

Sacred groves, Theyyam & a tryst with MG Hector Plus

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'Sacred groves of Kerala: Down from 10,000 to 1,200', the headline of an article snapped my mind to attention. I researched the topic when the Instagram post 'Sacred grove conservation and tracing theyyam, the sentinel artform', came across my feed by Cherish Expeditions that had partnered with MG Motors Coastline Garages.

Cherish Expeditions is a travel-based impact initiative. Each of their initiatives focuses on uplifting livelihood of local communities and their programmes are carefully chosen to integrate the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.



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Three weeks later, I was in the old city of Cannanore (now called Kannur in North Malabar region of Kerala). It is the land of looms and lore. I was out tracing one of the oldest art forms in Kerala and with me was the MG Hector Plus. Launched in the summer of 2020, the MG (Morris Garages) Hector Plus is India's first 6-seater internet SUV with a panoramic sunroof.

I was undertaking a 7-day long self-driven journey through the northern Malabar region. MG Motor India was our mobility partner. Handpicked by Cherish Expeditions, I was among the few conservationists and content creators who had to come together and work towards creating an impact by planting 100 species of Rare Endemic and Threatened Species (RET) trees.

RET trees and theyyam have an

almost sacred connection. Theyyam was performed mainly in the sacred groves of the northern Malabar region and it was believed that residing deities from these sacred groves were summoned to the performing man's body. For centuries, the sacred artform secured the groves from destruction but with growing urbanisation, these residing deities shifted to temples which resulted in loss of these groves and its unique biodiversity.

While most of the Theyyam performances were scheduled in the pitch darkness of sacred groves demanding the midnight silence, our alluring blue Hector Plus engaged our daytime on the trail, with its 17-inch diamond-cut alloys, inviting all attention while on the road. We took the flaunting beauty to Muzhippilangadi beach, Asia's longest drive-in beach, leaving the city

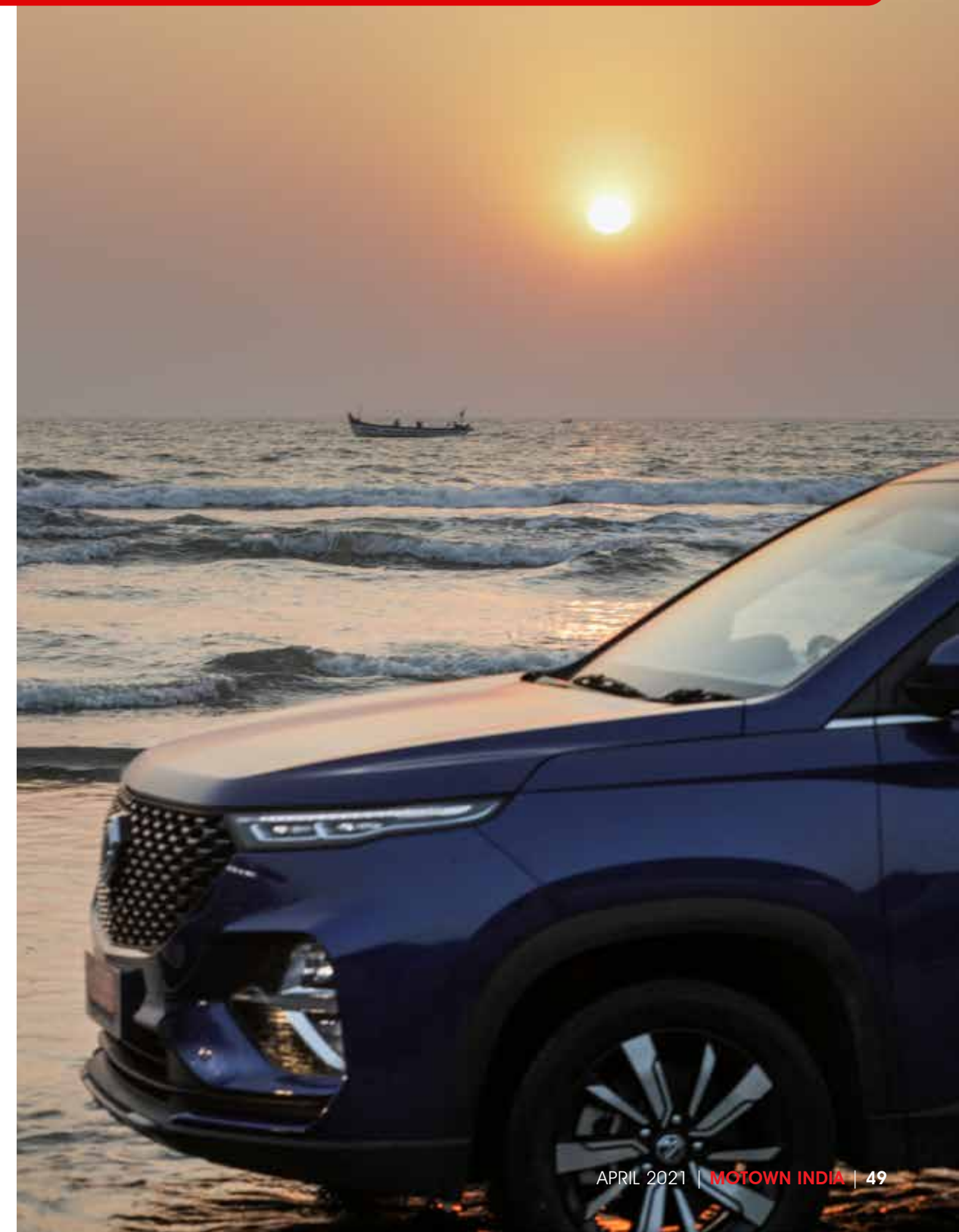
behind to have a splashy affair with the waves. The 1.5-litre turbo diesel engine ran perfect, absolutely sure footed on the sandy beach. With automatic gears, city driving felt effortless. On the highways, the Hector Plus drove perfectly, providing great ride and handling.

