

# Why the Indian Railways is likely to shelve projects in Meghalaya

A long-standing concern has been the possible, unchecked influx of “outsiders” into the state if the railway projects are completed.

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivering his speech at the flag off ceremony of the first train from Mendipathar in North Garo Hills of Meghalaya to Guwahati, Assam, at the Maligaon Railway Stadium in Guwahati, Assam. (Wikimedia Commons)

After years of opposition by **Khasi pressure groups against rail connectivity to Byrnihat in the Khasi Hills – and subsequently, the state capital Shillong – the Indian Railways is ready to shelve pending railway line projects to these two key locations.**

With this, Shillong will become the only state capital in the country without railway connectivity or an active ongoing rail project underway.

New protests have now cropped up in the state's Jaintia Hills against a recently sanctioned project to bring a railway line to Jowai, the biggest town in the Jaintia Hills.

### Status of rail connectivity in Meghalaya

Meghalaya has only one railway station, at Mendipathar in the North Garo Hills, which **became operational in 2014**. Passenger trains ply between [Guwahati](#) and Mendipathar daily, and the station received its first freight shipment last month.

Apart from this, the Northeast Frontier Railways (NFR) had three more projects in the state.

#### 01 Tetelai-Byrnihat Line

The first is a 21.5-kilometre line connecting Tetelia railway station in Assam to Byrnihat in Meghalaya's Ri Bhoi district. This had been sanctioned in 2010. The second project, **sanctioned in 2011**, is for a 108.76 km line from Byrnihat to Shillong with 10 stations.

“In the Tetelia-Byrnihat line, all the work on the 19 km line on the Assam side has been completed. Because of the local opposition and the uncertainty over the projects, the Railways is considering terminating this line at the Assam border itself, such that we can resume them if something moves forward in the future... There is not a very positive reception for the survey works in the Jaintia Hills either,” said NFR CPRO Kapinjal Kishore Sharma.

#### 02 Byrnihat-Shillong

The second project, sanctioned in 2011, is for a 108.76 km line from Byrnihat to Shillong with 10 stations.

In 2017, the Indian Railways granted Meghalaya Rs. 209.37 crore for land acquisition for these two projects. However, opposition from the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) has left the project in limbo indefinitely. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma told the state assembly earlier this month that the state has now been asked to return this amount to the Railways since it has been lying unutilised for over seven years.

### 03 Chandranathpur to Jowai

A third project, approved in 2023, would connect Chandranathpur station in Assam to Jowai in the East Khasi Hills. The project is at an initial survey stage, but is already facing opposition from Jaintia pressure groups.

#### But why are groups opposing these projects?

The KSU has opposed the entry of railways into the Khasi Hills since the 1980s, objecting even then to attempts to extend the railway link until Byrnihat. The stated reason has remained the same to this date: that the railways will bring about a huge influx of “outsiders” into the state.

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A long-standing demand has been the introduction of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) Regime in the state, already in place in neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and most recently, Manipur. The ILP is an official travel document issued by the respective state, authorising the travel of an Indian citizen into a “protected area” for a limited period. An Indian citizen who does not belong to these states cannot stay beyond the time period specified in the ILP.

“Without any laws to tackle the unabated flow of migrants, there is a huge risk that indigenous communities will become minorities, considering that the Garos are only 10 lakhs in population and the Khasis are around 13-14 lakhs. We have been telling the state government that we are not opposed in principle to the railways but we need safeguards, like the ILP,” KSU General Secretary Donald Thabah told [The Indian Express](#).

The Secretary also said that road travel could be checked, but the entry of railways would allow unfettered access to large numbers of people. “If there is an ILP, then there can be ILP check-gates at railway stations to regulate and keep track of this,” he added.

With opposition now spreading to the Jaintia Hills, Jaintia National Council president Sambormi Lyngdoh echoed this, saying, “The main issue is that we have no mechanism to tackle the influx. We want to protect our identity, we want to protect our land.”

### **Is this sentiment prevalent across the board in the state?**

“The groups spearheading the opposition are holding this issue as a bargaining chip to demand the ILP. But the public is quite indifferent. The Railways is crucial for the economic viability of the state where 75% of the population depends on small patchy agriculture and the rest is a service economy. There is an [inflation](#) in the prices of goods because of transport by road. The railways could help mobilise productivity and bring prices down,” said former bureaucrat and political commentator Toki Blah.

While saying in the assembly that any forward movement on railway projects will be with consensus with all stakeholders, Chief Minister Sangma also advocated for railway connectivity on economic grounds.

“It... would overall ease the transportation of different products into the state and out of it, and allow better prices from both ends... It will reduce logistical costs and benefit the masses and businesses in the state, our local entrepreneurs who are producing local products...” he said.

In the meantime, some representatives of the state’s other major tribe, the Garos, are instead pushing for expanding the existing railway connectivity in the Garo Hills. Three MLAs from the ruling National People’s Party – including Cabinet Minister Rakkam

Sangma – who are from the South Garo Hills have urged the Chief Minister to expand the railway line from Mendipathar in North Garo Hills to Baghamara in the South Garo Hills citing the need for this connectivity.

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