3. Nutan Mumbai Tiffin box suppliers charity trust: The shaping of dabbawala relations
3. Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust: The Shaping of Dabbawala Relations

After the initial rudimentary cooperative was set up in 1954, the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust (NMTBSCT) was registered with that name in 1984. The name was developed to include all the elements that characterise the work of the dabbawalas: the city where tiffin delivery is offered; the organisation’s specific role as a distribution network; and its establishment as a charity trust, reflecting its social commitment to sponsoring various non-profit projects.¹

An executive committee of thirteen permanent members sits at the highest level of the NMTBSCT, and it is responsible for defining and fine-tuning the overall dabba transport system in Mumbai. A second tier consists of about 800 mukadams, who are the group leaders in charge of a team of five or ten dabbawalas. The rest of the organisation is made up of the dabbawalas themselves, the members of the association. In the words of NMTBSCT’s president, Raghunath Medge:

Ours is an association, a union of 5,000 people. There are many groups in a single association and I’m the president of the association representing all the Bombay groups. I’m also chairman of my group, so I’m given a salary. The association’s work is a social commitment, which entitles it to qualify as a charity trust. Each station has at least five or six groups. Gangaram Talekar is the secretary general and there are nine directors throughout Bombay, found in the various areas. Then there are the mukadams, who are the heads

¹ All information contained in this chapter is based on interviews, personal communications and fieldwork undertaken in Mumbai in 2007. For further details of this fieldwork, please refer to the Appendix.

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0031.03
of the working groups, and the 5,000 members, who are not employees but partners, members. There is competition among the groups: we compete to find new customers, just like anyone else.

![Organisational Structure Diagram]

Figure 7. Diagram by Pawan G. Agrawal, director of Mumbai’s Agrawal Institute of Management. By kind permission of Raghunath Medge.

The executive committee

The executive committee is elected every five years and comprises a president, vice-president, secretary general, treasurer and directors. Committee members meet every month to discuss any problems related to the service and the association’s line of operations. Crucially, all the people who hold these offices continue to operate as *dabbawalas* because their salary comes from distribution work. Even the president does not draw a salary on the basis of his rank but on his *dabba* delivery line.

As president, Medge is one of the pillars of the NMTBSTCT. He combines brilliant communication skills with the ability to transmit a vision of shared values.\(^2\) The sense of community in the association derives from the shared

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\(^2\) Medge has become a great spokesperson for the *dabbawalas*. After his first meeting
cultural background of the dabbawalas, but also from each dabbawala's awareness that he is “part of an important project that generates meaning”, an awareness reinforced by the executive committee and by the president.\(^3\)

There is a consolidated tradition that Medge has exploited whilst acting as president to leverage the dabbawala's conceptual models—i.e. the images and figures that influence how a dabbawala interprets the world and consequently how he acts—to achieve a mutual objective and working trust amongst the members.\(^4\) This does not mean there are no conflicts amongst different groups, but these differences always play out within an association working for a common purpose. Social interaction between the dabbawalas is encoded within a corporate culture that uses a “policy of emotion management” to create a shared work ethic and enable socialisation which, especially in a migrant context, helps to overcome moments of loneliness by sharing holidays, free Sundays, and times of “sorrow and joy”.\(^5\) Medge explains:

Not just anyone can be the president, it has to be a dabbawala. At the moment, I have the Vile Parle contract. If I wasn’t a dabbawala I couldn’t be the president. I’m responsible for the whole Bombay group. To be president you have to have specific characteristics, you need to know things, you need to know

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4 Carena (2009), p. 44.


In this case I mean business culture as the intersection of different cultures or micro-cultures within the association. Each group has a strategy for developing its task based on a shared framework, but also on the possibility of managing that task independently. The micro-cultures may not be in harmony with each other and their interactions may result in conflicts and contradictions. This is because the company or the trust, belonging as it does to the social and symbolic order in which it is located, is a sphere that interacts with it and is therefore susceptible to the same processes of conflict and solidarity.
about the world, about Bombay, the problems arising in tiffin work. The
president is responsible for keeping the group together. How can anyone
who fails to keep his family together keep 5,000 members together? To see
if someone will be a good president, we test his strength, his intelligence,
his knowledge, his qualifications, how he bonds with the group, how he
interacts, if he is able to talk straight with everyone. Sometimes he has to be
gruff and to do that he has to be confident and show it. He has to be able to
control the whole group, whether he knows how to do it or not.

A short story from an NMTBSCT dabbawala: free time and faith

I came from the village of Rajgurunagar, near Pune, and I’ve been in
this family [in other words working as a dabbawala] for ten years. My
own family is all back at the village. I’m on my own here. Someone from
the village brought me here to work as a dabbawala. In Bombay I live
near Four Bangla, at Sagar Kuti, where we have a room. My work starts
at Four Bangla and goes as far as Vile Parle. We are an association of
people working as dabbawalas. We meet after work and we pass the time
performing plays. We go to ramlila [a pilgrimage] and sometimes there’s
Pandhur [this may be the festival of Pandharpur, which is the sacred
place of the Varkari], we play the lezid [harmonium]. We go on the ramlila
pandhupratha [pilgrimage] to the temple of Ramgir Baba Garon. We also
play the harmonium and I play the taal [a kind of drum also called a
dholak]. But we stopped playing in Bombay about five years ago: we do
it at the village.

On Sundays we stay at home with our families. Anyone who doesn’t
have a family here and is alone goes to their friends. You know yourself
how nice feast days are. Anyone who wants can go, because in this
country we are free. Anyone who wants can take Sunday off and go
to their family or their children, or do errands they can’t do during the
week, or meet their friends, meet people. Anything you can’t do from
Monday to Saturday, you can do on a Sunday. We dabbawalas meet for
the festivities and celebrate them together. For instance, Holi [the festival
of lights] or feast days on the Hindu calendar. For Holi we all meet the
day before, because we don’t work on Holi itself. During Holi we play
with colours. We play where we work but if we go to the village, then
we really celebrate Holi properly, better than in Bombay. They don’t do
so much in Bombay. We share every joy and every sorrow. It doesn’t feel
as if we’ve gone so far away: the village is close. All my family is there:
my wife, my sons and daughters. Two of my children are married and two still go to school. One is in seventh class, the other is the fourth class of the Marathi school [taught in Marathi]. One is twelve and one is eight. I’m Marathi, they are Varkari. [He shows his necklace] This is a Pandharpur necklace. As Medge says: ‘Work is worship’, no doubt about it. We all believe that.

