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PM irked by CMs bunking tribal meet

New Delhi November 5, 2009

How much our chief ministers care about tribals and their development was on ample display on Wednesday. Orissa Chief Minister Navin Patnaik was the only one who bothered to turn up for a conference convened by the Union tribal affairs ministry, which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The meet on the landmark Forests Rights Act had requested urgent participation by chief ministers, ministers of tribal affairs, social welfare and forest departments of all the states.

Besides Patnaik, only three states - Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Kerala- sent two ministers (from forest and tribal affairs departments) the rest of the states were represented either by ministers or officials holding charge of tribal affairs.

Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa was in Delhi the same evening to discuss the crisis his government is facing. But he did not care to attend the conference which was held just a couple of hours before he landed in the Capital around 8 pm. Inaugurating the conference, the prime minister said issues facing the tribals needed immediate attention. Admitting the Centre's failure to take any concrete measure to solve the problems of the tribals, he said there has been a systemic failure in giving the tribals a stake in modern economic processes "that inexorably intrude into their living spaces." "The alienation built over decades is now taking a dangerous turn in some parts of our country. The systematic exploitation and social and economic abuse of our tribal communities can no longer be tolerated," Singh said.

He added: "But the fact is that no sustained activity is possible under the shadow of the gun. Nor have those who claim to speak for the tribals offered an alternate economic or social path that is viable." Admitting a dearth of officials to work in tribal areas, the Prime Minister suggested that the states should consider offering incentives like hardship allowances, special housing and educational facilities or grants for officers who work in tribal areas.

"The administrative machinery in some tribal areas is either weak or virtually nonexistent. Creating the right infrastructure is a key issue. But I would like to emphasise the importance of posting committed and competent officers in tribal areas," he said.

The Union Tribal Affairs Minister Kanti Lal Bhuria said his ministry was awaiting the finance ministry's nod on certain issues of the proposed National Tribal Policy, which is in final stages of formation.

He said private sector was not making any investment in the field of education in tribal areas.

Expressing concern over the displacement of tribals because of mining projects, Bhuria said the displaced tribals should not only be provided employment in these projects but a part of the royalty should also be set aside for welfare programmes in those areas.

He said tribals were taking the route of Naxalism as hundreds of them were harassed under the Forest Rights Act for collecting minor forest produce.

Orissa CM Patnaik said it would not be enough to give land rights to the tribals.

"Steps should be initiated to provide irrigation facilities and improve productivity of these lands," he said.

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