

# INTERNAL COMBUSTION

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**REMOVABLE  
HARDTOP AND  
FOLDABLE  
WINDSCREEN,  
TWO FEATURES  
MISSING ON THE  
NEW THAR**

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**T**he new Mahindra Thar has generated a lot of buzz and caused a bigger stir than many other vehicle unveilings. But the Thar is certainly not Mahindra's highest selling SUV. In fact in 2018, just about 6,000 units were sold. So why so much interest and excitement?

In my view it's because the Thar is a niche SUV with genuine off-road capability and nostalgia evoking old school styling. It holds the promise of freedom and fun, and that too at an affordable price. In recent years off-roading has acquired popularity and owning simple but sturdy SUVs like the Mahindra Thar or Maruti Gypsy, has become a kind of lifestyle

statement too. Off-road driving videos posted on personal social media accounts, also garner attention and have further increased the appeal of SUVs like the Thar.

The fact that the new Thar looks so striking and is a huge improvement on its predecessor has fueled interest too. The earlier Thar may have been fashionable, but it also had several shortcomings like on-road performance, ride, handling, refinement, comfort, ergonomics, etc. It is to Mahindra's credit that they have now resolved most of these weaknesses. The suspension has been changed, with a multi-link setup with coil springs replacing the leaf springs at the rear. Mahindra say the stiffness of the ladder-frame chassis has been enhanced to ensure far better ride and handling. Fortunately they have also focused on the off-road ability and the new Thar retains the 4WD transfer case with selectable low ratio and the ground clearance and water wading depth have been increased.

The Thar now comes with a built in roll-cage that not only aids safety, but also adds to the body stiffness, which in turn benefits handling. Mahindra also needs to be praised for improving the interior and making it far more ergonomic and comfortable for occupants. Honestly, there was so much to improve, that now it's been done, Mahindra is inundated with compliments.

But a couple of questions have been raised too. One thing many people are saying is that the new Mahindra Thar is a copy or imitation of the Jeep Wrangler. And this is something even Mahindra cannot deny. Few people have even put forth the argument that since Mahindra bought over Italian design house Pininfarina in 2015, it should have used their skills and talents in coming up with an original design for the new Thar. Well the truth is Mahindra started making and selling Jeep vehicles under license in 1949, just two years after India's independence. While the agreement with Jeep may have now been abandoned, the reality is that Mahindra have carried forward the original Jeep CJ design and lay claim to it as part of their DNA too. This is also something that cannot be denied. And frankly, Mahindra has done a terrific job of copying the Jeep Wrangler. I recall a Hindi film director once saying, "So what if my film is a copy. Isn't imitation

the sincerest form of flattery?"

Also there is nothing stopping Mahindra from getting Pininfarina to make an original design for its next SUV. They could use the same platform too. This is now a far more sorted out chassis with good engines and transmissions and putting another body on it is not so difficult. In fact making a longer 5-door version with more space and easier access to the seats at the rear is most doable and desirable. And for all one knows, maybe there is already one in the offing.

While personally I am quite pleased with what Mahindra have done with the new Thar, I also have a few questions. The new Thar comes with a composite material hardtop, a convertible top and an optional fixed soft-top with removable side facing seats. Mahindra also says the doors can be removed by undoing just three fasteners. But the hardtop is not easy to remove and Mahindra does not advise it either. The windscreen is also fixed and cannot be folded down. I just don't understand this anomaly. The hardtop is one of the most useful changes on the new Thar and has many benefits. It significantly enhances NVH, improves high-speed stability, and to an extent, also safety. It also provides more security for any valuables left inside. With the superior on-road performance and comfort, more people may now opt for long journeys with the Thar and the hardtop version will be ideal for touring. But not being able to remove the hardtop after getting to your destination, is a hindrance. Especially for those who enjoy open-top motoring. Or people like me, who love going on wildlife safaris.

The Jeep Wrangler comes with hardtop panels that are easy to remove. The windscreen can also be folded down and this is a boon while driving on dirt tracks as it prevents dust from entering the passenger compartment. While Mahindra may have done well in copying lots of elements of the Wrangler, how I wish they had also worked on a removable hardtop and foldable windscreen. And both are quite easy to do. In fact the same latches used for the convertible soft-top, could have been utilised to engineer and make a removable hardtop. In my opinion, having these features would be like putting a telescope on a high-powered rifle. It might greatly increase the chances of hitting the target! ☺