

TECH | PEOPLE

Q&A with Yanesh Naidoo

*Executive Director
of Innovations:
Jendamark Automation*

The Jendamark brand is known for being an award-winning tech leader but not much is known about the brains behind the brand.

*In the third instalment of an interview series with the Jendamark directors, Jendamark India's head of marketing, **Sayali Mahajan**, chats to Jendamark Automation's executive director of innovations, **Yanesh Naidoo**, about spearheading our digital transformation journey and the human-centric approach to 4IR.*

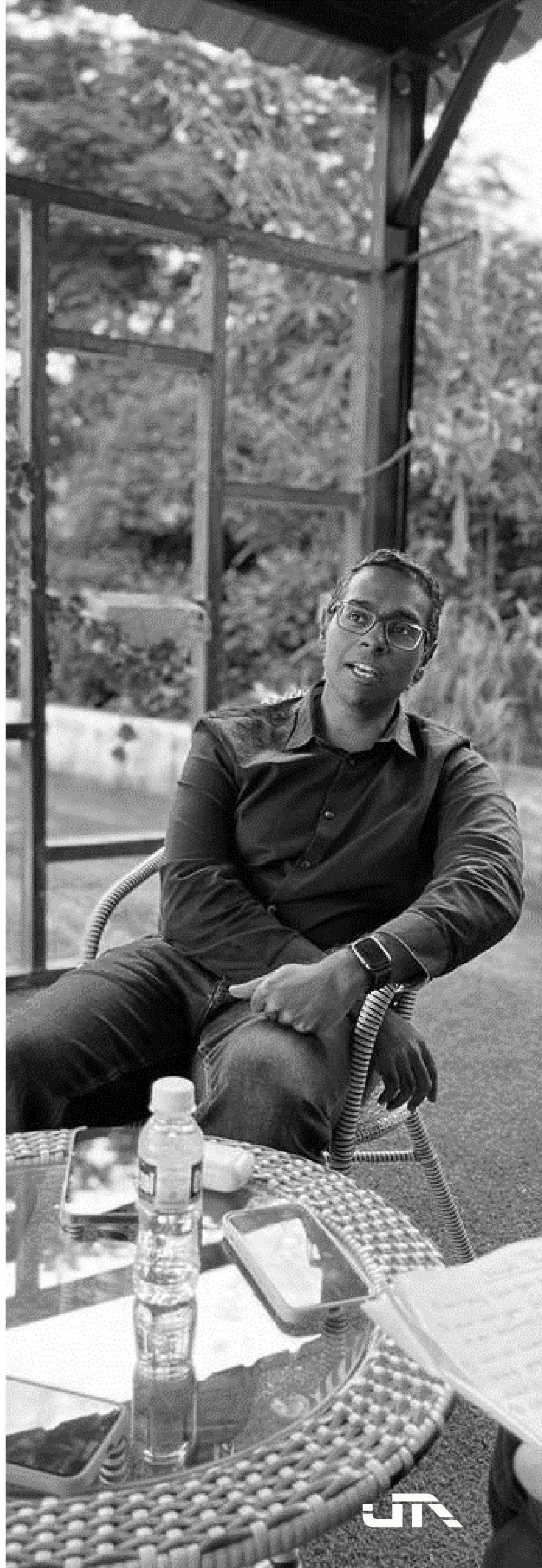


Sayali: How long have you been working at Jendamark?

Yanesh: I joined on 1 September 2004 and have been part of Jendamark for 18 years now.

Sayali: Where did you start your journey with Jendamark?

Yanesh: As the sales guy. We didn't have any key account managers back then. I was the guy going out, finding new customers, and convincing them to buy our solutions.





Sayali: How different was it back then as a salesperson compared to now? We probably were still in the process of creating the Jendamark brand name, right?

Yanesh: I think there are two ways of answering that question and both are true.

