

# FEAR AND LOATHING IN KATHMANDU

PUE MORROW LOCKWOOD  
The Guardian, courtesy of  
Los Angeles Times-Washington  
Post News Service

KATHMANDU, Nepal — A  
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DREAMCHASER



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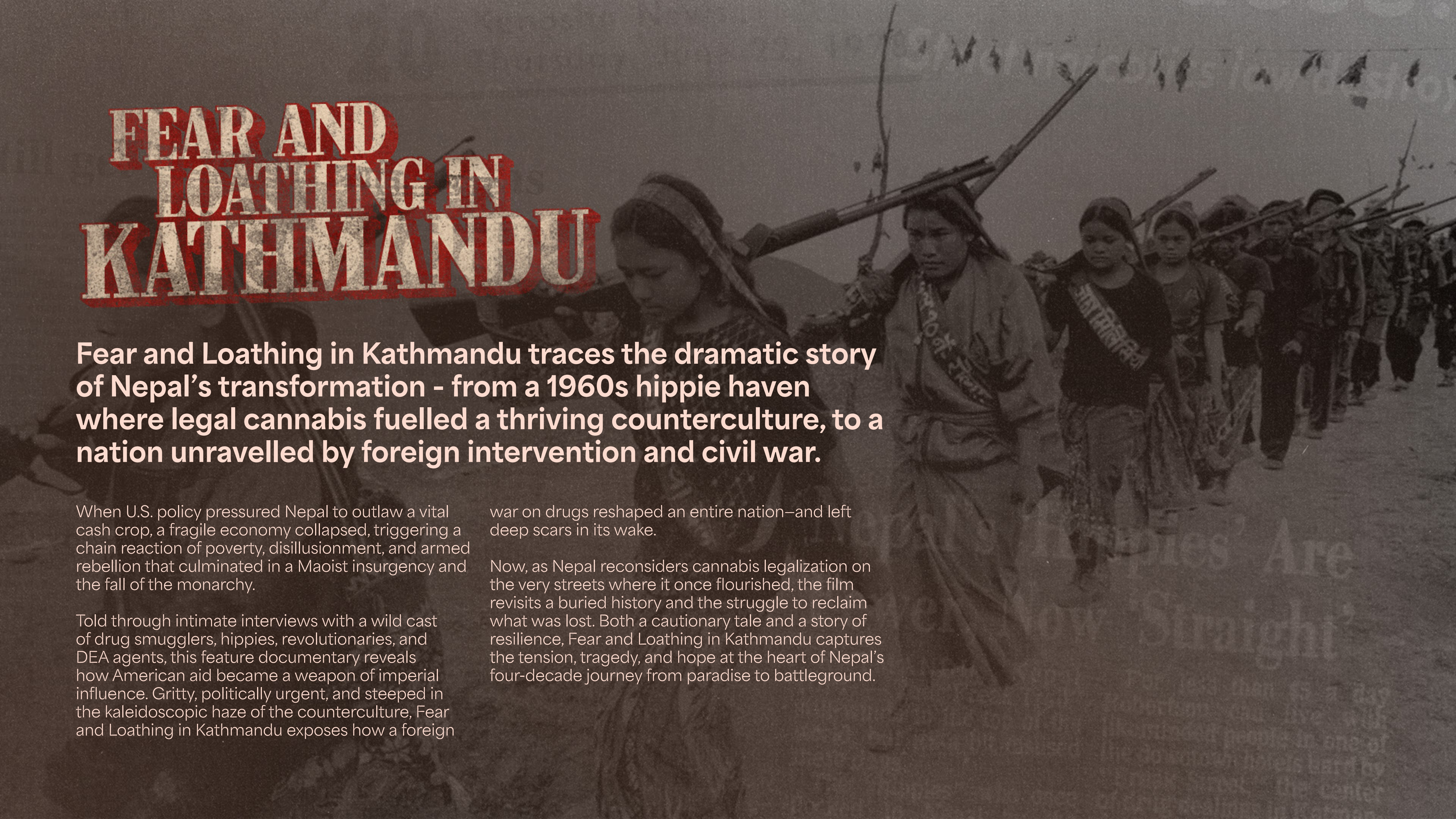
**Fear and Loathing in Kathmandu traces the dramatic story of Nepal's transformation - from a 1960s hippie haven where legal cannabis fuelled a thriving counterculture, to a nation unravelled by foreign intervention and civil war.**

When U.S. policy pressured Nepal to outlaw a vital cash crop, a fragile economy collapsed, triggering a chain reaction of poverty, disillusionment, and armed rebellion that culminated in a Maoist insurgency and the fall of the monarchy.

