

Peace-meal politics

ASSAM The HUL plant shows what the state can achieve industrially when peace reigns

Rahul Karmakar

rahul.karmakar@hindustantimes.com

Doomdooma, in Assam's Tinsukia district, 515 km east of Guwahati, symbolised the state's economic boom until the 1950s. Some of Asia's largest tea estates around this town of some 20,000 people yield the best of beverages that it offers.

Nothing could bring doom to Doomdooma, locals would say in a lighter vein. But the joke turned prophetic after the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) was born in 1979. The outfit that would strike terror for the next 30 years shifted to Kakopathar, a dense jungle 10 km east of Doomdooma, to graduate to subversion and extortion.

Its tea estates were among the first to suffer the Ulfa onslaught; executives fled, sales plummeted, quality fell. Around the time Tarun Gogoi began his innings as chief minister, in May 2001, Doomdooma found a reason to be upbeat once again — a new factory set up by Hindustan Unilever Limited to produce home and personal care products.

Today, the HUL plant in Doomdooma Industrial Estate, run by 650 locals, doesn't just produce 50,000 tonnes of toothpaste, hair and skincare products annually. It is often cited as an example of what Assam is capable of industrially when peace reigns.

"The Doomdooma plant is an out-

TOP PRIORITY

"The challenge for TARUN GOGOI is to either bring Paresh Barua to the negotiation table or ensure his small anti-talks group is kept in check," says NG Mahanta of Guwahati's Institute of Conflict Studies



come of our government's endeavour to end militancy in the 1990s and usher in an industrial boom," says former chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, whose Asom Gana Parishad party was routed in Mandate 2011.

But the first few years were tough. The Ulfa had by 2001 begun targeting Hindi-speaking people and use explosives. The Congress government seemed to be losing it. Gogoi, though, was prepared to wait. The wait looked like ending in October 2005 when the Ulfa agreed to a ceasefire-like arrangement. But Ulfa reneged and the violence continued.

By 2009, almost all the Ulfa top guns including chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa were behind bars. And in February this year, the Ulfa initiated a peace process



United Liberation Front of Asom chief Arabinda Rajkhowa talks to the media outside the Central Jail after his release in Guwahati earlier this year

with New Delhi although commander-in-chief Paresh Barua remains elusive.

"In the past 10 years Assam moved up the development index. Farm production has increased by 5-8% over 2005 while tourist inflow has more than doubled from 24.7 lakh in 2005. And we owe it to the atmosphere of peace," says Gogoi.

Until the other day, Gogoi was known for his *dhaba* diplomacy. He would make an impromptu nocturnal visit to a highway eatery and have his 'peace meals' to underscore how the '*dhaba* culture' had flourished fearlessly since 2001. He hopes this would rub off on the industrial sector for Doomdooma — other pockets of Assam as well — to be referred to as 'Boombooma'.