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► **To cite this version:**

Marie Percot. Dabbawalas, Tiffin Carriers of Mumbai: Answering a Need for Specific Catering. Article à paraître. 2005. <halshs-00004513>

HAL Id: halshs-00004513

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00004513>

Submitted on 31 Aug 2005

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Dabbawalas, Tiffin Carriers of Mumbai: Answering a Need for Specific Catering¹

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The dabbawalas² are nowadays a well-known figure of Mumbai, supposed to be so typical that distinguished guests are invited to visit them on their city tour, as did Prince Charles during his last visit to the metropolis. The “tiffin suppliers” who deliver daily the food of thousands of employees are indeed a “speciality” which cannot be seen anywhere else as their occupation is totally linked not only to the relation that Indians have to food but also to the specific geographic set up of Mumbai. It is nevertheless interesting to note that a job belonging to the informal sector, whose actors highly claim their rural roots, has been elevated to the status of model of Mumbai entrepreneurship.

In a first part, I intend to show how dabbawalas answer an actual need of the Mumbai employees by allowing them to get a food respecting their habit, be it linked to their community or geographic origin.

In a second part, I will demonstrate the efficiency of the dabbawalas' system of delivery that shows an excellent ability to catch the metropolitan opportunities by people who still belong to a rural community.

1. Home food for office lunch

Three main reasons explain why people use the service of the dabbawalas. The first one is the will to eat proper food, i.e. proper in quality and quantity. The second reason is more affective: to get at the office a meal prepared at home is a link with the private world that a lot of dabbawalas' customers express as a heartening feeling. Eventually, to hire dabbawalas is also a question of status.

¹ This paper is based on a fieldwork conducted in 1991. I followed and interviewed approximately fifty dabbawalas, in hindi that most of them speak. Interviews were also conducted with customers (generally at their home).

² I use here the common English writing coming from dabbāvālā in Hindi (dabbā, box, plus the suffix vālā, meaning “linked to”).

Proper food

Mumbai is indeed a very cosmopolitan city but cosmopolitanism doesn't mean standardization of everybody's habits, and in the Indian context most particularly, a standardization of food habits (Mahias, 1999). Actually, to keep on cooking or eating as it is the tradition in its own community may very well be one of the way of "domesticating" the megalopolis and one of the best way to reaffirm its own community's specificities (Rao, 1985). So, as long as it is possible when it comes to food, all the people I met in Mumbai agree that nothing is better than home food. Going to a restaurant just for the pleasure of eating outside is not a common practice and mostly reserved to the more westernised upper class. Other people will eat in a restaurant only when necessary, when travelling for example. For the majority of Mumbai employees, restaurants are anyway too expensive to be a daily solution. In the streets, numerous outside stalls sell for a few rupees different types of snacks that you have to eat standing on the pavement in the middle of the crowd. As said one of my informant: *"That is not real food. You cannot eat like that everyday or, for sure, you will get sick before long"*. *"These snacks they sell on the pavement, it is not clean. They don't cook it properly. Look, they use the same oil again and again"*, added another one. They also agree that there is no pleasure at all and no "dignity" to eat standing in front of everybody. In another hand, few administrations and fewer companies offer a canteen to their employees. It is true that with the diversity of Indian food habits, it is very difficult to answer the specific need of each employee in a same place: "veg" and "non veg" are thus the only two options that canteens are able to give, without taking care of all the different regime between religion, casts or geographic origin. By delivering to each employee his tiffin filled with food prepared at his home³, dabbawalas solve the problem for an estimated one hundred thousands people.

A link with one's home

Living and working in a big city induce relations with people from different social and geographical background and oblige to a minimum of interactions with them. Actually, if the Mumbai neighbourhoods are often constituted of people belonging more or less to the same origin, in the business areas and in the offices most especially, it is a vast melting pot that prevails (Kosambi, 1986). A lot of employees I met insisted that it is a source of stress for you constantly have "to adjust" to other people. They also pointed out that in addition to the hard

³ A big majority of the dabbawalas' customers are men. Women working in the city offices generally eat a very light meal that they bring with them from home.

time they sometime have at work, comes the fatigue induced by the long travel that most of them have to do twice a day: leaving home by 7 am and coming back not before 7 pm, from Monday to Saturday included, is the norm as business areas are mostly located in the extreme South of the city and most of the office workers live in the Northern suburb (Sama, 1991). A lot of employees feel that they hardly have enough time to spend with their family, and to rest at home. For them, the delivery of their lunch by the dabbawalas is then more than just food: it is an actual link with home.

