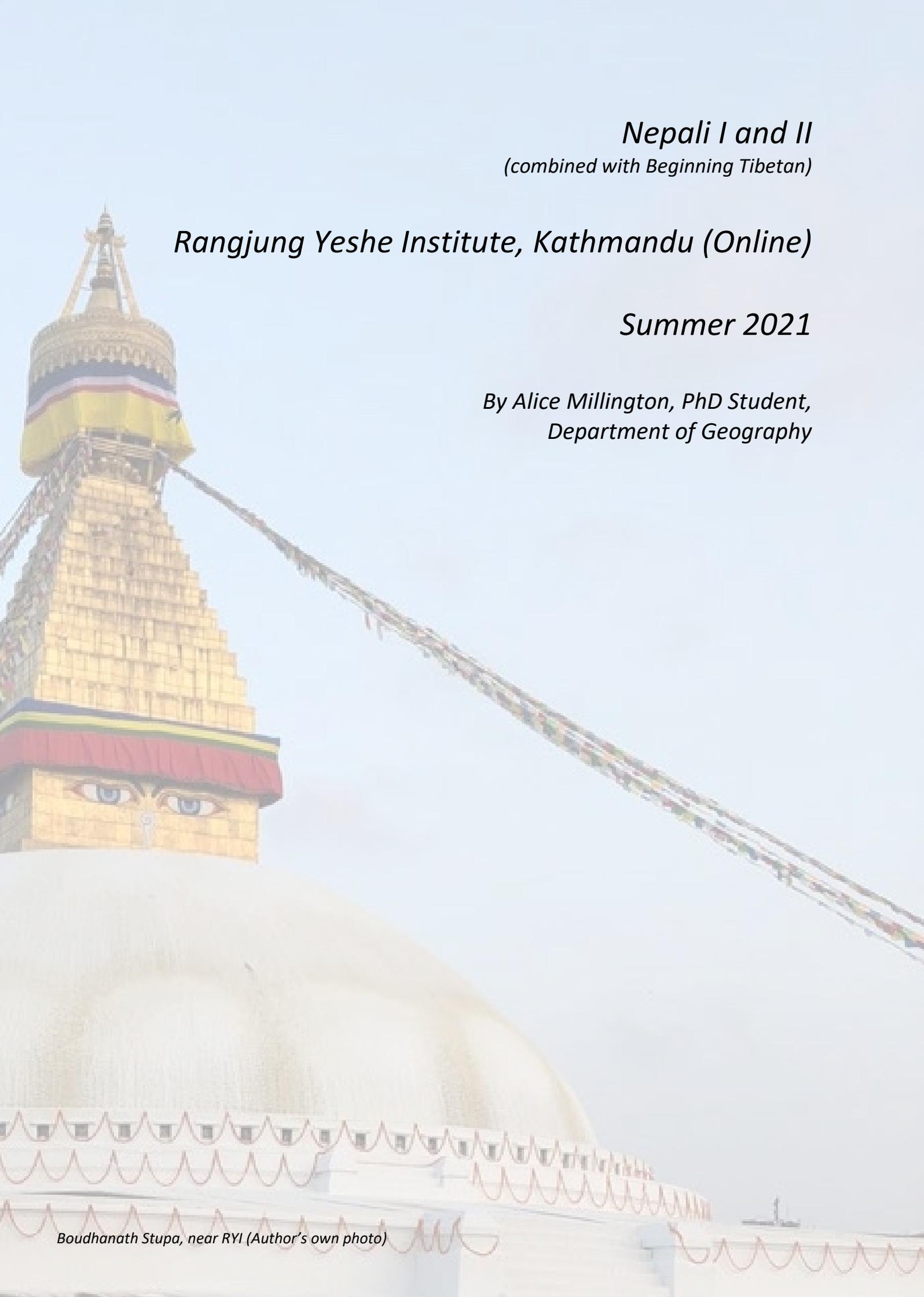


Nepali I and II
(combined with Beginning Tibetan)

Rangjung Yeshe Institute, Kathmandu (Online)

Summer 2021

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Boudhanath Stupa, near RYI (Author's own photo)

Course information at a glance:

Course Provider: Rangjung Yeshe Institute (RYI).

Course dates: 24th June - 4th August 2021

Location: Usually Boudha, Kathmandu – a culturally Himalayan segment of the city, and the home of the famous Boudhanath Stupa. This year, it was well organised over Microsoft Teams.

Accommodation: My bedroom in Cambridge, but in ‘normal’ years homestay accommodation with local families is organised by RYI.

Extra facts: the course is accredited to Kathmandu University, meaning the 6 credits earned from the Summer Program can be banked for a future Master’s degree here.

Price: US \$1800 for eight weeks, but this includes a COVID-19 discount.

Commitment: 25+ hours/week (17 online contact hours and significant preparation and review time)

Opportunities for further study: Nepali III, IV and V are also offered, with the (less intensive) Nepali III available to start three weeks after the Summer Program ends, for the fall semester.

Contact details: am2389@cam.ac.uk – feel free to message me with questions!

Report

This summer, I virtually attended the eight-week intensive Summer Program for Nepali language at the Rangjung Yeshe Institute (RYI) in Kathmandu. As a PhD student in Geography, fieldwork is an essential component of my discipline, and my project will soon see me venture to the Nepalese Himalayas. In the remote field sites of my research, where tourism is scarce, language skills will be indispensable – because there is simply no English alternative. As COVID travel restrictions dominated this summer, the Rangjung Yeshe Institute adapted its Himalayan Languages program to protect its staff and students. This move to virtual teaching had the surprise consequence of additional flexibility - and to this end, part of my Nepali course overlapped with a Beginner’s Tibetan course at another Kathmandu provider, the School of International Training. My course fees for RYI were supported by the AJ Pressland Fund.

