

## Decrease in dropouts

### Positive trend must continue

A 13 percent reduction in dropout rates at the primary education level in the last two years is commendable and we congratulate the concerned ministry for the positive steps taken which have enabled this progress.

A multi-pronged approach was and remains necessary in addressing the issue of students dropping out at the SSC level and the government has shown competence in matters of free and timely distribution of textbooks, widening the coverage of stipends and training of teachers. It is also encouraging that irregular students will be able to sit for exams. Efficient monitoring mechanisms are, however, required to keep regular tabs on these developments.

It is also necessary to identify the several factors, besides poverty, which contribute to dropout rates of students in order to attack the problem of illiteracy at the very roots. For female students, a common concern is early marriage. Communication and security too are issues that need to be addressed, for, while some parents are unwilling to let their daughters go to schools located far from home, many girls have stopped going to school due to 'eve-teasing' or sexual harassment faced on the way there. While girls bear the brunt of household responsibilities, male students too are often forced to drop out of school in order to take up jobs, also stemming from poverty. Children who start school late are also more likely to drop out, thus calling for a mechanism to reduce late/overage enrolment. A fear of teachers has also discouraged students from continuing their studies -- a concern which we hope shall be addressed by the strict enforcement of laws banning corporal punishment in schools. Finally, lack of support from poor and illiterate parents remains a key factor in the lack of motivation of children with regards to education. The value of literacy must be inculcated not only in students but also their family members, the primary source of guidance and support for children.

These and other issues yet to be identified must be addressed in order to ensure that, before going digital, the nation is first free of illiteracy.

## Ship breaking industry

### Safety must come first

THE High court has reasserted the need for safety first in the ship breaking yards. We are constrained to say that profit motive alone has come to dominate actions of certain entrepreneurs to such an extent that the attendant deleterious effects of ship breaking have been totally overlooked. The HC's activism is welcome.

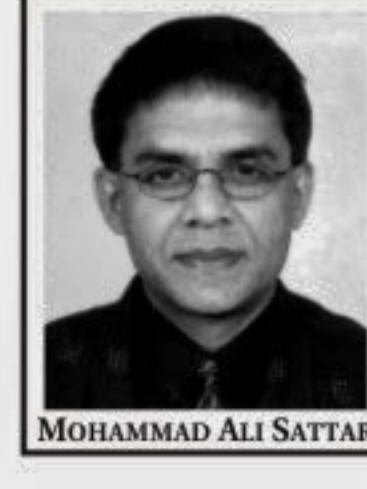
While no one will disagree that the ship breaking sector in Bangladesh, which has been identified as an 'industry' by the government very recently, has had tremendous positive impact on the country's economy given its lateral linkages, regrettably, it had been expanding uncontrollably and without fulfilling its obligation towards its workers and towards the environment on which the unbridled growth has had severe damaging impact.

It is unfortunate that some interested quarters have misrepresented the real situation and instead tried to project the efforts of those that have been pressing for workers' safety and environmental protection as being driven by ulterior motives and being anti development.

We are happy to note that the High Court (HC) has stuck to its position, and has allowed import of ships for dismantling on a temporary basis, pending framing of rules by the government on the matter, conditionally. In response to the Bangladesh Ship Breakers Association petition to withdraw its 19th January suo moto rule to stop ship breaking till further orders, the HC has allowed temporary import of ships for scrapping provided the safety of the workers were ensured, modern technologies were used in ship breaking and that the wastes were disposed off in a manner that did not harm the environment. It has embargoed the entry of uncleared oil tankers and nuclear and passenger ships that contain toxic materials.

Notwithstanding the potentials, no industry, least of all ship breaking, can afford to flout safety requirements. And in this regard the government must formulate the rules, as directed by the HC and keeping its directives in

# Think hard next time



MOHAMMAD ALI SATTAR

IT'S cricket again. Last week in this column I put my thoughts on the WC cricket 2011 a couple of days before the opening. Bangladesh being one of the hosts makes the occasion even more significant for us. We have made the world look at us, if not for anything, for cricket at least. In fact, like many others, I still clutch on to my belief that the Tigers have the talent to get to the quarters.

I was fortunate to get a ticket for the opening game played between Bangladesh and India. It was an exciting morning for my 11 year old son. We set off early and reached the venue at Mirpur at around 11.30 am. We had to leave our vehicle well ahead and walk the distance to the stadium. Security arrangements were almost flawless. There were checking points at intervals through which only ticket holders could filter in. These were manned by smartly adorned and well-armed police, Rab and army personnel. I thought the armoured vehicles that stood alongside the street were an added beauty. The crowd at the entrance was uncomplaining. Presence of foreign media was visible. By and large it was a well managed affair. It was festivity all around.

