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## Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

### Music with a message

The Merasi, from India's class of untouchables, get respect as they play in other countries.

By RAY ROUTHIER, Staff Writer

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John Ewing/Staff Photographer

The traditional form of music performed by the Merasi on Monday at Waynflete School has a history that goes back 800 years. The group is on a tour of the United States.

Sarwar Khan can speak three languages, but he doesn't know how old he is. The government of India won't issue him a birth certificate.

His prowess as a musician has allowed him to perform around the world to grateful audiences, but in his hometown he can't walk in the marketplace with a tourist without being harassed by police.

As a member of India's lower class, Khan was not allowed to go to school. Yet on Monday, he and six other musicians from the desert region of Rajasthan were at Waynflete School in Portland to teach about 500 students something about their culture and the injustices of India's caste system.

And about some of the little things people in a free society take for granted.

"When I come here, I get a dignity and a respect from people that I cannot get in my own country," Khan said minutes after Waynflete students, from preschool to high school, gave his group a rousing ovation. "We are hungry for dignity and respect. We get that every place we play here."

The musicians are members of a group in India called "the Merasi" ("the storytellers"), and that's what they call their musical group.

They led workshops for students and gave an hour-long concert at the school focusing on their musical tradition, using instruments that are deceptively simple and outwardly crude – wooden drums with animal skins, thin pieces of wood clapped together, a wind instrument made of a gourd, a high-pitched, one-string instrument fashioned from a can and a piece of wood.

In the hands of the Merasi, the instruments created complicated rhythms that at times sounded like they came from a 10-piece drum kit or the percussion section of a jazz orchestra.

Their songs, most with a toe-tapping rhythm and joyous, high-energy singing, were stories and celebrations of everyday life. One was about the birth of a baby, another was about the strength of rural Merasi women who carry giant jugs of water on their heads for miles at a time.

Khan and his group are on a tour of the United States sponsored by a New York-based nonprofit group, Folk Arts Rajasthan Inc. The group's educational director, Caitie Whelan, is a Waynflete graduate and Maine native.

"The Merasi are considered untouchables in India, part of the lower caste, without any recognition as a citizen or access to education," Whelan told the Waynflete crowd between songs. "Yet facing astounding odds, they continue to sustain and create this art form."

The American tour began in mid-March. In April, the group performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

The Merasi were at the Maine College of Art's graduation on Sunday, when Khan received an honorary degree. They are set to perform in New York

and New Jersey later this month.

Khan, who says he knows he's in his 30s, has been playing music since he could hold an instrument. The Merasi's music has allowed him to see the world and play in temples and for kings in India, but Khan said it is the playing of instruments with animal skins that got his family relegated to the lowest caste generations ago.

The Merasi played on Monday dressed in white, with multi-colored vests and bright orange and red turbans. They were accompanied by a female dancer.

Also included were photographs of one of the member's homes: a mud hut with grass and plastic sheets for a roof, a stone fire pit for cooking out front, and a pile of hardened cow dung by the front door for fuel. For water, Khan said, the Merasi "beg" from people from a higher caste. Most Merasi live on less than \$1 a day.

Khan, the only member of the group who speaks English, hopes the group's musical tours raise awareness of



John Ewing/Staff Photographer

Pinkudi Nath adds her own distinctive flair to the performance by the Merasi on Monday at Waynflete School in Portland.



John Ewing/Staff Photographer

Rasul Khan uses an ancient Indian instrument called Khartals while playing with Merasi, a group performing traditional Indian music at a concert at Waynflete School on Monday. Waynflete graduate and Maine native Caitie Whelan helped organize the event.

India's caste system and help bring about its downfall. Besides promoting the Merasi's music, Whelan and Folk Arts Rajasthan Inc. have started a small school for about 22 Merasi children.

Khan says education will be one of the crucial ways the Merasi will be able to eventually improve their situation.

"We will try to change things with one hand on (musical instruments) and one hand on the pen," he said.

*Staff Writer Ray Routhier can be contacted at 791-6454 or at:*

**[rrouthier@pressherald.com](mailto:rrouthier@pressherald.com)**

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