

## PASUMPON MURTHALINGA THEVAR'S ROLE IN THE CRIMINAL TRIBES ACT

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**ABSTRACT**

During the Criminal Tribes 1911 Act, strict rules were imposed on individuals, requiring them to visit their local police station every evening after sunset, regardless of their circumstances. Upon arrival, they were compelled to provide their thumbprints and stay overnight until the early morning, without the ability to leave until then. These regulations heavily impacted everyone, including those with sick or married family members who could not attend to their loved ones. To comply with this legal mandate, some individuals had to walk non-stop for ten to fifteen kilometres daily, which placed a significant physical and mental burden on them. Implementing such regulations highlights the harshness and lack of consideration for individual situations at the time.

**KEYWORDS:** Repeat offenders, Dr P. Varadarajulu Naidu, Genetic criminal, Maravars, and Sasivarna Thevar. Pillaiyarkulam.

Received: 15-Apr-2026

Accepted: 18-May-2026

Published: 28-May-2026

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Muthuramalinga Thevar was a great leader and politician who played a significant role in the Indian freedom movement. He was born on October 30, 1908, in Pasumpon Town, in the Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu. Muthuramalinga Thevar belonged to the 'Maravar' community, a sub-sect of the 'Mukkulathor' community, which is the dominant community in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. He was a prominent member of the Indian National Congress and was crucial in mobilising people against British rule. He also fought for the rights of his community and worked towards their upliftment. Muthuramalinga Thevar was admired for his leadership skills, and people looked up to him as a role model.

His contributions to the Indian freedom struggle and his efforts towards social reform are still remembered and celebrated by people across Tamil Nadu. Muthuramalinga Thevar was actively involved in the freedom struggle and fought tirelessly for the rights of the oppressed communities in South India. He staunch supporter of the Indian National Congress and worked closely with other leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

Muthuramalinga Thevar was a prominent figure in India's independence movement and is remembered for his immense contribution towards the cause of freedom. He was a social reformer, politician, and freedom fighter who was pivotal in organising several mass movements, protests, and rallies, urging the British to leave India. In addition to his efforts to inspire people to protest against

British rule, Muthuramalinga Thevar also encouraged people to boycott British goods. His call for the boycott of British goods was a significant blow to the colonial economy and helped to weaken the British hold on India.

Besides his contribution towards the country's independence, Muthuramalinga Thevar also worked towards the betterment of the socially and economically disadvantaged sections of society. He fought for the rights of the marginalised communities and worked towards their upliftment.

In recognition of his contribution to the country's freedom struggle, Muthuramalinga Thevar was posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award, in 1999. His legacy inspires generations of Indians to fight for justice, equality, and freedom. Besides being a freedom fighter, Muthuramalinga Thevar was also a social reformer. He fought against caste discrimination and worked towards uplifting the backward classes. He established several educational institutions and worked towards improving the living conditions of low-income people. Muthuramalinga Thevar's legacy continues to inspire people even today. His contributions towards the country's independence and his efforts towards social justice have impacted the nation's history.

## **2. CRIMINAL GANGS: AN HISTORICAL RECORD**

In 1871, James Fitzjames Stephen, a British legal scholar, proposed a bill that aimed to address injustices against certain tribes in India. The bill called the Criminal Tribes Act, categorised specific tribes as "Criminal Tribes" based on perceived criminal tendencies. This categorisation was based on flawed and discriminatory stereotypes and had a significant impact on the lives of these tribes. The purported social reform intentions of the Act did not materialise, and instead, it led to discrimination, restricting the movements of these tribes and subjecting them to police surveillance. The act criminalised entire communities, irrespective of individual criminality, and led to a loss of livelihood and social stigma for these communities<sup>1</sup>.

The Indian government enacted amendments to the Act in 1883 and 1897, introducing reformatory settlements for indigenous boys. However, these settlements were often inhumane and failed to achieve significant reform goals. The Madras Presidency extended the Act to the entire country in 1911, leading to harsher penalties and mandatory fingerprinting for members of these tribes.

