

# Assam Shikari

*A Tea Planter's Story of Hunting  
and High Adventure in the Jungles  
of North East India*

FRANK NICHOLLS

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1970

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## *Preface*

Many of my friends, past and present, have requested me to relate the many jungle experiences and other interesting events which came my way during my fifty years in Assam. All except five of those years were spent on the north bank of the Brahmaputra River and in rather remote areas near the foothills of the eastern Himalayas south of Tibet.

During my childhood days in England I took keen delight in being in the woods, amongst the trees, birds and flowers. For hours I watched fox cubs, stoats and weasels. I accompanied the keepers at every opportunity and watched them set their traps for vermin. When I went out to Assam the forests gave me a new sort of life, different and fascinating and for approximately forty years I spent my weekends in the forests.

Following my retirement in 1952 I spent five months of each year in camp at least five miles from the nearest human settlements, in the midst of elephants, bison, deer, birds and trees, in the wonderful cold weather which is characteristic of the sub-Himalayan region of Assam, or for that matter the whole of India. Lying in bed at night, with the sound of the river as it rushed over the boulders, an occasional wild elephant trumpeting, sambar and barking deer emitting their warning cries of their enemy, the tiger, and now and then the musical note of a tiger calling to a mate, gave me the utmost pleasure. For over forty years, since I started visiting the forests regularly, my elephants and their attendants were my regular companions.

The call of the wild is in me, and will remain there always.

“You can take a man out of the jungle.  
But if he is born to it, you cannot take the jungle out of  
the man.”

FRANK NICHOLLS  
The Jungle,  
Assam

Auckland,  
New Zealand  
July 1970



# Early Days in Tea

It was towards the end of 1911, while I was employed in the London office of a tea agency firm, that I was called in by one of the partners and asked if I would like to go out and join the firm in Calcutta. I looked down and hesitated to reply. The big man then asked me if I would prefer to go out to a tea estate in Assam, as an assistant manager. There was no hesitation in my reply this time and I was elated at the idea and by the offer.

I sailed from Liverpool for Calcutta early in January 1912 aboard the *City of Benares* and all went well until we reached the Bay of Biscay. Then we struck such a terrible storm that the ship did everything except capsize. Many of us hoped that it would, so dreadful did we feel! I kept to my cabin for about ten days and every time the steward asked if I was going down for a meal I simply lifted my head from the pillow and murmured "apples". I lived all those days on apples. I gathered afterwards that on most of those ten days that there were, on an average, only six people down to meals out of eighty passengers. A day out of Port Said I was feeling much better and was glad that the ship had remained afloat!

We reached Calcutta without further incident and after some ten days there, spent by me in purchasing tropical clothing and furniture, I left by train for Goalundo and thence by river paddle-steamer to Tezpur. This journey took ten days. The railway into Assam had not then been extended to Tezpur, but in any case it was an accepted thing to travel by steamer to Assam in those days and

this form of transportation had opened up the country. The day after my arrival at Tezpur, I left for Amaribari station, also known locally as Balipara, by a little narrow gauge railway which used to feed this important tea district from the vitally important steamer station. A friend of the manager of the Harchurah Tea Estate, to which I was going, met me at the station in a most peculiar-looking motor car, for I had not seen such a model in England. It was called the "Buggy-Aut" and it had a tiller steering, buggy wheels with solid tyres, and a two-way bell. The engine was at the back under the high seat, with crankshaft and drive across the vehicle, the drive being through two large rings bolted on to the inside of the rear wheels. The engine drove a pulley which made friction between the two rings, so that when the engine was pivoted forward the pulley contacted the smaller ring bolted to the wheel, and for the reverse the engine was pivoted on to the other and larger ring. It had an excellent clearance, as I well remember goats disappearing underneath without being injured. I also well remember sitting high up in the air, which was in keeping with my own personal feeling at that time. I was pleased with myself!