The first one is that we were open to anything. We were not focusing on any specific industry or business sector, like powertrain, catalytic converters, or electric vehicles, which we do now. I would approach pharmaceutical companies, food and beverage companies, and sell any kind of automation they needed. It was very cool, especially as a young person, and I was exposed to various types of factories.

The second answer is that, as we were not focusing on any particular sector, we were not up to the mark with the solutions we provided. I probably spent a year just learning from our mistakes and the challenges we faced with every project. We would start with the lessons learnt in the past while discussing a new requirement with customers. This helped us a lot.

Sayali: What was your first job? Did you always want to get into business, or you were okay just doing a job?

Yanesh: I knew since childhood that I would be in a technical role. There was no doubt about that in my mind, and I always wanted to work in a car factory. After completing my engineering degree at the University of Cape Town, I got my first job at VW and that's the first time I ever came to Port Elizabeth. I thought I would be there for a while and then I would leave. It didn't pan out as I expected.

What I thought working for an OEM would be, versus what I experienced, was also completely different. I wanted to get involved in the details of the machines, but it was a fast-paced, high-risk production environment. You had to understand the consequences of a 30-second line breakdown because, if they are building a car every two minutes, 30 seconds is a quarter of the value of a car. That's when I understood the value of time and breakdowns completely.

Also, the most important lesson was seeing the operators' skill level. It was the best place to learn to interact with operators and to understand that you should start putting them first. That's where my whole vision of the human-centric approach to 4IR comes from! If you make the operator successful, the business will be successful. That I learnt very quickly at VW.

When I joined Jendemark, I was very excited to join as a sales guy because I was less interested in getting into the details of the machine, and more interested in creating innovative solutions with concept designs that impact the customer's business.



Sayali: We all know that you are a tech guy who is extremely sharp and intelligent. Have you always been like this, even in your academics?

Yanesh: I am actually dyslexic*; I don't know if you know that. I wasn't the brightest kid in the school. I used to come last in my class. After primary school, to get into high school, we had to write entrance exams. I didn't clear a single one of them. There was this new school that had opened up which had no entrance exam. My dad somehow got me into that school and that's how I got my admission to high school. I wasn't academically strong at all. Neither my parents nor my teachers knew back then what dyslexia was. For all of us, it was just the problem that I couldn't read. So, if you can't read, you can't learn, right? But I could converse when someone explained something to me. I only learnt that I was dyslexic when I got to university.

The irony of the situation is that it's the reason I became good at what I do, especially from a sales perspective, because the key to selling is listening.

** Dyslexia: a condition affecting the brain that causes difficulty in reading and spelling, but does not affect intelligence*





Sayali: What are you most passionate about in life, apart from your gadgets and business?

Yanesh: Golf. I am absolutely passionate about it. When I go home, I like to read about the latest tech stuff, like I have started reading about the axial flux motor. It isn't work for me; it is what fascinates me. Now I am thinking how we can make axial flux motors back home. That for me is not a job. It happens to be my job but it's also something I love doing. I am lucky to do something which I am passionate about.

I have many gadgets and cameras, all sorts of weird stuff. I use tech for work and it's part of my job. I really find myself fortunate to be able to do this. If I could play golf at work, then I would be completely aligned.

I moved out of my office and sit in an open office with the Odin team because I want to feel part of this young and dynamic team and I want to build a different culture around the hierarchy of people. With the Odin team, in the hope that this thing becomes huge, I want to create a culture right from beginning that there is no hierarchy. There is no office because the office doesn't make you special.

Sayali: What is the biggest lesson that you have learnt in your professional and personal life?

Yanesh: I could be wrong. There have been times when I thought I was absolutely right, and it was impossible that I was wrong. But I was wrong. So, I am always open to accepting that I might be. Even someone who has less experience can be right or better than you. Young people with fresh ideas can teach you. It may sound like weakness, but I am always checking myself. Am I actually right in this situation?

Sayali: Being a successful salesperson, what is your secret to a successful sale?