Told through intimate interviews with a wild cast of drug smugglers, hippies, revolutionaries, and DEA agents, this feature documentary reveals how American aid became a weapon of imperial influence. Gritty, politically urgent, and steeped in the kaleidoscopic haze of the counterculture, Fear and Loathing in Kathmandu exposes how a foreign

war on drugs reshaped an entire nation—and left deep scars in its wake.

Now, as Nepal reconsiders cannabis legalization on the very streets where it once flourished, the film revisits a buried history and the struggle to reclaim what was lost. Both a cautionary tale and a story of resilience, Fear and Loathing in Kathmandu captures the tension, tragedy, and hope at the heart of Nepal's four-decade journey from paradise to battleground.



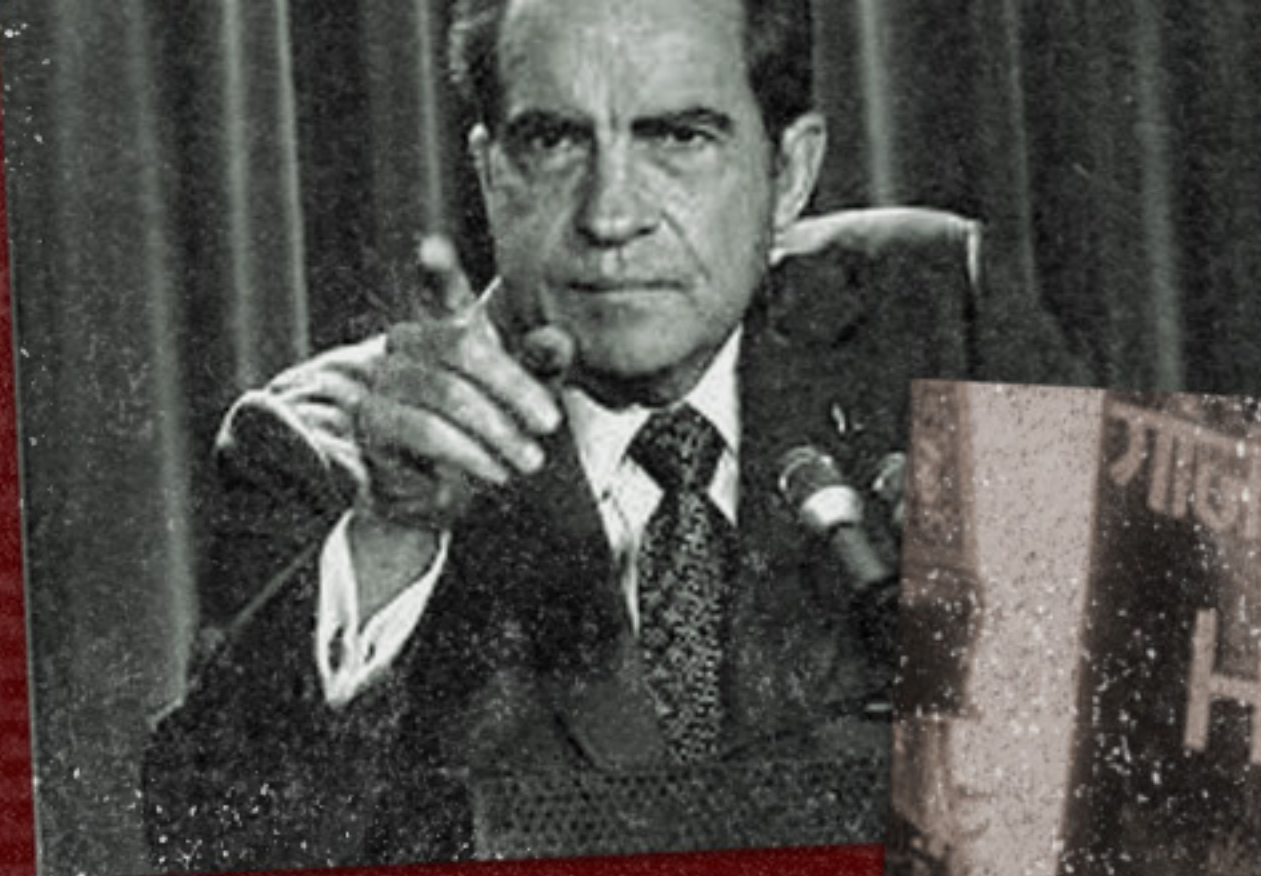


# THE STORY

In the late 1960s, the stoner haven of Kathmandu – the Shangri La of the hippie trail – became the mecca for the global counterculture. Long before Amsterdam, Nepal was the epicentre of a legal cannabis economy. Hemp was woven into daily life – in rope, cloth, religious practices, medicine, and food. And on Freak Street, Kathmandu's hippie district, government-licensed hash shops stood beside temples, drawing seekers, smugglers, and rock stars.

Then came 1971. Richard Nixon's War on Drugs. The U.S. began using foreign aid to enforce drug eradication policies. As America waged war in Vietnam, Nixon's counterculture opposition found themselves in the streets of Kathmandu. "The left-wingers are pushing the junk," Nixon told his advisors. "They're trying to destroy us."

Nepal, under its young, Eton-educated King Birendra, soon found itself in Washington's crosshairs. In 1973, under intense U.S. pressure, Birendra banned cannabis cultivation, decimating generations of rural livelihoods. Crops were burned, hashish shops shut down overnight, and farmers were left destitute. In return, Nepal received a \$50 million foreign aid package, meant to help farmers transition, but the money was allegedly pocketed by the royal family.





# THE STORY

The fallout was catastrophic. Fields were torched across rural districts. Shops were shuttered. Generations of farmers lost their livelihoods. In western Nepal, districts like Rolpa and Rukum, where hash was a primary source of income, simmered with anger. These regions would later become epicentres of the Maoist insurgency, which erupted two decades later, demanding the overthrow of the monarchy. With no legal income, many joined the insurgency, while others turned to the black market, where heroin – not hash – now flowed freely.

