EARTH FIRST

HOW BHOOMI HABBA IS REBUILDING BANGALORE'S FRACTURED RELATIONSHIP WITH LAND, FOOD, COMMUNITY & CLIMATE

Bindu Gopal Rao

In a city choking on concrete and heat, one festival is quietly rebuilding Bangalore's relationship with the earth, one millet meal, folk song and seed at a time.

Bangalore has been enduring problems. Harsher summers, acute water shortages, dwindling green cover, urban flooding. The city's ecological crisis is no longer a future threat looming on the horizon. It has arrived, and it is loud. But in a leafy corner of the city, something quietly radical is pushing back.

Every year, Bhoomi Habba gathers farmers, artisans, musicians, waste workers, educators, and children onto a shared green campus to do something refreshingly unfashionable - talk about the planet without making it feel like a lecture. And it has been doing so since 2008.

What began as the "Festival of JustPeace", born from a partnership between Visthar and the Inter Faith Forum as part of an international school of peace, has evolved into something far bigger and bolder. In its early years, it was a smaller, intimate gathering held around May Day, rooted in conversations around justice and peace. But a fundamental realisation changed everything.

"Human justice cannot be separated from eco-justice. Ecological questions are not isolated issues. They are woven into the fabric of everyday life, affecting food, livelihood, water, migration, craft traditions, and the very fabric of our communities," says Mercy Kappen, co-founder and strategic advisor at Visthar.

That insight cracked the festival wide open. Today, Bhoomi Habba is a full-throated celebration of lived environmental wisdom, and this year's theme, "Restore, Reclaim", says exactly what it means. Restore the soil, the water, the biodiversity, and a fractured relationship with the land. Reclaim local knowledge, food traditions, collective responsibility, and public spaces.

No grand slogans. No distant summits. Just people, purpose, and a millet meal under a tree.

Small acts, big shifts

Here is what community-led climate action actually looks like up close - a farmer preserving native seeds, women reviving handloom traditions using natural fibres, a neighbourhood mastering source segregation, children learning the names of local trees.

"These actions might seem modest compared to global climate summits," says Kappen, "but they possess a rare continuity and accountability because the people involved are directly impacted by the outcomes."

The festival understands something that most climate conversations miss entirely. Culture moves people far more effectively than data. When someone listens to a folk song about land and rain, or sits through playback theatre rooted in personal histories, the climate crisis stops being abstract. It becomes memory. It becomes grief. It becomes daily life.

"A child describing a vanished lake in their neighbourhood often communicates urgency more honestly than a data-heavy presentation," says Kappen. A disappearing recipe, she adds, speaks volumes about shifting agricultural patterns, seed loss, migration, and water scarcity, all without a single formal lecture.

This is the festival's quiet genius. It makes you feel the crisis before it asks you to act on it.

The millet blueprint

Traditional food systems, Bhoomi Habba argues, are not nostalgia. They are blueprints for survival.

Take the millet-based food cultures of South India. Millets require a fraction of the water that rice demands. Over centuries, these communities perfected seed preservation, food storage, labour-sharing, and multi-cropping to sidestep the vulnerabilities of monoculture. They were also fundamentally social, built around communal cooking, seed-sharing networks, and local markets.

"Urban India can learn immense ecological intelligence from this," says Kappen, "not by romanticising the past, but by recognising that true resilience stems from diversity and restraint rather than endless consumption."

The festival's food spaces are not simply stalls selling organic produce. They are invitations to ask harder questions: what kind of agriculture, and what kind of human relationships, make healthy food possible in the first place?

A festival for everyone

One of Bhoomi Habba's most deliberate achievements is who it brings into the same room, or rather, the same open field. Farmers sit alongside urban visitors. Children participate alongside adults. Folk performers share space with artisans working with natural fibres. Panel discussions exist, but they are not the point.

"We intentionally dismantle the barriers that typically separate different groups of people," says Kappen. "A visitor can buy produce directly from a farming collective, sit in a storytelling circle with children, watch a grassroots folk performance, and interact with artisans, all within the same shared space," he adds.

Children, crucially, are never treated as an afterthought. Intergenerational sessions, designed for both children and adults to experience together, are a festival staple, softening the atmosphere and keeping it honest.

The regenerative marketplace adds another layer, featuring over 70 ethical brands and collectives. But even here, the festival is careful not to let shopping become the hero of the story.

"We try not to position consumption itself as the ultimate antidote to climate change," says Nazar PS, executive director of Visthar. Deeper change, he insists, means reducing waste, repairing what you own, supporting hyper-local economies, and rethinking habits of excess.

Stubborn hope

What keeps Bhoomi Habba going, year after year, is not optimism exactly. It is something sturdier. Across India, Nazar points out, there are people quietly doing deeply consistent, unglamorous work without seeking the spotlight.

There is also a shift happening in how people understand the crisis itself. Climate change is no longer a distant future scenario for many. It is water access, food prices, health, and extreme heat, right now, right here. That localised awareness, Nazar says, is forging entirely new forms of solidarity.

"Hope, for us, is not a passive optimism that things will miraculously get better," Nazar says. "It is found in the stubborn willingness of communities to keep acting with care and persistence, despite the uncertainty. That is precisely what Bhoomi Habba celebrates every year, not perfection, but persistence," he concludes.

In a city that has forgotten what quiet sounds like, that might just be the most radical act of all.

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