Each area of Mumbai served by the dabbawalas has a director and the areas are defined in relation to a railway station. One of these is Borivali; others are Kandivali, Malad, Andheri and Thana. The directors are in contact with one another and ensure there are no problems in distribution. For this reason, they do not have an office but work on trains, station platforms, dabba handover areas and places where organisational issues may arise. The job of the director is appointed based on skills and seniority, since the delivery work is physically very tiring. Aspiring directors must also have an aptitude for managing human resources, which can be seen in their vision of their work group as a real family and in their loyalty to the association’s values, expressed in concrete terms by worshipping Varkari Sampradaya. Medge describes the role of the director:

The directors are not in an office and I also go out with them, wandering around the trains and platforms. After lunch, after tiffins have been delivered, everyone is free and can relax. Then we all go to lunch at Grant Road. Then, after 4 pm, we go to Andheri, where we have one of our association offices. After 7 pm I go home. The director considers the group to be a family where everyone works, teaching that along with the gift of food there is the gift of knowledge. In this spirit we also give presentations in colleges because only the gift of knowledge is greater than the gift of food.

Gangaram Talekar, the NMTBSCT secretary, adds:

You move to management when you can’t do heavy work or when you get old. To be a director you have to be involved [in the association for several years]. And you must be able to do other jobs like this. The association started appointing directors in 1992, usually electing a director from one of the workgroups for a term of five years. Mine was a typical evolution, for instance first I was a dabbawala, then a mukadam, then a director, then treasurer. Now I’m the secretary and I’ll be in office for five years.

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6 The NMTBSCT has three Mumbai branches: Dadar, Andheri (E) and Grant Road.
A short story from the NMTBSCT director

I’ve been in this job for twenty years. My father worked in the fields. When I arrived in Bombay I didn’t join the dabbawalas immediately. First I went to Malad, because my sister was there and I worked with her for five years, then I started this job. I rented a room at Andheri, in Sher-E-Panjab, and I became a dabbawala. Many of the other villagers were dabbawalas and I liked this job too, so I started with the basic salary. After eight years I became a mukadam. I gave money to my mukadam a little time at a time. I saved up and slowly paid for the line. Now I have two lines in Andheri and I’m both a mukadam and a director. The roles are similar, so if someone working in my group doesn’t turn up, if they’re ill or they go back to the village, then I do their job. It used to be very good in Bombay, with not too many people. Here in the village there wasn’t much money and getting to the city was cheap. The work was agreeable and the trains weren’t jam-packed. It was fine but now it’s too crowded. The crowds have increased as we’ve got older. I’m 50, so I no longer enjoy this work. The weather in my village is good and it’s a good place to be. Bombay’s too hot, there is a lot of pressure. I used to like it; when you’re young it’s different. The younger ones enjoy it but the older ones don’t.

The second line of operations

The second line of operations is coordinated by over 800 mukadams, who supervise the tiffin route as far as the final delivery. The mukadam participates in the recruitment of new dabbawalas, assessing their suitability by taking into consideration both their reputation and their shared origins with other members of the association. He also manages relations with customers, making preliminary agreements for deliveries, and administers monthly subscriptions (at a cost of about 120 rupees per month).

As can be seen from the twelve points in the agreement form (Figure 8) the delivery system is based on a code whose observance is enforced by the mukadam, who also oversees any disputes that may arise among various

7 Traditionally the term *muqaddam* (literally “village chief”) indicated the upper peasant class—a sort of rural aristocracy who did not farm the land directly but enjoyed special privileges over the land and crops. See Michelguglielmo Torri, *Storia dell’India* (Bari: Laterza, 2000), p. 194.
dabbawala groups as well as having the more difficult task of enhancing network competitiveness to improve earnings.

Each of the approximately 120 groups present on Mumbai territory is independent of all the others: it is a “Strategic Business Unit” and has to increase its customer base in order to generate the dabbawalas’ wages. Medge uses the metaphor of a cricket team to describe the mukadam’s role:

The mukadam supervises the group, is an expert in everything that concerns the work, is ‘the reserve’. For example there are fifteen people in a cricket

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team, but only eleven are fielded: the others are the reserves. That's the mukadam, he’s the reserve. He keeps the group together, he’s the player who knows how to do everything. He holds them together, manages customers, helps the dabbawala load and unload. The trains stop for deliveries for ten or fifteen seconds, so he has to help. His work is very important because he has to manage lots of people and it’s up to him to be able to coordinate the group, to look after the dabbawalas, increase revenue. The mukadam is like the captain of a cricket team: if the team captain is good, then the team will be a success.

A short story from an NMTBSCT mukadam

The name of my village is Rajgurunagar and it’s in the Pune district. I worked in the fields there. There are five of us altogether: four are in Bombay and one is in the village, still working in the fields. I came to Bombay in 1960 and started with tiffin work in 1967. I used to work in Dadar but now I work at Andheri and I’m a mukadam. My father wasn’t a dabbawala, he worked in Bombay near Victoria Terminal. He loaded and unloaded many of the ships that docked. I’ve been in this job for seventeen years and I’ve been a mukadam from the start. I have ten to twelve people working with me because I bought the line [the line is the specific route assigned to a mukadam]. There are forty tiffin in a line [here the term line is used to indicate the basket for carrying dabbas], which I bought from another dabbawala. Now my Andheri group has about thirty to thirty-five lines. A mukadam’s work includes filling in for a man if he doesn’t come to work. For example, if a dabbawala doesn’t come to work today, perhaps he’s sick, so I’ll work in his place. If there are problems at the station, they call me: if they need help to load trains, or if there are problems with traffic, or parking. But there aren’t any big problems.

The dabbawalas, the mukadams and the thirteen figures that make up the executive committee are members, “freelancers”: no one is an employee. The association has no institutional hierarchy but an agreement for decentralised operations, with each group using its own resources to extend the customer base. The current contractual formula was drawn up in 1982, after two incidents (the 1975 railway worker strike and the 1982 cotton worker general strike) induced the NMTBSCT president to modify
the association’s statute, changing it to a cooperative. Gangaram Talekar explains:

When I started as a *dabbawala* I was a *mukadam*. There weren’t many *mukadams* then but lots of employees. Each *mukadam* had eighteen to nineteen people working for him. Until 1980 everyone was an employee, including the *mukadams*, and everyone was equal. After 1980, they all became members. If someone wants to go to the village, we need men to replace him. Customers don’t stop eating, they have to eat. Even if a *dabbawala* doesn’t work, customers still have to have lunch. So they might buy food from outside, but then we lose the customer and work. Before, *dabbawalas* had a salary and as such they worked as employees, so work went like this: today they turn up, fine; tomorrow they say they’re feeling poorly and don’t show up. So if they’re all members, things are different.