**The irony? While cannabis vanished, heroin addiction soared.**

Meanwhile, the royal family, dependent on U.S. aid, found itself implicated in trafficking the opioids that replaced the very crops they had outlawed. Public pressure forced King Birendra, known for his pro-democratic views, to transition Nepal from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. Despite the surrender of much of the monarchy's power, civil strife persisted. By the mid-1990s, civil war had erupted, claiming over 17,000 lives, razing villages, and plunging the country into a decade of violence. U.S. military aid helped arm the monarchy, while the insurgency grew stronger.





## Killer prince on opium

NEPAL'S Crown prince embarked on the royal massacre fuelled by scotch and opium laced cigarettes, an official investigation reported yesterday.

The two-man panel that probed the murders of the Himalayan kingdom's royal family confirmed that the late Crown Prince Dipendra was responsible for the killings of his parents, King Birendra and Queen Aiswarya, and others.

Court Chief Jus-

tice Keshav Prasad Upadhyaya and House Speaker Taranath Ranabhat said that Dipendra had consumed his favourite Famous Grouse whisky and smoked the opium cigarettes before he walked into the billiard room of Narayanhiti Palace on the night of June 1 and gunned down the nine victims.

The panel did not say whether then Crown Prince Dipendra, who later died, shot himself as claimed by an eyewitness and some



## Himalayan high

*In Nepal, hippies have either gone straight or just gone*

# THE STORY

**By 2001, Nepal was on the brink of collapse. Then came the night that changed everything.**

Crown Prince Dipendra, intoxicated and paranoid from hash – allegedly laced with PCP – stormed a royal dinner and executed nine members of his family, including King Birendra, then turned the revolver on himself. For two days, as Dipendra lay in a coma, he was crowned King of Nepal. When he died, the monarchy effectively died with him. By the time the war ended in 2006, the Maoists had become Nepal's most formidable political force, taking power in 2008.