Rangjung Yeshe – an affiliate of Kathmandu University – is one of the principal locations for Buddhist Studies in the world. Located in the heart of Boudha, the Buddhist centre of Kathmandu, and home to Tibetan exiles and Nepali Buddhists alike, RYI attempts to give students a rounded Buddhist education in addition to its language classes, which are offered in Classical and Colloquial Tibetan, Sanskrit and Nepali. As students of RYI, we were permitted to attend meditation classes, talks

from high lamas about Buddhist Dharma, and various other Buddhist studies discussion groups over Microsoft Teams, although these were entirely voluntary.

With around 4 hours of online contact time per day, however, my principal focus was my Nepali class. The intensive summer Nepali program was designed for complete beginners, with the goal of mastering elementary speaking, listening, reading, and writing. As a former Hindi speaker, I was already well acquainted with Devanagari, the Sanskrit-derived script used for several South Asian languages. For newcomers, however, the course began with a three-day Alphabet Orientation to ensure readers could recognise the difference between a dental and retroflex 't' or 'd', or an aspirated or non-aspirated consonant. These can be a challenge to pronounce, as these sounds don't exist in English – however, the script is completely phonetic, so is comparatively easier to read correctly than in many European languages. Once we could read and write Nepali script, transliterations in Roman script became increasingly few and far between – for many, this was a trial by fire, although though we all got there in the end!

A typical day on the RYI Nepali Summer Program would begin early with a one-on-one class with an Assistant Language Instructor (ALI): a local Nepali speaker with ties to the Institute. In this hour, we'd review the content from the previous day, learn new vocabulary attached to the upcoming lesson, and spend some time in free conversation – invariably about the trials and tribulations of lockdown in England versus Nepal (an excellent chance to practice comparisons), discussions of local festivals, or the nuances of Nepali *Khana* (food). There were about seven ALIs on the roll at RYI, and we would rotate between them each day for variety. Each ALI would have their own style of teaching and, usually their own favourite topics of conversation – with some of these including American stand-up comedy, political tensions between India and Nepal, or incessant questioning about the Queen of England!

On Mondays, this first ALI class would be immediately followed by a *Kuraakaani* (conversation) class, which featured two other Summer Program students and an ALI. In *Kuraakaani*, we would play word games, practice conjugations, and invent increasingly bizarre role-play scenarios set in a shop, taxi, or hotel. From my room in Cambridge, I'd grab a quick lunch before my next ALI class, which would usually begin with a curious "tapaaile ke khannubhayo? / *What did you eat?*". We'd build on content I had struggled with in the morning session, and dive into reading and listening exercises. We could also optionally complete any homework assignments we had been given in this session, under the guidance of an ALI.

We'd say a hasty goodbye before the daily Masterclass with our two principal language teachers, Andy and Pavitra. This pair were a perfect team, with Andy often recounting his own process of learning Nepali after moving from the US as

cautionary tales for avoiding common linguistic pitfalls. Before the Masterclass, it was wise to be well-prepared by watching the series of pre-recorded videos by Andy and Pavitra which explained the grammar or linguistic construction of the day. With 8-9 other students tuned in to the Masterclass, active participation was essential and was well-rewarded by Pavitra's exclamations of "*kasto ramro!*" (how good!) – which would follow even after such unfortunate stories as "I didn't get on the bus because I had diarrhoea", so long as they were in flawless Nepali.

Learning online, and particularly being subject to the vicissitudes of Kathmandu's unreliable power grid, was not always easy. In an experience that is all too familiar to inhabitants of the post-Covid world, every few hours the 'poor connection' tone of Teams would insistently interject, with the rueful explanation "Batti gayo" ('the power went') invariably following a few minutes later. It is also difficult to reconcile that, though I can now confidently explain myself, my habits, and my country, in eight different tenses, I have yet to have a Nepali conversation in 'real life' – might my confidence crack without the shield of the screen?

For two weeks, I was also combining my program at RYI with a colloquial Tibetan course to adequately prepare me for the religious vocabulary and sacred landscapes on which much of my research is focused. For many of my participants, Tibetan will be the language of their social and spiritual world, and although I don't intend to conduct primary interviews in Tibetan, a brief conversation in a person's native and increasingly endangered language will no doubt be meaningful to many. Although, several times during that intense fortnight, befuddled by hours of Zoom and Teams, the words *tsaluma* (tib: orange) and *suntala* (nep: orange), *yak po* (tib: good) and *ramro* (nep: good) would slip out interchangeably – to the amusement or confusion of my language partner. Like many of other Summer Program students, I subsequently enrolled on the less intensive Nepali III module this autumn semester after a three-week *bida* (break), and continue to take these classes online.

As I write this report, I have just arrived in Kathmandu – for real, this time – for my PhD fieldwork, and finally saw the Boudhanath Stupa yesterday evening. As I prepare for my eight-month stay in a remote Himalayan village, a five-day trek from even the nearest road, I am in no doubt of the value of the skills I have acquired this summer. They will be essential not only to facilitate the rich data on how people's religious and spiritual lives are affected by the experience of climate change, but for my day-to-day survival – and to be able say a warm Namaste (नमस्ते) or Tashi Delek (བཏུ་ཤེས་བདེ་ལགས།) to anyone I meet in the mountains.

Many thanks to the Pressland Fund for making this experience possible.