

## Values in Leadership: Spiritual Leader Case

Chinnapillai is an illiterate farm worker from a poor village in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India. She was being presented with the Indian Merchant Chambers (IMC) Ladies Wing–Jankidevi Bajaj Award for rural entrepreneurship in 2000 in the Indian capital, New Delhi. After presenting her with the award, Ms. Sumitra Kulkarni, granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, remarked: “Chinnapillai doesn’t need our awards; she just needs us to allow her space to carry on the fantastic work she is doing.”

Her work? Women’s empowerment in village India, feudal India.

The diminutive Chinnapillai, a fifty-year-old landless laborer from Tamil Nadu, won the annual award for promoting a unique savings-and-loan scheme for village women in her region. The program, which she launched informally thirty-five years ago, now covers nearly fifty thousand village women in Tamil Nadu and the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh. The movement, called *Kalajiam* (savings, credit, self-help), now also conducts campaigns against alcoholism and child labor and runs a primary school.

“I’ve always been a daredevil. Perhaps that’s why God has been on my side,” said Chinnapillai to a journalist after the award ceremony. Not that her achievement came easily. “But can you accomplish anything in this world without a hard fight?” asked Chinnapillai, who has taken on the ferocious feudal lords, ruthless money lenders, bloody minded politicians, obstreperous bankers, and bureaucrats in her long struggle to give the downtrodden their due.

Chinnapillai’s struggles started when she was only thirteen. “We women would work long days in the fields but go home with only a bag full of grain, or occasionally a few rupees. It used to burn my heart. I was a leader of a group of women workers and decided to use my position to demand our due. I started calling women’s meetings to discuss the issue. Everyone was terrified in the beginning, including my husband, but I persuaded them to demand a hike in wages.”

Chinnapillai asked the landlord for a wage hike and got a kick instead. Nonetheless, she persisted until they relented and agreed to a two-rupee hike. “I felt that was a signal from God to carry on. I soon started urging the women to put aside a little money as savings. Of course, they didn’t listen. How could they? They needed food for their families and liquor for their men. But again, I kept at it. Eventually, they agreed to keep aside a few rupees—not at home, where it could be spent at any minute, but safely in our *Kalajiam*.

Chinnapillai then decided that these collective savings could be used to give small loans to women at a low rate of interest—24 percent against the 60 to 120 percent charged by local money lenders. “My dream was to free us peasants from

the stranglehold of money lenders. City people will not understand how that feels. It's like walking around with a tight noose around your neck."

She also organized the women to seek jobs in new and non-women-oriented projects. For instance, she obtained fishing rights in the local pond for her village women (which had for decades been controlled by local landlords and corrupt politicians). "We petitioned the local government authority in this regard, and the sympathetic officer took up cudgels on our behalf," she explained.

The *Kalajiam* movement began to spread and women from other villages joined in. As the corpus of savings grew, a local non-government organization (NGO) called DHAN (Development of Humane Action) came in to help them bank their money, liaise with officialdom, and establish local committees to disburse loans meant to pay for house construction, marriage expenses, farming materials, and seeds.

"We started with two hundred rupees collected from twenty women in my village some thirty years ago. Now our *Kalajiam's* savings run to several hundred thousand rupees in the local district alone and nearly fifty million rupees in the two states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh." She smiles. "But you know I have no idea how much money Rs. 100,000 is. I still cannot count more than 100."

The crusader is still as poor as, well, an Indian peasant, earning as she does twenty-five rupees a day for four hours' work in the fields. Her two sons and daughters-in-law toil all month, but Chinnapillai now works only ten days a month; the rest of the time she's busy with committee meetings in various villages. She has debts totaling 35,000 rupees. But she does not intend to touch her prize money of 100,000 rupees. "It will go to the *Kalajiam*, toward helping the more needy," she stated firmly.

Small wonder, then, that when he presented her with a special award during the special Women's Empowerment Year launch function in Delhi, the then-Prime Minister of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee, was sufficiently moved to bow down and touch Chinnapillai's feet.

[*Author's note:* In India you touch the feet of an elder to show respect. However, the prime minister of India is in a position where he or she is not constrained to do this as a formality. He or she would not have touched the feet of any top business executives of any organization in the world or of any politicians. He or she would have done it only in the presence of saints, sages, or spiritual leaders.]

### Some Leadership Values Demonstrated in the Case Study

- Honesty
- Credibility
- Trust

- Respect
- Perseverance/Determination/Never give up/No concept of failure
- Courage
- Compassion/Love
- Humility
- Focused drive
- Sacrifice
- Others?