

## A History of Greater Nineteenth Century Nepal – Seals and Signatures (A Synopsis)

The items shown in this exhibit are culled from the exhibitor's collection which includes well over 1000 Nepalese covers dated prior to 1912 and which has taken over sixty years to assemble.

**Treatment and Scope:** The exhibit is generally structured in chronological order. Rather than being limited to the numeral Nineteenth Century from 1801 to 1900, it roughly encompasses the era referred to by historians as the "Greater Nineteenth Century" which stretches from the start of the French Revolution in 1789 to the eve of World War I. During this period, in contrast to much of the non-western world, Nepal was always a sovereign state and never a colony. Changes to its government developed from within rather than being imposed by an outside power. How Nepal as a preindustrial, almost medieval country was able during this era to maintain its independence and adopt the structure of a modern, bureaucratic nation-state is compelling history. **This display class exhibit uses the signatures and personal and institutional seals found on select covers and documents as a narrative device to relate this history.** In addition, contemporary photographs, engravings from periodicals, and various other forms of collateral material are also used. This is thus not a postal history exhibit. It is instead concerned with history in the broad sense. Who wrote a letter and why it was sent are generally ignored in postal history exhibits. In contrast, this exhibit views the material shown primarily from these two perspectives to address the issues usually covered in a standard history book about nineteenth century Nepal. These include the social and governmental hierarchy, diplomatic dealings, wars, factional political disputes, changes in the structure of government, etc. It is important to note that after the establishment of the Nepalese Postal Service in 1879, the personal and institutional seals which are the major focus of the exhibit were used to show mail was official and no stamps were necessary. Private stamped covers generally did not bear seals and are therefore not relevant to this exhibit. **Since this study is largely concerned with what amounts to free franked mail validated by the seals of government officials, the stamped covers showing multiple and registered rates usually highlighted in postal history exhibits are generally off point as are those with rare stamp usages. The exhibitor has an advanced comprehensive collection of such covers which are not shown here. The exhibitor has at several shows been faulted for not showing these items. To be clear, they are not included because the exhibitor lacks them but rather because they do not advance the narrative and are outside the scope of the exhibit.**

**Importance:** Nepal had outsized effect on nineteenth century South Asian political affairs especially regarding the balance of power between the British and the Indian states. For good or ill, it was instrumental in allowing the British to maintain their hold in India through its aid during the Sepoy Rebellion in 1856 and its ongoing supply of Gurkha mercenaries to the British Raj as this exhibit shows. Within the context of nineteenth century world history, Nepal was thus not some insignificant colonial backwater but was arguably as important on the world stage as were for example Italy, Greece, or the Scandinavian countries.

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

*Nepalese Postal History, from the Earliest Times until 1959* by Dr. Ramesh Shrestha – This book is especially useful as a general guide to Nepalese postal history.

*Nepal under the Ramas* by Adrian Sever – The exhibit closely follows the same outline of history as this book and addresses virtually all the same historical episodes and issues.

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

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

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

*Himalaya – A Human History* by Ed Douglas

*Some Tibetan Seals Illustrated and Described* by Derrick Dawson

In addition, much information was also gleaned from various issues of *Postal Himal*, the quarterly publication of the Nepal and Tibet Philatelic Study Circle, and from the Royalark genealogical website as well as numerous other secondary sources. Most of the information relating to official and personal seals which constitute the major focus of this exhibit represents original research by the exhibitor some of which has been published in articles by the exhibitor in *Postal Himal* as well as numerous posts in the discussion forums on the NTPSC and Nepal Philatelic Society of Kathmandu websites. This research in some cases has yielded new historical information beyond that of the philatelic realm. The Nepalese national archives were lost in a fire in the 1970s; and little information remains detailing who at any given time held a specific government position such as a district governorship or diplomatic post in India and Tibet. This exhibit contains several covers and letters that shed new light on who occupied these positions and their term of office. Also, this exhibit features a historically significant series of letters and covers relating to the Indian Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 that helps clarify Nepal's role in that epic conflict. Due to the data loss resulting from the archive fire, the standard modern history books on Nepal are often vague about many historical events and the pre-1970s day-to-day workings of the government. As a result, understanding just how covers, letters and their writers were connected to specific events often required ferreting out information from some rather obscure sources such as nineteenth century periodicals and obscure local histories. Also, the similarity of many of the Nepalese names to one another usually necessitated a careful cross checking of genealogical and historical data to match the personal seals on covers to given historical

## **A History of Greater Nineteenth Century Nepal – Seals and Signatures (A Synopsis)**

figures with a reasonable degree of confidence. In other words, in addition to many hours of philatelic study, a significant amount of time consuming, complex primary and secondary historical research went into assembling this exhibit.