A *dabbawala’s* earnings derive in part from the ability of each group to attract more customers into their network but also partly from the role played by an individual *dabbawala* in that network. Those who have just joined the association and have not purchased a *mukadam* line have a fixed basic wage that may vary according to the group’s revenue (from 2,500 to about 4,000 rupees a month). A *mukadam* supervising a group earns on the basis of how many tiffins his men can deliver; if he supervises various groups, who deliver tiffins in various parts of the territory, his earnings may be higher (about 6,000–7,000 rupees a month). To become a *mukadam*, an ordinary *dabbawala* has to buy a customer line being auctioned off, which occurs when a *mukadam* decides to retire and sells off their lines because their children are not interested in taking it over. One NMTBSCT *dabbawala* describes how he began:

I’ve been doing this job for six years and I come from Pune, from a village near Var. I came to Bombay because at home we had problems with the rain. Without rain there’s nothing at the village. After working so hard here, I now know what it’s like in Bombay, with crowds and traffic. Not all *dabbawalas* are members. The ones in the network are members. The ones who aren’t are not members. To be a member you have to register with the association and pay twenty-five to thirty rupees in dues. When I started working I wasn’t a member, I became one when I bought a tiffin line. You have to get a line. For example, if someone has a line that costs 5,000 rupees and he has to go back to the village because he’s tired or because he has to do another job, then he says: ‘I have to sell’. If he wants to sell then he auctions to the highest bidder. For example, for one rupee I give five; for another I give eight, for yet another I give ten, then depending on the value of the line, a bid is made. I bought mine for 40,000 rupees.
Another dabbawala explains how the system works:

I’m a member too and fifteen years ago I bought the line for 30,000 rupees. The line had forty tiffins. The price of the line is not based on the number of tiffins, but the length of the route you cover to deliver them. For example, ten tiffins can be worth 2,000 rupees a month but so can two tiffins. The price of tiffins is different and this means the price of the line is different. So, a 2,000-rupee line may cost between 8,000 and 16,000 rupees. If a line is worth 20,000 rupees, we’ll pay 80,000 rupees for it. We make a bid based on a calculation of how much the line earns every month. Anyone who doesn’t have the money can’t become a member so they work for a wage: basic pay is 2,000, 2,500, 3,000 rupees. If a dabbawala closes his business, no one can deliver tiffin in his place because if someone else goes, people complain to the office. If a customer complains ‘I don’t want this dabbawala, send another one!’ the office can’t do anything about a dabbawala. But I’m a member and if someone delivers tiffin in my place, then I can complain about it to the office: ‘This man is taking my tiffin to deliver!’ So people from the office will tell him: ‘Don’t take his dabba’ and the office also fines people. That’s why we all work well.

Data supplied by Medge made it possible to reconstruct the costs of managing and the net earnings of an individual dabbawala member.

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Distribution logic
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We don’t cook. The cooking’s done at home. We’re not a catering service, we’re just a [distribution] network. You have to imagine food cooked in each customer’s home and delivered to their place of work. That is our service. Caterers cook food. If no one at home can cook the food, then I give the phone number of a caterer. ‘I don’t have anyone at home to do the cooking, so can you cook for me?’ We have the numbers of caterers, so if you have problems at home and there’s nobody there, or they don’t have time to give children food, then we can give a number. If that’s good with the customer, they settle a price for the delivery and the cooking service. But not us, we’re just distribution.

— NMTBSCT dabbawala

The NMTBSCT has the monopoly over the meal delivery service and, thanks to both its excellent grasp of distribution logistics and the high reputation it enjoys as an annadatta (food deliverer), it has gained a considerable competitive edge in a specific segment of the Mumbai market. Traditionally, logistics were regarded only as a function that allowed the enterprise to optimise materials, goods and intangible flows, like information. With the emergence of the “supply chain” concept that the dabbawalas appear to use in their management approach, the whole logistics process has been redefined to optimise links and coordination among suppliers, customers and distribution. In this respect, the inventory levels and flow of goods in the supply chain have been optimised, with an increase in the production efficiency of the enterprise and its fulfilment of incoming orders, while improving customer service by keeping prices down. The association therefore appears as an organisation capable of planning, implementing, and monitoring delivery operations, and as an expert in the “art” of moving materials, people and information from one place to another in order to satisfy customers.

What is known today as “supply chain management” has been effectively, albeit more or less unintentionally, internalised by the entrepreneurs of Mumbai’s meal delivery sector. The logistics essential to managing the distribution network revolve around the availability of urban

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10 This section was written on the basis of my observation and participation in the delivery service.
infrastructures and the cultural approach that dabbawala customers have to food. The dabbawalas adapt their distribution logistics and planning process to customer needs, taking into account the flexibility of their own working group. In 1998, the American magazine Forbes conducted a study of the dabbawala service and awarded its organisation a 6 Sigma, with a 99.9999% accuracy rate.\(^{13}\) This means that only one tiffin in every six million deliveries goes astray.\(^{14}\) Natarajan Balakrishnan and Chung-Piaw Teo, researchers at the National University of Singapore, compared the dabbawala distribution system with that of postal delivery and of a Mumbai goods retailer.\(^{15}\) In the first case, the mail is sent to a single central sorting branch and then delivered to the final recipient via a hub that handles distribution operations. The goods retailer, on the other hand, uses a zone map system similar to that of the dabbawalas, i.e. identifying groups of vendors within coded zones and then supplying each of these through a sub-sorting unit.

Although logistical considerations are important in meal delivery organisation, there is a strong likelihood that the dabbawala system relies mainly on Mumbai’s specific culture which, in turn, orients the executive committee’s planning. The dabbawalas identified Mumbai as a source of opportunity and their delivery process developed by taking into account the changing metropolis and the evolution of the preferences and well-being of the inhabitants, the urban infrastructure and social characteristics. Indeed, the service is difficult to replicate in other cities precisely because several elements characteristic of Mumbai are absent in other urban contexts—a very extensive transport network and large working class, combined with the cultural unity of the dabbawala association rooted in the rural areas around the city. Considering these aspects, it can safely be said that Mumbai is the cultural milieu underpinning the dabbawala distribution rationale, the mental map that underlies their work and from which they draw inspiration.

