Making Them Feel Important

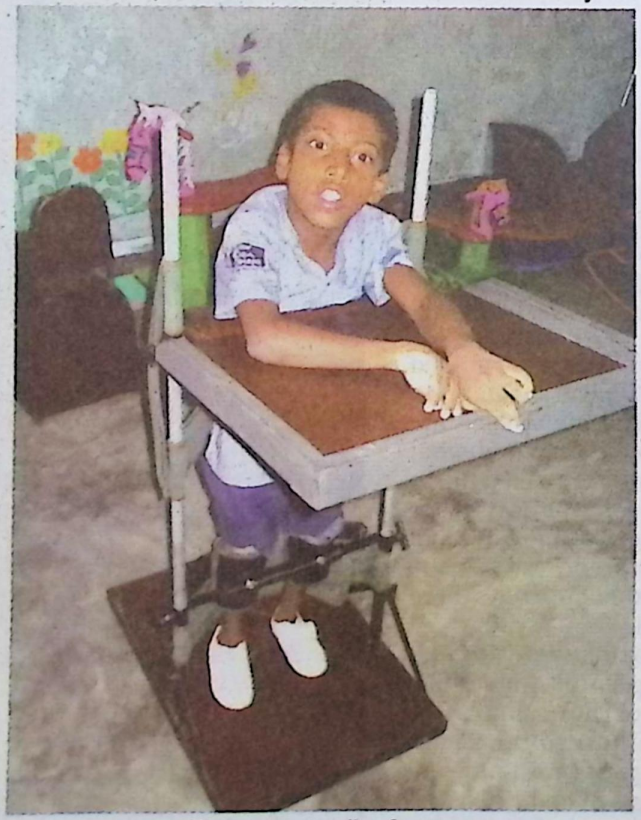
ANWAR ALI

It was not the usual classroom filled with the chorus of children's voices repeating a lesson or the sound of children shouting and chatting. Instead, the children were preoccupied with basic tasks like standing up, walking or working with their hands independently. Some of the more lucky ones were reading books, drawing pictures, working with papers, playing with coloured tools, alphabets and equipment designed for understanding things. Others were being given physiotherapy.

The teachers at this school named Prayash for children with disabilities are also not the usual brand of teachers. Parents and relatives are surprised to see how patient and caring they are, attending to each child, not losing their composure even when the children become hard to manage, for example when they spit on their teachers clothes or even soil their own clothes. Often parents cannot help but become teary-eyed when they see their children being treated with such love and caring. They are just happy that their kids are getting an opportunity that they never had at home. Local people sometimes look at the children with curiosity; some believe that this is some sort of mental institute for 'mad children'. But those who dare to enter the school are astonished when they see the remarkable things taking place within the walls.



The atmosphere at the classroom is cheerful and friendly.



Tinku on a standing frame.

The 'Prayash (Endeavour) Multipurpose Service Centre was set up by the Foundation for Women and Child Assistance (FWCA) in the country's northwestern deprived and underprivileged city of Rajshahi. The school gives these children and their families the hope of a decent life. It is a situation where disabled children are often written off by their families and society because they are seen as having no significant economic contribution to make.

"I was very surprised to find the underprivileged children with disabilities were being given some attendance, care, importance and whatever the mainstream people have access to," says Sheikh Abu Tarek, a disabled people's leader in the city who occasionally visits Prayash centre out of curiosity. "This is the basic demand of the disabled -- to be included in the mainstream, not to be favoured with special treatment but to have access to what everyone else has. There are many like Tarek in the city who laud Prayash activities as they have seen the positive results of its work.

Emel is now 15 years old and has both intellectual and physical disabilities. When he