A PRINCESS REMEMBERS

THE MEMOIRS OF
THE MAHARANI OF JAIPUR

GAYATRI DEVI OF JAIPUR

RUPA

Published by
Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd 1995
7/16, Ansari Road, Daryaganj
New Delhi 110002

Sales centres:

Allahabad Bengaluru Chennai
Hyderabad Jaipur Kathmandu
Kolkata Mumbai

All royalties that Gayatri Devi of Jaipur receives from this book are to be donated to the Maharaja Jai Singh Benevolent Trust, created for the needy of Jaipur State.

Cover painting by Pietro Annigoni.
Cover and book design by Vivek Sahni.

The views and opinions expressed in this book are the authors own and the facts are as reported by her which have been verified to the extent possible, and the publishers are not in any way liable for the same.

ISBN: 978-81-716-7307-0

Forty-second impression 2018

45 44 43 42

Typeset in New Baskerville by IPP Catalog Publications, Delhi

Printed at Nutech Print Services, New Delhi

Chapter 4

Family Life in Cooch Behar

Circumstances hardly permitted my mother to grieve in seclusion for long. She had too much to do. Soon after we arrived in Cooch Behar, Bhaiya, then seven years old, was crowned Maharaja. My mother made all the elaborate arrangements for both the religious and the civil ceremonies of the coronation, and she coached Bhaiya in his quite active part. He had, among other things, to learn by heart a little speech in reply to the address of the British Resident. Ma was very pleased with him for delivering it without a mistake. Soon she was to take on wider responsibilities.

It fell to the Viceroy, Lord Reading, as the King's representative in India, to consult with the British-Indian government of Bengal and the state government of Cooch Behar and then to appoint a regent and a minority council for Bhaiya. Usually a member of the young Maharaja's family was chosen to act as regent, and the Viceroy asked my mother to undertake the task. Although many Indian princesses were living in strict purdah, it was not extraordinary to appoint a woman as regent. Indeed, there were a number of instances throughout the history of India when women have either ruled or acted as regents. The mother of Maharaja Ram Singh in Jaipur and my own Cooch Behar great-grandmother were always consulted about state matters by the British Crown representatives and the minority councils, though they remained in purdah, never being seen by the men they advised. The state of Bhopal, too, was being ruled at that time by the Begum, who appeared everywhere veiled, even when she was addressing meetings or presiding over

went that I never really knew who most of them were. Once I asked a man who knew Ma well who her friends had been. He replied, "Oh, everyone from the Prince of Wales downwards."

Whoever they were, for us children Ma's guests ranked high among our many sources of entertainment. We enjoyed all the adult conversations and the constant spectacle of grown-ups playing tennis, billiards, or backgammon or taking part in the various schemes devised by Ma. Although we were encouraged to stay pretty much in the background, to smile politely and to speak only when spoken to, every now and then such restrictions were bound to prove too much for our self-control. On one occasion Ma had decided that all her English guests should dress up for fun in Indian clothes. When I saw them all standing on the veranda, the pale pink arms and legs emerging from saris and dhotis, I exclaimed loudly, "You look indecent!"

To us and to all our guests, the greatest and most thrilling attraction of Cooch Behar was undoubtedly the big-game shooting. It was among the best that India could offer. The jungles of Cooch Behar are linked with the Terai, a great unbroken belt of jungle running across northern India, south of the Himalayas into Nepal. This was superb terrain for wild animals, which could travel for hundreds of miles without crossing a single man-made path. All kinds of game abounded within a radius of a new miles from our palace: tiger, rhinoceros, panther, bear, wild buffalo, bison, hog, deer, wild boar, and sambar. Once I remember, we were forbidden to go into the palace vegetable garden because a wild elephant had been seen there.