As usual in an Indian family, the wife will wake up early to prepare her husband and children breakfast. After their leaving home for work or school, she will start to prepare the lunch of her husband and fill up the different parts of the *dabba* (for example, rice plus yoghurt in the lower part, a vegetable curry in the middle partition and a few chapatis and sweets in the upper one). She will then drop the *dabba* at the front door or wait for the dabbawalas to ring at the door. This latter will not come before 9 or 10 am, giving her two to three hours to prepare the lunch between the departure of her husband and the passage of the dabbawala. The meal once delivered will be freshly prepared food, but it won't be hot anymore as the *dabba* will take a few hours to reach the office). Said Raju, an accountant in an airplane company: *"When I open the dabba, it is each time a surprise. I know that my wife is doing her best to make me happy. She knows I work hard and that is her way to support me". "I like to get my food from home [...] In the middle of the day, I can get the same smell that I get at home, that's good!"* pointed out Anand, an administrative clerk.

But the *dabba* is also often used as a kind of letterbox. Since a lot of employees still don't have phone at home, it is a way for the wife to send a message to her husband before his coming home, to ask him to buy something, to inform him that some family is coming or just to say hello. In the same manner, husband will write a few words saying, for example, that he will come back late or in the company of a friend, etc. and put the message in the empty *dabba* to be delivered home before his return. It is not the habit for men to clean the *dabba* on the office spot (as it is anywhere!); so, once the dabbawala has returned it home, wives can check how much their husband has eaten. Said Lethika, a housewife whose spouse works in an insurance company: *"When the dabba comes back, I open it quickly. If it is empty, I am happy. I think that he [my husband] liked the food. When there is something left I worry: maybe he is sick or he didn't like it. And when he comes back home that is the first thing I ask"*.

A question of status

At first sight, it would seem more logical that employees just carry themselves their lunch while going to the office. But when one knows the travel conditions in the suburb trains of Mumbai, which are incredibly crowded at peak hours, it is much easier to understand: if not impossible, it is at least difficult to hold a box full of food in addition to the briefcase that most of the employees use to take with them. Nevertheless, the status issue comes certainly before the comfort of travelling with a free hand. It is a question of dignity (not to be seen embarrassed with a too prosaic item); then comes the feeling of being able to be served, at least partly. Actually, the life is so costly in Mumbai that people of the middle class or low middle class, to which belong most of the employees, are generally not able to hire servants. But the dabbawala, who comes to your home twice a day and that you pay monthly⁴ is regarded as a first step toward getting a servant service: the way housewives address them clearly shows this type of relationship, though dabbawalas would be offended by this conception, considering themselves as independent workers.

2. A sophisticated delivery system

A rural community

The dabbawalas' service is a monopoly. The system works only because of their total interdependence. All of them, around 3.000 individuals, come from the same rural area: a few villages of Maharashtra, 200 km east of Mumbai. They belong to families of small farmers of this region and they still participate to the work in the fields from time to time; most of them leave Mumbai at harvest time, stopping then the service to the customers for a week. According to the oldest dabbawalas, the first of them came to the city around 1950 to improve the family earnings, as land incomes were not enough to feed everybody. The building of a large dam in the area (the Mulchi dam) by reducing the land available has induced additional migration to Mumbai. It is difficult to know why these people in particular have been able to create this economical niche, but it is nevertheless very clear that the system can only works because of the solidarity and the social control that exist in the group. The trainees, coming from the villages, always belong to the family of an older dabbawala who will take care of the training. An association, the "Mumbai Tiffin Suppliers Association", led by senior dabbawalas, is the uncontested institution that regulates the activities of all the dabbawalas