# THE STORY

Fear and Loathing in Kathmandu chronicles this descent – from paradise to implosion – through the eyes of smugglers, farmers, legalisation activists, Maoist rebels, DEA agents, and the last generation of Freak Street hippies. At its heart is the story of a plant – once Nepal's spiritual cornerstone – now a pawn in a global economic power struggle.

As marijuana's global journey unfolded, it was reshaped by geopolitics, shifting markets, and new economic players. In California, we'll follow the story of the first hippie-led cannabis businesses as they begin to boom – built on Himalayan strains smuggled from Nepal. What was once a sacred crop became the foundation of a 30 billion dollar American industry. Meanwhile, Nepal was cut off from the very economy it helped spark. Today, the U.S. leads the world in

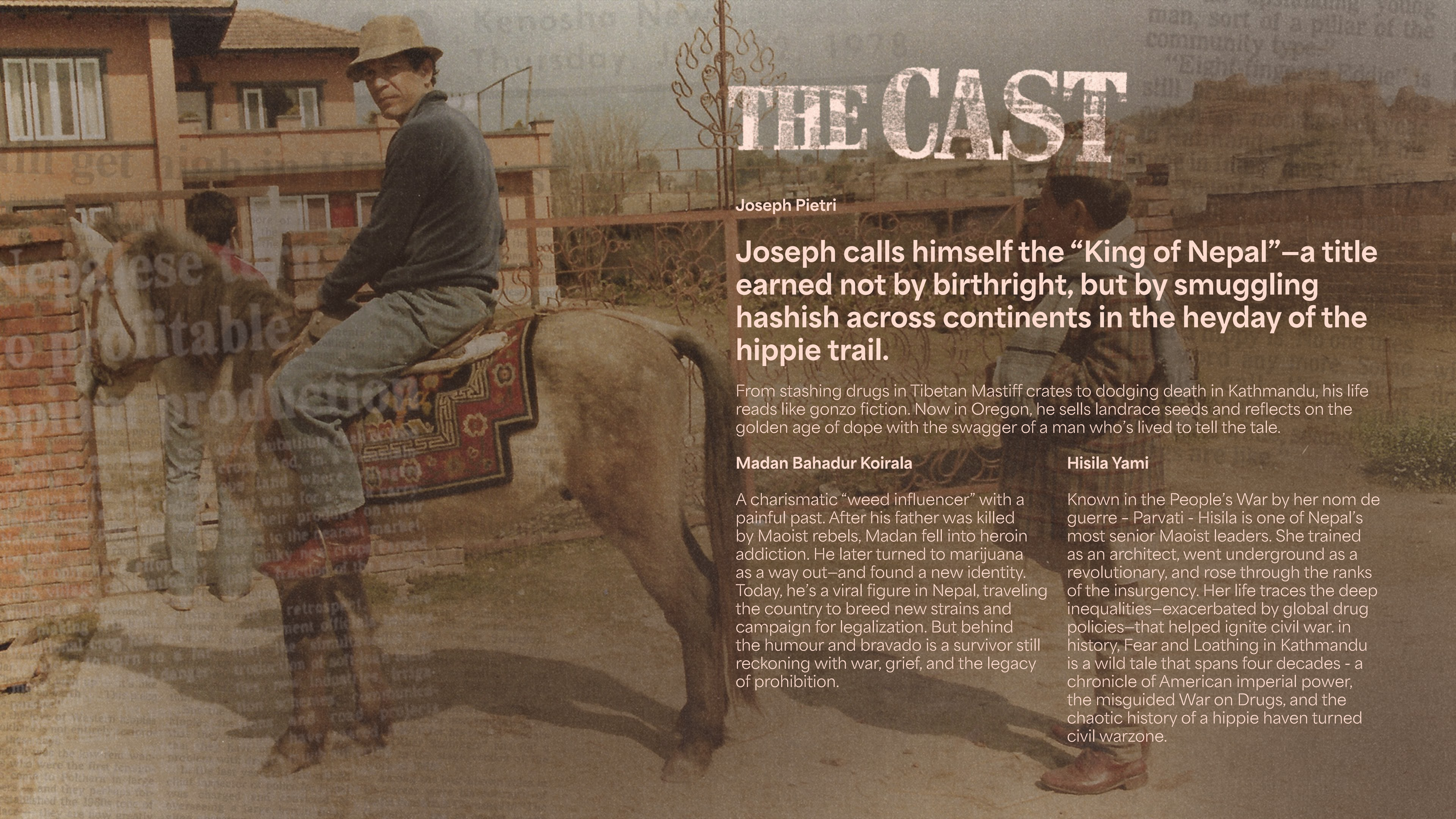
cannabis profits – while Nepal, rich in knowledge and biodiversity, remains locked out of the market it once defined.

