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“The incredible delivery system of Mumbai's Dabbawalas”

A dabbawala is a person who is part of a delivery system that collects hot food in lunch boxes from the residences of workers in the late morning, delivers the lunches to the workplace, and returns the empty boxes to the worker's residence that afternoon. They are also used by meal suppliers in Mumbai (cooked meals from central kitchens to the customers and back).

The "Dabbawalla" system that operates in Mumbai is unique and incredible in the complexity of its task, simplicity of its operation, and surprisingly low error rates for a system of its size. It is a daily service in which approximately 4,000 dabbawalas carry and deliver over 200,000 lunches every day, within a three hour block of time, across the city's 70-kilometre stretch, with each lunch box (dabba) changing hands at least four times.

In 1890 Bombay, Mahadeo Havaji Bachche started a lunch delivery service with about a hundred men. In 1930, he informally attempted to unionize the dabbawallas. Later, a charitable trust was registered in 1956 under the name of Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Trust. The commercial arm of this trust was registered in

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1968 as Mumbai Tiffin Box Supplier's Association.

A collecting dabbawala, usually on bicycle, collects dabbas. As many of the carriers are of limited literacy, the dabbas (tiffins) have some sort of distinguishing mark on them, such as a colour or group of symbols: (1) abbreviations for collection points, (2) colour code for starting station, (3) number for destination station and (4) markings for handling dabbawala at destination, building and floor.

The dabbawala then takes them to a sorting place, where he and other collecting dabbawalas sort the lunch boxes into groups. The grouped boxes are put in the coaches of trains, with markings to identify the destination of the box (usually there is a designated car for the boxes). At each station, boxes are handed over to a local dabbawala, who delivers them. The empty boxes are collected after lunch or the next day and sent back to the respective houses.

The Mumbai Tiffinbox Carriers Association is a relatively flat organisation with a narrow span of control and there are no stated goals other than that of continuing to provide the service in the best manner possible. The dabbawalla system uses virtually no technology, is limited to face-to-face communication, and is as informal as a system of this size can be. Yet, it registers an outstanding performance on both cost and reliability of delivery, proving that a labour-intensive, technologically unsophisticated logistical system can be as efficient and effective as a technologically sophisticated logistical system of the same design.

The dabbawallahs even deliver in the pouring rain or during political strife. And business is growing, at a steady rate of 5-10% annually.

"Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony"

- Mahatma Gandhi (1869 – 1948)

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