

Working Lunch

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Mumbai's dabbawallas deliver 175,000 meals daily to hungry workers using a unique system

Considering the many rituals, traditions and taboos that govern food preparation in India it comes as no surprise to find that most of the commuters of Mumbai – the vast metropolis formerly known as Bombay – have been able to enjoy this benefit courtesy of the city's famous dabbawallas. More recently this remarkable network of couriers have been serving up the inspiration for an exciting new signage proposal for the city.

The dabbawallas take part in what could only be described as a daily miracle: more than 175,000 meals are collected from commuters' homes, carried across the city in simple aluminium tiffin boxes and delivered to their workplaces in time for lunch, after which the boxes are collected for the return journey. The operation is carried out by 5000 dabbawallas each of whom is divided into one of the 120 registered carrier groups. They work in relay teams and can be found around late morning, gathered in shoals near major railway stations such as Churchgate or weaving through choking streets usually balancing large trays of tiffins on their heads. Given the sheer scale of Mumbai, the worrying lack of paperwork and the low literacy levels within the workforce one could be forgiven for expecting trouble. Yet business magazine *Forbes* places the dabbawallas alongside Motorola and General Electric with the highly prized Six Sigma rating for quality assurance – recognising a level of correctness that means only one in eight million tiffin boxes fails to reach its destination.

“175,000 meals are collected from the home of commuters and delivered to their workplaces in time for lunch” (pull quote)

“Each dabbawalla will gather up to 35 tiffins and carry these, usually by bicycle, to the local station. Here they are sorted by a second dabbawalla and grouped according to their destination station, indicated by the central symbol on the lid. Each pick up group has a particular set of codes or symbols to distinguish their group. The team leader establishes the choice, colour and range of these. They may use simple abbreviations, such as HO for hospital, or religious symbols such as the swastika. Other codes may represent stations by familiar landmarks such as a church or a bridge, or physical landmarks such as the seafront.” (side bar)

The dabbawalla system can be traced back to the growth of Bombay's textile industry in the nineteenth century, a boom that brought skilled workers and traders into the city and the spread of new housing developments. Because most of these were beyond walking distance of the mills, lunchtime posed a problem. In the mid-1880s a Parsi banker began to employ an errand boy – known as a coolie – to collect lunch from his home in Grant Road area and deliver it to his office in the Ballard District. Owing to the absence of catering facilities within the nearby factories the errand boy quickly picked up additional orders and looked to his friends and family members from Pune – a region 50 miles southwest of Mumbai – to help him build his business. Most of the dabbawalla workforce are still drawn from this region and, linked by a strong sense of kinship, they proudly express their Maharashtrian identity through their simple white cotton attire and Nuhru caps.

As demand grew, the dabbawallas developed a system of marking the tiffin destination by attaching coloured wire or string. This evolved into various hand-painted marks and dashes that can be found on the tins today. Yet surprisingly these marks are not standardised; each group of 30-35 works under a team leader responsible for developing a series for that particular team. These may comprise marks that draw from religious motifs or symbols referring to physical landmarks of the destination. While some teams employ Marathi script, certain colours or the initials of the railways stations, others may use a combination of two or three different systems. Because the system relies heavily upon the railway network, the main station destination forms the central mark within the arrangement painted onto the lid of the

tin. To add a further twist, each team operates without the luxury of a database and therefore each dabbawalla has to memorise up to 35 addresses.

“Despite low literacy levels within the workforce, only one in eight million tiffin boxes fails to reach its destination” (pull quote)

The success of the dabbawalla system is widely recognised, not only by leading authorities such as *Forbes* magazine, but also through the many international conference invitations extended to the leaders of the Tiffin Box Suppliers Association. This system, unique to Mumbai, also presents one of the most interesting areas to be uncovered by Kurnal Rawat and Vishal Rawley and their Typocity project. This ambitious project seeks to record and catalogue various expressions of Mumbai’s rich typographic palette and to digitise a select number of typefaces. Once made available on the Web it is hoped that these fonts will find their way back into the Mumbai cityscape via the neon, backlit-plastic and digital prints now favoured by shop-owners. Yet within their colourful and rapidly expanding collection of Arabic and Art Deco, Devnagri and Bollywood, the team see an immediate opportunity for the marks and dashes of the dabbawallas.