

HISTORY / CULTURAL HISTORY

Hare Rama Hare Krishna: The Film That Captured Kathmandu's Hippie Generation

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How Dev Anand's 1971 classic turned Kathmandu's hippie streets, Swayambhunath and the sound of "Dum Maro Dum" into one of South Asian cinema's most enduring portraits of a generation in rebellion.

Few films are as closely associated with the image of hippie-era Kathmandu as *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*. Released in 1971, written, produced and directed by Dev Anand, the Hindi musical drama arrived at precisely the moment when Nepal's capital had

become a magnet for overland travellers, spiritual seekers, dropouts, musicians and young Westerners trying to escape the social expectations of Europe and North America. The film did not create that world, but it captured it so vividly that for generations of viewers across South Asia, Zeenat Aman's Janice smoking among foreign hippies in Kathmandu became almost inseparable from the mythology of Nepal in the early 1970s.

The Nepal Film Development Board records the production among the international films shot in the country, listing **Kathmandu and Swayambhu** as locations and Dev Anand, Mumtaz and Zeenat Aman among the principal cast. That detail matters because the film's Kathmandu is not a studio imitation. The streets, religious sites and urban atmosphere belong to a real city at a historic moment of transition.

Yet *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* is not merely a travelogue, nor is it simply a film about hippies. At its emotional centre is the story of a broken family, a brother searching for his estranged sister, and a young woman who has reinvented herself so completely that she no longer wants to answer to the name she was given at birth. Through that personal tragedy, Dev Anand constructed a larger argument about alienation, drugs, Westernisation, family breakdown and the seductive promise of escape.

More than half a century later, some of the film's moral judgments feel distinctly of their period. Its critique of hippie culture is often broad, and the contrast between "traditional" values and Western permissiveness can become simplistic. But dismissing the film for those limitations would miss what makes it historically valuable. *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* preserves Kathmandu at the exact point where a local city became an international symbol—and it shows how differently that symbol could be interpreted from India, Europe and Nepal itself.

Watch the Original Trailer

The surviving trailer gives a compact sense of the film's mix of family melodrama, counterculture imagery, Kathmandu locations and music.

Hare Rama Hare Krishna (1971) trailer. Online availability may vary by region.

Watch the Full Film on YouTube

A full-length HD upload of the film is currently available on YouTube. This is a third-party upload rather than a claim by Nepal Digest that the uploader owns the rights, so availability may change if the rights holder removes or restricts it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPQWliW0oyE>

Current YouTube full-film upload: *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971), approximately 149 minutes. Availability checked in September 2026.

A Brother Searching for a Sister

The story begins far from Kathmandu. Prashant and Jasbir are children in a family being pulled apart by conflict between their parents. When the marriage collapses, the siblings are separated. Prashant grows up away from Jasbir, while Jasbir's life takes a radically different direction. Years later, Prashant learns that his sister has ended up in Kathmandu, living among a group of hippies under the name Janice.

That change of name is crucial. Jasbir has not simply travelled abroad. She has attempted to construct an entirely new identity. "Janice" represents separation from family, memory and the expectations attached to her earlier life. When Prashant arrives in Nepal looking for her, his task is therefore much harder than locating a missing person. He must convince someone who no longer wants to be Jasbir that her past still matters.

This gives the film a psychological dimension that is sometimes overshadowed by its songs and hippie imagery. Janice is often discussed as an emblem of drug culture, but her descent is rooted in abandonment and emotional dislocation. The film's message is conservative in places, yet it understands one important truth: people rarely reinvent themselves without a reason. Behind

Janice's apparent rebellion is a wound.

Prashant's search brings him into the Kathmandu counterculture, where Western travellers, Indian expatriates and local spaces intersect. The city functions as a place where ordinary social identities have loosened. People can disappear into communities where nobody asks too many questions about who they were before arriving.

Why Kathmandu?

By the beginning of the 1970s, Kathmandu had become one of the legendary endpoints of the Hippie Trail. Young travellers moved overland from Europe through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India before reaching Nepal. The route offered more than transportation. It was a rejection of conventional tourism and, for many, conventional life itself.