Though recreational marijuana remains banned in Nepal, the government legalized medical marijuana in 2024, reversing a 50-year ban. We'll show how Nepal's youth are pushing for new legislation through Parliament and explore what the future holds for the younger generation in the aftermath of the war.

Set to an unforgettable soundtrack and overshadowed by one of the most insane royal massacres in history, Fear and Loathing in Kathmandu is a wild tale that spans four decades – a chronicle of American imperial power, the misguided War on Drugs, and the chaotic history of a hippie haven turned civil warzone.







# THE CAST

Joseph Pietri

**Joseph calls himself the “King of Nepal”—a title earned not by birthright, but by smuggling hashish across continents in the heyday of the hippie trail.**

From stashing drugs in Tibetan Mastiff crates to dodging death in Kathmandu, his life reads like gonzo fiction. Now in Oregon, he sells landrace seeds and reflects on the golden age of dope with the swagger of a man who’s lived to tell the tale.

**Madan Bahadur Koirala**

A charismatic “weed influencer” with a painful past. After his father was killed by Maoist rebels, Madan fell into heroin addiction. He later turned to marijuana as a way out—and found a new identity. Today, he’s a viral figure in Nepal, traveling the country to breed new strains and campaign for legalization. But behind the humour and bravado is a survivor still reckoning with war, grief, and the legacy of prohibition.

**Hisila Yami**

Known in the People’s War by her nom de guerre - Parvati - Hisila is one of Nepal’s most senior Maoist leaders. She trained as an architect, went underground as a revolutionary, and rose through the ranks of the insurgency. Her life traces the deep inequalities—exacerbated by global drug policies—that helped ignite civil war. In history, Fear and Loathing in Kathmandu is a wild tale that spans four decades - a chronicle of American imperial power, the misguided War on Drugs, and the chaotic history of a hippie haven turned civil warzone.



# THE CAST

**Jimmy Thapa**

**A self-described “spiritual artist” and fixture of Kathmandu’s Freak Street in the 70s, Jimmy ran away from home, became a yogi, and then a famed hash dealer.**

He’s both a relic and a legend—a reminder of the uneasy fusion between spiritual longing and stoned tourism. Jimmy’s story captures the fine line between seeking liberation and selling it.

**Padam Thakurathi**

In 1986, journalist Padam Thakurathi risked everything to expose the Royal Family’s link to heroin trafficking. The fallout was swift—an assassination attempt - that left him blind in one eye. Decades later, Padam hasn’t stopped digging. His reporting is fearless, his memory forensic, and his body bears the marks of the stories he’s still determined to tell.

**Kanak Mani Dixit**

Publisher, journalist, and longtime thorn in the side of Nepal’s elite - royal and Maoist alike - Kanak offers a rare perspective from inside the country’s power structures. As founder of the newspaper Himal Southasian, he connects the dots between royal impunity, Cold War politics, and foreign interference—all of which helped fuel Nepal’s cannabis crackdown.

**Rama Didi**

A domestic worker from one of Nepal’s historically oppressed castes, Rama Didi spent the 1970s working for foreign hash smugglers—cooking, cleaning, and keeping house. When the ban came down and Interpol showed up at the door, they used her to cover for them. Her story offers a view into how everyday Nepalis supported the hippie economy from behind the scenes, only to be pushed aside when it fell apart.





# THE CAST

in the Himalayas

## Chirag Khadka aka 5:55

A breakout rap star with over 100 million YouTube views, Chirag is redefining Nepali identity through music. With lyrics that tackle marijuana, migration, and mental health, he channels the frustrations of a generation raised on contradiction. Dreadlocked and defiantly Rastafarian, his sound blends protest and pop.