Yanesh: Accept that every sale is going to be different. There is no standard procedure to follow. People are different. There will always be different personalities in each story. Understand each personality and their needs, and accept that you must adapt to that scenario, not force them to adapt to your scenario. In our business, there is no way you can know everything, but you should also know what you don't know. That's what builds trust. People buy from people they feel they can trust.





Sayali: What according to you is happiness?

Yanesh: My daughter has a bed with a bookshelf that is too high for her to reach, even when she stands on the bed. But the bed has a railing, so now she has learnt to climb the railing, hang from it and pick the book she wants to read. She is so proud of that. If I am sitting on the bed, she checks to see if I am watching and what I can do. She knows she's not supposed to do it because she can fall and hurt herself. But she feels secure with me and that makes me really happy.

Sayali: Where do you think the younger generation just out of college, or people who want to test themselves, should put their money or efforts right now? Which industry or business vertical is coming in the next two to three years?

Yanesh: I think many things in the world change as time goes by and many things stay the same. One thing that will always stay the same is that people who are successful love what they do. There are many people who are capable of a lot of things and can be relatively successful in any of those. But to be completely successful and happy, you need to love what you do.

I think the problem with the current schooling and education system, including university, is that we teach students to pass exams whereas we should be teaching them to find their passion. We are saying that the future of the world is engineering and IT. But that doesn't mean you will be successful if that makes you unhappy. Your success will not be sustainable if you are not happy.

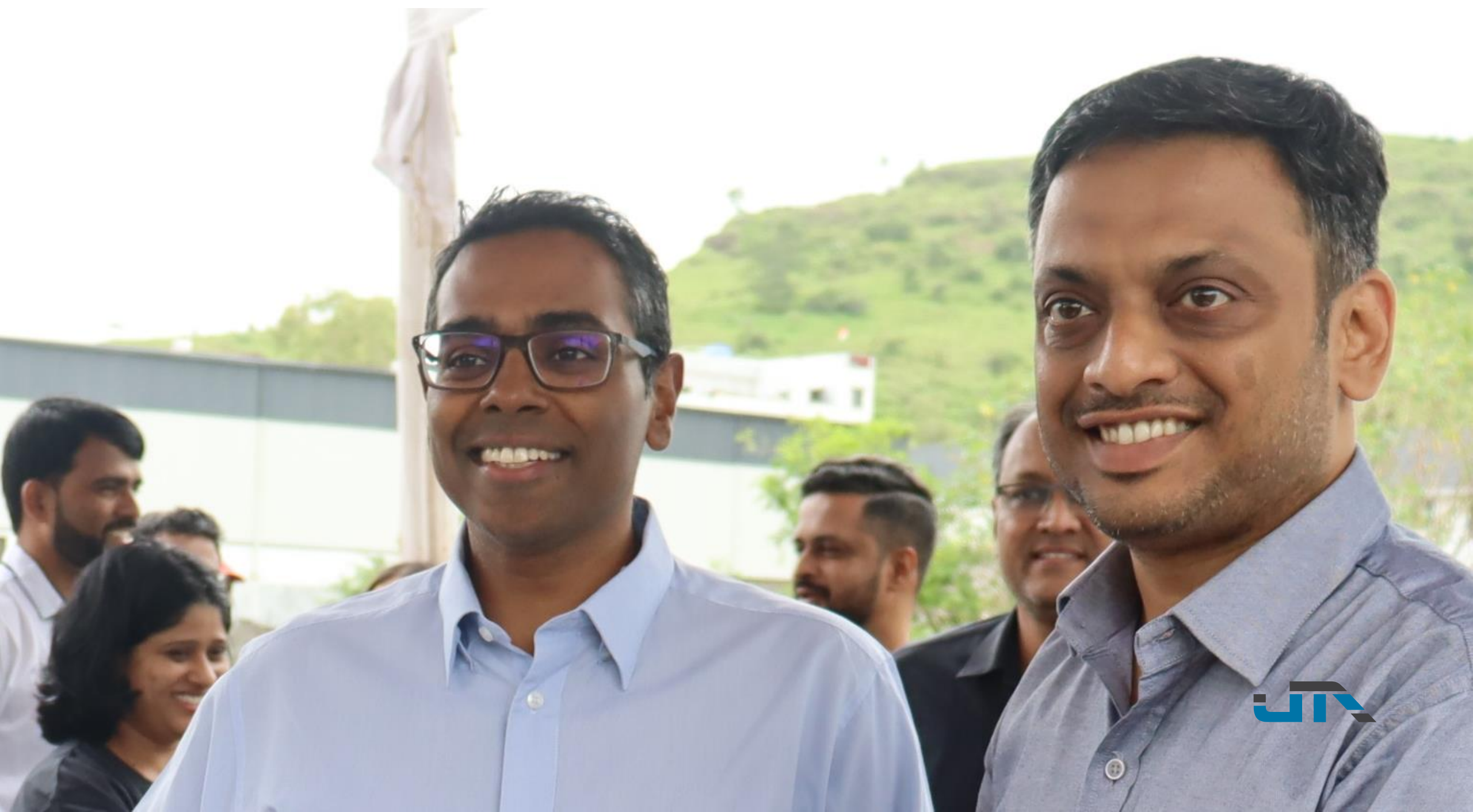
You can take the example of Jendamark. The people who have been most successful, at least most of the time, have been doing the things they love. So, my advice to anyone is – whether it be playing guitar, painting, engineering, whatever – do what you love. We hope money comes along, and we mustn't be too idealistic thinking that money will flow. But if you are doing something that makes you money purely because of the money, you will never have enough.