In Kathmandu, Jhochhen Tole near Durbar Square became internationally known as Freak Street. Cheap accommodation, cafés, hashish shops and a constant circulation of travellers created a neighbourhood that looked unlike almost anything else in South Asia. Cannabis was openly available during that period, and the city acquired a reputation for permissiveness that travelled far beyond Nepal.

For Dev Anand, this environment offered an ideal setting for a story about a young woman who had cut herself off from her

family. Kathmandu was close enough to India to be culturally intelligible to an Indian audience, yet sufficiently international and unusual to represent another world. It allowed the film to explore Western counterculture without leaving South Asia.

The Nepal Film Development Board's record of the film identifies Kathmandu and Swayambhu as shooting locations. The choice of Swayambhunath is especially interesting. One of the Kathmandu Valley's most important Buddhist sacred sites becomes part of a film about hippies who are borrowing fragments of Eastern religion, music and symbolism while often remaining disconnected from their deeper meanings.

Zeenat Aman and the Creation of Janice

If *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* belongs to anyone in popular memory, it belongs to Zeenat Aman. Dev Anand was already one of Indian cinema's most established stars. Zeenat Aman was not. The role of Jasbir/Janice transformed her career.

Aman had entered films after success in beauty pageants, including winning Miss Asia Pacific International in 1970. Her earlier screen appearances had not established her as a major star. Janice changed that. The character's Western clothes, detached manner, cigarette smoke, sadness and rebelliousness felt unlike the conventional Hindi-film heroine of the period. Aman's own cosmopolitan appearance allowed Dev Anand to cast her not

merely as a character living among hippies, but as someone who seemed genuinely capable of belonging to that world.

The performance works because Janice is not presented as happy. She is surrounded by people, music and supposed freedom, yet she remains emotionally isolated. Her style became iconic, but the character underneath the style is tragic.

Aman's performance earned major recognition and established her as one of the defining actresses of 1970s Hindi cinema. Her later screen image—modern, self-possessed, glamorous and less constrained by traditional heroine conventions—can be traced in part to this film.

“Dum Maro Dum” and the Sound of Kathmandu

No discussion of *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* can avoid “Dum Maro Dum.” Composed by R. D. Burman, written by Anand Bakshi and sung by Asha Bhosle, the song became vastly more famous than the film that contained it. Its hypnotic rhythm, psychedelic arrangement and visual setting made it an anthem associated with the counterculture even though the film itself was critical of drug use.

This contradiction is one of the great ironies of Indian popular culture. Dev Anand intended the film in significant part as a warning about the destructive side of hippie life. Yet the sequence

most audiences remembered was also the sequence that made that life look visually and musically electrifying.

The camera moves through bodies, smoke, unconventional clothing, guitars and communal movement. Janice appears not as an outsider observing the scene but as its emotional centre. The song turns the hippie gathering into something cinematic and seductive. The lyrics, music and images communicate release from responsibility even as the larger narrative insists that such release is dangerous.

This tension helps explain the film's endurance. Propaganda is usually forgotten when the culture it criticises is more interesting than the warning. *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* tried to condemn the hippie world, but it preserved its energy so effectively that viewers could interpret the sequence in ways the filmmaker did not fully control.

Nepal Through an Indian Lens

This makes the film an excellent companion to the French production *Les Chemins de Katmandou*, released only two years earlier. Both films use Kathmandu as a setting for drugs, youth rebellion, fractured identities and Western counterculture. Yet they look at the same phenomenon from different cultural positions.

The French film follows Europeans travelling east because they are dissatisfied with Europe. Nepal becomes a destination for escape. *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*, by contrast, views the counterculture from South Asia. Prashant is not trying to join the hippies. He enters their world because he wants to retrieve his sister from it.

That difference changes the moral perspective completely. European counterculture could interpret Kathmandu as liberation from family and social control. Dev Anand's film interprets the same separation as evidence of a family tragedy. Where the Western traveller celebrates detachment, the Indian brother sees abandonment.

