

# Dabbawalas: Mumbai's Best Managed Business

— *Amberish Diwanji*

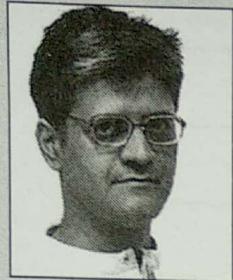
I have found that if I have faith in myself and in the idea I am tinkering with, I usually win out.

— Charles F. Kettering

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## About the Author



**Amberish Diwanji:** He has studied at Dept of Politics, University of Mumbai, Government Law College Mumbai, Elphinstone College, Mumbai. He has worked as a deputy news editor at Times Now, deputy editor at Business India and as Senior Assistant Editor at DNA (Daily News and Analysis). At present he is a freelance writer, editor and media consultant for editorial and legal aspects. He writes columns on international affairs, governance, politics, caste and communal issues, etc.

## The Passage

### Glossary

#### Difficult words:

*compatriot* = a fellow citizen

*documentary* = using film of real events

*blurring* = less distinct

*feted* = celebrated

*precision* = designed for accuracy and exactness

*transaction* = an exchange or interaction between people

### The Passage

Prince Charles is not the first person to show an interest in the dabbawallahs of Mumbai. In fact, the first time they actually shot to international fame was when his **compatriots** at the BBC did a **documentary** on them way back in the late seventies.

But it was in the 1990s, when the management **lexicon** became a part of daily life, that the interest in dabbawallahs, now synonymous with Mumbai's **blurringly** fast life, grew.

Today, they are **feted** regularly and invited to lecture students of business management. Corporate chiefs **applaud** them; management gurus use them as models.

Raghunath Medge, President, Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust, who met Prince Charles on Tuesday, will be in Lucknow in January to address the students of the prestigious Indian Institute of Management. And, in between, some management students will be spending time with him.

So what makes the dabbawallahs so **unique**? And how do they work? At the simplest, the dabbawallahs deliver home-cooked meals to individuals at their workplaces and return empty tiffin boxes to homes and, in some cases, **caterers**.

For this, they charge Rs 300 to Rs 350, that is, \$ 6 to 7, a month.

*acumen* = keen insight

*handful* = a small amount, number

*deity* = a god or goddess

*unique* = one of its kind

*logistics* = planning, implementation and coordination of the details of a business or other operation

*migration* = moving from one place to the other

*cumbersome* = troublesome

**One word substitute:**

*lexicon* = a word book or a dictionary

*caterer* = one whose business is to provide food etc.

*nightmare* = a terrifying dream

*deliverer* = one who delivers goods, food etc.

The workforce of the Tiffin Box Suppliers Trust, the cooperative body that runs the system, is 5,000. Each tiffin box contains two or three containers, often carrying traditional Indian fare – rice, curry, chapattis, and vegetables. Housewives even send notes to their hubbies in these boxes.

The process begins early in the morning. Cooked food is picked up from houses and caterers by dabbawallahs and taken to the nearest railway station. There, the different tiffin boxes are **sorted** out for specific destination stations and loaded onto large, rectangular trays accordingly.

Each tray can hold up to 40 boxes. These trays then travel in local trains down to various stations. At each station, there are another set of dabbawallahs who quickly take the dabbas meant to be distributed in that area and push in dabbas meant for other stations.

A Mumbai local **halts** at a station for about 20 seconds or less and thus, the dabbawallahs have to work with **precision** and speed. During **rush hour**, it's a **nightmare**. Ask anyone who has done time on Mumbai locals.

At each station, the boxes are once more sorted for localities and offices and taken there by handcarts or sometimes carried by individuals. "We carry up to 35 kg for distances of a couple of kilometres," points out Medge.

The boxes are placed in the offices' reception area by 12.30 pm and are **picked up** from the same spot by the **deliverer** a couple of hours later.

The whole process then starts again in the reverse. The boxes are picked up from the offices, taken to the nearest station and sorted for their journey home.

Forbes magazine gave this service its highest quality rating of Sigma 6, which means that per million **transactions**, there is just an error of one.

The service runs every working day.

"Every day, we deliver 175,000 to 200,000 lunch boxes," said Medge. "We use colours and code markings to ensure faultless delivery."

These codes would baffle a **cryptographer**! But they make perfect sense to the dabbawallahs. The codes and colours indicate the place from where a dabba is collected; the station where it must be unloaded and the office it is to be delivered.

Explaining one part of the code, Medge said they use English letters to mark out stations – such as A for Andheri and Bo for Borivli.

The men who form part of the organisation are not employees. "If you have employees, then you have unions and strikes," said Medge, revealing his deep business **acumen**. "We are all shareholders in the Trust and we thus share in the earnings."

*cryptographer* =

one who studies the techniques of secret writings, codes etc

*tight-knit* = well organized

*segment* = a small part

### Verbs and Idioms:

*to hold up* = to delay, to rob

*to applaud* = to clap loudly

*rush hour* = a time of day in which large numbers of people are in transit

*to sort* = to assign to a particular class, group or place

*picked up* = to move, work etc at a faster rate

*a couple of* = more than two but not many

*to grind to a halt* = to crush, to reduce

*to preside* = to be the president of a function

*to baffle* = to confuse

On an average, a dabbawallah can make about Rs 3,000 to 5,000. The Trust provides several services to its members, including schools for the children and health care in emergencies.

