

By **Gautam Pemmaraju**

In May 1914 *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese steam ship carrying 376 Indian migrants, was refused permission to dock at Vancouver in a show of racial exclusionism. On return to Calcutta, a British gunboat met the ship and its passengers, who were considered to be political agitators, and a six-month standoff ensued.



Sixty years later, Idi Amin's 1972 expulsion of Asians from Uganda became a well-documented pogrom of hate and violence. 1976 saw Jayaben Desai lead a group of disgruntled staff of the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories in North London on strike protesting over wages and work conditions.

Then late last year Akmal Shaikh, a British-Asian man convicted of heroin smuggling by the Chinese Supreme Court, was executed. A mentally ill Shaikh believed he was on his way to stardom with a self-penned song – "only one world, only one people, only one God", the lyrics read.

Migrant stories are often powerful, evoking images of great hardship and upheaval. Often enough the stories become songs, sung with the accents of the past alongside the borrowed cadences of adopted homes. *Este Mundo* (This World), the second studio album of San Francisco based agit-pop band Rupa & the April Fishes, is a contemporary mélange of the same pot.

Attending the launch at Cargo, Shoreditch High Street's premier venue in London, the agitation becomes apparent as the band raucously erupts on stage with cello, double bass, trumpet, accordion and guitar in hand; not to mention band leader Rupa's thoughtful, engaging lyrics in French, Spanish and English. Immediately one sees intrepid meanderings of idiom, form and style and the vagabond promiscuity thereof - it's all quite gypsy, folk, Latin, *chanson*, swing, a pinch of waltz, a dash of tango and a whiff of tabla – concocted by an eclectic mix of musicians of varying ethnic persuasions.

It is this musical re-articulation of migrants and their issues that make Rupa & the April Fishes both contemporary and relevant. The band's pointedly named debut album, *Extraordinary Rendition*, reveals the distinctiveness of the act – a peculiar pastiche of nationality, race, language, musical form and idiom.

Une Americaine a Paris

, a striking track, describes the singer's encounter with an Algerian man in Paris. He asks on learning her nationality, if she is not afraid being an American amongst the many angry Arabs in Paris. Her orphic reply: "I am not American, you are not Arab, we are not in Paris, we are in life."

This breaching of boundaries reveals the fault lines of national, linguistic and racial identities. It is in concept that Rupa & the April Fishes score the highest. The breathy strains of lost homes, difficult loves, past journeys and impending ones are hand in glove with the more overt political tones of the lyrics. Rupa says the decision to either be direct or subtle is in the construction of the song, implying that it is not her choice, but the song's. It is as if the words "when the road opens up like a flower, I know that time will not wait for me" wrote themselves into *La Rose*, just as the moon is faulted for the unsaid events of the night before in

Culpa de la Luna

, while in the migrant worker's missive (and title track)

Este Mundo

– "I am working far from you, I am paying with my time and peace" – the voice that speaks is of the many countless others who have trod the familiar path.

Of Indian Punjabi origin, and raised across India, Europe and America, Rupa's aesthetic is informed by location, language and race but her attempt is to transcend the same and forge an "artistic voice of global identity".

Speaking to her before the gig I ask if she chooses to identify herself by her nationality or her origins. She proffers that her “Indian-ness” brings a sense of historical comfort, adding that given her upbringing and concerns, to choose any one heritage – Indian, American or French – would be “provincial”.

As we struggle to navigate ecological crises, global terrorism and financial disaster, we realise that l’histoire ne s’arête pas ici, the story indeed does not end here, not the quest for love, a safe planet, and nor indeed the migrant’s journey.