Neither perspective should be treated as a complete description of Nepal. Both use Kathmandu for their own narrative purposes. Yet together they reveal how powerful the city had become as a global symbol.

The Film's Problematic View of the Hippies

A modern reading also needs to acknowledge the film's simplifications. The hippies in *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* often function less as individuals than as a social warning. Drugs, sexual freedom, Westernisation and emotional collapse are bundled together into a single cultural threat.

The historical reality was much more complicated. The people who travelled the Hippie Trail were not one uniform group. Some were genuinely interested in Hinduism or Buddhism. Some were primarily interested in drugs. Some were political radicals, artists, musicians, students or ordinary tourists travelling cheaply. Others simply wanted adventure.

The film also places much of the blame for Janice's condition on the environment she has entered, whereas her psychological pain begins with the breakdown of her family. This is important because it complicates the film's own moral argument. Janice is not destroyed solely because she encountered hippies. She arrives among them already alienated.

In that sense, the movie contains a stronger interpretation than it sometimes consciously articulates. Counterculture offers Janice a community because conventional family life failed her first.

Freak Street Before It Became Nostalgia

For Nepali viewers today, one of the most fascinating aspects of the film is simply the visual record of Kathmandu. When old movies are shot on real streets, fiction eventually becomes archive.

The Kathmandu Valley has changed enormously since 1971. Population growth, road expansion, concrete construction, traffic, commercial signage and urban sprawl have transformed the city.

Locations that may have appeared ordinary to the production crew now provide evidence of a vanished urban environment.

This is especially important because the hippie era is now frequently reconstructed through nostalgia. Restaurants use psychedelic decoration. Freak Street is marketed as a historical curiosity. Tour guides retell stories about hashish shops and overland travellers. The period has become part of Kathmandu's tourism mythology.

Hare Rama Hare Krishna is different because it was filmed while that world was still alive. The movie was not recreating 1971. It was 1971.

Swayambhu, Spirituality and Cultural Borrowing

The film's use of Swayambhunath adds another layer to its representation of foreign travellers. Western counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s drew heavily from Asian religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Meditation, yoga, chanting and Eastern philosophical vocabulary entered Western popular culture rapidly.

But interest is not the same as understanding. A traveller can adopt beads, chants or religious imagery without understanding the traditions from which they come. This creates a tension visible throughout the hippie era: genuine curiosity existed alongside superficial appropriation.

In Nepal, where sacred sites are not abstract symbols but active religious spaces, that difference matters. Swayambhunath is not mystical decoration. It is a living Buddhist and Hindu sacred complex with centuries of ritual and community significance.

The film does not deeply investigate this distinction, but its images allow modern viewers to ask the question: when Western travellers said they had discovered Eastern spirituality, what exactly had they discovered?

The Tourism Economy Behind the Counterculture

There is another irony beneath the film. Hippies often defined themselves in opposition to consumerism. Yet their arrival helped expand Nepal's tourism economy.

Visitors needed rooms, food, transport, guides, clothing, cafés and places to socialise. Local businesses adapted. Areas of Kathmandu became increasingly oriented toward foreign travellers. The counterculture therefore helped create commercial demand even while many of its participants imagined themselves rejecting commerce.

This pattern would become even clearer later. As the hippie period declined, Thamel developed into the dominant tourism district. Trekking agencies, hotels, restaurants, equipment shops and travel companies professionalised the visitor economy.

Kathmandu's international identity shifted from hippie sanctuary toward Himalayan adventure hub.

Hare Rama Hare Krishna captures the city before that transformation was complete.

Janice as the Film's Real Tragedy

It is easy to remember Janice through style: the large sunglasses, the smoke, the detached expression, the music. But the film's emotional force comes from the fact that Prashant still sees Jasbir underneath Janice.

The brother and sister represent incompatible interpretations of the same past. Prashant believes recovering family connection can restore what was lost. Janice believes the past itself is what she had to escape.