**The delivery process**

The dabbawala starts work at about eight-thirty in the morning, when he cycles or walks to pick up dabbas from the door of the “customer-supplier”,

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usually whoever does the cooking. Time is of the essence in this process, because if one of the two parties is running late, the subsequent schedule fails. On average, each dabbawala is responsible for collecting thirty to thirty-five dabbas, the number depending on personal ability to memorise customer addresses and the physical strength for carrying the tiffin baskets. One NMTBSCT dabbawala describes his day, and the efforts made to deliver his tiffin on time:

I pick up at least forty tiffin from homes just in Lokhandvala, from I, II, III and IV Street. Sometimes, when a bank is closed for holidays, there aren’t so many dabbas, but we still have to go to the customer’s home. I start work at 8.30 am and by 10.30 I have to be at the station, because my train leaves at 10.38. I cannot risk missing it, ever. Often someone doesn’t have the dabba ready in time and it’s late, but we adjust, we make it. For instance, we run faster up the stairs. If we know we’re more than five minutes late, we pedal faster. And if we miss the usual train, we catch the fast one so we can make up ten or fifteen minutes. If we don’t make the train, we use our lunch break to deliver tiffin and we eat afterwards. 99% of the time it doesn’t happen but if it does, we skip our lunch so we can deliver food on time. Then we take back the dabbas and we go and sit in the station to eat. But in certain circumstances it’s just not possible to deliver on time, for example during the summer monsoon when it rains, so sometimes we are gridlocked! When it rains, that does happen sometimes.

After this initial collection stage, the containers are taken to the nearest station by bicycle or in wooden baskets. Here a second group of dabbawalas, from the same line, takes the previously collected dabbas and loads them onto the trains. Although there is no formal agreement with the railways, the goods compartment at the head of the train is left for the dabbawalas or people carrying bulky goods. The biggest difficulties are the crowded stations and trains, which always make it problematic to move the heavy baskets among people trying to board the trains. Dabbas have to be loaded very quickly, in the thirty seconds the train stops on the platform. After this second stage, all the precious lunches are ready to move on to their destinations. If the trip is very long and includes a line change, the dabbawala in charge of the final delivery takes his own dabbas to a collection and sorting point. There are several strategic nodes near railway stations that serve as main centres for final sorting. In this case, the figure of the mukadam becomes essential for efficient coordination of the delivery network to ensure that no dabba is lost or routed to a wrong destination. The third stage is the final delivery: from the strategic collection point the cooked lunch is taken to the place of work of the “receiver-customer” for about 12.30 pm. The tension gradually eases and the dabbawalas can rest, eat their lunch and, lastly, prepare to make the
journey back, following a circular route that begins and ends in the same way every day of the week except Sunday.

The delivery process is easier to understand by looking at a schedule of the stages involved in *dabba* distribution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.20</td>
<td>The <em>dabba</em> is prepared by the “supplier-customer” and left outside the front door.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.25</td>
<td>The <em>dabbawala</em> arrives and picks up the <em>dabba</em>. If he does not see it, he knocks on the front door.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.35</td>
<td>The <em>dabbawala</em> loads the <em>dabba</em> into his tiffin basket or onto his bicycle along with others picked up in his area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.25</td>
<td>The <em>dabbawala</em> arrives at the <em>dabba</em> collection area of the nearest railway station.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>The sorting process starts and <em>dabbas</em> are grouped according to where they have to be delivered.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When the train arrives, the *dabbawalas* board the compartment at the head of the convoy.

The train arrives at the major junctions and if the *dabbas* have to change line to reach their destination, they are delivered using a relay system involving another *dabbawala*.

The *dabbas* change trains and continue their journey.

Arrival at destination station.

The *dabbas* are loaded onto various baskets or bicycles and taken to the “receiver-customer”.

The *dabbas* arrive at the place of work of the “receiver-customer”.

The delivery process is reversed and the empty *dabba* is collected at about 1.30 pm from the “receiver-customer” and returned to the “supplier-customer”.

Table 1. Schedule of the *dabba* distribution.

**The dabbawala alphabet**

A system like this could not exist without a code for identification of the *dabbas*. The containers change hands several times during the day, so the group must be able to recognise them or they may be lost along the way. Most *dabbawalas* are completely illiterate or barely able to read and write, so tiffin delivery relies on the use of identification systems to ensure successful delivery. These systems were an important factor in network development and basically comprise four or five symbols of different colours painted on the containers. Nevertheless, they do not share the same style due to the *dabbawala* association’s characteristics, which gives each group the freedom to manage its work independently. Thus, the codes are often indigenous, derived from the regions of origin, or are symbols that bring to mind specific circumstances. In most cases, however,
they are symbols common to the Indian cultural context, like letters of the Devanagari alphabet, religious allegories or just geometrical symbols, some of which are shown below:

Figure 11. Examples of dabba symbols. By kind permission of Raghunath Medge.
**GLOSSARY OF SYMBOLS**

| Dotted, right-facing swastika | **Svastika:** from the Sanskrit *su* “well” and *asti* “being”. This is the most frequent representation of the swastika used in Hindu symbolism. It is an ancient symbol, often linked to the Sun and the solar cycle (the four arms may represent the seasons). It is an emblem of transformation, of infinite steps of status, of cyclical eternity and, as such, has assumed important connotations in various religions and philosophies. In Asia it is found in Hinduism, in Tibetan shamanism (*bon*), in Jainism, Buddhism, etc. In Europe it is seen in megalithic civilisations, Germanic and Celtic shamanism, etc. Often the orientation (right-facing or left-facing swastika) or the type of arm (curved or hooked swastika) will change according to the cultural context. The Hindu swastika is a positive symbol that symbolises the invigorating power of the Sun, which is renewed every day, hence the allusion to well-being. Traditionally the right-facing swastika is connected to Ganesha and is considered an auspicious symbol for the start or the inauguration of concepts or businesses, so it is seen at the entrance to buildings of worship, on book covers and at the front doors of homes. The left-facing swastika is consecrated to the goddess Kali.

Typically in India (and in Tibet, where this symbol is known as *norbu shi khyi*), the swastika is drawn with four dots between the arms, an allusion to the four purusharths or duties/principles/achievements/blessings of the Hindu person: *dharma* (righteousness); *kama* (pleasure); *moksha* (knowledge); and *artha* (wealth). It is also read, above all in the vajrayana Buddhism, as a reference to the four “bodies” or *koshas*:

- **annamaya kosha:** the shell of food (physical body)
- **pranamaya kosha:** the shell of the vital force (five life breaths and internal organs)
- **manomaya kosha:** the shell of the mind (mind and perception)
- **vijnanamaya kosha:** the shell of intelligence/understanding (mind and senses).