What makes the dabbawallahs an extremely **tight knit** group is that they all hail from the same region, Pune district in Maharashtra. "We all come from the region east of the Sahyadri (Western Ghats), and everyone who joins us is known to us," said Medge.

"If an outsider does join in, we initially employ him on a fixed salary, and if in a couple of years he wins our trust, we may make him a shareholder," added Medge.

Only a **handful** of the Trust members are not from the Pune region and most of them are related to each other. They all share similar customs and traditions and worship Vithoba of Pandharpur.

"In fact, today is Prabhodini Ekadashi, when yatras (pilgrimages) to Pandharpur are made. So all our members will be fasting today," Medge explained.

Yet, while Vithoba is their presiding **deity**, their success is linked to the Mumbai suburban train network. On those odd days when the railways ground to a halt, the dabbas are not delivered.

But then, if Mumbai's locals aren't running, most Mumbaiites won't reach their offices.

Why have they not tried a similar service in other cities?

"Mumbai's geography makes it unique," Medge points out. "It is a longish city where residences are in the north and offices in the south, so it makes our work simple. We tried a similar service in Delhi a few years ago and it didn't work out; Delhi being a circular city, the **logistics** were difficult."

The dabbawallah service began way back in 1890, when Mumbai was a much smaller city. "At that time, **migration** of workers to the city had just begun and they wanted home-made food at their workplaces. Mumbai is a city with people from all over India, but the South Indians want their food, while the Gujaratis want their food. Our service began to fill this growing need," said Medge.

Today, the service delivers not just homemade food but also picks up food from caterers and delivers them to offices. But Medge said that food from caterers is still a small **segment** of the total operation. "Most people want to eat home-made food in the offices," he said.

As long as the dabbawallah service is there, Mumbaikars alone in the world would have the option of eating home-made food in office without the bother of having to carry a **cumbersome** lunchbox.

## EXERCISE - I

Find out the correct answer for the following questions:

1. BBC shot the documentary on the Dabbawallahs of Mumbai in the \_\_\_\_\_  
(a) nineties (b) early eighties (c) late seventies (d) seventies
2. Which one of the following trusts is Raghunath Medge the president of ? \_\_\_\_\_  
(a) Mumbai Tiffin Box Charity Trust (b) Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust  
(c) Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Trust (d) Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust
3. How much does a tiffin box of the dabbawallahs cost per month? \_\_\_\_\_  
(a) Rs 350 to Rs 400 (b) Rs 400 to Rs 450 (c) Rs 300 to Rs 350 (d) Rs 300 to Rs 400
4. How many tiffin boxes does each tray hold? \_\_\_\_\_  
(a) 40 (b) 45 (c) 35 (d) 50
5. Dabbawallahs work with \_\_\_\_\_  
(a) clarity and speed (b) precision and speed (c) carefulness and swiftness (d) precision and sharpness
6. Which magazine gave rating of Sigma 6 to the services of the Dabbawallahs of Mumbai?  
(a) 4 Ps (b) India Today (c) Gujarat Today (d) Forbes
7. What ensures the faultless delivery of tiffin boxes?  
(a) colors and codes (b) pictures and codes (c) colors and symbols (d) symbols and keys
8. Each Dabbawallah earns about  
(a) Rs 4,000 to Rs 5,000 (b) Rs 3,500 to Rs 5,000 (c) Rs 4,000 to Rs 6,000 (d) Rs 3,000 to Rs 5,000
9. Which region do most of the Dabbawallahs belong to?  
(a) Mumbai (b) Pune (c) Nagpur (d) Nasik
10. What is the unique feature of the success of this business ?  
(a) Mumbai's history (b) Mumbai's geography (c) Mumbai's economy (d) Mumbai's society
11. Forbes magazine gave the Dabbawallahs \_\_\_\_\_ rating.  
(a) Alpha 1 (b) Sigma 7 (c) Sigma 6 (d) Sigma 5.
12. One who studies the techniques of secret writings, codes is called \_\_\_\_\_.  
(a) Photographer (b) Stenographer (c) Cryptographer (d) Technician.

## EXERCISE - II

Write short answers for the following questions :

1. How are the Dabbawallahs of Mumbai recognized by the world?

2. How are the colours and code markings used for the delivery of tiffin boxes?

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3. What are the two secrets of the Dabbawallahs unity?

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4. What is a six-sigma rating?

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5. How did the business of Dabbawallahs start?

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6. What is the first step of this system?

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7. How did the Forbes magazine appreciate Dabbawallah's service? Why?

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8. To whom do the Dabbawallahs give credit for their success? Why?

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9. Why did they not succeed in a similar service in Delhi?

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10. How can you say that this service is in full process today?

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11. What makes the Dabbawallahs an extremely fight-knit group?

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### **EXERCISE – III**

Write a short paragraph on the following:

Distribution of tiffin boxes by the Dabbawallas of Mumbai

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