

Unboxing the *Dabba*

The *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai



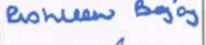
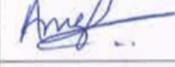
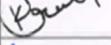
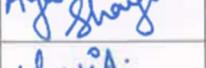
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled "***Unboxing the Dabba: The Dabbawalas of Mumbai***" submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

In the past, there has been a lot of research conducted on the *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai, with many research groups approaching the community over the years, studying their infamous business model that achieved a Six-Sigma Certification. The array of researches conducted meant that the community was open to people studying their organisation, people and lifestyles. With majority of the researches being conducted on the community's business model, there appeared a gap when trying to understand the socio-cultural traits of the *dabbawalas*. Where they come from, what their traditions are, their roots and where the community originated from, what their lifestyle revolves around, their opinions on the developing world and foresight into the future, etc., were other aspects that were yet to be discovered.

The research conducted by the group revolved around the aforementioned elements, with the goal of producing data about the *dabbawalas* primarily through the socio-cultural lens. The research conducted revolved mainly around three stakeholders, that is, the consumers/caterers, the *dabbawalas* along with their families and the other members of the *Varkari Sampraday*. It was important to account for the perspectives of these stakeholders, specifically because of their direct involvement with the community. Most of the first-hand information received was through interviewing these stakeholders. Apart from interviews, there was also presence of an interdependent structure of understanding between the stakeholders, since one contributes to the identity of the other. For example, the consumers impact the behaviour and work ethics of the *dabbawalas*, given how dependant they are on the service. Similarly, the *dabbawalas* rely on the consumers for their livelihood and lifestyle. The report talks about the co-dependent structure the *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai have, with the importance of each stakeholder being asserted.

The content generated through the research revolves around certain key elements, which formed the foundation of the questions summoned to the various stakeholders. The report encapsulates information regarding primary cultural aspects of the *dabbawalas*, such as the gender dynamics prevalent in the Community, the culture of the *Varkari Sampraday*, internal communal traits, consumer opinion on the behaviour of the *dabbawalas*, perspectives of the caterers, and the future of the *dabbawala*

culture and Community, while keeping an eye on their past. These key aspects contribute to iterating the culture that was held in comparison to what values are held onto in modern times. They also help to analyse how the community and profession would progress in the future. The data collected further exposes how the culture of the *dabbawalas* benefits their business, and vice-verse. The interlinking of the two domains raises interrogations and triggers analysis on the future of the Community and their profession.

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The sound of folk songs emanates from the luggage compartment of the Mumbai local train. It is another group of men dressed uniformly in white shirts and pants, Gandhi *topi* and red *tilak* adorning their heads (Krishnan, 2014). They carry the load of the *dabbas* and the responsibility entrusted to deliver them on time to the hungry office-goers. The *Dabbawalas* are a common sight on the streets and railways of Mumbai, picking up *dabbas* from doorsteps early in the mornings, gathering at railway stations, loading and unloading the crates with *dabbas*. Messages, valuables, and sometimes memories are hidden in these *dabbas*, highlighting how clients rely on the *dabbawalas*' punctuality without doubt.

The inspiring success story of the *dabbawalas* began in the 1890s, when a *Parsi* banker who wished to eat home-food hired the first ever *dabbawala* to bring it for him. This 125- year old idea has now risen to a well-established food delivery system that are now known as the Mumbai *Dabbawalas*. Started by Mahadeo Havaji Bachche, the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers' Association (NMTBSA) is now working with over 5000 recruits coordinating deliveries without error (Baindur & Maćario, 2013). They come from a common *Varkari Sampradaya*, a sect from rural Maharashtra comprising of followers of a common deity, *Vithala* (Ghodake, 2016).

The NMTBSA has been provided with the Six-sigma title and thus has gained a lot of recognition world-wide (Baindur and Maćario, 2013). Six-sigma as defined by Kollach and Cho in 2011 “is a methodology that provides business with the tools to improve the capability of their business processes.” This increase in performance and decrease in process variation leads to defect reduction and vast improvements in profits, employee morale and quality of products. (Rao, and M.L.,2014). Thus, by attaining the title, the *dabbawalas* have received world-wide recognition.

The *dabbawalas* are known for their business model, which contributes hugely to their success. The *dabbas* are collected in the mornings, brought to common railway junctions, labelled and segregated based on delivery address, and then delivered to

address before lunch hours. Post lunch time, the *dabbas* are again collected from the offices and returned to their owner's homes. A colour-coded system comprising of colour, alphabets and numbers denoting delivery address is used to label the *dabbas* and segregate them. The whole process is very cost and time effective as they do not waste time speaking or writing full addresses and using mostly public transport like local trains, buses and some going on bicycles. Being on time is a crucial aspect of their work and be it rain, flood or storm, they make sure the *dabba* reaches the right place at the right time (Krishnan, 2014).

