

Everywhere you look, a piece of the beautiful Grand Canal can be seen peeping through from beside the busy streets. You peek back and look a little further, you will see the beautifully hued gardens just hiding behind the befallen darkness of the night. You will want to wait till the sun is back up to take a better look. You will want wait forever, just to remain in the city, standing still, focus unhindered, as you swallow the sheer beauty in.

Known for the Grand Canal running from one end of the city to the other, around 100 gardens, and many aesthetically charming bridges and pagodas, Suzhou city is located in the southeast part of China's Jiangsu Province. It occupies an area of 8,488 square kilometres, of which 42.5 percent is water, making it a celebrated water town in the Yangtze area. The city is also known as Land of Fish and Rice, Garden Capital, Silk Capital and an Arts and Crafts City.

Historically, Suzhou was tantamount with high culture and sophistication. Generations of artists, scholars, writers and high society in China were drawn to it by its beautiful art forms and the delicate exquisiteness of its celestial gardens. These gardens are Suzhou's main appeal-- a symphonic combination of rocks, water, trees and pavilions that reflects the Chinese admiration of balance and harmony. As the saying goes- 'Gardens to the south of the Yangtze River are the best in the world, and Suzhou gardens are the best among them!' These gardens achieve their high standing not only for their vastness in number, but also for their natural beauty and harmonious construction. Some of these gardens have also been listed in the World Heritage List.

Built in 514 BC, this ancient city has a history of 2,600 years. The characteristics of the past, unique as they were, are still retained today. The double-chessboard layout of the city, with the streets and rivers going side by side, while the water and land routes run in parallel, is remains unbroken. The mild climate makes the city an even more desirable destination, all year around. Their rich history is celebrated throughout the city as you will come across the Zheng He theme park, highlighting his famous historic voyage. The Palace of Heavenly Concubine in Liuhe Town and the Tianfei Palace of Goddess Mazou will transport you back to the past where you can interact



The Grand Canal running throughout Suzhou city.

THE VENICE OF CHINA

Article and Photos: NAZIBA BASHER

with characters you had only once read about. The 2,600 year old Pingjiang Road can slow time down for any visitor as you see the sepia tinted historic roads, and faded grey walls of little shops offering both ancient and modern relics.

Suzhou city, playing an important role in the One Belt, One Road initiative, taken by President Xi Jinping, houses some of the most busy and powerful industries in China. It has 147 companies that are Fortune 500 listed. The Taicang Port boasts the largest timber import in all of China. The Wujiang Dingsheng Silk Co. Ltd or Saint Joy has not only provided traditional Chinese clothes designed for the political leaders and their spouses who



The ancient walls of Pingjiang Road.

were attending the 22nd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Beijing, but also provided the silk for the wedding dresses of Kate Middleton, the duchess of Cambridge, and Princess Diana of Wales.

There are 22,000 foreigners living in Suzhou, and for four consecutive years the city has been named "Amazing China- the most attractive Chinese city for foreigners."

With the city wearing the look of paradise, Suzhou people can bring you back down to Earth, with their sheer humility and humbleness. The sweetness of their delicious cuisine resembles the sweetness of their attitudes and personalities. Touring the wonderful ancient water town, you will truly know the charm of a 'heaven on earth'.

"The Venice of China, they call it," said Adria, a journalist from Spain. "And for good reason," I thought.



The statue of Goddess Mazou at the Tianfei Palace.



Inside the Zheng He theme park.

