

Bombay Dabbawalas go high-tech

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For over a century they delivered hot lunch in packages to thousands of Bombay's working people with almost faultless efficiency without the help of information technology. But now Bombay's ubiquitous Dabbawalas lunch deliverymen have realized that they need to go high-tech after all -- not only to expand their business but also for their social security.

The Bombay Tiffin Box Suppliers Association, an association of 5,000 lunch deliverymen who are called Dabbawalas (literally tiffin box carriers) in local parlance have finally started their own Web site and a text messaging order taking system that enables them to bag orders real time instead of depending on secondary sources like references or word-of-mouth.

"The world is moving ahead on technology," said Gangaram Talekar, 61, the Hindi-speaking secretary of the Association, "and we have to move with times too. So we decided to take advantage of technology to expand our business."

Talekar, who has been a Dabbawala for 40 years, admits that he has never operated a computer and doesn't know the language of text messaging "that well. I can just read the name, address and the telephone number of the sender in an SMS (short messaging service)," he says. "But I know that to grow and make our lives secure we must use technology."

Indeed the Dabbawala's method of lunch delivery is unique. Their origin

dates back to the 1890s, a period when Bombay saw an influx of people from various communities and regions of India migrating to the city to seek livelihood. According to the Association, there were no canteens or fast-food centers then, and those who could not take a packed lunch from home since they had to leave early invariably had to go hungry.

Besides, different communities had different tastes and preferences that could only be satisfied by a home-cooked meal. Recognizing the need, a migrant from the Indian state of Maharashtra called Mahadeo started the lunch delivery service with about 100 men, and the rest is history.

For over 115 years these lunch deliverymen who were subsequently started to be called Dabbawalas have been collecting lunch packed in three or two-tier metal boxes (called dabbas) from subscribers' homes and delivering them to their workplaces.

Today the 5,000 Dabbawalas make about 200,000 lunch deliveries in the city and have become famous for their clockwork precision and efficiency. Reportedly their mistake rate is just 1 in 16 million deliveries, which caused the Forbes Global magazine to award its Six Sigma certification in 2001. According to Forbes the Dabbawalas work with 99.999999 percent accuracy.

But besides the accuracy rating, the Dabbawala supply-chain system has also attracted interests from global educational institutions and think tanks for its complexity.

In fact, some even say that the Dabbawalas work like the Internet. Just like the Internet, where voice or data files are sliced into tiny packets with their own coded addresses that are then ferried in bursts, independent of other packets and possibly taking different routes, across the world, the Dabbawalas too work with packets in a similar manner.

They collect lunch boxes from homes in the morning and take them to the nearest railway station. From there each of the boxes that is coded according to the station of origin, the Dabbawala team at the collection and delivery point, and the destination, are sorted out and taken to the next intermediary stations, where they are sorted out again for area-wise distribution and delivery. So a single lunch pack could change hands three to four times in the course of its daily journey, "yet they get delivered without a mistake since they are so well coded," says Manish Tripathy, the chief information officer who looks after the Association's technology functions.

Small wonder then, that the world in general too finds the Dabbawalas fascinating. For instance the Berkeley University in California teaches the logistic system of Dabbawalas as a case study in one of their business management programs and many Indian business schools and industry associations have the Dabbawala logistics system in their case-study agenda.

In 1998 two Dutch filmmakers, Jascha De Wilde and Chris Relleke, made a documentary called "Dabbawalas, Mumbai's unique lunch service" and in 2001, the Christian Science Monitor, the Boston-based newspaper, covered the Dabbawalas in an article called "Fastest Food: It's Big Mac vs. Bombay's Dabbawallahs."

The British Broadcasting Corporation and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation have done features on the delivery system as well, while Prince Charles was so impressed with their service that he had even invited a few Dabbawalas to his marriage with Camilla Parker in London.

Yet these Dabbawalas have remained poor. "Nowhere in the world would you find a lunch delivery service that costs as little as \$9 a month," says Talekar. The charges for this complex delivery system have

remained dirt-cheap ever since its inception, and still the maximum rate that a Dabbawala charges (depending on the distance carried) is about \$11 a month.

Which is why technology is needed to improve their lives, says Tripathy. "No doubt a major driver for establishing a Web-based and mobile phone ordering system was the need for a central ordering facility where one can call for a Dabbawala's service by just hitting the Web site or through an SMS," says Tripathy, "but the other equally important driving force was to expand business."

Until recently business has come just through word-of-mouth or from contacts made in local railway stations. "But ever since we introduced the SMS-based ordering service we have been getting about 15 new orders every day," said Tripathy.

The Web site (www.mydabbawala.com) has also enabled the association to solicit donations and sell merchandise, the proceeds of which go towards creation of a social security fund to pay for the Dabbawalas' life and medical insurances.

"The use of IT would not stop there," says Tripathy, "we would be stretching its use soon to enable the Dabbawalas to add additional lines of business." According to him the next plan is to gear the Dabbawalas with the ability to sell groceries and other daily necessities, the orders of which could be taken through their mobile phones.

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