This is why Prashant's mission cannot succeed simply through recognition. Finding her does not mean recovering her. He can prove that they are siblings, but he cannot force her to experience that fact with the same emotional meaning he does.

The film ultimately turns the counterculture story back into a family story. Kathmandu is the place where the confrontation occurs, but the conflict began long before either sibling reached Nepal.

What the Film Says About Freedom

The film's argument about freedom is conservative but not entirely superficial. It asks whether freedom defined only as the absence of obligations can become another form of imprisonment.

Janice has escaped family authority. She can dress as she wants, travel with whom she wants and reject conventional expectations. Yet she is also dependent on drugs and emotionally trapped by the identity she has created.

The question remains relevant beyond the specific moral atmosphere of 1971. Freedom from something is not necessarily freedom toward something. Removing social restrictions can create possibility, but it does not automatically create purpose, belonging or psychological stability.

This is precisely where *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* connects with *Les Chemins de Katmandou*. Both films arrive at a similar conclusion through different cultural routes: travelling to Kathmandu can change the environment around a person without resolving the conflicts carried inside them.

Its Impact on the Image of Kathmandu

It would be inaccurate to claim that Dev Anand's film created Kathmandu's hippie reputation. The city was already famous on the international overland circuit. But the film helped transmit

that image to an enormous South Asian audience that might never have encountered the Hippie Trail directly.

For many Indian viewers, Kathmandu was suddenly not only a city of temples, monarchy and Himalayan geography. It was also a place of foreign youth, psychedelic music, drugs and cultural rebellion.

The film therefore participated in a broader transformation of Nepal's cinematic image. Foreign productions had already begun using the country for adventure and exotic scenery. Dev Anand used it as a contemporary social landscape.

That distinction is important. Kathmandu was not merely standing in for a mythical Himalayan world. It was playing itself.

From Film Location to Cultural Memory

There is also a specifically Nepali reason to preserve the film in public memory. Kathmandu has been filmed by international productions for decades, but many of those works use Nepal only as scenery. *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* is different because the social phenomenon it records was genuinely unfolding in the city around the filmmakers. Foreign backpackers, changing tourism businesses, old neighbourhoods and sacred sites were not decorative inventions. The production captured a real encounter between Kathmandu and a generation of outsiders arriving with

new habits, expectations and money. That encounter would reshape parts of the city's tourism economy and international reputation long after the film left cinemas. In that sense, the movie is not only about what India thought of the hippies; it is also evidence of one of the periods when Kathmandu's global identity was being negotiated in real time.

Why It Still Matters to Nepal Digest

More than fifty years later, *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* is valuable not because every conclusion it draws about youth culture is correct. It is valuable because it preserves the friction of its time.

The film captures India looking at Western counterculture through Nepal. It captures a young Zeenat Aman at the moment she became a star. It captures R. D. Burman producing music that would outlive the social debate around the film. Most importantly for Nepal, it captures Kathmandu before the hippie era became history.

Today, the old dream of Kathmandu has been replaced by multiple new ones. Trekkers imagine mountain freedom. Digital nomads imagine affordability and flexibility. Spiritual tourists imagine meditation and retreat. Luxury travellers imagine boutique heritage. Nepal continues to function in the global imagination as a place where ordinary life can be interrupted.

That continuity is striking. The visitor has changed. The fantasy has changed. But Kathmandu is still repeatedly asked to provide outsiders with something they feel they are missing elsewhere.

Hare Rama Hare Krishna reminds us where one version of that story became iconic.

Its Kathmandu is smoky, musical, restless and emotionally unstable. Its young travellers believe they have escaped convention. Its central character believes she has escaped her past. Her brother arrives believing the past can still rescue her.

Between them stands a city that is both real and symbolic.

That is why the film remains more than a Bollywood classic. It is part of Nepal's visual history: a cinematic record of the moment when Kathmandu became one of the world's great stages for the argument over what freedom was supposed to mean.

Featured image credit: Vyacheslav Argenberg / Wikimedia Commons.
Swayambhunath, Kathmandu. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Further reading: Nepal Film Development Board: *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* · IMDb · British Film Institute

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