



### Let's read and reflect:

Srikanth Bolla says, "The world may look at you and say, 'You cannot do it.' Look at the world and say 'I can do anything'." What do you understand from these words?

Here is the story of another young man who, though isolated by society, still became an icon of perseverance and social commitment.

Let's learn more about him.

## A Phoenix Rises

- *Twinkle Khanna*

Bablu Kewat had been an indifferent student at best. He still remembers his science teacher Mrs Sharma, and the egg incubator that he had made under her supervision. But when Bablu's father died leaving his mother struggling to support her small family, he dropped out of school to get a job and help her out.



He joined a workshop as a busboy, getting tea for the owner. He slowly worked his way up to becoming a welder. Gradually he took over the **mortgage** of the workshop. After that, he ran the

business himself, growing it steadily.

Bablu and Gowri had an arranged marriage, after meeting just once, briefly, in the presence of both their families.

One morning, Bablu's mother and younger sister, Shalu, were drinking tea. Looking for his wife, Bablu **sauntered** out to the back porch. He saw Gowri walking hurriedly towards the bathroom, holding a rag in her hand. He

#### While we read

- What impact did his father's death have on Bablu's family?
- What traits of Bablu impress you?

#### My words

#### My questions

came to know from her that women used rags instead of sanitary napkins.

That evening on his way back from the workshop, Bablu decided to surprise Gowri with a gift. He went to a small store. The storekeeper quickly wrapped the napkin pack in an old newspaper. Bablu was startled at the **exorbitant** price, but dutifully paid him forty rupees.

He unwrapped the packet and examined the pad. It seemed to be just plain cotton wrapped in a **gauze** sheet. He placed it on his palm, trying to calculate the approximate weight of the pad. 'Ten grams,' he said to himself.

Having seen his father working with cotton yarn, he knew that ten grams of cotton would barely cost ten paise. But here he was paying four rupees for each of these pads. He put the pad back in the packet. Back home, Bablu secretly handed over the pack to Gowri.

Gowri was not pleased. "If Shalu and I start buying these packets every month, then let alone curd and ghee, we will not even have enough money to buy milk." Bablu looked at her **dejectedly**. But he then determined to start a new project.

He pulled out a pair of scissors, a needle and some thread, cotton and cloth from his bag. He began flattening the cotton between his hands as if he were



spreading out dough to make a chapati. Within twenty-four hours of first touching a sanitary napkin, Bablu had managed to make his own. But he was not able to make a useful

#### While we read

- c. How would the exorbitant price of sanitary napkins affect the family budget?
- d. Why was Bablu determined to start a new project? What was it?

#### My words

#### My questions

one as he could not make out the material used by the brands. Months passed and Bablu **procured** different qualities of cotton and other materials to make pads.

He continued his experiments knowing that most women used unclean rags instead of sanitary napkins as they could not **afford** them. He also knew that this made them prone to disease. No one else appeared to be bothered by this. He looked at the little girls running around the neighbourhood. They couldn't even buy a good pair of slippers—how could they ever afford to buy sanitary pads month after month?

However, his experiments and his **obsession** caused some unrest even in the family. His mother **beseached** him to stop the experiments saying that the whole family would be disgraced by his **sordid** interest in women's menstrual cycles. The news was gradually spreading in the village and the villagers entangled the whole family in a mesh of **coarse** whispers and rude glances.

Bablu was gloomy for a while at the thought of stopping his experiments. But he devised an idea to conduct experiments on himself rather than others. With the help of a friend, he collected some blood. Using a rubber tube, he experimented with the napkins himself. One day, Lata, his neighbour Parul's daughter, happened to see this.

The next day all kinds of rumours spread over the small town. Unable to bear the **humiliation**, Bablu's wife left him. She said she would only return when he gave up his madness. His mother too followed suit. He had lost his wife, his family, his friends, and money that he could not afford to waste, all in pursuit of the sanitary pad project.

Bablu was a simple welder whose life had been ripped apart. And all because he had wanted to give Gowri a gift: a gift for all the poor women in the village and outside it.

*(Adapted from 'A Sanitary Man from a Sanitary Land')*

#### While we read

- e. What was the response of Bablu's family to his experiments?
- f. What was the response of the villagers to Bablu's experiments? What do you think of their attitude?
- g. Why was Bablu determined to continue his experiments even against his family's wishes?
- h. Describe Bablu's plight at the end of the story.

#### My words

#### My questions

Don't you want to know the rest of the story?

Do you want to know more about Bablu's journey?

Here is his story in his own words.

**Interview with Padma Shri Arunachalam Muruganantham, the 'Pad Man' of India, ('Bablu' in Twinkle Khanna's story).**



- **Good morning, Mr Muruganantham, it's very kind of you to meet and talk to us. We know that you've been working on the manufacture and distribution of inexpensive sanitary napkins for a quarter of a century. Now, we'd like to learn about your early days. Did anyone inspire you to work for the good of the community?**

Good morning friends. Let me, at the outset, tell you my story. My father was a handloom weaver. I dropped out of school at 14 when he passed away quite unexpectedly. My mother worked on a farm, and she found it very difficult to make ends meet. She had to take care of two daughters and a son, you know. She had hoped I'd become an engineer. However, she couldn't afford to send me to college, and I had to take up a job in a welding workshop, even as a young boy.

At 21, I married. It was then I discovered that my wife, Shanti, had to use old rags instead of clean napkins during her menstrual cycle. This made me think about the general state of women's health and hygiene. The knowledge triggered my research into the manufacture of affordable napkins.

