

Meghalaya's Railway Debate, Opposition, Economic Gains, Connectivity Challenges

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Rail connectivity in Meghalaya Latest News

- Despite years of opposition from Khasi pressure groups, the Indian Railways is set to abandon railway projects to Byrnihat and Shillong, leaving Shillong as the only state capital without rail connectivity.
- Meanwhile, fresh protests have emerged in the Jaintia Hills against a newly sanctioned railway line to Jowai, the region's largest town.

Rail Connectivity Status in Meghalaya

- Meghalaya has only one operational railway station at Mendipathar in North Garo Hills, functional since 2014, with daily passenger trains to Guwahati.
- The station also received its first freight shipment recently.
- Apart from this, the Northeast Frontier Railways (NFR) had planned three additional projects in the state, but all face significant opposition.

Proposed Projects in Meghalaya

• Tetelia-Byrnihat Line (Sanctioned in 2010)

- A 21.5 km railway line connecting Tetelia (Assam) to Byrnihat (Meghalaya).
- Work on the 19 km Assam portion is complete, but resistance from local groups has stalled progress in Meghalaya.
- The Railways is now considering terminating the line at the Assam border.

• Byrnihat-Shillong Line (Sanctioned in 2011)

- A 108.76 km railway line with 10 stations connecting Byrnihat to Shillong.
- In 2017, Rs. 209.37 crore was sanctioned for land acquisition, but Khasi Students' Union (KSU) protests have blocked progress.
- The Railways has now asked the state to return the unutilized funds.

• Chandranathpur-Jowai Line (Approved in 2023)

- A proposed railway line from Chandranathpur (Assam) to Jowai (Meghalaya).
- The project is still in the survey stage, but Jaintia pressure groups have already raised objections.

Overall Outlook

- While rail connectivity in Meghalaya remains limited, ongoing opposition from pressure groups has stalled or blocked multiple projects, leaving Shillong as the only state capital without a railway connection.

Reasons for Opposition to Railway Projects in Meghalaya

• Fear of Influx of Outsiders

- The Khasi Students' Union (KSU) has opposed railway expansion into the Khasi Hills since the 1980s.
- Their primary concern is that **railways will lead to large-scale migration**, threatening the indigenous Khasi and Garo populations.

• Demand for Inner Line Permit (ILP)

- The KSU has long demanded the introduction of the **ILP regime**, which restricts entry and stay of outsiders in protected areas.
 - ILP is already in place in **Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur**.
- Without ILP, they fear an **“unabated flow of migrants”** that could make indigenous communities a minority.

• Lack of Safeguards

- KSU insists they are **not against railways in principle** but want legal safeguards like ILP before any project proceeds.
- They argue that road travel can be monitored, but railway access would allow unchecked migration.
- **Opposition Spreads to Jaintia Hills**
 - The **Jaintia National Council (JNC)** has joined the opposition, citing the same concerns about **protecting local identity and land**.
 - JNC president reiterated that Meghalaya lacks a proper mechanism to regulate the influx of migrants.
- **Overall Concern**
 - Without protective measures like ILP, local groups fear that railway connectivity will accelerate demographic changes, threatening the cultural and economic security of Meghalaya's indigenous communities.

Diverse Opinions on Railway Connectivity in Meghalaya

- **Opposition as a Bargaining Tool for ILP**
 - Supporters of the project argue that opposition groups are using the railway issue as leverage to push for the Inner Line Permit (ILP).
 - They contend that the general public is indifferent, and railway connectivity is essential for the state's economic growth.
- **Economic Benefits of Railways**
 - Meghalaya's economy relies on small-scale agriculture (75%) and the service sector.
 - Road transport causes high inflation in goods prices, and rail connectivity could boost productivity and reduce costs.
 - Chief Minister Conrad Sangma supports railway expansion, emphasizing that it would improve trade, lower logistics costs, and benefit businesses and local entrepreneurs.
- **Support for Rail Expansion in Garo Hills**
 - Unlike opposition in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, many Garo leaders support railway expansion.
- **Overall Perspective**
 - While Khasi and Jaintia groups oppose railways due to migration concerns, economic arguments in favor of connectivity are gaining traction, especially in the Garo Hills, where leaders actively seek expansion.

Rail connectivity in Meghalaya FAQs

Q1. Why is there opposition to railway projects in Meghalaya?

Ans. Khasi and Jaintia groups fear an influx of migrants threatening indigenous identity and land rights.

Q2. What is the Inner Line Permit (ILP), and why is it demanded?

Ans. ILP restricts outsider entry, safeguarding indigenous communities; its absence fuels opposition to railways.

Q3. What are the proposed railway projects in Meghalaya?

Ans. Tetelia-Byrnihat, Byrnihat-Shillong, and Chandranathpur-Jowai lines face strong resistance from local groups.

Q4. How do Garo leaders view railway expansion?

Ans. Unlike Khasi and Jaintia groups, many Garo leaders support extending railways for economic growth.

Q5. What economic benefits can railways bring to Meghalaya?

Ans. Railways could lower transportation costs, reduce inflation, and boost trade and productivity in the state.

Source: IE | HT

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