

Where have all the CMs gone?

CITHARA PAUL

New Delhi, Nov. 4: Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee?

Silence

Nitish Kumar?

Silence

Raman Singh?

Silence

K. Rosaiah?

Silence

Shivraj Singh Chauhan?

Silence

Naveen Patnaik?

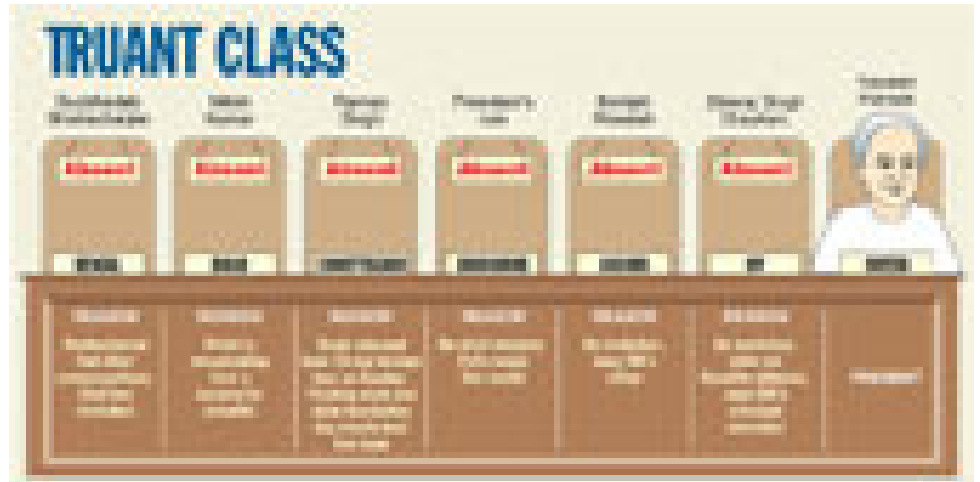
Present, Sir.

Phew!

If Manmohan Singh heaved a sigh of relief this morning, professors whose frontbenchers bunk class would have sympathised with him.

Barring Patnaik, no chief minister from the states expected to counter Maoists through tribal welfare turned up for a New Delhi meeting partly named after them. The two-day event is titled “Conference of chief ministers and state ministers (forests/tribal development) to review the implementation of forest rights and tribal development programmes”.

A tribal welfare ministry official said the department had specifically requested chief ministers of Bihar, Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, all states with Naxalite presence of varying intensity, to attend the conference the Prime Minister kicked off.



“We had specifically asked chief ministers of Naxalite-affected states to attend the meeting. We hoped it would send out positive signals to the tribals and to the rest of the world. But apart from the Orissa chief minister, nobody cared to attend,” the official said.

“Even states like Bengal and Tripura which write to us every other week seeking amendments to the forest rights act did not care to send their chief ministers to the meeting which discussed all issues related to the act,” he added.

The Bengal chief minister was busy today reviewing plans for weekend meetings in West Midnapore, the Maoist-affected tribal belt, where Bhattacharjee will review welfare efforts and law and order.

“This needs extensive homework. Also, the chief minister wanted to be in Calcutta to keep track of the situation in Arambagh where Mamata Banerjee held a meeting today after clashes in nearby Khanakul,” an official said in Calcutta.

Bengal did send forest minister Ananta Roy, backward classes welfare minister Jogesh Burman and his department secretary Nurul Haque to the Delhi meeting.

“The chief minister could not come as he had other preoccupations,” Roy said.

A senior Bengal official said: “Two ministers went and that was enough to accord importance to the programme. Delhi has this habit of inviting the chief minister or the chief secretary to every event but it’s not always possible for them to accede to such requests.”

Earlier, too, Bhattacharjee had skipped a meeting convened by Manmohan Singh in Delhi on the Maoist problem. His secretariat had then said Bhattacharjee wasn’t well.

The tribal welfare conference has assumed significance against the backdrop of the growing Maoist threat and a perception that the government was keen on a security solution before focusing on development initiatives.

Inaugurating the conference, the Prime Minister said there had been “a systemic failure” in giving tribals a stake in the modern economic process.

He said the alienation that had grown over decades was taking a dangerous turn in some parts of the country but “no sustained activity” was possible under the “shadow of the gun”.

http://www.telegraphindia.com/1091105/jsp/frontpage/story_11702167.jsp#