## Jaya Prakash Roka

A farmer from the remote village of Thawang, JP Roka relied on cannabis cultivation before the ban forced him to join the Maoists as a community organiser. Tortured by the army in 1989, his story—and those of his fellow villagers—illustrates the devastating impact of the ban on Nepal's poorest communities.

## Abhi Subedi

**Poet and professor Abhi Subedi is a witness to a time where Kathmandu became a crossroads of dreams, freedom, and artistic possibility.**

In the 1970s, his home was a gathering place for beatniks, avant-garde artists, and seekers—from Velvet Underground's drummer to wandering philosophers. Through his eyes, we explore how the counterculture carved out a space for utopia in the shadow of the Himalayas—one shaped as much by poetry and music as by marijuana.





# ARCHIVAL & ACCESS

We're working closely with Thomas Wide—our co-producer and a cultural historian whose upcoming book explores the Western counterculture's journey east in the 60s and 70s, and how it shaped everything from music to fashion to drug culture.

Through Thomas's deep research and connections, we're accessing rare archives and reaching out to former DEA agents, ex-smugglers, and the original Freak Street hippies who lived through it all.

Another major resource is the Facebook group 60s, 70s, 80s Trails to India and Beyond, a treasure trove of photos, letters and old footage. We're also working with the Nepal Photo Circle in Kathmandu, drawing on personal archives from our cast

(like Madan's family collection), and capturing present-day cultural shifts—from Nepali rap tracks to Silicon Valley's cannabis boom. Together, these sources bring to life a layered, transnational story of weed, war, and the long shadow of empire.





A person with short brown hair and a headband is seen from the back, looking towards a wall covered in various neon signs. The signs include a 'LIVE MUSIC' sign, a star, a heart, a glass, and a house. The scene is dimly lit, with the neon signs providing the primary light source.

# STYLE & APPROACH

Fear and Loathing in Kathmandu is soaked in the psychedelic haze of the 1960s – think pink sunglasses, long-haired hippies, dusty alleys, and the looming threat of guns, guerrilla warfare, and political murder. Our visual palette embraces the gritty grain and sun-bleached textures of film travel reels, archival fragments, and countercultural ephemera. We take cues from our namesake Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, Wild Wild Country, The Velvet Underground, and early Bollywood – blending vérité documentary and rare archival footage to create a sensual, fever-dream journey through decades of cultural upheaval.

We'll stitch visuals of archival material alongside diegetic audio and contemporary voice-overs /

talking heads - employing stylised elements such as diptychs and shifting frames to creatively present the archive.

The soundscape evokes a cosmic collision between East and West – swirling psychedelia from Ravi Shankar and Cat Stevens, the fuzzed-out rock of Hendrix and Cobweb, devotional bhajans, experimental synths, sitar-funk, and vinyl dust. We draw on icons like Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, the Beatles, and Asha Bhosle – weaving them into a sonic tapestry that feels like Soundtrack to a Coup d'État, filtered through the hash smoke of a lost utopia.





# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

## **Fear and Loathing in Kathmandu explores the long shadow of American cultural imperialism.**

Over 50 years, the U.S. has spent an estimated one trillion dollars on the War on Drugs – a campaign exported across the Global South with crippling consequences and no demonstrable success. In Nepal, this meant the erasure of ancient cultural traditions, economic devastation, and the collapse of a once-legal cannabis trade, while the U.S. used foreign aid as a tool of control.

This film interrogates the racist, politically expedient narratives that shaped global drug policy: why is marijuana demonized, while alcohol – a more harmful drug – is revered as cultural heritage in the West? What happens when Eastern spiritual and medicinal practices are criminalized, only to be repackaged and sold back for profit? Today, white entrepreneurs dominate America's billion-dollar cannabis industry, while communities in the Global South – and the Black and brown people historically persecuted for the same trade – remain excluded from the windfall.

Through the prism of the 1970s counterculture and the end of the Hippie Trail, Fear and Loathing in Kathmandu reframes Cold War geopolitics not as distant history – but as the foundation of today's global inequality, showing how imperial power reshaped nations, economies, and culture in its own image.





