

India's "patriotism pop" songs urge Hindus to claim Kashmir

By Sheikh Saadiq
The Associated Press

NEW DELHI — The music videos began appearing on social media within hours of the announcement by India's Hindu nationalist-led government that it was stripping statehood from the disputed region of Kashmir that had been in place for decades.

The songs delivered a message to India's 250 million YouTube users about moving to the Muslim-majority region, buying land there, and marrying Kashmiri women.

It's the latest example of a growing genre in India known as "patriotism pop" — songs flooding social media about nationalism and the country's burgeoning right-wing ideology.

Earlier songs were limited to the rise of Hindus in India, defeating regional rival Pakistan and hoisting the Indian flag in every household. Now, they include settling in Kashmir — a rugged and beautiful Himalayan region claimed by both Pakistan and India, although both countries control only a portion of it.

On August 5, Prime Minister Narendra Modi revoked Kashmir's decades-old special status that was guaranteed under Article 370 of India's Constitution and sent thousands of troops to the region. The move touched off anger in the India-controlled region, which has been under a security lockdown that has seen thousands detained to prevent protests there.

One of Modi's revisions allows anyone to buy land in the territory, which some Kashmiris fear could mean an influx of Hindus who would change the region's culture and demographics. Critics have likened it to Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories.

The patriotic songs are mostly shared on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and the fast-growing app TikTok, which in June had about 120 million active users in India. Despite their low production values, poorly matched lip-synching, and repetitive techno beat, many of the soundtracks have received millions of hits on YouTube.

The songs are a hit among youthful followers in northern and eastern parts of



India, and their creators don't seem to be stopping anytime soon.

Nitesh Singh Nirmal identifies himself as a producer, songwriter, and composer for his Rang Music studios in the eastern state of Bihar. A Modi admirer, Nirmal claims to be the first to produce a soundtrack on the revocation of Kashmir's statehood, completing it in three hours.

The song, "Dhara 370," or "Article 370," starts with visuals of an Indian flag fluttering atop New Delhi's famous Red Fort, followed by old footage of Modi from a previous Independence Day ceremony. The singer thanks Modi and his government for keeping his promise to remove Article 370 from the constitution. The video then cuts to the map of Kashmir, along with words that roughly translate to how Pakistan has lost to India.

The song has received more than 1.6 million hits on YouTube since it was posted there by Nirmal, who has no musical background. He said he only found his calling when Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party resoundingly won the 2014 election.

That's when Nirmal thought he could write songs about nationalism.

"I am doing service for the nation. People dance to these songs," he says.

Nirmal's claims about their popularity aren't far-fetched. TikTok, which lets the user lip-synch to music and make short vines, is flooded with images of Hindu nationalists declaring plans to go to Kashmir and marry women there. Most of the videos have music similar to the kind

produced by Nirmal.

In April, TikTok was removed from Android and iPhone app stores after an Indian court ruled it was "encouraging pornography."

The rising appeal for songs that promote nationalism and talk about reclaiming Kashmir have paved the way for lesser-known artists to join.

Salman Siddiqui, who is in his 20s and studies science in the state of Uttar Pradesh, wanted to showcase his musical writing prowess and contacted Nirmal. They collaborated on a song about a man who is seeking a Kashmiri bride and wants to be the first to have a wedding procession that travels from India to the region.

Nirmal and Siddiqui insist the songs are not sexist.

"It's the desire of a young man's heart to marry a Kashmiri woman," Siddiqui says.

The idea was boosted August 6 by lawmaker Vikram Saini, who told members of his Bharatiya Janata Party "eager to get married" to go to Kashmir, adding that his party has "no problem with it."

Critics say the idea of marrying Kashmiri women to "reclaim" the region is rooted in a patriarchy that objectifies and dehumanizes Kashmiris.

Political anthropologist Ather Zia calls this a "fetishization in the Indian imagination."

Such songs are a "culmination of a toxic misogynistic nationalist thinking that draws validation from humiliating

POP-PAGANDA. Pictured is a screenshot of a patriotic music video on YouTube that appeared after India's Hindu-led nationalist government revoked the statehood of Kashmir on August 5. The song is about a man who seeks a bride from Kashmir and wants to be the first to have his wedding procession travel from India to the disputed region. India's 250 million YouTube users are seeing a flurry of new videos about moving to the territory to buy land and marry a Kashmiri bride. (YouTube via AP)

Kashmiri women," Zia said.

"The Indian media — from news to entertainment — has left no stone unturned in portraying Kashmiri women in the racist trope of 'coveted fair-skinned ones' (and) at the same time being helpless and needing saving from their own men — all this while demonizing Kashmiri men," she said.