The 6-seater Hector Plus, comes with luxurious captain seats in the middle row. The SUV features an all-new dual-tone smoked sepia brown interior, along with stylish new headlamps, a new chrome-studded front grille, and a chit-chat feature on i-SMART Next Gen interface. It also comes with other attractive features including the all-new smart swipe for tailgate opening.

The voice assistant recognising Hinglish and the 'Chit Chat' feature ensured that we were never bored.



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THEYYAM, THE RITUALISTIC ART FORM

We drove through the interior villages of Kannur tracing Theyyam, the ritualistic art form and its unavoidable umbilical link with sacred groves. The Theyyam artist with his fierce red makeup and the attire enhanced in shades of red was strong enough to catch hold of my wandering mind. A cold shiver radiated across my spine as the light body movements of the theyyam artist changed into intense movements like firewalking.

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FEATURES

Theyyam is a centuries-old ritualistic artform restricted to perform only on temples and sacred groves, where the belief goes that the residing deities are summoned to the performing man's body. Today, when the caste system is openly criticised and secretly worshipped, the villages in the northern Malabar of Kerala celebrate this ritualistic art form where the caste system's lower hierarchy is honoured. Deities possessed to be the Theyyam Gods have folklores that tell the stories of humans who sacrificed their lives against the caste system, gender inequality and other societal inequalities. As each Theyyam performs and converse with their devotees, 'Thottam Pattu,' the Theyyam song, will be vocalised in the background, conveying the folklore behind each theyyam. To become a Theyyam artist is a privilege only given to the 'lower caste,' providing an equal status for the society's tyrannised community.

THEYYAM AND SACRED GROVES NURTURE EACH OTHER

Theyyam has been strongly coiled with nature starting from the ornaments used for the performance to the stage where the artist is performed. Theyyam was performed mainly in the sacred groves, till man's fantasy with brick and mortar took the upper hand. Once urbanization started hitting the rural villages, the grove's residing deities were carefully shifted to temples, leaving the sacred groves for deforestation. We were on a humble mission to revive the degrading sacred groves through this expedition planting the rare endangered species of plants and conserve the remaining ones.

SACRED GROVE CONSERVATION

Sacred groves may not be a familiar word for the present-day modern world. Though I have heard about sacred groves from grandma stories deeply intertwined with superstitious beliefs and folklores, I never imagined visiting one someday, and being a part of its revival and conservation.

Sacred groves are small rainforests with a residing deity placed in it for worship, deeply rooted with mythological stories making them sacred enough not allowing to cut any trees or branches. Sacred grove conservation is the need of this era as it is a treasure trove of biodiversity where rare flora and fauna flourish without human interruptions. As these

virgin forests are left to thrive, it houses endangered species of birds, mammals, reptiles and a variety of butterflies. Sacred groves improve the microclimate of their vicinity and water cycle by sun trapping and preventing soil erosion. Also, they are our last storehouse of many ayurvedic plants which were previously endemic to the forest.



As the geographical terrain changed from tar roads to narrow unpaved paths, the green got denser, hinting us the arrival of our destination, Mapitacherry sacred grove. There we have partaken in the GOD (Grow Our Dying) tree campaign by planting 100 RET trees along with MSSRF, which falls under the 1trillion tree campaign by the World Economic Forum. While we are having global discussions on climate change going on, it is crucial to conserve the last of these sacred groves and protect their rich biodiversity along with the extinct species of trees.

"What is happening here", is that one question we have come across the most, as we drove MG Hector Plus along the rural villages of Kannur where growing urbanisation has yet to be checked. It took a modern car like the Hector Plus to help us in our expedition so as to spread awareness about a cause that was for long ignored and forgotten. That, perhaps, is the impact when old meets new!

[The author is a professional freelance writer & photographer]