The *dabbawalas* are needed because their clients are either not able to carry a bulky hot tiffin with them in the local transport during peak rush hours, or they feel it is against their prestige to do so as they are in the habit of being served food by someone else (Percot, 2005). People want homemade food as it suits their taste and cleanliness standards. But what about the people who have no one to cook for them? The solution is *Dabbawala* canteen, a catering service that delivers food that resembles homemade food in *dabbas* (Percot, 2005). Mainly those who live away from their families and cannot cook on their own use this service. Hence, it can be understood that the *dabbawalas* keep their customers' requirement in mind and consider customer satisfaction as their main objective.

1.2 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE DABBAWALAS

The origin of the worldly renowned Mumbai *Dabbawalas* goes back to the late 19th Century. Started in 1890, this organisation is known for its coordination, discipline and precision. It all began when an aspiring young man, named Mahadeo Havji Bacche, came to Mumbai in search for a job. He started off by doing some basic jobs, which didn't require many qualifications, such as unloading cargo off ships, and dragging sacks for grocers.

During this time, he realised that there weren't many restaurants where office goers could go for a good lunch. Hence, he started a delivery service where he transported tiffins or lunch boxes from homes to offices. When he saw great potential in this business, he invited young men from his village in Maval District to join him in his

new venture. This event gave birth to the “Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association”, now known as the *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai.

From a small Community to one with 5000 members, over the years, the organisation grew with the city. Dhondiba Medge, a villager from the same district, joined the association in 1940. He saw the poor conditions in which the *dabbawalas* lived and was determined to make a change. He saved up enough money and bought a small room in the suburbs for some *dabbawalas* to live in. Soon, he became the supervisor of one line of *dabbas*. He continued the process of saving money and buying places to live for *dabbawalas*. Eventually, he became the President of the Community and became an idol for all. He never missed an opportunity to do something beneficial for the group. Looking at all the work he had done, his son Raghunath Medge had big shoes to fill. He was the only one who had completed his education. He would help in business affairs whenever he could and introduced a new system, such as the coding system, that had a drastic impact on their functioning. Their business flourished and all believed that he would be just like his father. They had high expectations from him and they strongly believed that he would meet them.

However, Raghunath had different plans for his future. He wanted to study further and become a lawyer. Unfortunately, this dream was put to an end before it even began due to the untimely death of his father. He was given the position of President which was previously held by his father. He realised the weight of the position and the immense number of responsibilities that came with it. Initially, he struggled a lot. He was unable to do justice to his father’s reputation. With the help of the Secretary of the Association, Vithal Jundhare he was able to get back on track and get everything under control. The Community proved to be one of the finest in the world and a proof of this is the Six-Sigma Certificate they were awarded with.

1.3 GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS AND THEIR EFFECT ON DABBAWALAS

While most individuals may consider the geography of a region to simply be a matter of either preference or non-preference; the geography of Mumbai affects the very existence of the *dabbawalas*, simply put. This section will not focus primarily on the physical geography; instead, a major emphasis will be laid on the complex yet sophisticated rail route system, mapping the infrastructural aspect of the land area of

Mumbai. The delivery system of the *dabbawalas* (explored largely through the supply chain principle) would be nullified if the local trains in Mumbai did not operate. In a layman's terms, Mumbai has been often called "a thin strip of land", which may be true, but a huge contradiction occurs here as this thin strip has an expanse of about 604.3 km and a staggering population of approximately 18.4 million people, that was accounted for as of the 1st January 2018 (The Times of India, 2017). The geological term classifies the Mumbai region as a 'strait', which is defined as a "narrow strip of land that connects two larger landmasses and separates two bodies of water" (Society, 2011).

The details of each of the railway lines of Mumbai (suburban and city) areas have also been described briefly. On the Western line, the tracks direct us to path north of Churchgate (the southernmost station) and end at Virar. On the Central line, the track directs to a path north of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CSMT) and makes their final stop at Kalyan. Lastly comes the Harbour line (which depicts the eastern coastline of the peninsula), which is a branch of the Central railways and shares the same starting and ending point.

