

**Four thousand five hundred** semi-literate dabbawalas collect and deliver 175,000 packages within hours. What should we learn from this unique, simple and highly efficient 120-year-old logistics system? Hungry kya? What would you like: pizza from the local Domino's (30 minute delivery) or a fresh, hot meal from home? Most managers don't have a choice. It's either a packed lunch or junk food grabbed from a fast food outlet. Unless you live in Mumbai, that is, where a small army of 'dabbawalas' picks up 175,000 lunches from homes and delivers them to harried students, managers and workers on every working day. At your desk. 12.30 pm on the dot. Served hot, of course. And now you can even order through the Internet.

The Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association is a streamlined 120-year-old organisation with 4,500 semi-literate members providing a quality door-to-door service to a large and loyal customer base.

Though the work sounds simple, it is actually a highly specialized trade that is over a century old and which has become integral to Mumbai's culture.

The dabbawala originated when a person named Mahadeo Havaji Bachche started the lunch delivery service with about 100 men. Nowadays, Indian businessmen are the main customers for the dabbawalas, and the service often includes cooking as well as delivery.

### □ **Economic analysis:**

Everyone who works within this system is treated as an equal. Regardless of a dabbawala's function, everyone gets paid about two to four thousand rupees per month (around 25-50 British pounds or 40-80 US dollars).

More than 175,000 or 200,000 lunches get moved every day by an estimated 4,500 to 5,000 dabbawalas, all with an extremely small nominal fee and with utmost punctuality. According to a recent survey, there is only one mistake in every 6,000,000 deliveries. How has MTBSA managed to survive through these tumultuous years? The answer lies in a twin process that combines competitive collaboration between team members with a high level of technical efficiency in logistics management. It works like this...

After the customer leaves for work, her lunch is packed into a tiffin provided by the dabbawala. A color-coded notation on the handle identifies its owner and destination. Once the dabbawala has picked up the tiffin, he moves fast using a combination of bicycles, trains and his two feet.

### Team work

The entire system depends on teamwork and meticulous timing. Tiffins are collected from homes between 7.00 am and 9.00 am, and taken to the nearest railway station. At various intermediary stations, they are hauled onto platforms and sorted out for area-wise distribution, so that a single tiffin could change hands three to four times in the course of its daily journey.

At Mumbai's downtown stations, the last link in the chain, a final relay of dabbawalas fan out to the tiffins' destined bellies. Lunch hour over, the whole process moves into reverse and the tiffins return to suburban homes by 6.00 pm.

### Who are the dabbawalas?

Descendants of soldiers of the legendary Maharashtrian warrior-king Shivaji, dabbawalas belong to the Malva caste, and arrive in Mumbai from places like Rajgurunagar, Akola, Ambegaon, Junnar and Maashi. "We believe in employing people from our own community. So whenever there is a vacancy, elders recommend a relative from their village," says Madhba, a dabbawala.

To know know more about the complex process read more@ [rediff](#)