**Rarity of Material:** Obviously most of the items in the sections predating the establishment of the modern Nepalese Postal Service in 1879 are quite rare and in many cases unique in usage and form. The seal or signature of virtually every important nineteenth century Nepalese political figure is included, the vast majority of which exist in quantities of five or less. Even during the post 1879 classic era period, mail volume was generally light in most areas of the country because the national literacy rate was less than 5% until well into the twentieth century. The only mail from such areas would have been the bi-weekly or monthly official reports. Many of the classic era official covers shown were thus from districts for which the total mail volume was probably less than fifty letters a year resulting in a miniscule number of surviving covers. In summary, almost all the cancels, postmarks, and seals shown in this exhibit exist on cover in quantities of 30 or less. Several items are probably unique, and a substantial number are believed to exist in quantities of 4 or less. Generally, only those thought to exist in quantities of 15 or less are specifically noted in the exhibit for their rarity.

**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 unless otherwise noted are the work of the exhibitor.

**Some Excuses and Clarifications:** Over the years, this exhibit has been criticized by judges as being more akin to a book than an exhibit. While the exhibitor agrees that it is generally wordier than the standard, he would argue that the book analogy is not correct. Rather the wordiness arises because the exhibitor has tried to fashion this exhibit to be interesting and comprehensible to a casual viewer by adopting some of the textual tenants of a museum exhibit. For this reason, the text often reflects the literary approach laid out in chapter 12 of *The Manual of Museum Exhibits* by Dexter and Gail Lord in contrast to the minimalist, phrase-based one espoused in philatelic exhibit handbooks. To quote the museum manual, "...exhibition text must be short, relevant to the interests and motivations of the visitors, accessible, and engaging to read. This also means that text - both in appearance and quality of prose - must be of professional quality..." The manual then continues, "...many visitors may not read the exhibition copy. However, if the printed word is presented in an inadequate or non-professional manner, all visitors will notice this, whether they are inclined to read the words or not." Obviously, it is going to be a very rare viewer or judge who reads every word of an exhibit no matter how sparse the text. The idea is thus not that an exhibit should be constructed with the expectation that any viewer will read every word of an exhibit but rather that if an item catches their attention, it should be presented in a manner that is understandable and at least moderately interesting. Given its historical overtones, such an approach would seem particularly appropriate for this exhibit. Many of the items shown are extremely "information rich" in that they in themselves have a compelling story to tell in addition to advancing the narrative in multiple ways. For example, some covers contained interesting letters often of historical importance. In most exhibits such letters would be largely ignored. In this exhibit, while these letters are generally not shown, brief summations or excerpts are included when appropriate. Also, important Nepalese historical figures related to a given set of items are pictured if portraits exist to give the viewer some sense of the people who authored and received these items. Contemporary era photographs or illustrations are generally used. However, if a particular figure has been pictured on a modern postage stamp, it is used instead. Unfortunately, in several cases the only known images of a given individual are in family collections or museums. If so, the exhibitor has included a small thumbnail scan if these have been published. Most such images have been taken from the previously cited Nepal under the Ranas or in the case of the kings from an opening page of the official program handed out to attendees at King Birendra's coronation ceremony in 1972.

**The Development of This Exhibit:** Over the last 17 years, this exhibit has garnered 9 gold awards at various national level shows including COLOEX, WESTPEX, and the 2009, 2011, 2014, 2018, and 2023 APS StampShows. It has been completely rewritten three times and modified after every show to incorporate many of the judges' suggestions. It finally achieved a large gold with 91 points at INDYPEX 2023. Since that show, several changes have been made to comply with the judges' suggestions. Most notably, the title has been changed to allow several pages that had been part of the epilogue to be incorporated into the main portion of the exhibit and improvements were made in identifying and explaining certain seals. In addition, new covers have been added to the section devoted to the 1855 Nepali-Tibetan War as well as a cover showing Nepal's involvement in the Tibetan Civil War of 1862-63. A double page has also been added to the beginning of the exhibit explaining the importance of the Royal Seal Documents and how the design and usage of the Nepalese royal seal was influenced by those of the Dalai Lamas of Tibet.