This piece is not a review of the opening battle (?) between Bangladesh and India. It's about what I saw from the other side of the ropes. Opening ceremony was grand but not the opening contest. It's been a disappointing day. It traumatised us.

To everybody, the sides were never at par in strength and experience. I for one did not care to find out the cricketing statistics of the two or between the two. It hardly mattered. Rather I wished another bad day for the Indian team. I was in grip of fear

of the ruthless Indian batting line-up. I was particularly afraid of the timid but fearsome "baseball" batsman Virender Sehwag. His feet are so firm that he doesn't need a cricketing footwork. My fear came true. He destroyed our boys with his belligerent beauty. How could you describe his easy but ruthless clubbing of any ball that he received? Mashrafee would not have made much of a difference that day, for sure.

To the cricketing world the deci-

In short, there's no single reason as to why he opted to field. Shakib spoke of "good in chasing" and "the dew factor."

Bangladesh was never outstanding in chasing and there was no threat of dew that would matter. It was a suicidal decision, at worst. Shakib was without a formidable pace attack and full spin power. With half the bowling potency he dared to take on a batting line up like India! That too on a lovely placid track drenched with hundreds



**We need to have better plans for the games ahead according to our strengths and weaknesses instead of the other way round.**

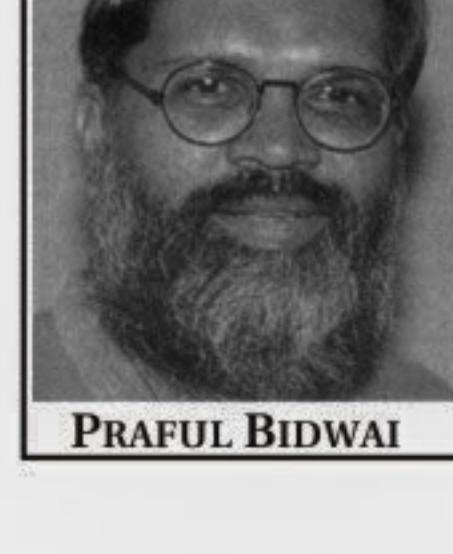
sion to field first was a big, big surprise. To me a sheer stupidity, it was more than the pain of losing. We know the worst case of defeat and many dazzling performances that make the game so very glamorous and uncertain! But no expert of experts could justify Shakib's choice of fielding first. The post match tete-a-tete on every TV channels (local and foreign) only questioned the rationale of Bangladesh's decision to field first.

A friend informed that Indian captain M.S. Dhoni while talking to the press the day before the match remarked that if he won the toss tomorrow (19.2.11) he would put Bangladesh into bat. If it's true, Dhoni won the mind game and had the last laugh!

Apart from Sehwag, whose classic innings of 175 was a beauty in itself, another Indian Virat Kohli stole a

### PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

# The UPA is floundering



PRAFUL BIDWAI

JUST as the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government seems set to concede the opposition demand for a Joint Parliamentary

Committee (JPC) on the 2G-telecom spectrum scam, another scandal has broken out, involving the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and a private company, Devas Multimedia.

ISRO subsidiary Antrix Corporation sold 70 megahertz (MHz) of electromagnetic spectrum from the 2.5 GHz frequency S-band to Devas for about Rs 1,000 crores for a range of commercial multimedia broadband services. This would have caused a Rs.2-lakh-crore loss to the exchequer, even higher than the Rs.1.76-lakh-crore damage from the 2G-scam estimated by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG).

No wonder Devas earned a premium of Rs.1.14 lakhs on its Rs.10 (face value) shares when it sold 17% of its equity to Deutsche Telekom in 2008!

ISRO thus joins other science and technology institutions of dubious integrity, which hide behind "expertise" and abuse their power, such as the Department of Atomic Energy and Defence Research and Development Organisation.

These are pampered with \$1 billion-plus budgets, but have never completed a project on time and without huge cost overruns. ISRO has performed better than the DAE, but follows the same organisational model and defies public accountability.

Devas was floated by former ISRO executives. They exploited their contacts in Antrix-ISRO to commit it to launch two S-band-spectrum satellites, whose use was a great bonanza for Devas.

The bonanza's key is the unique S-band. An industry report says: "As mobile voice and data traffic increases,

wireless operators around the world will require additional spectrum. However, few bands remain available for new allocation to mobile wireless services and even fewer exist for global harmonisation of wireless spectrum assets. The 2.6 GHz band is one exception. The band provides an opportunity to meet rapidly rising demand for capacity to deliver mobile broadband services across the world."