My manager at Harchurah, Mr Harley Mortimer, was from the north of England and we got along famously together. I very soon found out that he was an exceptionally hard worker, which suited me. I lived with him for six months while my bungalow was being built and received my first taste of the planter's life and style of living from that stay with him. Mr Mortimer's bungalow was on a brick and cement plinth with walls made of dried, split bamboo plastered with lime and sand and limewashed. The roofing was of bamboo covered with very thick thatch. The bungalow had four rooms and a large kitchen outside and it overlooked rice fields about 100 yards down below. The company started to build a small bungalow for me about a quarter of a mile away, to be all brick from the

foundation to the top of the room walls, about eight feet high. It had three rooms and an outside kitchen and overlooked a small but very deep river and occasionally wild elephants came at night to eat the long succulent grasses which grew alongside.

The Harchurah Tea Estate was of around 500 acres, but planting went on all the time I was there and about 20 acres were added each year. There was a mixed lot of labourers such as Santals, Urias, Sambalpuris, Porjas, Tanti Urias and Ghatwals, all of whom came from Orissa and Behar to work on different estates. They came for three years and most of them stayed when their time was up, and some men left their families and went and brought up their other relations. In those days there were recruiting agencies in the districts, kept going by the many tea companies. The Phulbari Tea Estate was only three miles from Harchurah and covered about 1,200 acres and in the evenings I frequently rode over on my pony to see the assistant manager there. It was the pruning season when I arrived at Harchurah and the machinery in the factory was being overhauled, in readiness for the approaching months of March to December, when tea leaves would be plucked and manufactured.

About June, although I was not an engineer, I was appointed to work in the factory for the season, and this experience was to prove invaluable. The manager emphasised that unless great care was taken, good leaf could be ruined in the factory. We were short of machinery and with much young tea coming into bearing the manufacturing hours were long and tedious. The manager never stopped talking about expenditure to me, and the resultant cost per pound of tea. Afterwards the reason for this continual emphasis on expenditure dawned on me when I learned about the commissions which the manager would earn on a good year's business! Whatever it was, I had only one native overseer to help me and when I visited other factories of gardens of about the same acreage and

crop I gathered from the European assistants there that there were two overseers, and in some cases even three!

It was a case, therefore, of my being present from about 3 a.m. until 11 p.m., with time off for meals, which included two hours for lunch. I worked that number of hours for five manufacturing seasons. When I tell young men of today of the number of hours that I worked in the factory and for five manufacturing seasons, they either do not believe me or consider that I must have been mad to have done it.

In those days to travel about we had either a horse or a cycle, which we bought ourselves. The assistant of today can obtain an advance soon after arrival equivalent to £800, or more, for the purchase of a car. Such are the changed times!

Five Europeans died in the district during my first year in tea, two of blackwater fever and three of malaria. It was the worst district in Assam for malaria in those years. Today blackwater fever, kalaazar, and the like, have been wiped out and malaria is on the decline.

I remember going to a funeral at Tezpur the year after my arrival in the district, which, to say the least, somewhat shattered me. About forty of us went in by train with the coffin. It was a special train and consisted of a guard's van next to the engine followed by a carriage in which travelled three frivolous young men, then the carriage containing the coffin, followed by a few more carriages containing the rest of us, and finally the rear guard's van.

In those days the track was only two feet six inches wide and on the way into Tezpur there is a fairly steep rise, followed by a sharp decline. Suddenly, upon reaching this point, the carriage parted, those behind the coffin all started to run backwards, the others, in front, going ahead at a breakneck speed. The guard in charge of the rear van completely lost his head and we had travelled quite a few miles before he realised what had happened and applied the brakes!

The engine and the front half of the train, including the carriage containing the coffin, had also gone a mile in the other direction before any action was taken to sort things out. After much shunting we were off on our journey again. Apparently two of the young planters in the next carriage to the one containing the coffin had unhooked the coupling at the commencement of the decline, thus causing the two halves of the train to part company!

On arriving at Tezpur we all proceeded to the club, where drinks were served. I thought this was funny procedure before attending a funeral. After about an hour I asked what time the funeral would take place and was informed that it had already taken place and that only the padre, the widow, and very close friends had gone, as the deceased was not very popular. Apparently the idea for most of the planters was more for a "joyride" and the consumption of liquor rather than to be present at the funeral ceremony itself. This being the first funeral I had attended since my arrival in Assam I was naturally somewhat shocked!

