

The Indian Customs and Immigration authorities denied entry permission to Pakistani journalist Ms. Zainab Fathima Shah on board of “Peace Boat” when it reached Kochi port in South Indian State, Kerala, on September 16. A Lahore-based journalist, Zainaba, is one of the 8 journalists among 548 passengers of various nationalities in the “Peace Boat”, which started its 39th global voyage from Tokyo, Japan, on September 1. The group of journalists, including those from areas of mutual conflict and mistrust like Palestine-Israel and India-Pakistan, is headed by the founder-editor of “Kashmir Times”, Ved Bhasin.

When all other passengers went out of the ship to visit and study different localities and topics in Kerala, only Zainaba was discriminated against to forcibly remain alone in the “Peace Boat” because she is a Pakistani. The authorities quoted rules and regulations of “security” which does not permit temporary visit for Pakistanis to step into Indian soil.

“I have to obey the rules. Therefore, I had to quench my thirst to see India by looking at the Indian shores by standing on this ship deck”, she said.

The experience in India was an unexpected rude shock for Zainaba. For, among all the passengers, it was she who was more eager to visit places in India and to interact with local Indians. Kochi is the only port where the “Peace Boat” touches in India.

“Despite our language, food habits, dress, and skin color being the same, lot of obstacles are there separating us”, said Zainaba whose grand-father, Dr. Asif Shah of undivided Punjab, stoutly opposed India-Pakistan division in 1947. Although she follows her grand-father’s vision, the Indian experience hurt her deeply.

According to Zainaba, she accepted the invitation of the Japanese NGO to join the 100 days global voyage primarily because it would provide her a chance to see India. From Tokyo, the ship reached Kochi after touching Manila and Singapore ports on its onward journey to Massawa in Eritrea. However, what greeted her at Kochi port was a firm denial of entry with an equally firm order not to step on Indian soil.

She does not want to rake up this bitter experience to act as yet another thorn between the already disturbed India-Pakistan relationship. On board, however, Zainaba chose an Indian journalist – Saptarshi Bhattacharya of “The Hindu” – as her close friend and voyage companion.

The Japanese NGO “Peace Boat” have special consultative status of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of United Nations and seeks to establish a global network among people and NGOs working for peace, human rights, environment and development. The ship will anchor at 19 countries including Egypt, Turkey, France, Spain, Cuba, Columbia, Peru, Chile, Tahiti, New Zealand, Australia and Papua Guinea.

Ironically, the study list itinerary of “Peace Boat” passengers in Kerala were a programme of ‘home stay’ with local families at Ambalamukal near Ernakulam, which was meant to exchange preparation of Japanese and Keralite food, identify local dressing habits, a visit to historical

places in Fort Kochi, and also to know “Art of Living” course – all of which are so innocuous and come nowhere near to cause security concern objections against Zainaba’s entry.

After this fourth trip to Kochi, the “Peace Boat” left Kochi on September 17 afternoon. Launched by Japanese NGOs in 1983, the “Peace Boat” had so far took around 15,000 people to more than 100 ports spread over 50 countries through its 38 global voyage conducted so far. The current trip will conclude at Tokyo on December 9.

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