Like in the 2G scam, ISRO sold the S-band spectrum without inviting competitive bids. The difference was that its own former scientists turned salesmen and rooked it.

ISRO didn't inform the Union Cabinet or Department of Telecommunications of the deal. An insider blew the whistle on it in 2009.

However, in the latest reshuffle, Dr.

**If the UPA continues to be so brazenly pro-rich, and ignores the poor majority, it will forfeit its legitimacy in the eyes of the people and invite their wrath -- the way the National Democratic Alliance did via its "India Shining" campaign in 2004.**

The Antrix-Devas deal would have robbed many Indian public organisations of spectrum access, including the defence services, paramilitary forces, Coast Guard and Indian Railways, which pitched for S-band spectrum.

Devas would have sold/leased the spectrum for high-definition television, telecom services, mobile TV and broadband Internet, to make a killing.

The Department of Space (DoS) set up a one-man committee to inquire into the deal. ISRO overruled its recommendation to annul the contract. The contract has been cancelled, but the company is threatening to sue the government.

The UPA has earned discredit by appointing a committee to investigate the contract, consisting of former bureaucrat B.K. Chaturvedi and Roddam Narasimha, member of the

Space Commission, DoS's policy-making body. Mr. Chaturvedi was a Commission member by virtue of being the cabinet secretary, and approved the deal. Mr. Narasimha's too is a case of conflict-of-interest.

This is the latest in an unending series of scams, including the Commonwealth Games, Adarsh Housing, 2G-spectrum and money-laundering, which have damaged the UPA's credibility.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh could have partially restored credibility had he sacked tainted ministers like Kamal Nath, Praful Patel and Vilasrao Deshmukh, indicted for shielding loan-sharks who drove farmers to suicide in Maharashtra.

However, in the latest reshuffle, Dr.

Singh elevated Mr. Deshmukh to Rural Development, a ministry with a huge budget meant to be used for the poor. This shows deep cynicism. Merits apart, the UPA lost a course-correction opportunity.

The UPA has failed to provide the public relief from rising prices, in particular high food prices, while parroting homilies about how inflation will level off, by October, November, January.... People are relieved that onion prices have at last fallen.

Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar's first reaction is to allow onion exports, although the export of an annual average of 7.9 million tonnes of foodgrains in recent years caused the domestic price rise. After all, there's a chance to make an illegal 10% on exports.

Meanwhile, the UPA continues to pursue pro-rich, pro-corporate poli-

cies while imposing destructive and predatory industrial, mining and dam projects on the poor.

The UPA came to power by pledging a commitment to inclusive growth. It reconstituted the National Advisory Council (NAC) under Ms. Sonia Gandhi to help formulate programmes that would provide India's disadvantaged people food security, basic healthcare, right to education and other amenities.

The NAC is meant to be fully autonomous. But the government is messing with it. Dr. Singh first asked the NAC to shed its insistence on a universal Public Distribution System for food security. The NAC formulated a two-tier structure of entitlements and prices to cover 90% of the rural population and 50% of city-dwellers.

But Dr. Singh wasn't satisfied. He appointed another (Rangarajan) committee to scuttle the proposal of giving affordable food to underprivileged Indians.

He also rejected the NAC's demand that workers under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act should be paid the statutory minimum wage! This violates Supreme Court injunctions, which say the minimum wage must be paid "in any event." It's "the lowest limit below which wages cannot be allowed to sink in all humanity." Paying lower wages amounts to "forced labour."

Dr. Singh quibbles over a few hundred crores for the poor, but blithely gives away Rs.500,000 crores in tax-breaks and subsidies to corporations. This is a dangerous trend.

If the UPA continues to be so brazenly pro-rich, and ignores the poor majority, it will forfeit its legitimacy in the eyes of the people and invite their wrath -- the way the National Democratic Alliance did via its "India Shining" campaign in 2004.

As the crucial budget session begins, the UPA has a major chance to correct course. By wasting it, it risks disaster.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 22

1948

Communist revolution in Czechoslovakia.

1958

Egypt and Syria join to form the United Arab Republic. It existed until 1961 when Syria seceded from the union.

1969

In the face of a gathering popular movement against the government of Pakistan, the regime of Field Marshall Ayub Khan is compelled to withdraw unconditionally the Agartala Conspiracy Case and release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and thirty three other accused on this day.

1973

United States and the People's Republic of China, agree to establish liaison offices following President Richard Nixon's visit to the PRC.

1974

Bangladesh Pakistan accord mutual recognition. Bangabandhu goes to Pakistan to attend OIC conference.

1986

Start of the People Power Revolution in the Philippines.