**Sparsh Ahuja - Director**

**Sparsh Ahuja is an award-winning filmmaker and National Geographic Explorer working primarily in animation and documentary.**

His work explores themes of migration and belonging, and has featured in MUBI, The New Yorker, TIME, The BBC, Al Jazeera, NOEMA and The Economist. Sparsh's documentary short, BIRDSONG, premiered at SXSW 2023, was shortlisted for the Grierson, IDA and BIFA Awards, and was acquired by The Guardian as a Vimeo Staff Pick.

His VR Film, CHILD OF EMPIRE- financed through the Venice Biennale Gap Financing Market - premiered at the Sundance Film Festival 2022, played Sheffield DocFest, and MIFF, and won the inaugural XR History Award from the Korber-Stiftung Foundation in Hamburg. In 2023, Sparsh was one of the 12 factual producers selected for VicScreen and Screen Australia's "Originate Factual" incubator. In 2024, his reporting on Indigenous land rights disputes was a finalist for the LA Press Club Award.

Sparsh's work has toured institutions such as The Smithsonian, The Victoria and Albert Museum, BFI Southbank, and ForumDesImages in Paris, and has been supported by the British Council, Australia Council for the Arts, Doc Society, Ford Foundation, Ian Potter Cultural Trust, and the CatchLight Fellowship amongst others. He spends his time between Naarm (Melbourne) and Delhi.

**Gil Marsden - Producer**

**Gil Marsden is an Emmy-nominated documentary director, producer and showrunner.**

He is a proud member of the DGA, PGA, ADG and AACTA. Living between the United States and Australia, Gil started his career as a producer, assistant director, and production manager across independent feature films, commercials and music videos. His debut as director came with documentary series THE GYMKHANA FILES which launched globally on Amazon Prime in 2018 and was Emmy nominated for directing, cinematography and sound design. His acclaimed sophomore series, MAKING THEIR MARK, was the biggest sports docuseries in Australian history. Releasing in 2021, the series chronicled the coronavirus pandemic from the inside of the biggest sporting code in Australia.

Other recent documentaries include 2021's HEAD ABOVE WATER, which follows four Australian swimmers approaching the 2021 Tokyo Olympics and 2022's KICK LIKE TAYLA that chronicles the public and personal challenges of AFLW player and professional boxer Tayla Harris. 2024 sees the arrival of UNITED STATES OF SCANDAL WITH JAKE TAPPER, a new six-part series executive produced by Gil that sees the CNN anchor and chief Washington correspondent interview individuals at the centre of political scandals. The series is produced by The Intellectual Property Corporation and premiering in 2024.





## Pallavi Sharda - Producer

**Pallavi Sharda is an international film actress, writer and the founder of Bodhini Studios**

- an Australia based production company and story incubator dedicated to unearthing untold stories within traditionally 'othered' narratives. A distinguished alumna of the University of Melbourne, Pallavi holds an LLB (hons)/BA (Media and Comms) and Diploma in Modern Languages (French). She commenced her performing arts career in Mumbai where she became the first ever Australian-born-Indian-heritage Bollywood leading lady. Her slew of Indian theatrical releases include Begum Jaan and Hawaizaada alongside mega stars such as Vidya Balan and Ayushmann Khuranna.

Internationally, her Hollywood, British and Australian credits include Warner Bros live action film Tom and Jerry (2021), Netflix drama The One (2021), Gurinder Chadha's period drama Beecham House (2020), ABC dramas Retrograde (2020) & Les Norton (2019) and Oscar winning film Lion (2016). Pallavi's most recent Australian role in Foxtel drama The Twelve has garnered her a Most Outstanding supporting actress nomination at the 2023 TV Week Logies. In 2022 Pallavi starred in the global hit Netflix rom-com Wedding Season. Pallavi sits on the board of Screen Australia and is widely recognised as a leader in India-Australia cultural relations.

# Dreamchaser

**Dreamchaser is a contemporary Australian content studio.**

We partner with Australia's leading creators to develop, finance, produce, and distribute premium content across all genres for the global film and television market. Our aim is to harness the dreams of Australian creatives and make them a reality.

Dreamchaser brings together an experienced management team with a proven record of world-class, full-service execution. With the backing of global content powerhouse Fifth Season, Dreamchaser provides a unique home for creators to develop exceptional programming slates, cultivate distinctive creative identities and bring the next generation of Australia's most ambitious and imaginative stories to the world.



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