A Supply Chain Without a Computer

What Mumbai's Lunchbox Network Knows About Logistics

MUMBAI DABBAWALA · MUMBAI · SINCE 1890 · 5,000 DABBAWALAS







A sorting platform at a suburban station. The whole system is a colour code and a train timetable.

1890
running without a break
through monsoons, riots and a pandemic

5,000
dabbawalas (lunchbox carriers)
most with little formal schooling

200,000+
lunchboxes a day
collected, sorted, delivered and returned

3,500+
seminars given
to business schools and companies

> Two hundred thousand home-cooked lunches move across Mumbai every working day and arrive hot, routed by a handful of painted symbols and a train timetable. No computer is involved.

Each box is collected from a kitchen, carried to a station, sorted on the platform by destination, put on a train, sorted again at the other end and delivered. In the afternoon the whole chain runs backwards to return the empty box.

The coordination sits in a code painted on the lid. A 1998 Forbes study gave the network a Six Sigma rating, and Harvard Business School has taught it since. The dabbawalas themselves now lecture on it.

HOW YOU CAN ENGAGE

Go to a sorting platform at about 11.30am. The network takes student and corporate groups, and its men give the talk themselves.

Go and stand in it.

Mumbai Dabbawala

Every sheet in this set points to a place you can visit: a sorting platform, a solarised health centre, a processing floor, a driving lesson. It is real work, and all of it is open to visitors.

WHERE TO GO



A sorting platform, Churchgate

Fifteen minutes that explain the whole system.



A collection round in the suburbs

Kitchen to station, on foot and by bicycle.



A dabbawala's own seminar

The network has given thousands of them.

THREE QUESTIONS FOR THE ROOM

01 The system has no technology and very high reliability. Which of your own processes is the reverse?

02 The code is legible to the men who use it and almost nobody else. What is the cost of that, and what is the protection?

03 Quick commerce now delivers lunch in ten minutes. What does the dabbawala network have that an app does not?

WHAT WE RUN

Academic programs

Business, leadership, entrepreneurship, healthcare, technology, sustainability and culture. Immersions of 12 to 15 days built around one of them.

Faculty and dean cohorts

Site-based curriculum development with Indian universities, industry and state agencies.

Executive programs

Company visits, policy briefings and operator conversations, tailored to a sector.

Service learning programs

Working visits with non-profits, social enterprises and CSR partners, tailored to your group.

READS WELL WITH: CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK

03 Quick Commerce **12** Jugaad (frugal innovation)

SOURCES Mumbai Dabbawala's own site: operating since 1890; about 5,000 dabbawalas; more than 200,000 deliveries a day; Six Sigma rating from a 1998 Forbes Global study.