

Name: Mohit Rai

Graduation: Bachelor of Engineering

Post Graduation: PGDM in Finance (Pursuing)

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Name: Mohit Rai

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Dabbawala: Everywhere on time!

We have heard people saying that Mumbai is a city that does not stop. But similarly, an army of men in the same town does not get tired or stop. Who are they? They are Mumbai Dabbawalas, also known as Dabbawalas.

If you visit Mumbai, you are bound to notice the Mumbai Dabbawalas. You may not realise this, but the Mumbai Dabbawala is an essential part of the life of Mumbai.

Dabbawalas deliver around 2,00,000 meals daily and have been doing this for 130 years. Within 4 hours, they provide home-cooked meals to offices daily and do all this without using any technology.

Founded in 1890, Mumbai Dabbawalas are the men dressed in traditional white outfits with Gandhi caps delivering home-cooked food to Mumbaikar from home to office daily.

Their work is so efficient that many famous personalities like Richard Bradstone and Prince Charles have visited them.

Moreover, these men in white have given lectures at different business schools. Therefore, they are six sigma compatible. The service was born out of sheer need.

With so many people belonging to different communities reaching the city of dreams and no fast-food culture being that popular back then, there was a shortage of an adequate food delivery system.

While there was a rising demand, there was a supply of illiterate workers who had traveled to the city after their agriculture business failed to ensure sustenance at home.

With no education to work as clerks in the homes of Britishers but with enough energy to embark on any hard work, the idea of delivering home-cooked food was born. Thus was the launch of the “Dabba Delivery System” in Mumbai.

Nearly 125 years ago, a Parsi banker working in Fort Branch wanted to have home-cooked food in his office. So he appointed a young man who belonged from Gurgaon to get his lunch from his home every afternoon. It is how the job of 1st Dabbawala emerged. The Mumbai dabbawalla price was nearly two annas at that time.

Soon, the business started picking up and gaining popularity because of the visionary work of Mahadeo Havaji Bacche, who considered this a golden opportunity and decided to grow it as a business.

The Dabbawalas run their food delivery service on four fundamental pillars. These are the organisation, management process, and culture.

All these four pillars are correctly aligned and mutually supporting. It is uncommon to see such coordination in the corporate world.

The Mumbai Suburban Railway, one of the most complex, vast, and mainly used urban commuter lines worldwide, plays a vital role in the Dabbawalas' operations.

Its basic layout requires delivery people with cycles and handcarts to travel between the railway stations and customers' offices and homes.

Every day, a Dabba reaches its destination after passing through several hands. In the morning, a dabbawalla picks it up from the customer's home and goes to the nearest railway station. Then, it is sorted and put on a wooden cart as per its destination.

Once it reaches the nearest station, it is sorted and assigned to another dabbawalla, who delivers it to the office before lunchtime. Once lunchtime is over, the process runs the other way around, and the Dabba reaches the customer's home.

They use a trick to avoid confusion about which Dabba (the Indian Lunchbox) belongs to. They follow a "coding system." The lids of the dabbas are labeled with numbers, letters, and symbols indicating where they came and where they should be delivered.

The Mumbai Dabbawalas are famous for their punctuality. Their mission statement since the day they started operation has been "Always deliver on time."

The Dabbawalas manage themselves concerning logistics, hiring, retention, and customer acquisition.

First, however, governing committees fix guidelines for costs, considering factors like the distance between a customer's house and office and the distance between the office and the nearest railway station.

It helps them operate the service efficiently and keep charges low and the quality high.

Every Dabbawala is an entrepreneur responsible for negotiating prices with his clients. As Dabbawalas own their relationships with clients and tend to work in a similar location for several years, those relationships are usually trustworthy and long-term.

Many dabbawalas have had to overcome challenges like floods and railway strikes. Also, they have had to advance their skills in recent times, like learning to speak English and embracing technology.

In October 2020, an official website for the dabbawalas, digitaldabbawala.com, was launched. It is an official website that includes details of all the delivery organisations.

In November 2020, they launched a Dabbawala app to make food delivery accessible and uncomplicated. The app helps you find food and order food from where you are.

You type an address, and the app tells you the restaurants that can deliver to your area. Also, you can search restaurants by cuisine, menu, and name.

Once you find what you want, you can place your order online without extra charges. The app also offers access to coupons, special deals, and a customer care team with 24/7 assistance.

Soon, the deliverymen started growing their services from delivering lunchboxes to delivery of digital services like electronic registration of marriages and property.

Customers can now place their lunch orders through the website. In addition, they can choose between a monthly or annual subscription for payment.

The dabbawalas partner with 14 local restaurants to deliver food to clients. Recently, they have been encouraging customers to order directly from the hotels and receive nearly 25% discount and free home delivery.

In August 2021, the dabbawalas launched their digital operation known as Central Kitchen, which lets customers place orders for a wide variety of food for delivery.

The idea behind these new creativities is to think outside the box and to expand the Mumbai Dabbawalas business, starting from lunch delivery to a wide range of other services that will help to protect their source of income and trade after the Pandemic is over.

The men in white continue to deliver lunch and protect the future of the world's oldest and most respected Mumbai dabbawalla system.

The men in white will still be delivering lunch, though, safeguarding the future of one of the world's oldest and most respected food delivery systems.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the dabbawalas of Mumbai, a group of delivery workers known for their unique and efficient business model. The lockdowns and restrictions on movement that were implemented to control the spread of the virus made it difficult for dabbawalas to deliver lunch boxes to office workers, resulting in a decrease in demand for their services. The shift towards remote work that occurred during the pandemic also contributed to this decrease in demand.

The economic impact of the pandemic was felt by many dabbawalas, who rely on their delivery work as their primary source of income. Many dabbawalas were forced to take pay cuts or temporary leave, and some were even laid off. The loss of income and disruption to their livelihoods posed significant challenges for the dabbawalas and their families.

In addition to the decrease in demand for their services, the dabbawalas also faced challenges in their operations due to the lockdown and restrictions on movement. They were unable to use their usual modes of transportation, such as cycles, and had to find alternative ways to deliver the lunch boxes. The pandemic also caused disruptions in the supply chain, which made it more challenging for the dabbawalas to obtain the materials they needed to operate their business.

The dabbawalas have been in the same business for 130 years. They never thought about diversifying their business. They used to deliver lunch boxes from home to office. If there was something like a cloud kitchen where people can cook food at home for those who don't have anyone at home, the dabbawalas could deliver food there and it would be a good business.

But that was not done, the dabbawalas continued to rely on one source of income. This is a very risky strategy. We have to increase income streams for people.

The importance of time and customer satisfaction: We should also learn from the dabbawalas that they always came on time and refused to accept the lunch box if it was just two minutes late. Every day, they always delivered the lunch boxes on time and also returned on time. When Prince Charles of England wanted to meet them, he had to adjust his schedule to the dabbawalas' schedule because they were not ready to compromise on their delivery time. This is the dedication of every employee.

As an MBA student, we can understand a lot from our dabbawalas about hardworking, networking, hustling mind, organizing stuff and their never give up attitude and as MBA students we can help them by organising Mentorship Programs, Educational Workshops, Tutoring and Academic Support, Community Projects, Fundraising and Resource Mobilisation, Consulting and Business Strategies, Awareness and Advocacy, Sustainability and Impact Measurement.

Thank-you