⁴ Between 50 and 100 Rupees a month, according to the distance.

and solve the possible conflicts between them or with customers or authorities. It has the authority to fire a “bad” dabbawala or to give fines for those who commit repeated errors. There are two types of dabbawalas: the muqaddam⁵ who in a certain way “own” a small sector of the city (i.e. the place where *dabbas* are collected) and its potential customers⁶, and the simple workers who work for a muqaddam. The latter may have up to twelve workers, plus a few trainees, the average being two to three workers for a muqaddam. All of these “teams” are anyway strongly interdependent since no dabbawala can take care of his *dabbas* from the beginning (customer’s house) till the end (customer’s office): the city is too large and the delivery places may be situated in very different places. Actually, the delivery of a *dabba* works as a sort of a relay race.

The journey of a dabba

From the customer’s house to his office, the *dabba* will be handle by at least three different delivery men and up to twelve men, depending on which place it has been picked up and to which part of the city it has to be dropped. A dabbawala has only one area of collecting and one of delivery. He has to collect around 30 *dabbas*. He will start around 9 am and will need a little bit more than one hour to do the collecting before going to the station where he gathers with the other dabbawalas of this area. Of course, all the *dabbas* he picks up won’t go to the same delivery area. At the departure station, the *dabbas* will thus be shared out according to the next destination of each other.

The dabbawalas use the train network that is roughly formed of two parallel lines oriented North-South whose terminals are Victoria Terminal and Churchgate. The two lines are connected at Dadar, a common station that allows a change of direction (Ponnuswamy, 1991:93). The train network is indeed relatively simple and that is why dabbawalas can operate in this city and no other.⁷ Moreover, the direction is almost always the same for the *dabbas* to be delivered: North-South in the morning, South-North in the afternoon.

Let’s take an example by following the journey of a *dabba*. The *dabba* of Mr Lal has been picked up by Chandra, the dabbawala of this city area (a part of Andheri, a suburb located on the Western line, northward). Chandra’s delivery area is located near Victoria Terminal (VT), but Mr Lal works in Nariman Point whose closest station is Churchgate, southward. So, Chandra will take care of his *dabba* up to Santa Cruz, a station on the same train line, where

⁵ Boss or foreman.

⁶ If he stops working, he may give his practice to a son or sell it to an other dabbawala.

⁷ The urban network of Delhi, for example, is a lot more complicated and would not allow this system of relay.

he makes a stop to gather a few *dabbas* to be delivered around VT and drops the *dabbas* to be delivered at the other terminal. Mr Lal's *dabba* is then taken care of by a second dabbawala whose delivery area is still not Nariman Point but who is going further on the right train line. At Dadar Station, this second dabbawala makes another stop and exchange tiffins with other dabbawalas. A third deliveryman is now in charge of Mr Lal's *dabba*, this one is going up to Churchgate. Churchgate is the station for the biggest office area of Mumbai, it is thus divided in many different sectors to which different dabbawalas are devoted: once again, Mr Lal's *dabba* will go to another dabbawala whose delivery sector includes the office of Mr Lal. In that case, four men have been necessary to drop the tiffin at the right place. It will be the same for the return of the empty *dabbas* after lunchtime: the same dabbawala who delivered at the offices of a specific area will collect them again, reach the closest station and the same sharing out will start again till the dabbawala of the residence area has gathered his 30 customers' lot in order to begin his home to home delivery.

The journey of a dabbawala

To make it clear, let's follow now the journey of a dabbawala. He will start his day by walking from home to home to gather his bunch of tiffins that he carries on his head in a large wooden box⁸. He will then meet at the station the other dabbawalas of this area and proceed, on the platforms, to the first exchange of *dabbas* according to their respective destinations. From his 30 collected *dabbas*, no more than three to four are following his full journey. From the inscription on the top of the *dabbas*, he knows which ones are not going the same way than he goes but he has to memorise in which station on the path and to which person he must drop them. This exchange may take place anywhere on the train line: in different stations where he stops to drop and pick up *dabbas* and even in the train. It is imperative to be very punctual: a delay of one dabbawala may retard an important number of workers, as the stops in the stations are not the same for all of them in order to limit the gathering size. It is therefore essential to catch every day the very same train and to reach as soon as possible the right place on the platform since every minute is counted. Picking up two *dabbas* here, dropping three or four of them there while picking up two others one station further and so on, till one reaches the terminus of the journey seems, at first, very complicated. But it has to be remembered that a dabbawala makes the same work everyday, often having the same customers since a very long time; it ends up to be a sort of mechanical task as underlined the

