutional reforms, even as he remained careful not to openly antagonise the colonial government.[xxiii] During the famine of 1896–97, he provided large-scale relief to peasants, acts that were widely reported in the nationalist press as evidence of his alignment with public welfare rather than narrow zamindari interests.[xxiii]

Darbhanga's involvement did not end with Lakshmishwar Singh. His successors, particularly Maharaja Rameshwar Singh (1898–1929), continued this dual policy of cautious engagement with nationalist causes. Rameshwar Singh was a member of the Indian Legislative Council and, while maintaining loyalty to the Raj, often spoke in favour of reforms. His speeches in the Council reveal an insistence on the rights of Indian landlords to participate in governance, a position that implicitly aligned him with broader nationalist demands for Indian representation.[xxiii] By the 1920s, members of the Darbhanga family were active patrons of educational institutions that became important bases for nationalist mobilisation in north Bihar.[xxiii]

Beyond elite correspondence and legislative presence, archival newspapers and local reports document more concrete forms of Darbhanga's engagement with public politics, as well as the limits of the widespread embrace of that engagement. Contemporary Calcutta and Patna press coverage shows the Raj making repeated, public donations to nationalist causes and hosting delegations of reformers; for example, Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh's recorded subsidies to the Indian Association and his public role in arranging provincial meetings were reported in the nationalist press of the 1880s and 1890s, giving visible form to elite support for constitutional reform.[xxiii] Primary newspapers also recorded the Raj's large-scale famine relief efforts during the 1896–

97 crisis, an act that was viewed by many contemporaries as public-spirited nationalism rather than mere paternalism.[xxiii]

However, the Darbhanga story in the 1920s shows how elite patronage could generate contestation on the ground. P. K. Jha's archival study of the Non-Cooperation period documents local peasant agitation around Darbhanga: itinerant leaders (for example, the movement associated with Swami Vidyanand) mobilised tenant grievances against rental demands and estate punishments, and these protests sometimes framed the Raj as a target even while national politics sought a unified anti-colonial front.[xxiii] District-level reports and contemporary peasant press extracts preserved in provincial archives record instances where Darbhanga's police or estate agents intervened to suppress agitations, and other documents show negotiations in which the estate offered limited concessions to avert wider unrest.[xxiii]

These primary traces complicate the image of Darbhanga as simply a 'friend' of the national movement: to urban nationalists and cultural patrons, the Raj appeared as an ally and benefactor, but to many rural tenants, it remained a coercive landlord. This dual reception explains a crucial aspect of Darbhanga's political identity in the twentieth century , an estate that projected national and political influence through public benefaction and institutional patronage, while simultaneously being contested by social movements emerging from below.[xxiii]

Colonial officials, however, remained uneasy about this trajectory. A confidential report of the Bihar and Orissa Government in 1922 described the Darbhanga Raj as 'politically restless' and noted its 'encouragement of vernacular associations.'[xxiii] Unlike smaller zamindars who remained confined to agrarian dominance, Darbhanga positioned itself within the arena of public politics, thereby attracting suspicion.

At the grassroots level, the estate's role was more ambivalent. While nationalist leaders invoked Darbhanga's philanthropy, many tenants and peasants viewed the estate as an exploitative landlord. Peasant associations in the 1920s and 1930s often targeted the Raj in their protests,

demanding rent reductions and relief.[xxiii] Thus, while Darbhanga enjoyed prestige among nationalist elites, it also faced contestation from below. This duality captures the complexity of zamindar politics in late colonial Bihar: both patrons of nationalist causes and objects of peasant resistance. Under the reign of Maharajadhiraja Kameshwar Singh (1929–1962), the Raj Darbhanga entered its most explicitly political phase in relation to India's independence and constitutional transition. At the age of 22, Singh was elected President of the Bengal Landholders' Association in 1929, a position that connected him with a network of zamindari elites who were increasingly vocal in their views. He was invited to participate in the Round Table Conferences, thereby engaging directly with the British government's deliberations over India's political future.[xxiii] As a member of the Constituent Assembly from Bihar, Singh took a special interest in issues concerning zamindari rights and land reform. In assembly debates, he defended the need for just compensation for landlords affected by land reform legislation, arguing that agrarian justice must be balanced with the protection of vested property rights.[xxiii] Beyond legal-constitutional arenas, Singh's contributions also included educational and cultural patronage tied to nationalist identity: he donated Anand Bagh Palace and its grounds for establishing a state Sanskrit University; he supported vernacular literatures, particularly Maithili, and pursued inclusion of Maithili as a subject in universities, helping cultural nationalism in Mithila gain institutional recognition. Singh also made substantial philanthropic gestures to nationalist educational institutions beyond Bihar, such as contributions to Aligarh Muslim University in 1945, which were reported in contemporary press coverage as signaling his commitment to the broader nationalist movement.[xxiii] Through these actions, Kameshwar Singh combined the prerogatives of landed authority with modern political responsibilities; his leadership illustrates how powerful zamindars could adapt to changing nationalist pressures, negotiating legal status, public legitimacy, and the demands of constitutional politics.