- **We understand that it took you years to find the right materials for your napkins. Could you tell us more about that phase of your research?**

As I mentioned earlier, my father was a weaver. Therefore, I was somewhat familiar with cotton, and made use of many varieties of cotton. All my initial experiments failed miserably. Moreover, the topic was taboo in our village at the time, and my interest in the subject led to my isolation within the community and even my family. But I didn't give up.



I tried to find out what type of cotton the popular brands were using for their napkins. It took me two years of trial and error to figure out it was pinewood pulp and not cotton. The suppliers sent me some samples. I spent several days wondering how to make cellulose from it. One day, my pet dog accidentally scratched the sample card, and I could see the soft cottony material. This gave me the idea of defibration.



- **Later, Mr Muruganantham, you discovered that the real need was for more efficient machinery. How did you understand this?**

The machines that produced sanitary napkins cost crores at the time. I realised that women would get affordable napkins only if the machinery became less expensive. I then began to focus on designing affordable machines.

Again, by trial and error, I succeeded in designing and building relatively inexpensive machines. These could be operated by people without much training. I designed three separate machines for the defibration, compression, and **sterilisation** of the material.

This too is the result of trial and error, the only method I'd ever recommend for genuine innovation.

- **Sir, of course, many MNCs would have made you handsome offers for your machines. Were you ever tempted to take any of these offers?**

It took me thirteen years to get a **patent** for my invention. When I got the patent, I placed it in the public domain, for anyone who wanted to use it. I sell my machines at a **subsidised** price to women's self-help groups. My profit margin is based on need, not greed. I believe that the success of entrepreneurship lies not in making money, but in allowing others to benefit.

- **Sir, why do you promote women and women's self-help groups so much?**

Gandhiji strongly believed that women could transform India. I follow Gandhiji's wisdom and his path. My vision is to generate one million jobs for women in India and to promote one hundred per cent hygiene in households. How can I best do that? I use the power of women to empower women.

In my mission, three elements are the most important ones—awareness, availability, and affordability. Women can communicate effectively with women, and create awareness on menstrual hygiene.

- **You have said that you prefer to use the word 'detail' rather than 'retail' when you mention your product. Could you explain what you mean by this?**

More than turnover, I focus on **impact**.

Social entrepreneurship should be impact-based. I ask the women's

collectives to personally talk to every woman customer in detail about hygiene. Our aim is not to increase sales but to increase awareness.

We have created 1363 local brands and earned three-quarters of a billion dollars in revenue so far. Detailing information and creating awareness is a tough thing to do. I bow to all teachers as they spend their whole lives detailing things to pupils.



- **Did you ever get any support from policymakers or government agencies for your project, sir? Can you tell us how the government supported your efforts?**

IIT Madras honoured me with the National Innovation Foundation's 'Grassroots Technological Innovations Award.' I received the award from President of India. The Government of India selected me for the Padma Shri award in 2016.

The Indian Parliament discussed the issue of women health and hygiene at great length, and the government **waived** GST on sanitary napkins.

But what I consider the most important of all is that my family came back to me.

- **What message do you have specifically for the young innovators and social entrepreneurs of our nation? What advice would you give to students?**

Education empowers us. We must, however, always bear in mind that we do not need to beg for a job after education. Try to find solutions to social problems and create jobs for yourselves and others. You need education and knowledge to identify the problems. Convert every problem into an opportunity. Come out with a solution, an invention, an innovation, an enterprise. Become solution providers and social entrepreneurs. Transform the world.

**Thank you very much, sir. We're sure your life and your words of wisdom will indeed be an inspiration for generations to come.**

## About the Author

Twinkle Khanna was born in 1973 in Mumbai. She began acting in films in 1995. In 2002, she embarked on a new career as an interior designer. Later she established herself as an author and columnist. In 2015, her first book *Mrs Funnybones*, became a best seller. *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad* is a collection of stories, in which the tale of the social entrepreneur Padma Shri Arunachalam Muruganantham is portrayed. The story inspired the National Award-winning feature film – *Pad Man*.



### Let's rewind:

1. Why do Bablu's neighbours and friends desert him?
2. Why does Bablu continue his experiments?
3. What, according to Muruganantham, is the purpose of education?
4. Why did Muruganantham begin to think of designing machines?
5. What ideas of Muruganantham impress you the most? Mention any two.



### Let's recall and recreate:

1. The 3<sup>rd</sup> of November is observed as National Entrepreneurship Day. The English Club of your school plans to conduct an idea generation contest for the *Young Innovators Programme (YIP)*. You wish to invite Arunachalam Muruganantham as the chief guest. Draft a **letter** to Mr Muruganantham seeking his consent and inviting him to the event.
2. 'The future of India will be shaped by its youth. The nation needs the efforts of young entrepreneurs for its growth and development. Young men and women should take the initiative to turn challenges into opportunities.' Prepare a **speech** on the topic 'Entrepreneurship; The Path to the Nation's Progress.'

Include details on:

The Need for Entrepreneurship

- The purpose of education
- Unemployment and brain drain

Ideation

- .....

Implementation

- .....

3. From the story 'A Phoenix Rises' and from the interview, you have gained some insights into Arunachalam Muruganantham's life and achievements. Using the hints given, develop a **biographical sketch** of the entrepreneur. The following format may help you.

Title		
Early life	<p>weaver's son – two sisters – father's death – drops out of school – job in welding workshop – marriage</p>	Photo
Major events	<p>experiments to make sanitary napkins – failures – wife leaves him – family blames him – village isolates him</p>	
Major accomplishments	<p>finds the material used in sanitary napkins – designs cheaper machines – social entrepreneurship – a revolution in women's health and hygiene</p>	
Interesting facts	<p>his vision and mission – to supply machines to women's self-supporting groups – the school dropout now gives lectures in universities all over the world – biopic on his life released in 2018.</p>	