

which had managed to hold its ground. Mr. Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mr. Laloo Prasad Yadav have managed to stem the BJP advance in U.P. and Bihar. If the Congress(I) has turned in a slightly better performance now than in 1996, it has had a lot to do with the electioneering by Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, whose entry as the star campaigner undoubtedly helped galvanise the party cadre. Tactically, the party lost potential allies like Ms. Jayalalitha and Mr. Hegde to the BJP. In the overall context, the unwisdom of the United Front partners and the Congress(I) in letting ego clashes, personal ambitions and narrow regional interests to prevail over the imperatives of forging strategic alliances stands out as a major cause for whatever extra political and electoral space the BJP has been able to secure this time.

## An indecisive verdict

THE PEOPLE'S VERDICT in the 12th Lok Sabha elections is anything but decisive and as such the nation would seem in for an extended phase of unstable governance. While in numerical terms, the Bharatiya Janata Party, together with its 10-plus regional allies, can be said to have come within the striking distance of power, the other two major combines, the Congress(I) and the United Front, would appear to be evenly poised in the matter of government formation. Whether or not the leaders of the two formations display the willingness to make compromises so necessary for working out a viable arrangement is a different question; and that would in turn depend critically on whether they are in a mood to learn the right lessons from the current poll mandate. As for the BJP, even if it manages to cobble up the required tally, it will have to depend a great deal on allies with their disparate character and their unconcealed reservations over much of what constitutes the core of its ideological plank.

As a general rule, the voter across the country, barring in a few States like West Bengal and Punjab, has apparently been seething with resentment — in varying degrees and for different reasons — against the parties running the State Governments. If the BJP gained significantly in States where it had struck deals with regional leaders having a dominant political presence, as for instance Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, where it owed its successes to Ms. Jayalalitha's AIADMK and Mr. Ramakrishna Hegde's Lok Shakti, much of the advantage it secured on this count got neutralised by its poor showing in Maharashtra and Rajasthan, thanks primarily to the anti-incumbency factor. In Maharashtra, the Congress(I)'s alliance with the Samajwadi Party and the RPI — constructed by Mr. Sharad Pawar — ensured that the anti-Shiv Sena-BJP vote did not get divided, whereas in Orissa the fledgling Biju Janata Dal (of Mr. Naveen Patnaik) and its ally, the BJP, have scored at the expense of the ruling Congress(I) and the Janata Dal. The non-Left constituents of the United Front, wherever they are in power, have come in for a particularly harsh treatment at the hands of the voter, suggesting a strong disapproval as much of their governments' performance at the State level as of the U.F regime's at the Centre over the past 18 months and more.

The biggest surprise however was the abysmally low tally of the DMK-Tamil Maanila Congress, a performance that has left the pollsters and political analysts non-plussed; they gave the AIADMK-led rival alliance just a handful of seats out of 39 at stake in the State. In the post-facto context, it would seem that, apart from the areas of discontent associated normally with a ruling party, the public perception of the DMK regime having failed on the law and order front and being 'soft' towards elements that are out to disrupt peace and communal harmony played a major role, with the poll-eve Coimbatore bomb blasts only serving to heighten it. Comparatively speaking, Mr. N. Chandrababu Naidu's TDP in Andhra Pradesh did not lose much of its ground, although it needs to be noted that the few seats the BJP gained there were at its cost, not at the cost of the Congress(I)