

Learning the power of conviction with Arunachalam Muruganantham Founder- CEO at Jayashree Industries

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The dire conditions of women's hygiene during menstruation have been neglected for eons. Said negligence has not only increased the bias against this rather significant matter but has also proved to be hazardous for women's physical well-being. Despite these societal challenges, the CEO and founder of Jayashree Industries, Mr. Arunachalam Muruganantham, is striving every day to find a solution to this and bring a change to our society. He has given thousands of rural women access to affordable sanitary napkins.

During our conversation, we asked about what inspired him to travel this path laden with hurdles posed by taboos and biases, to which he said, "Inspiration is temporary; having faith in your cause and confidence in your work is the key to success."

During the early days of his marriage, he discovered that his wife relied on a ragged cloth to manage her menstrual cycle. She used this unhygienic approach as a substitute for a sanitary napkin as they are expensive, and as a child, she and her sister would have had to cut back on meals to buy sanitary pads. This encounter gave him a hunch about what he wanted to do. He went to a local shop to buy his wife a packet of sanitary pads and noticed that they sold it in black-colored packaging, concealed in a way that felt like smuggling some illegal product. It made him curious about the product and upon inspection found out that it was a bandage-like substance made of cotton and was around eight-inch long. It was overpriced as compared to the raw material utilized to make it. He decided to make low-cost but efficient sanitary napkins for rural women.

He was driven more by confidence than inspiration in this case. He had an observation and knew that it was essential to create an impact in this domain. He believes an idea is like a fetus in a mother's womb. No one except the mother can experience and understand the true beauty of it. His suggestion to all the innovators and creators is, "If you have an idea and believe it can succeed and bring a change, execute it." Talking about the fetus would not enable people to actually empathize with what is inside you, but delivering the baby will. In his case, delivering the product to the world was just the first step towards the solution. The domain he chose has deep-rooted taboos in our society. He had to face criticism every step of the way. He sent his idea to IIT madras and faced mockery for wasting his life making a machine, which was apparently very "simple".

To put the machine on a field trial, he installed it in Madhubani near the Nepal border. He trained rural women to use the device and make sanitary pads for themselves. It was his first big success. He had created the world's first decentralized machine unit to make sanitary pads. The domain he chose posed numerous problems on the way, but the determination to make a difference kept urging him forward. According to him, all the awards he has been honored with are for his design and the impact it has created on society.

He observed that while the domain of women's hygiene in macros is a multi-million dollar business, it is non-existent in the underprivileged sector. The usage of sanitary napkins amongst women in India is less than 10%. To bring a change on such a large scale, he needed to reach a massive audience. He got an award for best innovation by the honorable President Dr. Pratibha Patil; this put him in the limelight and made him a public speaker. He recounted his experience from when he spoke in Delhi in front of numerous corporate leaders and health ministers. He told them about the dire conditions women across the country were forced to live in while we were solely focusing on increasing the GDP. He later got approached by a few ministers who wanted to know the accuracy of the data represented by him about the usage of sanitary napkins. The government called AC Nielsen (their American consultant), and in around one and a half years, came out with a figure that confirmed his report. He says, "The problem is that when you look at India with an urban glass, the severity of the matter is not apparent. This outlook can blur our vision and impair us from seeing the harsh circumstances most women in our country live through."

He has created a market of more than a billion dollars today without procuring market shares from any existing giants. He states that these large multinational corporations are not aware of the ground reality. They are not connected with the common people and therefore do not understand their needs, and this is the aspect where he excelled. His product has made menstrual hygiene a movement in rural areas and has empowered various rural women to launch their own brands. The same awareness has also reached a global audience. There are now around 1380 such brands that are forming a billion-dollar revenue in this domain.

While the process of conceiving an idea may be difficult in itself; the ability to execute it is a different story altogether. Having information of a domain may be very beneficial, but it also instills fear in an individual. In his opinion, this is where our education system should play a more effective role. The ability to unlearn on an individual level and moving forward with what is relevant - is the training our young minds need. Only information makes you impotent. Possessing knowledge out of that information makes you fertile.

According to him, having a clear vision is what creates a successful business. He wanted to provide women a livelihood opportunity and a chance to live with dignity. To aid that cause, his organization has built an ecosystem to help women become monetarily empowered and independent. Having equal planning and decision-making power as a man is true gender equality, and only education and financial independence can achieve that.