I found India, generally, to be a land of many contrasts and it was comprised then of provinces and numerous feudatory states which acknowledged British sovereignty and was inhabited by people of many tribes and religions. The area to which I had been posted was on the foothills and plains which stretched south from the Himalayas and was a largely wild and untamed region with many areas of jungle. In many places it was impenetrable to man but was rich in varieties of animals, scenery and climate. It was an area shut off from the rest of Asia by the lofty Himalayan mountains, the "Dwelling-place of Snow", and in the fertile valleys, cleared for cultivation, was reared the beneficial tea-plant, providing a living for planter and labourer alike.

The Harchurah Tea Estate, my first post, was a division of the Borelli Tea Co. Ltd., a company which had been formed many years before by arrival. The other divisions

of that company were the Phulbari Tea Estate, on which I was also to serve for many years, and also the Amaribari and Panipoota Tea Estates. I was also to serve on estates of the Moabund Tea Co. Ltd., which had two divisions known as the Moabund and Sangsua Tea Estates, and the Attareekhat Tea Co. Ltd. with divisions known as the Attareekhat, Paneery and Bamonjuli Tea Estates. My first management was to be a compact estate called the Borbheel Tea Co. Ltd., in the Bargang area of Darrang, and I was then to manage the Bargang Tea Co. Ltd. which had three divisions known as the Bargang, Kettela and Rangaghur Tea Estates. These various companies had different directors and shares could be brought on the London Stock Exchange.

After about eight to ten years of being an assistant manager on a tea estate one could be chosen to be an acting manager for six months while a permanent manager went on leave. This relieving could entail transfer from one estate to another in the same firm's agency of gardens. When a relieving manager had shown his capability he was usually given a post as permanent manager. In my case I became a superintendent of a group of gardens after fifteen years' service and as such visited various estates each week or so. Later on I became a visiting agent and visited estates about every six months, these being long distances apart and from one end of Assam to the other.

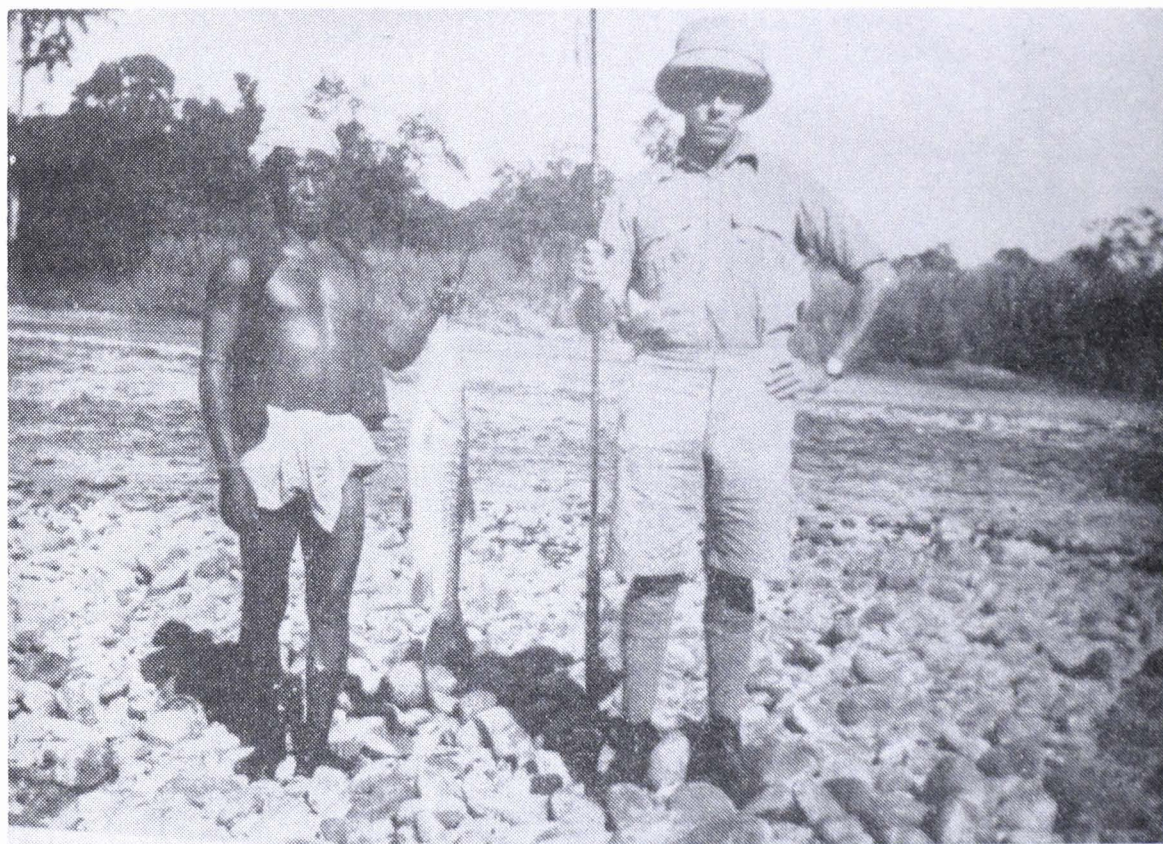
Balipara, when I first arrived, was a very small place with one post office for many tea estates. Tezpur, is now a large town, miles from most tea estates, but only in recent years has this growth resulted and it obtained an airport only a short time before the Chinese attempt to invade Assam and other parts of North East India. Naturally many changes have taken place in Assam as they have in other countries which have progressed or developed.