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Swastika without bent arms or even a possible Hindu-Christian syncretism of the symbol of the cross and the swastika.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Dam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Bo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Number seven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Ca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Ma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image7" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>In classic iconography this symbol could be associated to a shell for its inner concentric line, reminiscent of a shell’s circles. In turn, the shell is a symbol attributed to Vishnu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image8" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image9" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image10" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image11" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image12" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Ba</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Glossary of symbols.
Despite each group enjoying a certain amount of autonomy, a partial standardisation of style was introduced several years ago when Medge gave some useful guidelines for creating these symbols. He provides an interesting description of this change:

As far as the code system is concerned, we did use strings in the past, not colours but cords of different colours, without applying paint with our fingers. There were seven colours and each one indicated the food’s district of provenance. This system was used in Bombay when the dabbawalas began delivering, then the number of dabbas increased. For example, an area of origin was green, with a different colour for the final destination, another was yellow or white, or black […] but it was an outdated method. The new code was my idea, when I started working. After the coloured strings, but before I arrived, there were symbols: plus, minus, dots, arrows, triangles, squares […] This was because few dabbawalas can read and write, even now. But they know how to read English addresses, street names, initials, because someone else has taught them where to take dabba. The code is not personal, each group has a different colour. For example, my group uses green, another group has yellow, another grey; so the colour identifies the group. We abandoned triangles to adopt this coding because there are seventy-two delivery destinations. Not all dabbawala groups use this system, but there are two common denominators: the destination and the sorting site. All dabbawalas know this code identifies Churchgate, which is a big railway station. It’s a large area so it’s numbered from one to ten; eleven is the Marine Line. Everybody uses that numbering. If we look at this sheet we see that this is the dabbawala alphabet. Each letter corresponds to a group of fifteen or twenty people, and each has a letter (A, B, C, D, E). For example, in my group there may be ten people, or there are groups of fifteen or twenty, and each group has a colour. My group is green. In the group each person has a letter: he must pick up the containers from the homes and take them to the station. Each person collects thirty containers and leaves them here, at the collection point. Person B collects thirty containers and leaves them here. Person C does likewise. At the Vile Parle sorting station, persons A, B, C, etc, divide the containers according to destination: for example tiffin with the number three are all for the same destination. Then the containers depart. Another person will deliver about thirty containers all in the same area. Then there is a number for people who are given the container, and a code that indicates the building and the floor.

The dabba identification code was also essential in 1993, when there were bomb attacks on the railway network. On that occasion, despite strict controls during the periods following the attacks, there were no specific inspections of dabbawalas because, as one interviewee pointed out, in addition to the trust placed in them by the police, the dabbawalas themselves are the first to notice any abnormalities in their tiffin. Only the dabbawala and the people in his group
can recognise dabbas that are not part of their line, thanks to the identification codes, and in such a case they would refuse them immediately. An NMTBSCT dabbawala explains why tiffins weren’t searched during security checks:

After the bombings there were very strict security checks but we had no problems in this respect because everyone trusts tiffin containers, so there weren’t any problems. Because of the bomb attacks everyone who travelled by train was checked, but no one checked dabbawala tiffin containers. Everyone recognises a dabbawala. They start from the home, go to the station and from the station to the office. If one of our tiffin isn’t right, we notice immediately. Even if we have a thousand tiffins, if one’s not right… let’s say someone plants a tiffin container in amongst ours, we notice immediately, because we’ve never seen it before. Then we know the codes found on the dabba but no one else can know our codes. If someone leaves a dabba with a bomb in it, if they do that, then we’ll know. We pick up the dabba from home and it has our code on it. A dabba goes everywhere but comes back to us. Wherever it goes in Bombay, it comes back.

**The Dabba coding system evolution**

![Diagram of the Dabba coding system evolution](image)

Figure 12. The dabba coding system evolution. Diagram by Pawan G. Agrawal, director of Mumbai Agrawal Institute of Management. By kind permission of Raghunath Medge.
Coded System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VLP</td>
<td>Vile Parle (suburb in Mumbai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9EX12</td>
<td>Code for Dabbawalas at Destination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EX</td>
<td>Express Towers (building name)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Floor no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Code for Dabbawala at residential station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Code for destination Station eg. Churchgate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Station (Nariman Point)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 13. The dhabba coding current system. Diagram by Pawan G. Agrawal, director of Mumbai Agrawal Institute of Management. By kind permission of Raghunath Medge.

Apprenticeship and “practical management”

As the narrator of this short story reveals, most dabbawalas are illiterate or have attended only the early years of elementary schooling. Yet this does not seem to pose a problem to their tiffin pick-up and delivery work, because the basic skills required for their job rely on two main resources: possessing the physical strength needed to carry heavy tiffin baskets and being a native of the areas common to all dabbawalas. These two elements complement each other, because they allow workers to ground their communication in a shared language and a shared faith, as well as in a body language they recognise as their own.

Such non-verbal expressions are seldom studied in social sciences but are very important in daily personal interaction, since they allow immediate recognition among kin and kind, developing a trust that
is not conditioned by verbally expressed knowledge. This “civilised
gaze” is essential to social interaction, for as Paul Connerton suggests,
“We always base our particular experiences on a prior context in order
to ensure that they are intelligible at all”.\(^\text{17}\) The body, which basically
learns the world’s sensory fabric, retains a memory of our actions,
incorporating individual behavioural patterns that evolve in the course
of a community’s collective history. This manual memory generates a
different model of learning, a practical knowledge, which makes the
social body movement and experience the collective expression of
everyday work. Medge summarises this knowledge in his definition of
practical management:

Nowadays knowledge comes from reading books, whether they’re about
management, engineering or the study of social sciences. Now we just
read books or a teacher explains, but that’s not enough for us. Ours is
‘hands-on management’. We haven’t been trained. We haven’t studied.
There are 3,000 people in our association who still sign using their
thumbs [literally: 3,000 people use a “thumbs up” to sign. This describes
an informal, good-humoured gesture used to indicate the person is
illiterate]. It means that they leave a thumbprint as a signature. So, to
make an honest living they need a good memory. If you can read and
write, and have an education, then you can write things on your computer,
on your cell phone, but anyone who doesn’t know how to read has to
work by memorising everything. They keep everything in their heads.
Like the blind who hear very well or the dumb who have better eyesight.
There are about 5,000 of us and 3,000 are illiterate, but they are skilled
workers. The job is to deliver food. Educated people ask questions but
illiterate folk just get on with the job. The food there has to be delivered
to someone, that’s all they know. They don’t have to worry about the
rest. So there’s precision in their work. If they don’t work properly, they
don’t get paid. Without money, they go hungry. So they see only their
work: with faith, devotion, strength, enthusiasm and zeal. They work
with all these aspects and with stamina. With devotion, with the heart,
with hard work you get something, but without prayer [because giving
food is already in itself a meritorious action, a \textit{puja}] you get nothing.

An NMBTSC member explains: why we become dabbawalas

There are many reasons why we leave the village to come to Bombay. Some have no choice, some do, some come to work and some for pleasure. In this job the point is to have time, not brains or talent, because some of us are illiterate, some have been educated, but those who are in the service network, whether educated or illiterate, all work the same way. Once they’ve learned the job, once the line work is explained, even those who have no education can do it well. Anyone can be perfect for this. To do other work you need to be educated, there are limits, you need to have reached tenth or twelfth class. But here, even those with no education can earn up to 5,000 rupees. Those who live in the village are not very well educated, so they came to Bombay to earn a wage because even people who are not educated can earn well. People who live in the village are used to working from the start, both hard work and slow work: for them there’s no difference. They just need the money, the money for the family. Who can manage on 1,000, 2,000, 2,500 rupees. It won’t fill the belly, so there has to be another job. And if someone doesn’t like tiffin work, they don’t come, they go somewhere else and do another job.