The Act persisted until its repeal in August 1949, when it was replaced by the Ongoing Offender Act of 1952. The Criminal Tribes Act was a painful reminder of the colonial legacy that India had to endure. It was a manifestation of the discriminatory mindset of the colonial powers and their attempts to maintain control over the indigenous population. The legacy of the Act continues to impact the affected communities, who continue to face social stigma and cultural marginalisation<sup>2</sup>.

## **3. HISTORICAL PLACEMENT OF COMMUNITIES WITHIN CRIMINAL TRIBES ACT**

The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 was a controversial law initiated by the British colonial government in India. The Act aimed to control and monitor specific communities deemed inherently criminal based on their traditional occupations. These communities were involved in activities such as hunting, acrobatics, and music and were identified by the colonial authorities as threats to public safety<sup>3</sup>.

The Act was enforced in various regions of India and designated specific castes for police surveillance. This led to the wrongful arrests and harassment of innocent people who were often targeted based on their caste and appearance rather than any evidence of criminal activity<sup>4</sup>. The Act also led to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of these communities, who were forced to abandon their traditional occupations and were left with limited economic opportunities.

The impact of the Act was particularly severe on the affected communities, who were subjected to discrimination and prejudice for generations. The Act perpetuated negative stereotypes and created a

social class, now known as the Denotified and Itinerant tribes of India, comprising approximately 60 million people. These communities were denied fundamental rights and were subjected to social and economic exclusion, which contributed to the intergenerational poverty and marginalisation experienced by many members of these communities today<sup>5</sup>. Despite the repeal of the Act in 1952, the legacy of this legislation continues to affect millions of people in India. Many members of the affected communities still face social and economic challenges and struggle to overcome the historical injustices inflicted upon them. The Criminal Tribes Act remains a painful reminder of the brutal colonial past of India<sup>6</sup>. It serves as a warning of the dangers of discriminatory laws and policies that can have lasting and devastating consequences for generations.

#### **4. THE FIGHT AGAINST THE CRIMINAL TRIBES ACT**

Muthuramalinga Thevar was known for his strong opposition to the Criminal Tribes Act, which the British government in India enacted. The Criminal Tribes Act required members of specific communities to provide their thumb impressions at police stations<sup>7</sup>.

Thevar believed this Act was discriminatory and violated the people's fundamental rights. He launched a campaign against the Act, urging people to refuse to provide their thumb impressions.

Thevar was a prominent political leader and a champion of social justice and equality in Tamil Nadu. He firmly believed that every individual deserved to be treated with dignity and respect regardless of caste, religion, or social status. He was deeply committed to promoting the rights of the oppressed and marginalised communities in the state and worked tirelessly to ensure that their voices were heard and their needs were addressed.

Throughout his career, Thevar was a vocal advocate for the rights of Dalits and other disadvantaged communities. He fought against discrimination and prejudice and worked to empower these communities by providing them with education, healthcare, and other essential services. He also played an important role in promoting communal harmony and unity in Tamil Nadu and worked to bridge the gap between different communities in the state.

Thevar's legacy continues to inspire people across Tamil Nadu and beyond. His unwavering commitment to social justice and equality is a shining example of what can be achieved when we work together to create a more just and equitable society. Muthuramalinga Thevar's legacy is a remarkable one. He is remembered as a courageous and compassionate leader who fought tirelessly against injustice and oppression. His contributions to India's freedom struggle and his unwavering commitment to social justice continue to inspire people worldwide. Despite facing police intervention and the threat of imprisonment, Thevar never wavered in his resolve. He led a powerful campaign that gained momentum across Tamil Nadu, using peaceful protests, marches, and speeches to mobilise and educate people about the discriminatory nature of the Act. Thevar also formed strong alliances with other political leaders and organisations, which helped to build a robust movement against the Act. Today, his legacy lives on, reminding us of the power of courage, compassion, and resilience in the face of adversity. Thevar's campaign gained widespread support and soon became one of India's earliest and most successful civil disobedience movements against discrimination. He inspired many other leaders and movements, eventually leading to India's independence from British colonial rule<sup>8</sup>.

