

## The Rana Era Sawari Camp Mail of Nepal

### Synopsis

A particularly rare form of Nepalese mail originated from the hunting camps established by the Rana Prime Ministers in the Nepalese Terai, a 40 mile wide strip of tropical forested lowlands that stretched across Nepal's entire southern border with India. For most of the year, this region was mosquito infested and malaria ridden. However, during the winter dry season from late October to mid-April, the malaria threat abated and it became a big game hunter's paradise, home to a huge population of bears, rhinoceroses, leopards, and tigers. From the 1850s to the 1940s, for up to three months each year, these huge camps often accommodated over 13,000 people and became in effect the capital of the country. They were therefore termed "sawari" camps – sawari meaning of supreme honor and importance. As might be expected, they generated a significant volume of mail which was carried by special messengers between the camp and Kathmandu. Unfortunately little of this mail survives. This single frame presentation is the most comprehensive collection of such mail thus far exhibited. The items shown are culled from the exhibitor's extensive Nepalese postal history collection which includes well over 1500 covers dated prior to 1950 and which has taken over sixty years to assemble.

**Importance:** These yearly hunts were more than just fancy sporting events. As the philatelic record shows, Jung Bahadur, the first of the Rana prime ministers, and his successors adroitly used them as a diplomatic tool to gain favor with the British royals and thereby inhibit the Indian Colonial officials from challenging Nepalese sovereignty. Several of the covers shown thus have an historic significance beyond just the philatelic and would also be of interest to collectors of India, as well as, Nepal. These include covers posted from the traveling post offices of the Prince of Wales in 1876, of the Indian Viceroy in 1901, of King George V in 1912, and of the Prince of Wales in 1921. These camp offices were operated by the Indian Postal Service on Nepalese territory and represent one of the rarest forms of Indian stamps used abroad.

**Study and Research:** This exhibit is the result of many hours of background study and original research. Sawari camp mail has not previously been examined holistically or in any depth. Both Dr. Hellrigl and Dr. Singer list and examine in some detail the postmarks related to the British royal hunts of 1912 and 1922. Dr. Hellrigl also mentions the camp postmark associated with the Prince of Wales hunt in 1876. And both along with Dr. Ramesh Shrestha comment on the half anna camp rate of 1899 and two pice rate of 1907. However, very little has been written about how the camp mail system actually worked. And the mail from anything other than the big British royal related hunts has been largely ignored. There is thus far more to this story than has been previously told. This study hopefully goes a long way toward addressing this problem. It also corrects some errors made in previous studies. For example, while both Dr. Hellrigl and Dr. Singer implied that the hunts were located in the area of Chitwan in central Nepal, in actuality as this study shows they were held in a variety of locations across the entire southern length of the country. To the best of the exhibitor's knowledge, this exhibit is the first to systematically assign specific covers to these different locations.

Several books were heavily referenced in the construction of this exhibit and are as follows:

*The Classic Stamps of Nepal* by Dr. Wolfgang Hellrigl and Frank Vignola

*The Native Postmarks of Nepal* by Dr. Wolfgang Hellrigl and Colin Hepper

*Nepal 1772-1961 and Beyond* by Dr. Armand E. Singer

*A Catalogue of Nepalese Postmarks* by Dr. Wolfgang Hellrigl

*Nepal Postal History / The British-Indian Post Office in Nepal* by Dr. Wolfgang Hellrigl

*Nepalese Postal History, from the Earliest Times until 1959* by Dr. Ramesh Shrestha

*Nepal under the Ranas* by Adrian Sever

*Big Game Shooting in Nepal* by E.A. Smythies – This rare book published in India in 1944 has been especially useful in determining the dates and location of the hunts between 1931 and 1938, as well as, providing a wealth of general information on their day-to-day operation.

In addition to the books listed above, the exhibitor has over forty more books on Nepalese history and philately in his personal library which along with numerous books on Nepal in the Ohio State University Library have served as secondary sources to provide context and background for the study.

## The Rana Era Sawari Camp Mail of Nepal - Synopsis

The hunts of the British royals were heavily covered in the British Press often with extensive illustrations. In addition to the covers, the exhibitor has assembled a fair-sized collection of these articles which has provided additional valuable information for this study.

Much information was also gleaned from various issues of *Postal Himal*, the quarterly publication of the Nepal and Tibet Philatelic Study Circle, to which the exhibitor has contributed several articles. The exhibitor has also been active on the Facebook page of the Nepal Philatelic Society of Kathmandu and engaged with its members in a long running discussion about the nature and workings of the camp mail system. They have been kind enough to offer numerous valuable comments and data in response to my queries over the years. The exhibitor's discovery examples of several of the items displayed in this exhibit such as the 1876 Prince of Wales camp receiving postmark, the 1901 Viceroy cover, the 1938 Prime Minister seal document, and the earliest examples of the 1911 Emperor's camp cancels were first publicly recorded on this site.

Of course, the internet in general has provided a wealth of information. There are several Rana family websites which have been very useful. And Wikipedia and Google have both proven their worth especially in pointing the exhibitor towards obscure online data sources.

