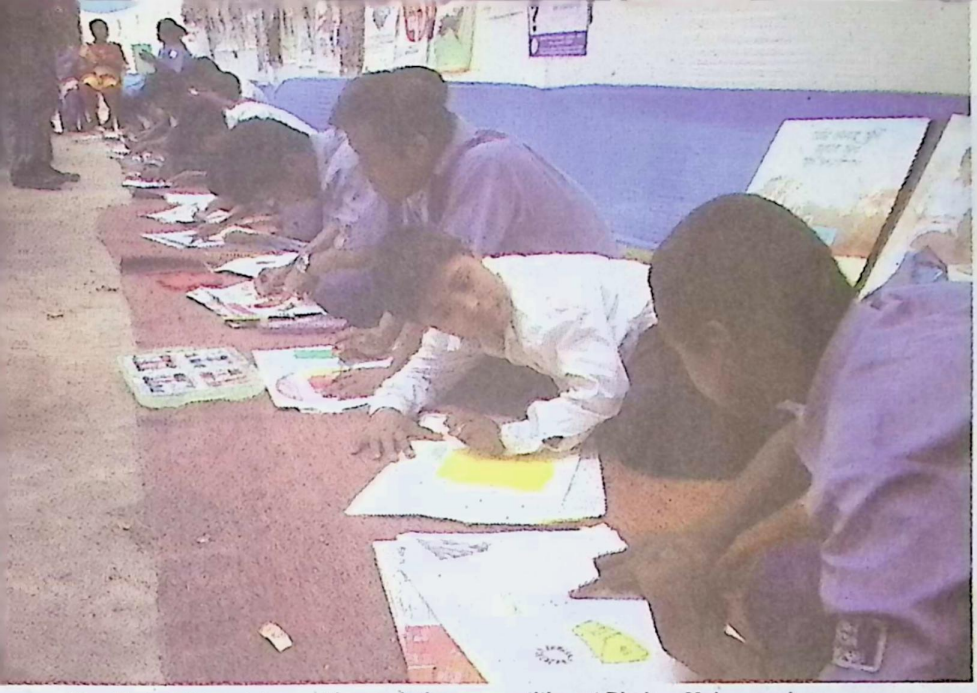
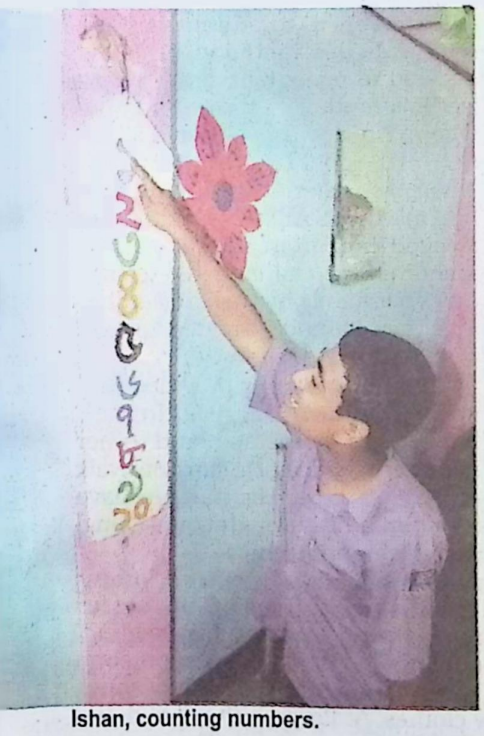
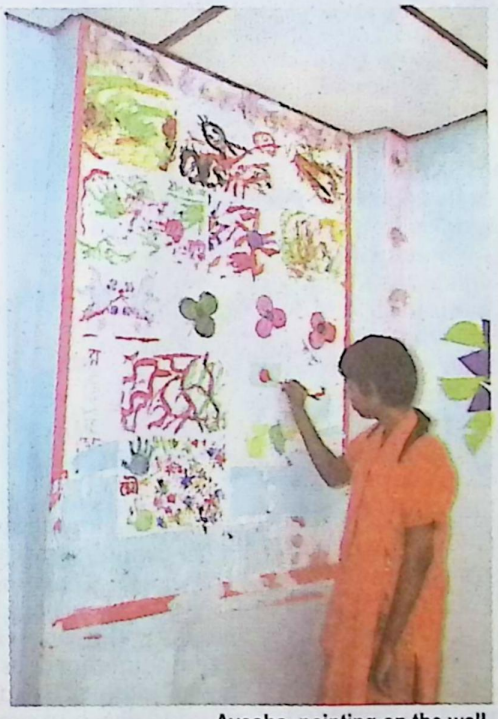


Disabled children take part in a painting competition at Bhuban Mohon park.



Ishan, counting numbers.



Ayesha, painting on the wall.

was only 14 days old he had a severe attack of pneumonia that affected his ability to sit, walk or speak. It took eight years to get his neck strong enough to hold his head. When he was just 5, his father left the family to marry another woman from a distant district. Emel's mother stays at her in-laws' house but has to work at other people's houses, as her in-laws are also poor. Sending Emel to school, under such circumstances, was unthinkable. Now thanks to Prayash, he is in an environment where people care about him.

Ten-year-old Santana is a bit better off than Emel. Her chest and back has swollen up, the consequences of a fever at age three. She came at Prayash at her six. Soon it was evident that Santana was quite sharp and was good at drawing as well as her studies. Her father Santu Chandra Das, a cobbler, is grateful that his daughter has the opportunity to develop her natural talents.

Children with disabilities are usually treated with neglect in our country. They are deprived of their rights as children. Ostracised and sometimes abused, these children are left in isolation and have to go through life without hope. Estimates show, about 80 percent children with disabilities live in low-income families, as there are some 3.4 million disabled children in the country. In Rajshahi city, there is no data on the situations of disabled children other than the base-line study published by FWCA in February 2008. The study estimates that approximately 7123 children with disabilities live in the city out of 44.3 percent of the population of eight lakh below 18 years of age.

The study found that a majority of the children with disabilities belong to the school-going age groups -- 34 percent of 6-10 years and 27.10 percent of 11-15 years. Among the total children with disabilities, about 34.48 percent are intellectually disabled while 26.11 percent are physically impaired, 25.12 percent have multiple disabilities, and 12.81 percent are hearing and speech impaired. In many cases the fathers do not acknowledge them as their children. A large proportion of these children are deprived of health care. About 90.64 percent surveyed children have taken treatment once while a few have never been treated at all. Some 54.89 percent children who have taken treatment were not taken to appropriate professionals. The overall picture of access to education of the children in the city is not happy either as about 70.94 percent disabled children are yet to find access to any school. Such children are at risk, says the study, as protection or care issues of the children are not addressed. A disturbing trend is of parents or organised gangs using children with disabilities for begging. The Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) has registered the births of all children, but most of the disabled children, about 51.23 percent, are still unregistered.

Prayash's approach to this deprived vulnerable group is