I was to spend over forty years in tea but my greatest enjoyment was in spending my free time in the jungle and very soon after my arrival I was appointed an honorary



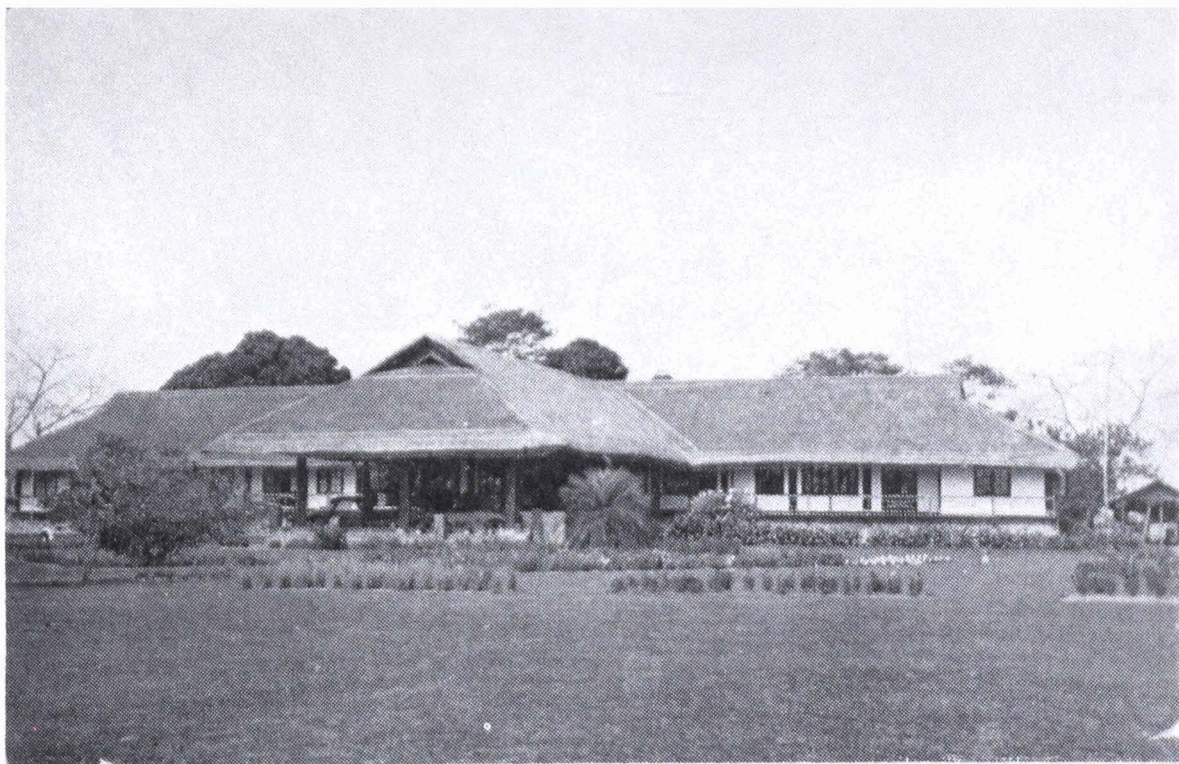


1. The road to the author's bungalow at Harchurah Tea Estate, Darrang, 1913.

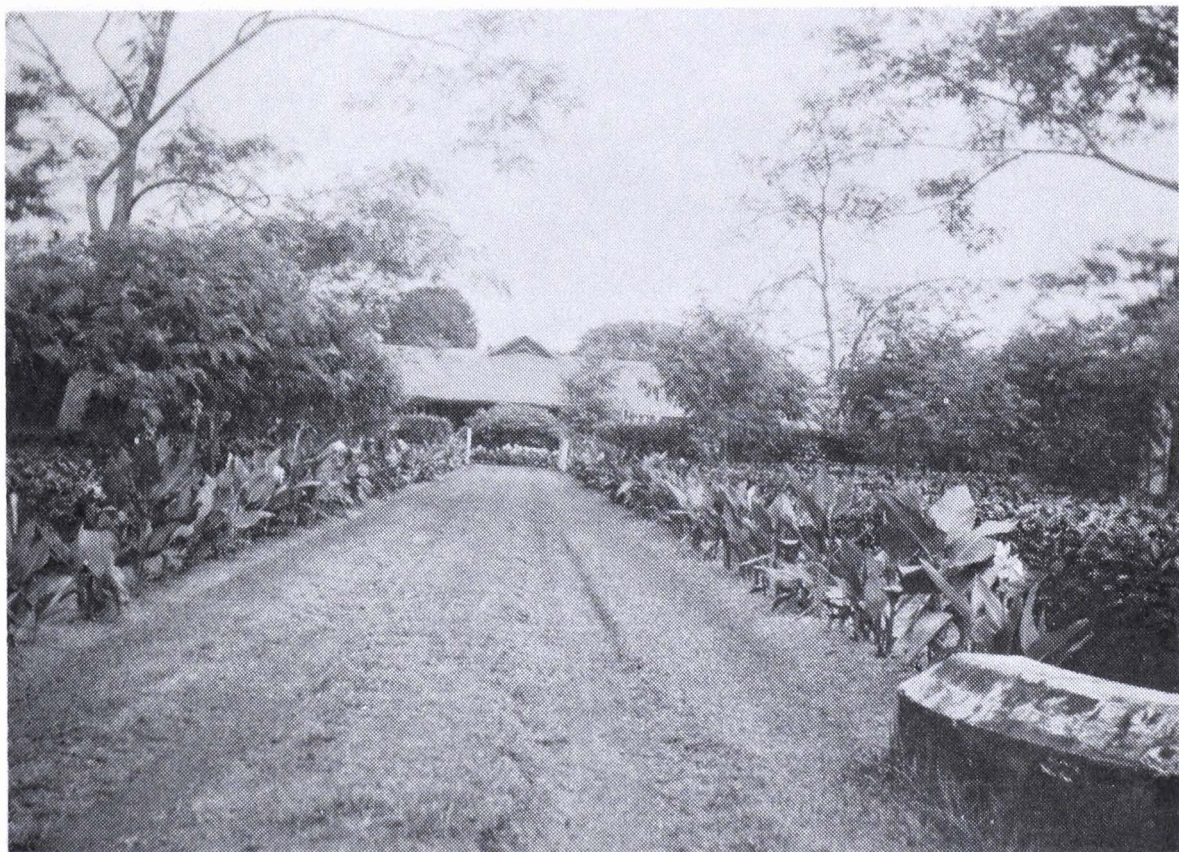


2. A fish caught in the Borelli River, 1915. The Mikir tribesman is an informant of poachers.





3. The author's home at Bargang Tea Estate, Kettela, where he lived for twenty years from 1920.



4. The driveway leading to the bungalow at Bargang Tea Estate, Kettela.



game warden by the Assam Forest Department of India. My territory was up the Borelli River area and I was compelled to be accompanied by an informant of poachers, usually a Mikir tribesman, for in those days elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns were much sought after by native shooters. This direct contact with wild life was a pleasant and absorbing interest to me and life in the forest and river areas gave me an inner satisfaction which was to remain with me during all my years in India.

one is liable to come down under the elephant's back feet. These incidents usually occur in very thick and dense jungle, as these are the places where one sometimes disturbs a sleeping tiger or bear, and the resulting noise is quite enough to frighten some elephants.

