

SONG OF THE DUNES

Search for the Original Gypsies

Song of the Dunes: Search for the Original Gypsies will begin airing this month on the PBS stations. Co-Directed by William Haugse, Academy Award™ nominee, and Paula Fouce. It sheds light on the caste musicians of Rajasthan, India and the injustices that befall them.

In India today, over 160 million people are born “Untouchables”, assumed to be low caste, almost sub-human in the hierarchical Hindu caste system. They suffer human rights abuses including murder, rape, and lynchings. Called Dalits, they cannot even drink from certain wells.

The caste system was abolished in 1947 In India, yet it still persists. In the Thar Desert on the Pakistan border, low caste Merasi and Kalbeliya musicians have performed in village ceremonies and royal courts for millennia, but they are not allowed to set foot in the traditional rites for which they play. Terrible atrocities are often committed against them due to caste discrimination. They live a very precarious existence.

The Khan family belong to the Merasi caste in Kanoi village where Chanan Khan donated the land to build a music school. They struggle to keep their musical tradition alive. Nowadays, there is no longer patronage from the Maharajas, so the tribe plays for tourists. Yet the higher caste villagers have harassed them.

The Kalbeliyas of Jodhpur are a caste of snake charmers who exist on the lowliest rung of the caste system. They have squatted on land in Gangana village for fifty years. Now a government program is knocking down their homes to construct a road.

The Kalbeliyas beg the *Song of the Dunes* film crew to take a letter to His Highness Gaj Singh II, the Maharaja of Jodhpur asking him to intercede on their behalf. Gaj Singh was profiled on June 28, 2013, in the *Wall Street Journal*, in an article entitled, "*The Last Maharaja*." A patron of the arts, his aid to the musicians of Rajasthan is legendary; he works diligently to save their traditions. The Kalbeliyas are poor people, with nowhere to go, and no education. The city of Jodhpur is growing as India's population expands, and millions are moving into the urban centers from the countryside, in search of a better life. The local tribes are being displaced by development.

The Kalbeliyas have finally collected enough money over many years to build their own temple. This is a great achievement, as they are not allowed to enter most temples in the rural areas. They travel to Falna for the dedication of their new temple, for a festival where they dance and sing all night. The Thakore, the regional head announces that the Kalbeliyas finally have made their mark, because Western media has come to see them.

As the Kalbeliyas and Manganiyars battle life's struggles, and try to find equality from severe caste discrimination, their music keeps their indomitable spirit alive.

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