

Kanti confesses to flaws in education policy

SUNANDOSARKAR

Calcutta, Feb. 5: "*Amar buk bhengejaye* (My heart breaks)." It's very appropriate when it comes from school education minister Kanti Biswas.

From a Calcutta Book Fair programme — where he refuses to defend the indefensible, accepts criticism and asks for "understanding" from a staunch critic of the education policy — to a chat with the media, Biswas seems to have woken up to the follies for which the state's youth are paying.

After decades of being a prime votary of the state's no-English-in-primary-classes policy and everything "orthodox" (critics say regressive) in school education, Biswas is now unusually defensive.

A day after the fair "surprise" — those from his party who were present at the programme said they had never seen "any minister so defensive" — Biswas told The Telegraph he was through with defending his position. "We had many plans," he admitted. "But we have not been able to implement them despite trying."

But, if the turnaround appears to be dramatic, his party colleagues have something different to say. They trace his mood to the "dressing down" he got from his seniors in the government and the party at a



Kanti Biswas: For whom the alarm bells rang

CPM state committee meeting on January 22.

"He had to face uncomfortable questions in the presence of the leadership (the government and the CPM)," a source said. "No one came to his aid and, instead, it appeared that his seniors had planned the exercise to convey their unhappiness," said another source.

Biswas was "given to understand" that his department was being perceived as "one of the laggards".

The first apparent effect of the tough talk came on Tuesday. Educationist and dissenting member in the Ashok Mitra Commission Sunanda Sanyal, who remains one of the government's bitterest critics in the education sector, read

out a litany of charges.

Bengal's schools did not have a high dropout rate, he said. The number of entrants itself was very low, he added, quoting from a 1998 Unicef report.

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan would fail in Bengal, Sanyal said; a government that could not handle formal education would not be able to manage non-formal education, especially when teachers would be paid only Rs 1,000 or Rs 2,000. Besides, the government has failed in making schools and the curriculum "attractive". Schools without meals, toilets and uniform and a syllabus that did not pay any attention to "area-specific needs" are what Bengal's students have got apart from a politicised school environment.

Biswas did not deny the charges. "*Amar buk bhenge jaye*" he said, explaining how lack of finances had prevented changes. "We tried to do our best—appointing so many teachers and giving them a reasonable pay—but that hasn't been enough." He then walked up to Sanyal. "Abuse me if you want to, but understand my problems," Biswas told him.

Sanyal said later, he was touched. "I'd always thought him to be a gentleman, so his behaviour wasn't surprising. His frankness was," he added.