Cooperative competitors

Ten people work in my group. Each of them has bought his own line. They have the same authority as me. We can only deliver the dabbas if we work with each other. Give a helping hand. Like a government coalition, right? The government has policy, so do we. By uniting, we can continue to work. But governments fall. We don’t, because we know that another’s loss is also my loss. That’s what we think and it won’t change.

— NMTBSCT dabbawala

The shared aim of each dabbawala team is to deliver the customer’s lunch on time. The group is organised internally so that if one of the dabbawalas is absent, he is replaced by a colleague. Moreover, the system requires a mentality that promotes the sharing of responsibilities with intensified interpersonal cooperation. Medge describes this attitude with a metaphor: “the five fingers of a hand alone cannot do much, but if they work together they can grasp, embrace, grip, and make hundreds of gestures”. Dabbawalas therefore manage their business without interfering with that of others,
since they know that the fortune of each person is closely connected to the system’s overall success. The association’s structure and the type of contract applied to the dabbawalas also foster “cooperative competition”. This means the groups compete amongst themselves to acquire more customers for their own lines, and cooperate with co-workers in the group to increase profit and, at the same time, membership for the NMTBSCT. A dabbawala talks about this competition:

There’s a lot of competition amongst groups, even more than there is amongst politicians. The competition is for tiffins. If someone has tiffins to be picked up, they phone for a dabbawala, so you have to get there first to get that tiffin. Just think, I want to pick up tiffin before the others, so I arrive and I say: ‘I’m so-and-so’s brother, I’ll take that dabba’. There’s so much competition. Dabbawalas may look a bit daft, but they aren’t: they’ve got their heads screwed on. They’ll stop at nothing to take your dabba and once they’ve got it, you can’t get it back. But there’s no fighting. Once the dabba has been collected, you know there’s nothing to be gained by arguing. If there was any advantage, then we might fight, but there isn’t.

Medge, however, insists that there is no rivalry:

If someone gets your back up, how can you work? How would we manage to deliver? If I have ten customers across Bombay, I can’t supply them all on my own. If I work with all the others in the luggage car, I can take other people’s tiffin from the station to be delivered in my area, and they’ll take mine and deliver it. Deliveries have to be regular. If you can’t manage to deliver to four customers, then you don’t make a profit. If you aren’t part of the group, you can pick up forty tiffins from Andheri Station, but you can never deliver them to forty customers before 12.30. Lunch is at 12.30. So you have to be involved in the planning.

Another dabbawala adds that co-operation is key to success:

We come from Ambegaon and Maval, the area around Ambegaon. Before coming to Bombay we didn’t know one another and we got acquainted when we started the business. No one knew anyone else before that, because we’re all from the same district but different villages. Usually, if I’m at the village and a friend calls me to say there’s work, if I need a job I go. When we’re a man short, we call someone from the village. Now we all work in the same group. Between us dabbawalas of the same group, we don’t compete for new customers. Not like we do with other groups. At Andheri alone there are more than a hundred groups but in all Bombay there’s only one association.

Competition between teams rarely turns into open conflict, but there may be problems between different groups on a train or on the platforms when they are carrying heavy baskets or bicycles. When this happens, a chain
of communication is triggered from dabbawalas to mukadams, and then from the directors as far as the president, if more complex issues are to be resolved. Conflicts are never settled by recourse to external figures; instead, the association’s own rules of conduct are implemented, like a “mini government” with legislation and sanctions. Medge explains what happens when problems arise:

The dabbawala first calls his group leader, then the director of the reference zone is told, and he calls me in the office. If I’m not in the office, he calls my mobile phone. Then we go there. Dabbawala problems may be with the BMS [a municipal waste collection service] or bicycle parking. They sometimes walk across the tracks so the railway police get involved. If someone forgets their baggage pass at home, they have to find the inspector [otherwise he does not let the dabbawala through]. If there’s any argument the police want them brought to the office [sometimes asking for money to resolve the situation]. The groups squabble amongst themselves, for competition, for money matters. One thing leads to another and there’s a fight. Someone cracks a joke and someone else gets offended. If there’s a dispute, a problem with the BMS or the police, or with the public, if someone on the train treads on a tiffin container, there’s a row and the police turn up. Our director arrives and so does the commission, and they sort it out. It’s not police business or something for the courts to deal with, we run our own regime and as such have our rules and regulations, which the dabbawalas themselves obey. We don’t involve the Indian Government or counsellors. We have defined our own rules and regulations, and whatever happens, we solve the problem alone. Whatever problem there is at work, we find a solution. We don’t call a lawyer or go to court or to the police.

Cultivating empathy with the customer

Beyond the code of ethics that underpins the delivery service—no alcohol to be consumed during working hours; wearing a topi cap to be recognised by customers; delivering food as if it were an act of faith; in short, all the rules summarised in the expression “work is worship”—there is also a certain empathy with the customer. Through a non-aggressive attitude, the dabbawala connects with what is probably the most “sentimental” part of Mumbai, the bond that exists amongst members of the family when they are apart during working hours (a wife to a husband, a mother to her children), and which is expressed in the daily act of feeding.

Dabbas’ customers are predominantly men, and work six days a week outside the home, spending little time with their families. The wife usually gets up early in the morning to prepare breakfast, and after her children
and husband have left for school and work, she begins to cook lunch for her spouse, waiting for a *dabbawala* to arrive and pick it up. When the *dabba* reaches the place of work, the husband opens it up and enjoys home-cooked food. The meal embodies familiar traditions, recipes and flavours. Since it is the wife who usually cleans the tiffin after it is returned, she can judge how much her husband enjoyed his meal when she sees if there are any leftovers.¹⁸

The long relationship of trust that enables this everyday emotional connection between the city and its “bicycle runners” has its basis in the association’s internal rules. In fact, when the *mukadam* recruits, the aspiring *dabbawala* has to be of proven honesty and any violators are stigmatised by the group without having to resort to other type of justice. Medge describes the bond between the *dabbawalas* and their customers:

> People have a great deal of trust in *dabbawalas*. We’ve been serving some of our customers for three generations. Their grandfather ate with us, then the son and now the grandson eats with us. We don’t recruit our *dabbawalas* externally, they have to have a bond with the people in our district. They have to have a permanent address to the village or in Bombay, so either a contact with a *dabbawala* or with his village. That’s why customers trust us. We enter the customer’s home so a *dabbawala* has to be responsible. He might find himself in a situation where he could open a wallet and steal something, plant bombs. Someone might steal or he could be a Naxalite,¹⁹ and in that case would ruin the reputation of the *dabbawalas*. We don’t want that sort of person as a *dabbawala*. You must register with our association. If one of our own steals, then we go to pick him up at the village before the police get him.