⁸ This box is approximately 2,5 meters long and 50cm large, its weight is around 10 kg. Once the box is full of *dabbas*, it is around 30 kg that the dabbawala has to carry on his head.

dabbawalas: “If we had new customers every day, it will be difficult to manage, but since there is only one dabbawala for a collecting area and since this one interacts every day with the same co-workers, it soon becomes an habit. You know by heart where you have to stop and which dabbas you have to pick up or to drop, no need to think about it”⁹. Arriving at his terminal station, the dabbawala gathers with other co-workers: delivery areas being most of the time situated in places with a very high rate of offices’ occupancy, the delivery area have to be divided in small sectors for each dabbawala (In Churchgate, these are hundreds of dabbawalas who met in front of the station, more or less tolerated by the crowd of employees coming out of the suburb trains). So, once again, the dabbawalas collected on the way are shared out according to the different office areas. With this ultimate freight the dabbawala reaches the office building and drops each *dabba* to a precise place decided by the customer (it can be near the elevators, in a dining room when available, at the door of a meeting room, etc., but rarely directly to the hand of the customer¹⁰). Having completing their delivery service, the dabbawalas meet again to take their own lunch together, behind a parking lot, in a deserted courtyard... It is worth noticing that they don’t have a real meal for themselves but just bring from home a very light collation packed in a piece of fabric or in a small metal box: it can be a simple snack or a little bit of curry already mixed with rice¹¹. After one hour of rest, they start again their tour: inverting the morning gestures. By 5 pm, their duty is over.

The marking of the dabbas

The *dabbas* are cylindrical boxes made of tin or sometimes aluminium. The “address” of the customer is painted on the top by the dabbawalas. There is no need to precise the home address since the dabbawala knows by heart to which places in his collecting area he has to pick up his dabbas. If a new customer appears in his own collecting area, he will do the complete journey to check the address of delivery in order to fix with the other dabbawalas in which manner it will be then delivered. He will have to find who, on the way, will have a free place in his freight to take one more *dabba* up to which place, and so on up to the very place of delivery. Once the chain has been established, with all the necessary stops for exchange decided, it is possible to mark the address. But it is not a postal one: it would be useless since

⁹ My translation from Hindi.

¹⁰ Actually the customer generally doesn’t know the face of his dabbawalas (the one collecting and the one delivering) and it is generally the wife who deals with the collecting dabbawala. If any problem occurs, it is to this latter that the customer has to complain.

¹¹ For them, the real meal (with meat in particular) will be the evening meal that the few women of the community present in Mumbai prepare for them or sell to the single men who doesn’t belong to the direct family.

a lot of dabbawalas are illiterate or at least very low educated, since habit in Mumbai is a lot more to use landmarks¹², and, most of all, because the system being based on the exchanges of dabbas between the workers, the important thing is the directions on the train lines that the dabbas have to take and the final point of delivery, i.e. a code for the stations and for the sector of delivery.

For this, dabbawalas use signs, different colours, numbers and a few letters. There is no clear logic as C for Churchgate or B for Bandra, or 1 to 20 according to the place of the station on the train line. On the top of the dabba, appears first, right in the middle, the sign indicating the return journey: 12 is, for example, the sign for Andheri-Bombay Central-Andheri, 31 meaning Bandra-Bombay Central-Bandra, etc. For stations where a big amount of *dabbas* are gathered (like VT or Churchgate), there can be different numbers indicating smaller sectors: 212 means Borivali-Churchgate (Colaba area)-Borivali, when 313 means Borivali-Churchgate (Nariman Point)-Borivali. Some codes goes like A, or B13, some others may be a svastika or a circle with a point in the middle... This central code, which has been decided arbitrarily according to the dabbawalas, is nevertheless immutable and known by all of them. It is the base of the job that all the trainees have to learn little by little.