Most mahouts, when they find they cannot hold their elephant with the sharp hook of their ankus, just lie as flat as they can behind the elephant's head for protection and hope for the best. If they are swept off, the elephant is often lost for days. I remember an occasion when two tame elephants took fright together. One bolted upon the sudden closing of a car door and the other followed sympathetically. They both kept together and went fully five miles before they became more or less exhausted and the mahouts managed to pull them up. I saw the mahouts the next day and they looked a very disfigured couple with many deep scars on their faces and legs. They certainly were a brave pair and were suitably rewarded for not losing their charges.

Not far from an estate which I was on many years ago, a rhinoceros had gone berserk and had killed some natives. It had made its home in a *bheel* or large muddy pond, surrounded by high grass, from where it rampaged through the surrounding villages. The local planters decided to destroy it and as many of even the staunchest of elephants are really terrified of rhinoceros, no less than seven shikar elephants were collected together. They advanced towards the *bheel* where the rhinoceros had taken up its residence, when out came the animal and with a terrific snort and bubbling sound it made towards one of the elephants and the whole seven turned and fled for their lives. Fortunately, it was open grassy country so no one was hurt but not one of those elephants pulled up under three miles.

I was on an elephant once which I knew to be staunch as far as wild elephants, buffaloes and tigers were concerned. While proceeding over some open country, we came upon the dung of a rhinoceros. The elephant turned

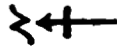
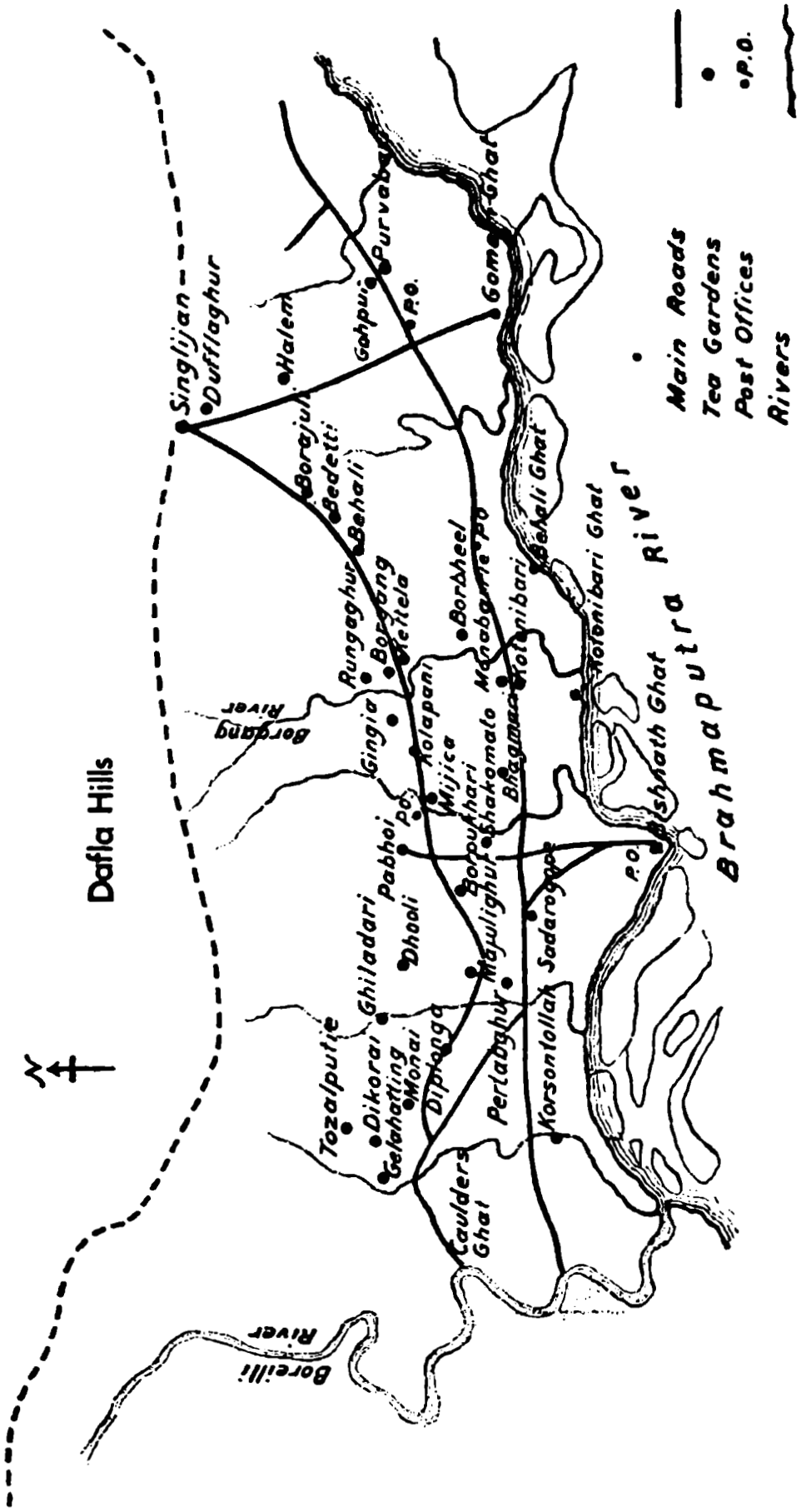
and bolted and the mahout was not able to stop it for about half a mile. The rhinoceros was somewhere about and that was quite sufficient for that elephant!