While finding new customers is one of the *mukadam*’s main tasks, a first contact is more often established through word of mouth among acquaintances and there is no particular strategy. Potential customers recognise a *dabbawala* on the street by his clothing, or they meet him at work, because his job involves delivering lunch to their co-workers. It would appear that the most important aspect for a prospective customer is that they trust a neighbour who, in turn, trusts a *dabbawala*.

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¹⁹ The Naxalites take their name from the Maoist revolutionary movement that has its origins in a peasant insurrection in the late 1960s, which occurred in the rural district of Naxalbari, in West Bengal. Nowadays, “Naxalite” is synonymous in everyday language for “terrorist”. 
An NMTBSCT *dabbawala* describes how this works:

Tiffin-carriers are dressed in a specific way, they wear a distinctive *topi* cap, so when people who are out on errands, out shopping, see them they call them over and say: ‘Hey, you, I have a *dabba* to deliver’. Or, for example, you call for a *dabba* from an office and other people working in that office will also ask for tiffin to be brought there. If you’re in the office and you eat home-cooked food while others eat purchased food, they ask: ‘Who brought your food from home? How do they bring it? How much is it?’ So the *dabbawala* gets contacted. Then there’s also the ‘title’ [the advertising run by local channels: a slogan with the association’s phone numbers] or sometimes flyers. That’s where people get the phone number and contact us. They call the offices in Andheri, Dadar or Grant Road, and come to an agreement. They contact them and say: ‘This *dabba* should be delivered to this person’. That’s how we get new customers.

Medge goes into further detail:

You see, *dabbawalas* dress in a red *jhabba* [tunic], white trousers and a *topi* cap. They have their bikes with them and the bike has a bell, so they make a noise. If there’s a security guard outside your company and you need tiffin service, just tell him and he’ll call the first *dabbawala* who comes out of the alley or the street, to see if he can start delivering tiffin to this building, at this number. Then lunchtime is 12.30 pm to 1 pm for everyone, in every office, factory, company, data entry desks in public offices. Then they all eat together and some of these people have tiffin delivered. So our *dabbawala* goes into the canteen. Lunch is at the same time everywhere in India, so everyone goes to the canteen together. Then if someone decides to order tiffin, they give the *dabbawala* a home address. The *dabbawala* gives it to his *mukadam*, who arranges pick-up. Anywhere you order tiffin, whether at home or at the office, my man will deliver. So tiffin is growing.

**Intergenerational ties**

The children of *dabbawalas* who have grown up in Mumbai often do not want to continue the work of the family. This resistance depends on several factors: often they are better educated and therefore aspire to professional prospects that were unthinkable for their parents. They also may want to withdraw from a job that appears tiring and socially degrading. The *mukadams* and the association’s executive committee are not particularly concerned by this, however, because for every young Mumbaite who says no, there is another youth arriving from the old villages who wants to join the network. Indeed, it seems that these continual migrations towards the city are the lifeblood of the association’s identity, characterised by rural
virtues and a belief in Varkari devotional expressions. Although Medge praises these new recruits, he is aware of generational shifts: “The new boys do the dabbawala job well, even if previous generations worked better than the new ones. The youth don’t have the stamina to work that we had. We used to carry tiffin on our heads and shoulders, now it’s all done by bicycle. Now they’re using technology—mobiles, trains, bicycles”.

Another NMTBSCT dabbawala talks about the differences between the generations:

Everyone has their own opinion about whether their children should come into the job. Now we need to see how the new generation will grow up. Someone’s son will be a dabbawala, someone else’s will be a doctor or an engineer, and someone else again won’t do anything at all, while some will go back to the village, because whatever a man thinks may not be how it turns out. A person thinks ahead, but doesn’t go ahead, because they will become what their karma has in store for them [karma taken to mean actions to be performed in life to achieve something or become someone]. Everyone thinks of moving up but it’s not always the case. I think my son will be an important person, but who knows if this will really happen. If it’s not in his Sanskriti [cultural baggage, learned from parents and family], if his karma is not to be, he won’t become what I think or what I teach. Maybe he’ll inherit the line from me, sell up and go back to the village. Could be. My father had no tiffin lines. I got the line after I arrived in Bombay. I could even just sell up and leave.

The generational turnover in the association is required to ensure the elderly return to the village and retire. During the 2007 fieldwork, Medge was considering insurance for dabbawalas that would provide compensation for any accidents at work and a minimum pension. As things stand, however, the livelihood of the elderly still relies on the presence of an extended family living in rural areas where the dabbawalas retire at the end of their working lives. One dabbawala discusses the importance of inter-generational care:

When people in Bombay aren’t able to work any longer, they return to the village and work in the fields. It is work handed down over the generations: the son takes over from the father. There are no pensions and children take care of their parents. I don’t know when. There’s no fixed time. As long as I can work and there is work, then I’ll carry on. That’s how it is. The state gives me nothing. In our villages or at home we have our children, don’t we? Maybe the son of a brother will work.

20 During my stay in the villages of the district of Pune, where most dabbawalas come from, I was a guest in Medge’s home. His family—his father’s two wives and an uncle, himself a retired dabbawala—live in a simple house surrounded by fields.
Medge says that when he retires, he will go back to his village:

Bombay is such a costly place and it’s up to the new generations to work. It takes strength to work and the elderly don’t have the strength to live in Bombay. That’s what the village is for. It takes three hours by train as it’s about 150km from Bombay. When there are public holidays, Sundays […] I go there to meet my family and come back to work on the Monday. There’s a problem; how do you find a large apartment in Bombay? So people in the group take a kholi [a small room] to share. Then live together, earn the money to send back to the village. My father did that too.

Beyond technology: the railway network as a mental map

The dabbawala service draws its strength from a rational philosophy, an architecture of values that sustains a long-lived business based on minimum technology. These characteristics fit into the Mumbai way of life for two reasons: on the one hand, the dabbawalas convert their source values into knowledge of the urban territory and thus connect with the desires of people at an essential, intimate, and emotional level;\(^ {21} \) on the other, the world of “small things” that they represent finds the widespread transport network, in particular the railways (with their low environmental impact), to be the means for reaching every customer. One dabbawala emphasises the significance of the railways in his work:

We have a lot of work on the Western Line from Virar to Churchgate. This line is very important to us, while the Thana-Dombivali-Kalyan aren’t so important. If these lines don’t work out there aren’t many problems for our network. At most, we go up to Thane when we must, if the train’s on time… But the Western Line, from Virar to Churchgate, is very important.

