

ART OF THE DELIVERY

A day in the life of Mumbai's dabbawallas – professional lunch box couriers – with their unique system of practices, traditions and codes of conduct.

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ideas, destinations and more

JOURNALS



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Besides private homes, dabbawallas also collect lunch boxes from small catering canteens; the Health Awareness Centre provides healthy lunches for those without access to home-cooked food; Gawande ties the dabbas that he has collected onto his bicycle for the journey to the train station; dabbawallas have a coding system, which they paint onto the tops of the containers.

It is 8.30am and I am almost running,

trying to keep pace with dabbawalla Kiran Gawande as he purposefully navigates, on foot, the narrow lanes of central Mumbai's Lower Parel area. He has already been up and about for two hours, and has travelled by train from the distant northern suburb of Goregaon. For the next two hours, he will go through his usual routine of picking up dabbas on his route, from upscale apartments and small homes alike.

Dabbas are lunch containers, usually with two or three smaller containers inside, each carrying a different food item like roti (Indian-style flatbread), dal (lentils) and sabzi (vegetables). The dabba is kept ready for pick up by wallas (delivery men).

Among middle income families, eating out every day is not an option due to financial constraints. Culturally too, Indians prefer home-cooked food. This keeps the dabbawallas in business.

Gawande is unperturbed when I ask him about competition from restaurants and fast food places. He says, "People don't like to eat out daily, no? That's why our business is still strong; nothing like home-cooked food." For those without access to home cooking, there are small catering canteens such as the Health Awareness Centre founded by nutritionist Vijaya Venkat in 1989. The idea was to promote the cause of healthy living among her clients through specific kinds of food.

A typical dabba from such a place will cost the customer about 3,750 rupees (US\$70) per month. But if the food comes from the customer's home and only has to be collected and delivered, then the charges range from 400 to 500 rupees each month.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Soon, Gawande has tied all his dabbas to his bicycle and is ready to leave for the next stage ▶

ART OF THE DELIVERY

CHARUKESI RAMADURAI FOLLOWS A DABBAWALLA THROUGH HIS BUSY DAY IN SOUTH MUMBAI.





WITHOUT ANY FORMAL TRAINING, DABBAWALLAS LEARN FROM EACH OTHER BY WATCHING AND DOING.



Gawande carrying a crate of dabbas to a local train headed for Churchgate station. ABOVE: Dabbawallas gathering to unload and sort their deliveries onto wooden crates.

of the process – sorting the containers at the nearest local train station.

When we reach the Lower Parel station 10 minutes before 11am, a group of dabbawallas covering the area is already there. The cyclists chain their rides to the pavement railings and proceed to transfer the dabbas on to long rectangular, open crates that will hold them till their destination.

In this group of more than 30 men, Gawande, who has been working as a dabbawalla for over 10 years now, is the unspoken leader. However, every man knows his role and proceeds to sort through the dabbas, transferring them to the crates headed to different locations. There is a sense of silent camaraderie as they go about their task, lending a helping hand to each other. With his band of dabbawallas trailing him, Gawande walks into the station, balancing on his head a crate laden with over 30 dabbas. It is 11.20am by then and very soon, a train pulls into the platform and the dabbawallas push their crates and themselves into the crowd, into the luggage compartment set aside for them.

Getting off at Churchgate, one of the main terminals in South Mumbai, the cluster of dabbawallas again begins to resemble a beehive colony. Here, there is another round of sorting the dabbas from various locations and transferring them onto bicycles.

Like many other dabbawallas, Gawande who has moved to Mumbai from his village, has not had much formal schooling. In this profession, men who have made it as a dabbawalla in the big city of Mumbai usually bring into their group younger relatives from the village after a few years. Without any formal training, dabbawallas learn from each other by watching and doing. All belong to an association, usually formed on the basis of the neighbourhoods they serve.

CODED ROUTINE

It is interesting to see not just the speed but the ease and confidence with which Gawande carries out his work. The lid of each dabba is coded with paint, depending on its origin and destination, and the specific building and floor it's headed to. For instance, green means the dabba contains a vegetarian meal, No. 11 stands for buildings on Marine Drive and so on. Gawande sketches out the system for me on my notebook and in that instant, it all seems so simple but I know from watching the ▶



operation that the whole system is really very complex. In the course of a day, a single dabba is handled by three to eight dabbawallas at various stages.

Indeed, the dabbawallas have gained fame for their near-perfect deliveries, with a reputable business magazine lauding their reliability to be of Six Sigma standard. The Six Sigma system permits no more than 3.4 defects per million opportunities.

All the time that he is working and chatting, Gawande's eye remains on his watch, which is set according to the clock at Churchgate railway station. At exactly a quarter past noon, all the dabbawallas set off for their respective destinations. Suddenly the pavement is quiet and empty. We walk at a rapid pace to several multistoried office buildings in the commercial district of Nariman Point where Gawande delivers his dabbas.

It is only when his hands are empty that there is any respite for Gawande. He sits with his colleagues under a tree, wipes the sweat off his face and takes out his own lunch box. An hour is all he gets, after which he is back on the same route – this time in reverse. There is another round of sorting and transferring onto the crates at Churchgate station and it is past 3pm by the time they get on the train.

Now, Gawande finally has a smile on his face – the last task of dropping off the empty dabbas at the right homes is easy and he has no time constraints. He cracks a few jokes with his colleagues and asks me questions in turn. It is another three hours before he reaches home but he is happy that his work for the day is done. ■



At the end of the day, the delivery men gather the empty dabbas to be returned to their respective homes. ABOVE: Only after all the dabbas are delivered at the start of the lunch hour can the dabbawallas take a break.

ON THE MOVE

With dedication nurtured by pride and tradition, dabbawallas deliver fresh sustenance to Mumbai's workers, every day, rain or shine.

Dabbawallas travel to their respective collection zones in Mumbai, for example, Lower Parel.
7.30AM

Each walla collects dabbas from 25 to 30 houses within the area and brings them to the local train station.
8.30-10.30AM

The lunch boxes are sorted according to destination. The men then board the train for a central station, such as Churchgate.
10.45-11.15AM

1.30PM ONWARDS
The process is repeated in reverse. The men's day ends at about 6pm.

12.15-12.30PM
Dabbas are delivered to different recipients within a specified area.

11.45AM-12.15PM
On arrival, another round of sorting takes place.