Darbhanga Raj's involvement in the national movement was neither accidental nor peripheral. Through philanthropy, educational patronage, and cautious political interventions, it carved out a distinctive position for itself within the nationalist discourse. Yet, this very involvement also made it suspect in the eyes of colonial administrators, reinforcing its ambiguous status as a landlord estate that was too powerful to ignore but too unreliable to elevate to the rank of princely.

The Question of Recognition and Denial of Princely Status

Despite its immense wealth and influence, Raj Darbhanga never attained recognition as a princely state under the British Indian system. This omission is striking, given that the estate's annual revenues and territorial expanse exceeded those of many minor princely states in the subcontinent.[xxiii] By the late nineteenth century, Darbhanga controlled tens of thousands of tenants, maintained quasi-bureaucratic institutions, and patronised cultural projects of regional and national significance.[xxiii]

Historians have debated the reasons for this denial. On one hand, colonial administrators consistently classified Darbhanga as a *zamindari* under the Permanent Settlement, thereby rendering it a landed estate rather than a sovereign polity.[xxiii] The administrative logic was that recognition of zamindaris as princely states would undermine the carefully constructed legal hierarchy of colonial property rights. On the other hand, archival evidence suggests that political factors also mattered. Darbhanga's visible sympathy with nationalist organizations, its support for educational institutions associated with Indian reformers, and its willingness to intervene in legislative debates raised suspicions about its loyalty.

Confidential correspondence in the India Office records reveals that as early as 1919, officials in London worried that granting princely recognition to Darbhanga would 'enhance the political pretensions of an estate already inclined to nationalist sympathies.'[xxiii] The fact that the estate's rulers, unlike many Rajput or Maratha princes, did not seek active military collaboration with the British further weakened their case.[xxiii]

Thus, the denial of princely status cannot be explained merely by administrative precedent. Rather, it reflected the colonial state's determination to restrict political recognition to landlords whose loyalty was unquestionable. In this sense, Darbhanga's ambiguous position, too powerful to ignore but too politically entangled to be trusted, became emblematic of the contradictions of colonial governance in Bihar.

Conclusion: Raj Darbhanga and the Paradoxes of Colonial Power

The history of Raj Darbhanga illuminates the paradoxical position of India's great zamindaris within the colonial order. As one of the largest estates in the subcontinent, Darbhanga commanded revenues and social authority that rivalled the princely states. It acted as a cultural patron, an economic powerhouse, and, unlike most landed estates, a visible participant in nationalist politics. Yet, despite its immense influence, it was denied princely recognition, confined legally to the category of a landed estate under the Permanent Settlement.

This paradox reflected the deeper contradictions of colonial governance. The British sought to stabilize their rule in Bihar through the zamindari system, which created a loyal class of intermediaries. Yet the very success of Darbhanga in mobilizing its resources for education, philanthropy, and political engagement rendered it an ambiguous ally. Its support for the Indian National Congress, its sponsorship of vernacular cultural revival, and its interventions in legislative debates meant that it could not be counted among the unquestioning collaborators that the Raj preferred. Colonial suspicion was therefore not incidental: it was structurally bound to the ways in which Darbhanga transcended the expected limits of a landlord estate.

The estate's role in the national movement further complicates the simplistic binary of 'feudal landlord versus nationalist elite.' Lakshmishwar Singh's philanthropy and Congress sympathies in the late nineteenth century, Rameshwar Singh's legislative interventions, and the continued patronage of nationalist-leaning educational institutions reveal

a distinctive mode of elite politics. Darbhanga's rulers combined their feudal authority with modern forms of public engagement, seeking to anchor their legitimacy in both traditional patronage and emergent nationalist discourse. This duality explains why they were celebrated by sections of the nationalist press even as they were targeted by peasant mobilizations from below.

The denial of princely status is therefore best read not simply as a bureaucratic decision, but as a political judgment. By refusing to elevate Darbhanga, the colonial state drew a boundary between 'feudal collaborators' deserving recognition and 'politically unreliable landlords' to be contained within the zamindari framework. Darbhanga's fate thus underscores the degree to which colonial classifications of status were not neutral legal categories but politically charged strategies of control.

More broadly, the case of Raj Darbhanga invites us to rethink the role of landed elites in India's nationalist trajectory. The tendency to treat zamindars as uniformly reactionary obscures the diversity of their responses to colonialism and nationalism. In Darbhanga we find a landlord estate that not only exercised immense local dominance but also projected itself into the public sphere, shaping debates on education, famine relief, and constitutional reform. Its rulers may not have been radical nationalists, but their actions widened the field of nationalist politics and complicated the colonial state's efforts to draw neat lines between loyalty and resistance.

In conclusion, Raj Darbhanga demonstrates that the national movement was not only the preserve of professional politicians, urban middle classes, or militant peasants. It also drew in segments of the landed aristocracy, whose ambiguous position as both beneficiaries of colonialism and aspirants for wider legitimacy compelled them into nationalist spaces. Darbhanga's story is thus not a marginal footnote but a central episode in the social history of Indian nationalism, revealing how power, culture, and politics intersected in ways that unsettled both colonial classifications and nationalist orthodoxies.

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