It was my grandfather who started the tradition of big shoots in Cooch Behar. His game book records the animals killed over a period of thirty-seven years in the jungles of Cooch Behar and Assam: 365 tigers, 311 leopards, 207 rhinos, 438 buffaloes, 318 antelopes, 259 sambars, 133 bears, and 43 bison. In recent years I have become very interested in the organizations that have been formed to protect wild-life, so perhaps I should mention here that although big-game hunting was an important activity of Cooch Behar, the decline of game in India today is not a consequence of reckless slaughter by

sportsmen. The decline has, in fact, been caused by the steady destruction of the animals' habitat. Even during my grandfather's youth, jungles were being cleared because of the rapidly growing need for land to cultivate, and since Independence the pace has accelerated. Today only 13 percent of India is covered by forest, while the minimum needed to sustain our wild-life has been estimated at 30 percent.

My grandfather was a first-class shot and achieved a rather special kind of record by shooting two rhinos with a left and, a right. During the beat, he suddenly saw a rhino charging from the left. Just as he was raising his gun — a heavy eight-bore — another rhino appeared on his right. Many hunters think rhinos the most dangerous and treacherous of animals; their horn can rip open an elephant's belly. However, with astonishing presence of mind, my grandfather took two quick shots, first to the left and immediately afterwards to the right, dropping both rhinos and then finished them off at his leisure. A rhino is an impressive animal even in death. I have only seen one rhino shot and vividly recall the awesome sight of the blood spurting up in a scarlet fountain. I remember too, that it was impossible to drag the huge animal to the camp and that a guard had to be mounted over it to prevent the villagers from taking the horn, which is supposed to be a powerful aphrodisiac.

During my childhood shooting was as much a part of our lives as our lessons and incomparably more exciting. At that time there were shooting-camps two or three times a year at one of the two reserves in the state, either at Patlakhawa, which was adjacent to the jungles of Assam and the Terai, or at Takuamari in the south. Indian princely shooting-camps in those days were quite unlike anything that an Englishman or an American might understand by the word 'camp'. There were tents, it is true, but there the similarity ends. Our Indian tents were enormous and had separate drawing-rooms, dining-rooms, bedrooms and bathrooms. They were fully furnished with carpets, chairs, tables, and everything else necessary for comfort. Our camps consisted of ten or twelve such tents, with smaller ones for the staff, all pitched around a huge open fire that was lit at night to keep the animals away.

I went on my first shoot when I was five. Every morning after breakfast we went to the ADCs' rooms to see if there was any *khubbar*, any news and by that we meant only news of big game that must be destroyed. Villagers came to the palace almost every day with complaints about a panther, or sometimes a tiger that had killed a goat or a cow. If after cross-examination by an ADC the story held together, the villager was given lunch while all of us excitedly joined in the preparations for a shoot. These were the only times we were allowed to break our routine of lessons, and then only if we had finished our homework. If the tiger had been sighted a long way from the palace, we usually drove part of the way to a pre-arranged meeting-point where elephants waited to carry us for the next few miles. Then at a second pre-arranged meeting-point, the howdah elephants with their mahouts stood ready. The howdah elephants acted as 'stops' towards which the pad elephants, serving the same function as teams of beaters, drove the game. The howdahs were equipped with racks on either side to hold the guns and whoever was to shoot sat in front; there was room behind for another couple of people. We soon learned that the seats could be lifted up, and underneath we always found chocolate biscuits and orange squash to keep us going. Ma used to suspect that one of the chief charms of going shooting was to eat the chocolate biscuits.

One spring when Ma was in Delhi and Ila and Bhaiya were both away at school, I had my own moment of glory. Early in the morning news was brought by some villagers that a panther had to be killed in a nearby area, so after lunch Indrajit, Menaka, and I set off. Each of us was mounted on a howdah elephant with an ADC behind us, and Indrajit was specifically instructed to let me have the first shot.

Naturally, we had all been taught how to shoot from the time we were very young, how to be careful, how to make sure that we got a clear shot without the chance of wounding any of the hunting elephants through overexcitement, and so on. We were in a very small jungle that afternoon, near a village and we could hear the elephants trumpeting as they usually did when there was a wild or dangerous animal in the vicinity. Then the breathless moment came when the beat began.

