

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

People with disabilities are often defined by what they can't do as opposed to what they can.

Sarah Bernhardt has been referred to as the most famous actress in the history of the world. During the peak of her career, Bernhardt had to have her entire right leg amputated as a result of an accident and had to use a wheelchair for several months. Despite this, she continued to woo millions with her voice and is considered an inspiration by many modern day actors.

All these people suffered from some sort of physical disability in their lives. However, incredibly, they are known for their work, for their contributions to the society and not for their disability.

Now, imagine that these people were born in Bangladesh. Would the world still be singing praises of the administrational abilities of Roosevelt? Could a person like Jean Do have the courage to write a book in the face of continuous obstacles and stigmatisation? Could Sarah Bernhardt still inspire thousands with her acting prowess?

Now take the example of Emdad Hossain Mollik Ibrahim. Emdad, 26, lost both his upper limbs after he fell while working on an electric pole six years back. He has since been living at the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP) in Savar.

Defying all odds and in response to the taunts he received after losing his arms, Imran was determined to earn a living on his own without depending on anyone else.

"During my initial stay at CRP, I was introduced to Lovely, another resident at the centre. Lovely, like me, had lost both her arms. But she decided to make the best of her situation and learnt to paint using her mouth. I was inspired by her dedication and decided to learn this art form," says Emdad.

Eventually, Emdad learnt how to use his mouth to paint on a canvas. News of his talent soon reached the outside world and people started thronging CRP, enquiring about his artwork and asking about how one could buy them. A couple of art exhibitions displaying his works were also organised in the capital city. He was also involved in designing t-shirts of certain retail shops.

However, people began to lose interest in Emdad's abilities once the hubbub surrounding the immense talent of a double amputee began to die down.

"Initially, I was crowded with offers. People were interested to see how a person with no arms could still paint competently with his mouth. But over time, the offers began to trickle down. Individuals and organisations that had earlier shown keen interest in me and my work seem to have suddenly disappeared," says Emdad wryly.

Emdad considers himself lucky, however, as he is still able to earn a livelihood. He works as a vocational trainee at the CRP and is a regular participant in the art classes of the centre. He pays rent to for his small room where he lives with his mother. He says that he still gets regular working assignments from well-wishers, who have a genuine interest in him and his talent.

It goes without saying that people with physical disabilities face numerous challenges in our society that looks at them with a mixture of pity, neglect, disgust and disregard. Disability is often seen as an individual's problem. Quite like colonizers, most non-disabled people seem to have created a binary distinguishing "us", the normal people, from "them", people with disabilities. Most are of the opinion that "they" face difficulty in their