Beside this main code, other signs are painted on the border of the *dabba* which precise the delivery area: they may first designate a team of dabbawalas operating in a precise station: G being, for example, the team of dabbawalas who meet in front of the Maidan near Churchgate, then a number which indicates the dabbawala of this team having to take care of this *dabba* (i.e. his precise delivery area); at last, for the areas where a lot of *dabbas* are delivered a letter or a number may specify a building or even a floor in this building. In a busy area, the top of a *dabba* may be marked this way: 45 (for the return trip), E (for the team), 6 (for the delivery man), B (for Bank) and 2 (for the floor), i.e. 45 E6B2.

At each stage of the process, only one part of this code needs to be read, it works as a signal and allows thus to pick up the right *dabbas* very quickly. It is also particularly efficient since any dabbawala seeing a *dabba* knows which path it has to take. In case a *dabba* is lost or forbidden somewhere, any dabbawala is able to put it back on the right track. It is actually the job of the trainees to bring back forgotten *dabbas* to the station it has to be delivered. This explains why very few *dabbas* are not delivered on time and on the right place. The dabbawalas' association claims that they have almost no complaint from the customers and I have actually heard mostly praise from the employees I interviewed.

¹² One says, for example, "next to Appolo cinema", "opposing Gulf Hotel", etc...

Peasants in the city

Though they have been living in the city for years (some of them for more than thirty years) and know it perfectly well, the dabbawalas persist to claim their rural origin. Their uniform¹³, in fact the traditional garment of the Maharashtrian rural people, is for them the symbol of their community. As said a leader of the Association when asked to precise their origin: *“We are Khor Maratha¹⁴ from Maharashtra. Land is our first attachment [...] our families are there, our homes are there and we are proud to be Maratha”*. *“Since we are Maratha, Mumbai is our place too”*, he added, pointing out that a lot of them have sympathy for the *Shiv Sena* but that they were the first in the city to affirm the pride of being Maratha by never giving up the traditional costume. Feeling fully legitimate in the city, they nevertheless continue to see themselves as migrants. Wives, children, older parents actually live in the villages where the dabbawalas can hardly go every three months since the journey is long and expensive for them. In Mumbai, they are a community of males only¹⁵, living disseminated in the city slums or chawls, who nevertheless take care to constantly reaffirm their common origin during numerous ceremonies: common prayers in Mumbai temples, annual pilgrimage to Alandi¹⁶ or music festivals are the occasions to do so. Participation to the harvest, during which for a week no dabbawalas’ service is available, also plays its role to secure their link to the village. There is nevertheless no idea of return: unless they get sick or have got an accident, they don’t come back before retirement. Since they generally arrive for training when they are around fifteen years old, they actually spend most of their life as urban even if they don’t consider themselves like this. In fact, the attachment to the villages contribute to unite the group, to reaffirm a solidarity without which their occupation would not be possible.

Conclusion

Being a symbol of the megalopolis, while running in its trains and streets, most of the dabbawalas continue to dream of the countryside. It is nevertheless remarkable that they have been able to find their place in an astonishingly manner in the megalopolis. Having found an economical niche that they have strictly secured as a monopoly, they give the chance to their villages to live in a better condition. To Mumbai employees, they are the chance to eat the

¹³ White shirt and pant, plus the small white cap popularised by Nehru.

¹⁴ A important cast of Maharashtra .

¹⁵ If one excepts the few women (often wives of muqqadams) who generally have in charge the preparation of food for a group of dabbawalas living in the same area. But this food is not eaten in common, they just deliver the food (except for the men living with them –husband, brothers-in-law, nephews...).

¹⁶ An important pilgrimage centre of Maharashtra.

way they want or, should I say, they need. In that sense, dabbawalas are a product of the Mumbai specific cosmopolitanism where so many different traditions coexist and, first of all, food traditions which are certainly the most deep-rooted ones.

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