By the standards of more experienced hunters, my first triumph might well seem rather tame. When the panther was finally forced out of cover, it snarled once and simply stood still, staring at my elephant. The ADC behind me told me to fire, and the only thing I can say to my credit is that I didn't lose my nerve. I picked up my gun — I used a twenty-bore shotgun — and got him in the face with my first shot.

There was great joy and jubilation; even the mahouts and the professional hunters with us joined in. I was deluged with congratulations, and when we got back to the palace everybody made a big fuss over me. We sent a telegram to Ma in Delhi telling her that I had shot my first panther. I was twelve years old and speechless with pride and excitement.

A wounded tiger is perhaps the most dangerous creature in the jungle and in its death charge can leap astonishing heights. So can panthers. I remember on one shoot in Cooch Behar, when we were still quite small, a wounded panther leapt up onto an elephant that was carrying my two brothers. Bhaiya, without time to think of the danger, butted it with his gun and helped by the mahout managed to push it off. Luckily neither of the boys was hurt, but I noticed that Ma took care from then on to never let them be together on the same elephant.

Cooch Behar was renowned for its *pilkhanna*, and all our sixty elephants were splendidly trained. They were used for all kinds of purposes besides big-game shooting. In fact, the best way, often the only way, of getting about in Cooch Behar is by elephant. The land is nearly all flat, although in the north you can see the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas, but it is covered with tall grasses that grow up to ten feet high, and much of it is swampy, crossed by broad, slow-running rivers whose course varies from year to year. As children we were always riding elephants and would often race each other home on them after a shoot.

Driving an elephant is not really difficult once it has been trained. We all knew the special words of command to which an elephant responds; we had learned them from the mahouts, each of whom might easily spend the whole of his adult life with the same ele-

phant, developing a curiously intimate relationship of trust, affection, and mutual protectiveness. There were the ordinary commands, '*beht*' 'sit down,' '*oot*' for 'get up,' and then the more special words said in a kind of chant when a mahout was steering an elephant through the jungle and came across a tree that had to be knocked down, or though elephant grass that had to be trampled to make a pathway. Then he said in a singsong lilt, 'Dalai, dalai, *dab*. Dalai, dalai, *dab*.' At each '*dab*' the elephant made a renewed effort to flatten the obstacle in his way.

Elephants are extremely intelligent animals and sensitive to insults or harshness. Their mahouts change the intonation of the commands according to whether they are driving a tiger or leopard out of cover or simply guiding the elephant through the jungle, but their tone of voice is always gentle. There are some occasions when you have to kick an elephant behind his ears and sometimes goad him with an iron spike that can be felt through his thick skin, but this is rare. The only time a male elephant is dangerous is when he is ready to mate. Then the most even-tempered beast can go berserk and has to be chained up until the mating period is over. Usually, however, sufficient warning is given by two tiny holes in the elephant's temple which start to secrete just before the dangerous time begins. Only once in our *pilkhanna* did an elephant break loose and kill his mahout. This was lamented by everybody but recognized as an extraordinary occurrence.

My Cooch Behar grandfather was said to have had a remarkable, almost telepathic understanding with elephants. On one occasion, when one of his best elephants got stuck in a swamp, the mahouts threw in a tree-trunk for the animal to cling to, but no one seemed able to keep him from thrashing about and sinking deeper and deeper into the mud. Then my grandfather was sent for. Within a few minutes of talking he had calmed the elephant and then slowly coaxed him out of the swamp. When my grandfather died and his ashes were brought back to Cooch Behar, all his elephants were lined up at the station to salute him. The story is that with tears in their eyes they all lifted their trunks and trumpeted in unison as the train drew in. All the tusks of his favourite elephants were kept in

the hall at Cooch Behar with their names on them.