Muthuramalinga Thevar's campaign against the Criminal Tribes Act was a remarkable feat that played a significant role in bringing about change and upholding the rights of the people. He was a prominent political leader who took up the cause of the oppressed and downtrodden communities of Tamil Nadu in India. The Criminal Tribes Act was a discriminatory law that allowed the government to label specific communities as criminal tribes, depriving them of their fundamental rights and subjecting them to surveillance and harassment.

Muthuramalinga Thevar was a prominent political leader who played a significant role in the Indian independence movement. One of his most notable contributions was his tireless campaign against

the Criminal Tribes Act, which labelled specific communities as "criminal tribes" and restricted their movements and professions. With his natural leadership qualities and unwavering determination, Thevar was able to garner support from other political leaders and activists, who joined him in his fight against the Act. Together, they approached the governor and requested the repeal of the Act<sup>9</sup>.

After much deliberation and discussion, the governor finally agreed to repeal the Act, resulting in a significant decline in enrollment. Thevar's relentless efforts and campaign against the Criminal Tribes Act played a crucial role in bringing about change and protecting the rights of the people.

Thevar's struggle against the Criminal Tribes Act was not confined to political circles or the upper echelons of society. He also mobilised popular support from the marginalised communities affected by the Act. He galvanised the masses through his speeches and rallies and created a groundswell of support for his cause.

Thevar's activism was not limited to his fight against the Criminal Tribes Act. He was also a strong advocate for the rights of the Dalits, who were subjected to discrimination and oppression in Indian society. He worked tirelessly to improve their living conditions and secure their rights.

Muthuramalinga Thevar was a prominent leader and freedom fighter from Tamil Nadu, India. He was born in 1908 in Pasumpon, a small village in southern Tamil Nadu. Thevar belonged to the Maravar community, considered one of the most oppressed communities in the region at that time. He witnessed firsthand the discrimination and inequality that his community faced and decided to dedicate his life to fighting against it. Thevar's commitment to social justice and equality led him to join the Indian National Congress in the early 1930s. However, he later parted ways with the Congress. He formed his political party, the All India Forward Bloc, which aimed to represent the interests of the oppressed communities of India.

One of Thevar's most significant achievements was his successful campaign against the Criminal Tribes Act, which had branded many communities as criminals simply based on their caste or ethnicity. Thevar's peaceful protests and civil disobedience brought attention to the injustice of the Act and eventually led to its repeal in 1949.

In recognition of his contributions to Indian society, Thevar was posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award, in 1999. His legacy inspires generations of Indians to fight for justice and equality for all. Muthuramalinga Thevar's legacy of fighting for the rights of oppressed communities is an inspiration to many. He showed us that we can bring about positive change and make a difference in the world with determination and collective action. Thevar's successful campaign against the Criminal

Tribes Act is a powerful reminder of the impact of peaceful protests and civil disobedience in creating social change. His legacy inspires many to fight against discrimination and injustice. He is remembered as a hero who fought tirelessly for the rights of India's oppressed and marginalised communities<sup>10</sup>.