Furthermore, the infrastructure of Mumbai allows for certain optimum means of transport such as auto *rickshaws* and publicly governed BEST (Brihanmumbai Electricity Supply and Transport) corporation buses have helped *dabbawalas* to commute with ease throughout distant localities of Mumbai for a cheap cost along with time efficiency. As aforementioned, the importance of the local railway spanning the Mumbai suburban district as well as the island city cannot be highlighted enough. Salsette island (containing most of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region except for Thane, Palghar and Raigad), is the original land mass upon which the 'Mumbai movement', so to speak began. Daily, the peak travel of office-goers begins at around 8-8:30 a.m., when they board the local, usually from the suburban neighbourhoods to arrive at most of their workplaces located in old/south Mumbai (synonymously; the island city). The fast-paced life of daily commuters who power the economy of India's financial capital need to be served punctually during designated lunch hours. Without the brilliantly-planned and well-connected railways of Mumbai, the thought of feeding over two-lakh people in this ever-growing megalopolis. It is quite astonishing that despite many points where train tracks interchange, or where only

slow trains operate, the maximum time taken on the largest railway route (Western line) is restricted only to 1.5 hours at most to cover a relatively daunting 64 kilometres, making the railway system in Mumbai an infrastructural marvel, which would only be supported by the peculiar yet highly effective geography of this region.



Figure 1: Pathway to stomachs - A map of the Mumbai Suburban Rail Network

1.4 RESEARCH STATEMENT, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Based on the review of literature and the gaps found, the research statement formed was meant to explore factors that had influenced the survival of the *dabbawalas* in the city of Mumbai. Based on this the research statement formed was as follows:

“Understanding the socio-cultural and economic factors such as gender roles, value systems and developing competition that have contributed to the survival of the Mumbai *Dabbawalas*. ”

Based on the research questions one of the aims was to explore the existing gender dynamics within *dabbawala* Community. Through the century that the *dabbawalas* have existed in Mumbai, there has never been any female *dabbawala* within the Community. The objective was achieved through understanding the perspectives of the *dabbawala* families regarding the working of women within their Community. Since the *dabbawalas* were also associated with the *Varkari* Community, the status of women within the *Varkaris* was also understood. Further, it was also taken into account what consumers/non-consumers thought about the lack of women in this field of work.

The second aim was to understand the development of the culture within the *dabbawala* Community. The *dabbawalas* have been a part of Mumbai for over a century. Within this century, a lot of changes have taken place in their culture and belief system. This was understood by noting changes in behaviour and belief systems as mentioned by them as well as by consumers. We also took into account how *Varkaris* not in this profession felt the Community had made changes that were not always positive.

The next aim understood the changes within the consumers/non-consumers societal structure and its impact on the survival of the *dabbawala* Community. With the increase in pace of the city life and both members of households working, the use of the *dabbawala* service has declined. The objective was to understand what the consumers/non-consumers felt about their changing needs when it came to food. It was understood that a lot of them believed that if the *dabbawalas* did not change their business structure they would struggle to adapt to the changing needs of the society.

Finally, it was also understood what the influence of external market forces (competition from Swiggy/Zomato) would be on the survival of the *dabbawalas*. This was gauged by how consumers/non-consumers believed such competition would influence the survival of the *dabawala* service. The perspective of the *dabbawalas* themselves was also taken into account to understand their views about their potential competitors and whether they perceived them as a threat to their survival.

Based on these factors and their influence on the Community, the research aimed to achieve an understanding of how the *dabbawala* Community would survive over the next few years. A metropolitan city like Mumbai is under the constant influence of change, which could be seen, in the internal factors of culture as well as the external factors like changing societal structures. In the face of such changes, adjustments would have to be made by the Community to make their business last. Whether these adaptations would be made by the *dabbawalas* or not, is a pressing question that would determine their survival.

1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the objectives and the research statement, the method adopted was a qualitative methodology for the research on the *dabbawalas*. As tools for data collection, we aimed to focus mostly on the interviews and observations. The team aimed to conduct semi-structured interviews with the stakeholders, since this would provide flexibility to the interviewees as well as the interviewers to put their point forward. For a few interviews of consumers/non-consumers and temple goers, a focus group interview was used to get multiple perspectives about the *dabbawala* service and their lifestyle. Furthermore, as a part of observation, an overt non-participant observation for the field study was adopted, wherein the *dabbawalas* were informed beforehand that they would be observed.

To get in touch with most of the stakeholders, the head of Marketing and Public Relations of the Union and fixed certain appointments. This included interviews with the Union Head & President of the *dabbawala* organization as well as veteran *dabbawalas*. Furthermore, the homes of *dabbawalas* to get interviews from the women of the *dabbawala* families were also visited. Consumers from different households, catering business and office goers from different localities were interviewed. Along with that, non-consumers, including those who were once consumers were also interviewed, in order to get a holistic perspective on our research. Hence, a mix of snowballing and convenient sampling was adopted.

Using observation as the second tool of data collection resulted in getting a cohesive qualitative data. An overt non-participant observation allowed the understanding of the *dabbawalas'* and the lifestyle they followed.

Keeping all of this in mind, it was made sure that the ethical guidelines were followed. Consent was taken from each interviewee for audio and video recording before the interview. It was also made sure that the interviewers were informed that the data collected was solely used for academic purposes, and also made sure that they were comfortable with the data being used at all.