For me, elephants were the most important and beloved creatures in the world. I used to spend hours with the mahouts and their wives learning elephant-lore and listening to the songs that the wives sang when their husbands were setting off on a tour of duty, for elephants were used not only for shooting but also to collect rents and taxes and to round up wild elephants to be tamed by the fully trained ones in the *pilkhanna.*

A mahout's wife would sing to *sunar bandhu re,* 'my golden friend' (meaning her husband), describing him sitting on the noble beast, his elephant, and how small he looked in contrast, but how the elephant had a chain around his neck and so the mahout was really the master. Another song was about a new elephant that has been caught and how each of his four legs is chained so that he can't stretch too far. And then the song described how he must get used to the presence of people, how the mahouts stroke him with bamboo leaves to get him accustomed to the touch and feel of human hands, and how they wave flames before his eyes so that he is not frightened by fire. And all the time they chant to him, "You are not in the jungle any more. Now you have a master and an owner who will love you and cherish you and look after you, and in exchange you will obey in love and gratitude."

Whenever I went to Cooch Behar, I would ask the mahouts to sing for me and I remember the days when Bhaiya returned from school in England before he went off to Cambridge, when the mahouts made up a song for his departure: "Our Maharaja is going, our ruler is going, our friend is going. But we hope he'll come back soon. And when he comes back, we hope he brings us a lot of knowledge of the things that will be useful to us here. And we hope that the poisons of the West don't infiltrate him." (By 'poisons' they meant liquor and loose women.)

Our elephants had a variety of names, some called after gods and goddesses, some named for family members. I remember that the one called Ayesha was excessively slow and old-looking, and my sisters and brothers used to tease me about it: "That elephant of yours is just like you!"

When Ma had guests for a shoot, I remember that often we would go ahead to the meeting-place on elephants. While we were waiting, I always pleaded with the mahout to let me take his place, sitting on the neck of the elephant. There I used to lie down, my head between elephant's ears, feeling the faint breeze as he flapped his ears, listening to the buzz of the bees, saturated with the peculiar smell of the elephant, the sense of the jungle all around. I felt completely out of the palace's restricted life. Alone. Just me and the elephant in the jungle.

From the mahouts we picked up a certain amount of the local dialect enough to converse with the palace staff and their families. I used to be known at that time as '*pagly rajkumari*', meaning 'the mad princess', because I took such an intense interest in the lives of the mahouts and all the rest of the palace servants. I used to draw up plans for new houses that should be built for them. "Here," I would explain, capturing some puzzled retainer and pointing to my drawing, "here will be your bathroom."

"But we haven't a bathroom of our own," he would protest.

"Maybe not *now*," I would carefully explain, "but you will have when I build your new houses. And there'll be another separate room for your children."

Usually he would say, unbelievingly, "Yes, Princess, as you wish it."