My mahout's father, who had spent all his life with elephants and who must have been seventy when I first knew him in 1927, was one of the most interesting old men I have ever met. He has been dead many years now but up to his death, although too feeble to work, the old fellow still loved being on an elephant with his son, my mahout, roaming through the jungle. Before I employed him the old man had been in charge of twelve elephants which belonged to a European and had been used by him for catching wild elephants in the Assam forests. He once told me of a terrifying experience he had once had, deep in the wilds, with his employer. They were moving camp and had two elephants, one carrying the pots and pans, glasses, crockery and other utensils in a large box, in addition to carrying his employer's personal servant. Another servant was following behind carrying two empty kerosene tins, which had been used for carrying water from the river for the camp.

They had just entered the forest, when the man behind dropped the two empty kerosene tins, just behind the elephant's hind legs. The elephant immediately bolted. Some pots and pans soon dropped off and this further noise caused the elephant to accelerate. These were followed by the box containing the glasses and dishes crashing to the ground, with the result that the elephant increased its speed still further! The servant was brushed off but the mahout managed to cling on and he pulled up a mile or so further on, just as darkness was setting in. As elephants do not realise that when passing under low branches in the blackness of the forest the mahout can be easily swept off, it is no fun riding on an elephant in the jungle at night! Therefore, after calling out for sometime and obtaining no reply from the servant the mahout hurried on to get out of the forest before darkness finally closed in.

# SKETCH MAP OF THE BISHNATH DISTRICT

Scale—8.645 Miles to 1 inch



Daffa Hills

Boreilli River

Borgang River

Bishnath River

Brahma Putra River

Singlijan  
Dufflaghur

Tozalputie  
Dikorai  
Ghiladari  
Selahattling  
Monai  
Diphonga

Pabhai P.O.  
Dhooli  
Majulighur  
Majulighur P.O.

Rongpukhari  
Shakamalo  
Bhagam  
Kotanihari

Mijica  
Kotapani  
Borbheel  
Manabamte P.O.

Saheli Ghat  
Kotanihari Ghat

Gomay Ghat  
Gohpur  
Purvab  
P.O.

P.O.

Main Roads

Tea Gardens

Post Offices

Rivers