Sayali: What is your opinion about Jendamark India now compared what it was three years ago?

Yanesh: I think the development is beyond my imagination. I knew that with Himanshu, the team we will always move forward. There was no doubt about that.

Even during Covid-19, the fact that we survived was already a success. The fact that Jendamark India thrived is still unimaginable. How is that possible amid a pandemic and an economic crisis, with people working from home, family members suffering, and people sleeping in the design office? It was like a movie, and Himanshu and team did it alone. As much as we were on the phone talking, it is very different being 8,000km away versus being here and doing it.

It was always our intention as the owners of Jendamark Automation to build a sustainable business, and now we have. In two years, Jendamark India has gone from being dependent on us for business to almost independent in every way. I think the reason for collaboration is to make us all better, not to create dependency.



Sayali: Where all have you travelled in India and what do you like most about the country?

Yanesh: I travelled to a few places in the north. I visited the Taj Mahal, Jaipur and Delhi. What I like about India is that it is a country of layers. When you first come, you see the top layer, which you can view as a good or a bad thing. But I think you have to peel the layers away to see what India really is.

And, fortunately, every single time I come here, there is a new layer that gets peeled off and I start to see more and more. I missed not coming and it wasn't just about the work or economic opportunities. There is this energy around, as it is said, "Incredible India". With respect to festivals, India has many countries in one. You embrace your culture. Independence Day is special for you as you raise your flag in your houses and workplaces. Even my wife says she wants to come to India. I would like to travel here with my daughter too. One thing for sure is I would advise anyone on this planet to visit India at least once.





Sayali: What is that one thing you are most proud of in your life?

Yanesh: I am proud of my daughter.

Sayali: Where do you see Jendamark in the next five years?

Yanesh: It's a bit hard to answer. I try to work every day in the right way, doing the right things, and then what will be will be. I don't want to imagine some future. I want to do the right things based on what I know now and trust the future will be good. That's probably not the answer you were looking for, but this is how I work and feel. If we are doing the right things daily, the future we deserve will be coming our way. So, what I know is that we are trying to build a sustainable business, look out for our staff, and make a positive impact on the world.