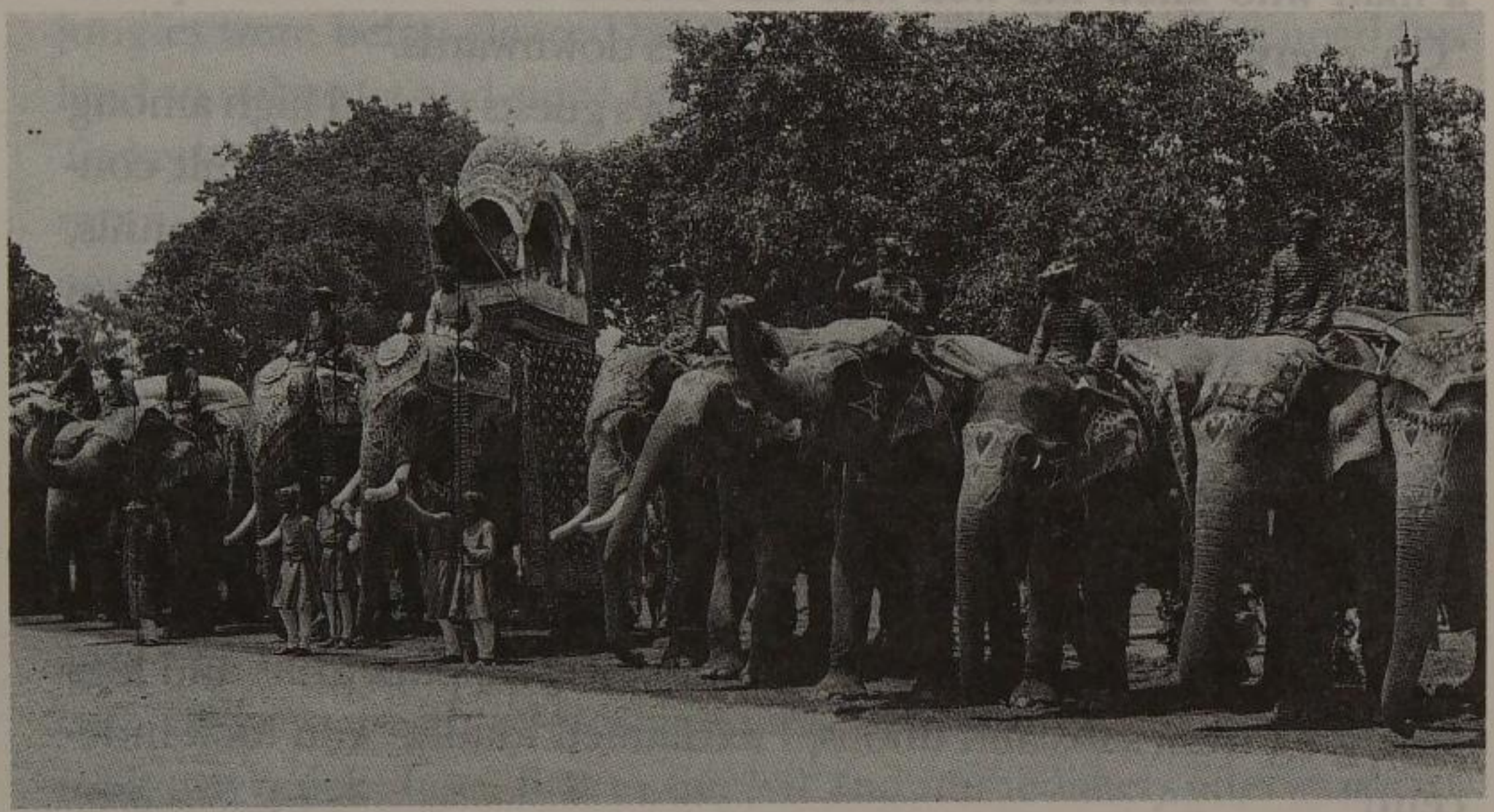
I used to question the mahouts about how much money they earned, inquire into the conditions in which they lived, and insist that they should get more money and better houses. Bhaiya used to try to shut me up, saying, "There'll be a strike in the *pilkhanna* if you keep this up."