TRAVELOGUE

AWARENESS



THE STORY OF UNTOLD SUFFERINGS

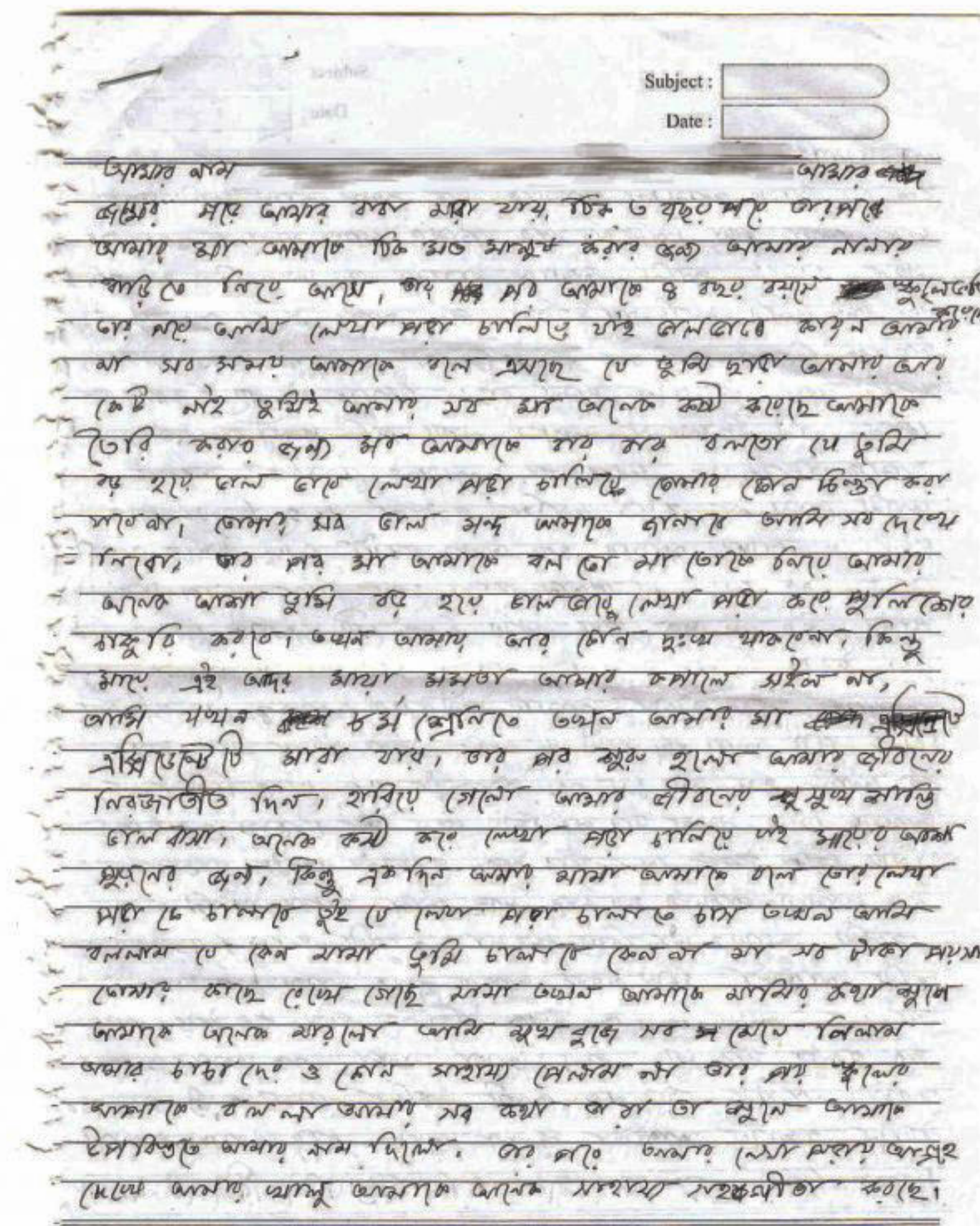
MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN
PHOTOS COURTESY: IMAGE

Shorifa (not her real name), a fifteen year old girl lives in a village of Nilphamari district. Her poor day-labourer father married her off at the age of thirteen, when she was a student of class six. Her husband, who is also a day-labourer, could not afford to continue her education. For Shorifa, now the mother of a baby girl, her dream to be educated and to get a job is a memory of distant past. With her husband's meagre income, she is now suffering the bitter struggle for survival with her four months old daughter.

There are thousands of Shorifas in the villages of Bangladesh particularly in the northern districts where delaying to marry off a girl right after her puberty means their parents have to pay more dowries. According to a national survey conducted by Plan Bangladesh and ICDDR,B in 2013, 64 percent of the women aged 20-24 were married before they turned eighteen and 29 percent of them were married before they were fifteen. A lot of initiatives are visible both from the state and the NGOs to prevent child marriage but very few think about the millions of victims whose childhood and hopes have already been shattered by this malpractice.

To fill this gap, five renowned organisations namely Terre des Hommes Netherlands, Terre des Hommes - Lausanne, RedOrange, Pollisree and SKS Foundation have been working to implement an initiative called 'Image' (Initiative for Married and Adolescent Girls' Empowerment) to ensure a life with dignity for the thousands of victims of child marriage. Funded by the Dutch Embassy in Dhaka, this initiative has been providing medical, educational and psychological support to 4500 married young girls in Kurigram, Gaibandha and Nilphamari, three of the poverty stricken districts of Bangladesh.

As a part of this activism, workers of 'Image' asked the victimised children to write letters describing their sufferings and thoughts after marriage. These heart wrenching letters are the testimony of excruciating mental and physical sufferings, which these children have to go through.



One of the girls, who is 13 years old wrote, "I cannot do so much works in my in law's home. With so many things to do all day, I feel dizzy and my eyes blur. Sometimes I feel like I can't see anything and I feel sick all the time. I feel like going to bed but cannot sleep. My mother-in-law scolds me if I try to get some sleep."

"I have to get up. My heart bursts; I think of my parents, I feel like crying, I remember how happy I was when I was with my parents."

Shuchi Karim, adviser (research & knowledge management) of the programme says, "We intend to use the narratives of these letters as our primary knowledge base for understanding the lived realities of married adolescent girls, who are made to enter adult lives before time and often remain voiceless within development discourses and dialogues.

"These letters are, in fact, our primary platform for advocacy, communication, research and a positive image building medium for married adolescent girls of Bangladesh both at national as well as international levels," she adds.

Meher Afroz Chumki, State Minister, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs says, "The government has taken initiatives to stop child marriage completely by the year 2041." However, till then every year hundreds and thousands of adolescent girls in Bangladesh will become victims of child marriage. If these victimised girls are empowered through education and financial freedom with the help of initiatives like 'Image', this harmful practice of child marriage can be removed effectively.