## **5. THE CRIMINAL TRIBES ACT WITHIN THE REGION OF PIRAMALAI KALLARS**

During the early 20th century, the British colonial government in India implemented the Criminal Tribes Act (C.T. Act) to curb crime and control specific communities that were deemed "criminal" or "dangerous." One such community was the Piramalai Kallars, a traditionally agricultural and semi-nomadic community living in the southern region of Tamil Nadu<sup>11</sup>

Implementing the C.T. Act in the Piramalai Kallar region resulted in dissatisfaction and agitation from the local Thevar community. Thevars were another dominant community with a history of conflict with the Piramalai Kallars. Thevars saw the implementation of the C.T. Act as an attempt to suppress their influence and give the Piramalai Kallars an unfair advantage in local politics and economics. However, the tragic incident that sparked intense opposition from Thevar was the Perungamanallur

shooting that occurred in 1920. The police used force to suppress a group of Thevars who were protesting against the Act. This incident led to widespread outrage among Thevars, who saw it as an act of injustice and oppression. As a result, Thevar's opposition to the C.T. Act became more intense, and the movement gained momentum in the following years.

Thevars organised themselves into a political movement and started demanding the repeal of the C.T. Act. They also called for more excellent representation in local governance and to end discrimination against their community. The movement gained support from other communities in the region affected by the Act.

The British colonial government initially tried to suppress the movement by arresting its leaders and using force to disperse protests. However, as the movement gained momentum, the government was forced to take notice and make some concessions. In 1927, the government amended the C.T. Act to exclude specific communities, including the Piramalai Kallars and Thevars, from its purview<sup>12</sup>.

The Thevar movement is considered a significant chapter in the history of Tamil Nadu and India's struggle for independence. It united various communities and helped forge shared identity and purpose. Today, Thevar is a prominent community in Tamil Nadu, and its leaders continue to play an active role in politics and society.

## 6. STRUGGLE OF ANTI- CRIMINAL TRIBES ACT

Muthuramalinga Thevar was a prominent political leader in Tamil Nadu, India, who lived from 1908 to 1963. He was a visionary leader known for advocating for the rights of people affected by the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA). This controversial law classified specific communities as "criminal tribes" and subjected them to harsh treatment and discrimination. Thevar's political involvement saw him leading numerous protests and awareness campaigns against the CTA. He firmly believed in social justice and equality and was committed to fighting against the discrimination and injustice faced by marginalised communities. As a result of his tireless efforts, there was a significant reduction in enrollments in the Appanad region, one of the most affected areas by the law<sup>13</sup>.

Thevar was a charismatic leader who had a large following in Tamil Nadu. His tireless work culminated in an all-India gathering of political leaders and activists who rejected the C.T. Act. The gathering was a significant milestone in the fight against the CTA and helped to raise public awareness about the issue.

However, despite the widespread opposition, the Madras Presidency's prime minister, Rajaji, refrained from taking a clear stance on the issue, disappointing many of Thevar's followers and supporters. Thevar's disappointment with Rajaji's lack of action led him to form his political party, the All India Forward Bloc. He worked tirelessly to build his party's base and support, and it soon became one of the most influential political parties in Tamil Nadu<sup>14</sup>.

Thevar's contributions to Indian politics and society were significant. His tireless efforts to fight against the CTA and his commitment to social justice and equality helped to raise public awareness about the issue and ultimately led to the law's repeal. His legacy inspires many in Tamil Nadu and beyond, and he remains a revered figure in Indian politics<sup>15</sup>.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Muthuramalinga Thevar was a prominent leader in the Indian independence movement who significantly repealed the Criminal Tribes Act. This act, which was passed by the British government in 1871, labelled entire communities as "criminal tribes" and subjected them to surveillance, harassment, and discrimination. Thevar's persistent efforts and leadership played a crucial role in repealing the act in 1952. However, even after repealing the Criminal Tribes Act, the Denotified and Itinerant tribes faced societal challenges. These communities were stigmatised and ostracised by mainstream society, and their



members were often denied fundamental rights and opportunities. Thevar recognised the ongoing struggles of these communities and emphasised the need for continued government support to help them overcome these challenges.

Thevar's legacy as a national leader was recognised, and his fight against injustice left a lasting impact on the community. He was a champion of the oppressed and marginalised, and his efforts continue to inspire generations of leaders to fight for justice and equality. Thevar's contributions to the Indian independence movement and his fight against discrimination will always be remembered and celebrated.

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