

Travel + Leisure
India & South Asia

Experiences

TRAVELLERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR



THE FORGOTTEN NOMADS

In the higher reaches of Uttarakhand lies Nelang Valley that was once an essential trade route between India and Tibet. **SHIVYA NATH** travels to this obscure land and encounters tales as old as time.

BETWEEN A DEEP gorge and jagged, snow-dusted mountains, our driver Pawar *ji* cautiously manoeuvred our jeep on a narrow, broken strip of what was once a road. Thousands of feet below at the base of the gorge, I could see a turquoise river appearing deceptively calm. Suddenly, the jeep jerked to a stop at the edge of the gorge, and with it, my beating heart. A loose rock rolled down the mountain, narrowly missed our wheel, and tumbled soundlessly, in slow motion, into the river below!

That could've been us, I thought silently, as Pawar *ji* alighted from the car, and looked at the mountain and then the river. We solemnly resumed our journey towards Nelang, a forgotten valley on the south-western edge of the Trans-Himalayan Tibetan Plateau, in the higher reaches of Uttarakhand. I suppose I first unwittingly stumbled upon Nelang many years ago, while reading *Seven Years in Tibet*. In his memoir, Heinrich Harrer, the Austrian mountaineer, wrote about his escape from a British internment camp in Dehradun in the 1940s. He walked all the way to Lhasa in Tibet, crossing a precarious wooden walkway above the Jadh Ganga, the turquoise river at the base of the deep gorge we drove along.

I felt a chill run down my spine as I spotted remnants of a timber bridge, on a dangerously slender ridge of the mountain, with a free fall, hundreds of feet down into the river below. Built by the Pashtuns of Peshawar, this wooden pathway witnessed centuries of trade between Tibet, Afghanistan, and the Indian subcontinent. It was this bridge that the Jadhhs, the semi-nomadic traders of Nelang valley, once traversed to trade with the northern Tibetan traders.

In these mountains claimed by both India and China, the Jadhhs moved with the seasons, shuttling across three villages between altitudes of 1,524 and 3,658 metres. Over perilous mountain trails and bridges, they walked some 240 kilometres every year, accompanied by large caravans of goats, loaded with home-grown, sand-cooked wheat and barley for the journey. Camping along the way, they spent summer in the lowest village, spring in the middle village, and finally reached Jadung—snowed in and silent until the snow melted in the summer.

Only four wheel drives are permitted in Nelang Valley in Uttarakhand.



▲ The Jadh Ganga snakes through the Nelang Valley. Below, from left: Gartang Gali is a wooden walkway that was recently reopened for travellers; the last accessible civilian spot before the China border.

It was in Jadung that they waited with their cotton, sugar and oil seeds, to trade them for salt and wool with the northern traders from Tibet and the Gobi Desert. No money was involved; a cup of sugar was traded for a cup of salt, and disputes settled with a good old game of dice! In exchange for cotton, the Jadh sheared the sheep that the traders brought in their caravan, and carded and spun it into the elegant clothing—long winter coats and warm caps—they wore. A successful season of trading culminated with

music, played on the Indian harmonium and violin. This was the only time of the year that the Jadh sacrificed a goat from their caravan at a mountain altar, for an annual feast of goat meat. The trade influenced not just their food and clothing, but also the dialect they spoke and the Buddhist traditions they followed.

Their semi-nomadic, country-agnostic way of life however, was abruptly dismantled in 1962 during the Indo-China war, with both countries vying ownership of their Trans-Himalayan trading route. Nearly 60 years later, we were allowed to go no further than the army check post several kilometres before Jadung. Our inner line permits were checked and returned, along with a warning about stray dogs and stray bullets from the other side of the border. These mountains that once knew no borders had been cordoned off, and trade between the Jadh and the Tibetans halted forever.

As we drove along, I felt a strange nostalgia for the awe-inspiring barren landscape and the aging, windswept deodars, imagining the mountain dwellers who once traversed this land on foot. It was only in 2015 that the valley of Nelang was cautiously opened to outsiders—only Indian nationals with a permit. Pawar ji, who grew up in nearby Dharali and has been frequenting it since, slowed down at a once-cultivated piece of relatively flat land. Deodars had sprung up where the fields once were; scraps of wood and stone lay where the houses of the middle village



A grainy photo of the ancestors of Nelang's last chief, from 1957.

GETTING THERE
IndiGo (goindigo.in) and **Vistara** (airvistara.com) operate regular flights from New Delhi and Mumbai to Dehradun, from where Nelang is roughly 270 kilometres by road. Only four wheel drives are allowed in Nelang.

PERMITS
Only Indian passport holders are allowed to enter Nelang. An application for a permit at the District Magistrate's office in Uttarkashi, followed by verification at the Forest Department is required.

once stood. These eroded signs of settlement are all that remain of the once self-sustainable, low footprint, money-free, technology-free lives of the Jadh.

Nelang valley is now dominated by makeshift settlements of workers, mostly from Nepal, building roads for the army in preparation for future conflicts. The Jadh were given land inland, in the villages of Bhagori (near Harshil) and Dunda (near Uttarkashi), between which they now shuttle in summer and winter respectively, growing apples and doing odd jobs.

As we returned to the jeep and followed the course of the Jadh Ganga, originating in Tibet, out of the valley, I couldn't help but lament the loss of an entire culture. Although the lure of urbanisation might have eventually drawn the Jadh out of their semi-nomadic lives, their resettlement represents a broken bridge—much like the tattered walkway beneath—between two ancient civilisations.

As luck would have it, in the settlement of Bhagori a couple of days later, we landed up in the home of the son of Nelang's last chief—one of the only houses brimming with life in an otherwise deserted settlement. While most of his people were still in the warmer reaches of Dunda, he had returned home early to tend to his apple orchards and experiment with mushroom cultivation.

His beautifully wrinkled face lit up with joy when we mentioned that we had recently visited his ancestral valley. In his slow gait, he pulled out his phone, and dug up photos and a grainy sepia footage that a visitor had shot in 1957 in his father's house in Jadung, five years before their semi-nomadic life would be dismantled



▲ The writer spends a few quiet moments by the Ganga.

forever. I saw women and men dressed in traditional mountain coats, smoking hookah from hand-carved mouth pieces in the courtyard of their wood and slate-roof houses. News and letters travelled nearly 160 kilometres via a diligent postman on foot. Young girls played with dried yak knuckles, women washed clothes with their feet in hollowed-out tree trunks, and elderly men spun their Buddhist prayer wheel in deep meditation.

The chief's enterprising son seemed hopeful that someday, he'll be able to establish tourism in Nelang. He talked about restoring the remnants of houses in Jadung village, and emulating his father's life by hosting travellers from around the world. My conversations with others, like those in the government and the army, felt less optimistic though.

That evening, sitting by the gushing river on the outskirts of Bhagori, I watched a multitude of Tibetan prayer flags flutter in the wind, not very different from the sepia-toned photos I saw on the chief's phone. The flags urged me to accept the transience of our times, but the traveller in me wished I could dissolve political borders to walk this ancient passageway that once connected my home town with the faraway land of Tibet. ✦