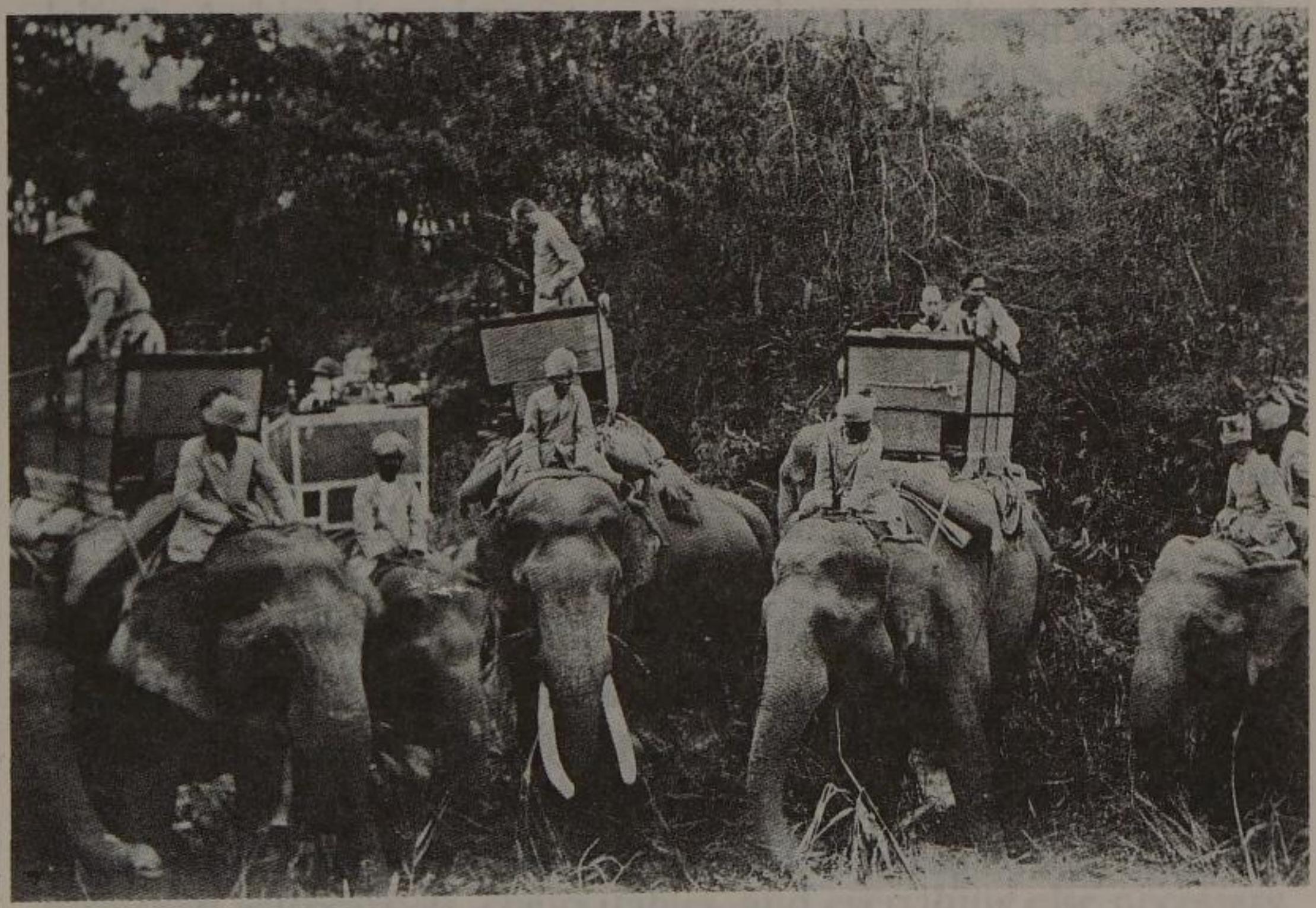
One of the most haunting memories of my childhood in Cooch Behar is of coming home on an elephant just before dusk, tired after the excitement of the day's shooting. The air was full of the smell of mustard flowers, and from a distance came the lovely and lonely sound of flutes. Far to the north, still visible through the twilight after a very clear day, stands the white half-circle of the Himalayas. This remembered moment immediately takes me back to the happiness and security of my childhood, to a time when my life was untouched by change and the loss of the people dearest to

me. Sometimes, as I fall asleep at night during the moist heat of the monsoon rains, it seems that we are all back there still, Ma and Bhaiya, Ila and Indrajit, my husband Jai, and I, and that Menaka and I are not the only ones left alive.

Myself at a picnic during a tiger hunt, (1930s).

A reception room at Cooch Behar Palace.





Above: Elephant line up at Cooch Behar
Below: A tiger hunt at Cooch Behar.

Above: Brothers and sisters on the steps of
Cooch Behar Palace, (1930s).
Below: Bobby and I at Cooch Behar Palace.