**Rarity of Material:** One reason that Sawari camp mail has not been previously studied in depth is the rarity of the material which is the result of several factors. Prior to World War II, there were very few stamp collectors in Nepal, and foreign collectors had limited and very spotty access to material. Thus, little early Nepalese philatelic material was privately saved. And the amount of such material saved in government archives was also small compared to West. File cabinets did not exist. Paper records were generally bundled and stacked against a wall which made them difficult to sort through. All long-term government records were therefore kept to a minimum. Existing early Nepalese material is thus in general comparatively scarce. And hunting camp mail is especially so. All freight and mail between the camps and Kathmandu was carried for much of the distance by foot. Only the most important records were carried back to the capital. Most of the incoming mail was thus not saved but instead ended up in a cooking fire. And mail from the camp to Kathmandu usually did not have a return address or any postal markings making it impossible to verify the origin of a cover unless it was saved with the enclosed letter. And as to the traveling post offices operated by the Indian postal service during the British royal hunts, these operated for only a few days; and little of their mail has survived. The number of existing Sawari camp covers of all types is thus minuscule. Based on the number of such items that have come up for auction over the last twenty years and the exhibitor's familiarity with the other larger collections of Nepalese material, a reasonable estimate of the number of domestic Nepalese pre-postal camp covers would be between 15 and 20. According to the Richard Frajola Harmer Sale 3025 of Nepal in 2029, there are 7 to 10 of the half-anna rate covers. And again based on the exhibitor's knowledge of the market over the last twenty years, a reasonable estimate of the number of other domestic camp covers posted between 1879 and 1944 would be 30 to 40. Of the British-Indian Nepalese camp covers, there are 6 known from the Prince of Wales 1876 traveling camp post office. The viceroy camp cover of 1901 shown is the only example currently recorded. And Dr. Hellrigl estimated the number of 1812 British King-Emperor camp covers and those from the 1922 Prince of Wales camp at about 20 each. All told, there would thus appear to be something on the order of 100 to 125 camp covers of all types in existence of which 19 including all the rarest forms are included in this exhibit.

**Condition:** Early Nepalese covers are usually a bit worn and dirty looking. Many were carried up to three hundred miles by native runners on primitive footpaths through the harshest of weather conditions across some of the roughest terrain in the world. And according to various western observers, it was common practice even at the main post office in Kathmandu to sort and cancel the mail outside on the ground if the weather was pleasant. In rural areas, postmasters often worked their mail on the dirt floor of their local office. One observer in the 1950's even noted that a flock of chickens routinely pecked for food among the stacks of mail being sorted outside of the main national post office in Kathmandu. A pristine Nepalese cover is a relative term.

**Acknowledgement:** Most postmark illustrations were taken from Dr. Hellrigl's *A Catalogue of Nepalese Postmarks* with the author's kind permission. Maps are the work of the exhibitor unless otherwise noted.



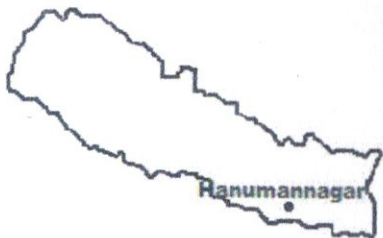
# The Rana Era Sawari Camp Mail of Nepal

Jung Bahadur, the prime minister and dictator of Nepal from 1847 to 1877, was an avid hunter who spent several weeks every year in special camps (known as Sawari Camps) in the Nepalese lowlands (the Terai) in pursuit of bears, rhinoceroses, and especially tigers. Jung's descendants as hereditary prime ministers continued this practice until the 1940's. These camps which accommodated several thousand people became in effect the seat of the national government for the duration of the hunt with special couriers employed to ferry mail between the camps and the capital, Kathmandu. This exhibit presents a series of covers arranged in chronological order to show how this mail system operated and changed over its history. It is divided into three sections: Pre-Postal Era Mail, Classic/Transitional Era Mail, and Pashupati Era Mail

## Pre-Postal Era Mail

Before the establishment of the modern Nepalese postal system in 1878, government mail was carried between officials on an ad hoc basis by a messenger system made up of relays of runners supplied by local families or clans in lieu of paying taxes. There were no post offices or postmarks. All mail was official and carried without charge validated by the seal of the sender.

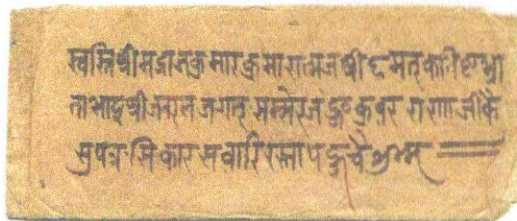
### An 1856 Cover to the Southern Commander at a Sawari Camp



This is the earliest example of Sawari camp mail known to the exhibitor.



From Hanumannagar to a Camp in the Parsa-Bara Area December 1856  
Validated by the Seal of General Bhakta



The above cover contained a letter from General Bhakta Bir Kunwar Rana, a lower caste half-brother of Jung Bahadur, to General Jaget Shumsher Rana, a younger full brother of the prime minister. Jaget as the newly appointed Commander of the South had just been put in charge of setting up and maintaining the camps.

Reverse Side of the Cover Addressed to Jaget Shumsher