Every day, the urban rail and bus services are packed with commuters, who thus come into contact both physically (just taking a trip on any train will reveal what it means to be surrounded by a crowd like this, constantly jostling to get on and off) and mentally (since travelling together requires some mutual arrangement, a code of survival and reciprocal respect). This implicit code of conduct allows residents to access streets drawn on the Mumbai map, defined by stations, architecture, houses and signs that

\(^{21}\) Pandit (2007).
are all part of the sphere of social interaction.\textsuperscript{22} The latter demonstrates how power is stratified by class (first and second class compartments), gender (men and women), or bodily expressions (it is important to avoid physical contact with other passengers). Moreover, the city’s employment stratification is also clear: the packed rush-hour compartments reveal the professions of passengers. Office workers, teachers, factory workers, labourers and domestic help all usually catch trains between 7.30 and 8.30 am; sales staff going to the big shopping centres and those who do not have jobs in the public administration travel later. The railways connect the points of urban geography and are a kind of mental map for Mumbaites, allowing a linear view of the city, recognising it by the stations, the huge junctions that connect various rail lines and offering safe transit despite the endless changes in urban toponymy.\textsuperscript{23}

The railways function as a relational nexus, an antidote to social fragmentation. Not only do they connect space and people, they also weave the threads of the many lives being played out in Mumbai into a tapestry that its residents can recognise and understand.\textsuperscript{24} Their social role is entwined with the very nature of the city, which is neither that of a cultural “melting pot”, nor of a “salad bowl” or a “mosaic”—to quote some of the metaphors commonly used by scholars to describe culturally complex human urban aggregates—but it is rather a “connective nature”, experienced and reproduced on a daily basis by millions of people.

The \textit{dabbawalas}, like most of the people of Mumbai, make this means of transport their most relied upon technology. The wooden basket is still a key device for delivery, the bicycle has only been in use for ten years and the most recent conquest, the cell phone, facilitates communications between colleagues in a line. The aim, repeatedly reaffirmed by the president, is to limit the expenses that could only be sustained by increasing the cost of the monthly subscription. One NMTBSCT \textit{dabbawala} talks about the way that technology has changed the ways in which the \textit{dabbawala} network can operate:

Before, the real problem was that there weren’t any bicycles, there was a wooden basket where all the tiffin was stacked. We carried the baskets

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 39.
\end{flushleft}
on our heads and we walked. But then came the bicycle, then trains and other commodities to make work easier, so that’s why we like our job: it has become easier. Now, with cell phones you can find out if you’ve missed a dabbā. For example, I’ve ten men and we’re all in contact. One at Andheri, a second at Dadar, a third at Churchgate, one goes to Ghatkopar. So if I miss a Ghatkopar dabbā, I ring my man there and he can take that dabbā. He’ll take it to Ghatkopar Station and from there another man will deliver the dabbā at Dadar. From there another man takes the dabbā and goes to Andheri. For instance, if someone misses the 10.30 am train, the slow train, which goes to Churchgate, he can take the fast train and we know he’ll get to Vile Parle or to Dadar. So to catch up with the slow train, I go on the fast train and I catch up with him at Dadar. If I don’t catch the slow train to Dadar, then I catch up at Bombay Central; if I don’t catch up at Bombay Central then we catch him at Churchgate. The hour’s leeway I have becomes fifteen to twenty minutes and if I can’t find him I phone and say to those who have missed the train: ‘Get off at Dadar’. In the meantime we have other tiffin and when we get there we hand over to the others who have the numbers. So with a mobile phone, work has improved, because we know if someone has missed a train, if someone has to get off at an earlier or later station. In a word, with a mobile it’s become a bit easier. Before it was different. You didn’t even know if a person had gone to work or not. By phoning you find out […] Customers also know if the dabbawala is at work or not. If he’s delayed he calls and we let them known he’s on his way.

Not even the monsoon stops dabbawalas delivering, although at times high water prevents trains using their usual track. In this case, as an interviewee explained very precisely, the service stops and the dabbā is taken back home:

When the trains were stopped for rain, we’d bring tiffin back. If the train had gone on, we’d have lost a bit of time. For instance, if a dabbā has to arrive at 1 pm, it’ll get there for 1.15 pm. But if the train stops, like when it floods with rain, then the dabbā goes back. Any such loss is the customer’s, but they don’t complain because they know the dabbawalas have had this kind of problem. It’s not intentional: if the train stops, we can’t take the dabbā as far as Churchgate. If you’re close, then that’s OK. But if it’s from Churchgate to Grant Road, at Mumbai Central or even further than this, then we can’t go by bike up to there. And even with a bike, how can we get through the streets if there’s high water? So we take the food back to the home. Just like we picked it up, we take it back. If the train stops, then our work stops too.

The dabbawalas base the entire service on the use of suburban trains, because deliveries are limited primarily to areas where a track is installed. The railway network comprises three lines: the Western Line that passes through the western suburbs and extends from Churchgate to Virar; the Central
Main Line which passes through Thane and the central suburbs, and runs from Victoria Terminus (or Chattrapati Shivaji) to Kalyan (this is the line that meets the Western Line at the Dadar junction); and the Harbour Line from Victoria Terminus, branching at Vadala Road, with one branch going towards Panvel and the other towards Andheri. The *dabbawalas* celebrate the railways every month with a *puja* (excluding June, July and August because of the monsoons). Through this prayer, the sacralising expression of daily life, they give thanks to this valuable means of communication that allows the service to prosper by delivering lunch to customers. It is no coincidence that a popular Mumbai saying is: “If the train is the lifeline of the city, the *dabbawalas* are the food line”. An NMTBSCT *dabbawala* explains the role of *puja*

Mr Bacche started *puja* in every station in 1952, so we too have *puja* in every station. For example, Andheri, Dadar, Marine Line and Churchgate all have *puja* every week, one week in one station, the week after in another. So in a year, every station has *pujas*, because there are so many stations. At least thirty to thirty-five stations so there are thirty to thirty-five *pujas*. We had *puja* at Andheri on 10 March, where we sang *kirtan* [a ceremony of choral singing of devotional hymns to the gods]. There was *puja* at Dadar, Khar, and Santakruz. Now there will be no further *puja* until next year because during the rainy period we don’t have it. When the rains stop, *puja* starts up again. We have *puja for Satnarayan* [one of the names of Lord Shiva] and we also offer food [real food, not just sweets but a handful of millet]. The funds for *puja* are collected by our one hundred members: each *dabbawala* gives thirty rupees per month and each area collects money for their own district *puja*. 