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INDIA | Women's Prayer Meeting Disrupted

A women's prayer meeting was disrupted Feb. 17 when Hindu hardliners broke up a gathering at a home in Vairichettipalayam village, Trichy District, Tamil Nadu, verbally abused the women and threatened to attack them if they met for prayer again.

The prayer meeting was attended by 30 women aged 35 to 45. Approximately 35 perpetrators interrupted the meeting, verbally abusing the women and demanding that they stop praying permanently. The women were threatened with further attacks if they continued to meet for prayer. The property where the women met belongs to Pastor Raju of Church of God Ministries based in Tamil Nadu's Salem District.

A local source told CSW that the same perpetrators had disrupted a church service in Kottampatty village, Tamil Nadu, that morning and threatened to close it down. The police are yet to register a First Information Report, which is required in order to start an investigation into the incident.

Violations of freedom of religion or belief are becoming the norm for religious minorities in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Examples include harassment, intrusion of private places of worship, targeted attacks and the use of "anti-church" posters in public places. Local sources report that the state is one of several which have witnessed a sharp increase in targeted violence based on religion.

Veteran human rights activist Shabnam Hashmi said, "The last five years under the Modi regime have seen a sharp rise in mob attacks on minorities, both Christian and Muslim, across India. In the first 31 days of January 2019 alone, reports of violence against Christians were reported from 13 states. Twenty-nine cases were reported on just one helpline. In Tamil Nadu, cases included reports of Hindu mobs who forcefully took Christians to the temple, smeared ash on their foreheads and forced them to worship Hindu gods. Independent India has not seen this kind of intolerance towards minorities. Nothing short of a defeat of Modi's regime in the upcoming elections can change the situation."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "This attack on a prayer meeting, and others like it, are deeply disturbing, as is the reluctance of the police to investigate and prosecute those responsible. This climate of impunity will embolden perpetrators of similar attacks and undermines the confidence of religious minorities that they will be protected as they try to live out religious observances and traditions. CSW urges the police to investigate these incidents and prosecute those responsible and we continue to call on the government of India to act decisively to combat the spread of religious intolerance throughout the country."