

har), the bribery involving Members of Parliament, *et al* — the verdict does not reveal any uniform voter response. The voter therefore would seem to have been guided by either local factors or his own perception of the calibre and integrity of the individual concerned.

In a sense, going by the post-poll scenario, the just concluded elections could well mark a watershed in the evolution of federalism in the political party system. With the one-party governance a thing of the past and with the Congress(I) — the one party that for historical reasons has till recently enjoyed countrywide dominance — taking on the character of a “federation of regional outfits,” much more pronouncedly after the current poll, what obtains is a stage of transition, so to say. If the seat projections of the three contenders to power are anything to go by, the regional political groups have a decisive say in what sort of government should be formed. In fact the National Front itself is nothing more than a group of regional parties seeking commonly to serve a national purpose and cause. Viewed in this wider perspective, what emerges from the rival moves to cobble together an alliance — whether it is going to be a chimerical formation actuated by purely opportunistic compulsions or a coalition effected through a realignment of forces sharing common political values like secularism and democracy — will determine the shape of things to come.

## A negative verdict

THE THREE-PHASED NATIONWIDE general election has thrown up a severely fractured verdict as forecast by pollsters and political watchers alike, with none of the three major formations — the Congress(I), the BJP and the National Front-Left Front combine — anywhere near the striking distance of an absolute majority. Unlike in 1991 when the Congress(I), though in a minority, could work up a functional majority support without much difficulty, this time the numbers game involved in the exercise of government formation promises to be a tricky and mindboggling business. What is the meaning of the splintered vote? First and foremost, it means a clear, firm and near-total rejection of the P. V. Narasimha Rao-led Congress(I)'s claim for a renewed mandate. Between 1991 and now, States and regions considered to be its bastions have turned away from it, the South providing the latest example. Now the mighty organisation is piteously stymied while its national base has sharply shrunk in geographical terms.

The party's debacle in the Lok Sabha poll is so pervasive that its Governments in the few States where it is still in power — Madhya Pradesh and Punjab for instance — may well become shaky. Whatever might have been Mr. Narasimha Rao's successes as the head of government, his calculated and crafty ways which destroyed the party's inner organisational core and the palpably cynical disregard he showed for the sentiments of the party cadres — as in Tamil Nadu over the alliance question — have left the Congress(I) in total disarray adding to its travails at the hustings. If the proverbially faction-ridden Congress(I) has had to pay a heavy price because of its squabbling in several places, the plight of the Bharatiya Janata Party which has long been priding itself as a cadre-based and disciplined alternative, a “party with a difference,” is not very different either. In the running battle between the VHP/RSS group and the other elements in the BJP in Gujarat, the rebel leader, Mr. Shankarsinh Waghela, has fallen victim to sabotage by the pro-Keshubhai Patel faction.

As for the issues, “economic reforms” is the one area where the Narasimha Rao Government has done remarkably well for which it could legitimately take credit. If the slogan “stability for prosperity” failed to carry much conviction, the “reforms” message failed to click by and large. For one, all the propaganda hype through the electronic media notwithstanding, the ordinary voters at the lower rungs of the economic ladder are in no mood to wait for the five years the Congress(I) sought for ensuring that the benefits of the liberalisation and globalisation policies to accrue. For another, the fact that all national parties including the Left parties appropriated “economic reforms” as their platform neutralised it as a campaign issue. Although the phenomenon of “corruption in high places” burst on to the centre stage in close proximity to the elections, thanks to the series of scandals — the Jain diary-linked hawala case, the housing scam, the cattle feed scam (of Bi-