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1961 Silchar firing unjustified: probe

By S. K. DUTTA

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THE Mehrotra commission probing the police firing on May 19, 1961, during the language disturbances, at Silchar railway station, killing 11 boys and girls, has found no justification for either the firing or the extent of force used, it is learnt.

The report of the commission, after having gathered dust over the years, has suddenly come into the news as a result of persistent demands made for its publication by Marxist MLAs in the Cachar district of Assam. The state government has examined the contents and seems favourably inclined to publish the report. Only a few technicalities remain to be sorted out.

In his report, Mr. Justice G. D. Mehrotra, the chief justice of the Gauhati high court, who constituted the commission, is understood to have pointed out that the police version — of a violent crowd surrounding an unarmed group of policemen and setting fire to a truck carrying prisoners — was not convincing.

The total disassociation of the

local magistracy and the local police from the firing has struck Mr. Justice Mehrotra as significant.

He has also drawn attention to the fact that a crowd, which had remained generally peaceful from 4 a.m. to 2 p.m., could not have suddenly grown violent at 2.30 p.m., especially when the demonstration was due to be called off an hour and a half later.

The commission is also believed to have detected some discrepancy in the various official versions of the incidents leading to the firing.

According to Mr. Justice Mehrotra, the case finally presented is one that has had more than the usual share of subsequent thought and preparation. The firing order, for instance, was held to have been filed in later.

CHILD KILLED

It is learnt that the commission report has also questioned the justifiability of firing 11 rounds of ammunition for freeing the allegedly surrounded and unarmed group of policemen.

The report makes a particular mention of the child killed in the firing and points out that it could not presumably have been one of the crowd that allegedly assaulted the policemen.

The commission is understood to have doubted if unarmed policemen would have sallied forth on mission to salvage a lost rifle from a tank, as stated by the government, if the crowd had been menacing.

The report is also believed to have made critical references to the existing rules concerning the dispersal of an unlawful assembly by force and the lack of control over the nature and amount of force used once the dispersal order was given.

The Mehrotra commission was assisted by Mr. Nageshwar Prasad, an advocate from Patna, on behalf of the government, and Mr. S. S. Ray, on behalf of the victims.