Some artists oppose writing such songs, but they say the audience demand is strong.

Singer Nardev Baniwal, who lives in Haryana state and owns the Jawan Music Co., has a song on Kashmir that received 1.9 million hits on YouTube.

"We write songs about things people want," Baniwal says, noting his main audience is from smaller cities and towns in northern India where internet penetration has picked up in recent years.

Google Trends has shown an increase in Indians using search terms like "marry Kashmiri girl" and "buy land in Kashmir."

"I am personally against such declarations, but if we don't make these songs, someone else will and we will lose out on money," Baniwal says.

Nirmal said that since he published his song August 5, he has earned nearly \$100 for work that cost him about \$20 to produce.

He said the key is to keep abreast of the news and gauge the public mood. He has songs ready if India's Supreme Court allows a Hindu temple be built on a site where hardliners in 1992 attacked and demolished a 16th-century mosque, sparking deadly Hindu-Muslim violence.

"Songs about building of the temple could be my next hit," he says.

Apart from the online revenue, the artists also perform concerts. Nirmal has had 10 shows in the last two weeks.

"The business," Nirmal says, "is booming."

Chinese casino hub Macao's elite choose new leader

MACAO (AP) — An elite pro-Beijing panel has chosen a new leader for the Chinese casino gambling hub of Macao.

Ho Iat-seng was picked to be the next chief executive of the former Portuguese colony in a selection process with no other candidates.

Ho, a pro-establishment businessman and politician, will become the city's third leader since China took control of Macao in 1999 after more than four centuries of Portuguese rule.

Ho will replace the city's current leader, Chui Sai-on, whose term expires in December.

Macao and nearby Hong Kong are former European colonies that were handed back to Beijing, becoming Chinese special administrative regions that retain considerable control over their own affairs under a formula known as "one country, two systems."

Residents of the two cities can elect some politicians, but the top leader is handpicked by members of an elite committee who fall in line with the wishes of China's communist leaders.

While Hong Kong has been gripped by more than two months of turbulent anti-government protests demanding full democracy, Ho's anointment went ahead with little controversy, highlighting Macao's much weaker opposition movement. Officials said the 62-year-old Ho garnered 392 votes from Macao's 400-member "election committee."

He said he was confident Hong Kong's protest movement, which began with calls to scrap an unpopular China extradition bill, would not last.

"The protests against the extradition bill will end," Ho said at a news conference, adding that the demonstrations were taking a toll on the enclave's tourism industry.

Residents in Macao, who have benefitted from economic



CHIEF EXECUTIVE. In this photo released by the Macao Government Office, newly elected Macao chief executive Ho Iat-seng speaks after the election in Macao, on August 25, 2019. An elite pro-Beijing panel has chosen a new leader for the Chinese casino gambling hub of Macao. Ho was picked to be the next chief executive of the former Portuguese colony in a selection process with no other candidates. (Macao Government Office via AP)

growth supercharged by casino revenues, showed little interest in changing the system.

"As long as no major incidents occur now and it won't affect the livelihoods and income of the Macao people, I won't be against Macao's electoral system," said Gavin Au, 16.

Macao, an hour by high-speed ferry from Hong Kong, is the world's biggest casino gambling market, raking in revenues dwarfing the Las Vegas Strip and fuelled by high-rolling mainland Chinese gamblers wagering at glitzy resorts run by companies including Las Vegas Sands and Wynn Resorts.

Indonesia to move capital from sinking Jakarta to Borneo

Continued from page 2

estimated to cost the economy \$6.5 billion a year.

Mineral-rich East Kalimantan was once almost completely covered by rainforests, but illegal logging has removed much of its original growth. It is home to only 3.5 million people and is surrounded by Kutai National Park, known for orangutans and other primates and mammals.

Widodo said the relocation of the capital to a 444,780-acre site will take up to a decade and cost as much as 466 trillion rupiah (\$32.5 billion), of which 19% will come from the state budget and the rest will be funded by cooperation between the government and business entities and by direct investment by state-run companies and the private sector.

He said the studies determined that the best site is between two districts, North Penajam Paser and Kutai Kertane-

gara, an area that has minimal risk of disasters such as floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, forest fires, volcanic eruptions, or landslides in the seismically active nation.

Indonesia's founding father and first president, Sukarno, once planned to relocate the country's capital to Palangkaraya in Central Kalimantan province.

Infrastructure improvement has been Widodo's signature policy and helped him win a second term in April elections.

Decades of discussions about building a new capital on Borneo island moved forward in April when Widodo approved a general relocation plan. He appealed for support for the move in an annual national address on the eve of Indonesia's Independence Day on August 16.

He said his government is still drafting a law on the new capital, which will need to be approved by parliament.