Stakeholder	Sampling Method Used	Research Method Used	Sample Size
<i>Dabbawalas + Families</i>	Snowballing	Overt non-participation observation & Semi-structured interview	25
Consumers/Non-Consumers	Snowballing & Convenience	Semi-structured interview & Focus group interview	30
Temple Goers	Convenience	Overt non-participation observation &Semi-structured interview & Focus Group interview	8
Caterers	Convenience	Semi-structured interview	5

Figure 2: Sample size of the Stakeholders

1.6 LIMITATIONS

The on-field research conducted by the team faced various limitations, some of which were predictable while others required immediate adaptions. One of the biggest limitations of the research was the city of Mumbai itself, which is not very research-friendly. People in this city are extremely busy in their lives, always trying to run faster than time, and hardly having the time for answering the questionnaires created for research. However, the circumstances were dealt with, and interviewees were found. Even though the number was less than predicted.

The weather also proved to be a great barrier. The intense heat and humidity got the better of a lot of people. It was important to make sure that everyone on the team was

always hydrated. There were instances of people falling ill but none of them let that come in the way of the research, and literally put their blood and ‘sweat’ to make the on the field research a success.

Travel in and across Mumbai city took up a lot of time during the field research which interfered with the time kept aside to conduct interviews, even though the team mainly travelled in autos, through metros and local trains. Being new to the city and adjusting to the commute, which most of the team had not used before, was difficult. Travel also raised problems in terms of safety.

As the pre-decided itinerary was greatly altered, sub-group formations took place naturally. This caused communication problems within the team for the first two days, making it difficult to reach out to all the stakeholders. However, this problem was solved in due course, once a point of contact in each group was determined.

The *Dabbawala* Union heads themselves were a big limitation to the research. The team kept constant touch with the Union for months and had made all the appointments for the interviews. Promises were made regarding a lot of things by the *dabbawalas* on the phone. However, on field, their indifferent attitude and rigidity in answering questions became a huge obstacle. Nonetheless, the team did not get disheartened and continued to perform its roles with efficiency, till enough research gaps were covered.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY DATA FROM THE EXISTING LITERATURE

In a multicultural city like Mumbai, the Mumbai *dabbawalas* have been able to carve out an identity for themselves for years. This identity is deeply embedded in their social and cultural values. Their traditions hold great significance to their lives and is also reflected in their organizational culture. Nevertheless, how they are planning to evolve and revise their work culture to fit into the changing environment and how they expect to continue to manage their households with the changing times is largely unexplored. The area which has been most heavily researched is no doubt their exemplary supply chain which has even won them the Six-Sigma certificate. Along with this the literature review also traced the history of the *dabbawalas* in an attempt to discover their origins since this is also much debated about. Therefore, the literature review attempted to sew together the various factors that have together helped in the smooth functioning of the organization so far. However, it also simultaneously attempted to understand gaps which are yet to be answered and explored, especially with regard to socio-cultural factors which govern their lifestyle and work culture.

2.1.1 HISTORICAL ASPECT

The obsession with the comfort and pride provided by home cooked meals is typical to the Indian society. Started in the late 19th century, the envy of fresh, home-cooked lunches delivered daily at a Parsi banker's desk led to the increase in the errands for delivery boy Mahadeo Havaji Bacche. As demand increased and he was joined by others from his village, this location-based connectivity established a Community of “*dabbawalas*” (Tiffin-box providers), that is signature to the profession even to this day. As the small group of delivery boys understood their clients' needs, the capabilities of their colleagues and most importantly Mumbai's time-bound local transport context, they grew to become a Community of 5,000 who served the metropolitan's middle class their daily mid-day meal. Recognizing team-work as their

biggest strength, this Community makes deliveries across the city, with each “*dabba*” or tiffin sometimes travelling a distance of 60-70 kilometers, before reaching its receiver.

Alternatively, it has also been suggested that the start of the *dabbawala* culture began nearly 130 years ago, the “Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association” came into force. During that time, India was still under the British rule. Most British officers did not like the local Indian food that was served to them. Hence, a service was started to bring lunch of these British officers from their homes to their offices (Patel & Vedula, 2006). This service was started by none other than Mahadu Havji Bacche, a young enterprising soul (Bondre, 2011).

Mahadu Havji Bacche was a resident of the Maval district, a region in Western Maharashtra. He came to Mumbai in search for a job. He earned very little through the jobs. Even though the jobs were stable, he did not stop looking for other job opportunities. Having spent ample amount of time in Mumbai, he realised that there were not a lot of restaurants that served good food. He came up with a start-up idea, which later changed the lives of many. He started delivering lunch boxes from homes to Government offices, on foot. He invited young men from the Maval district who were in search for a job and asked them to join him in this venture of his. They were all descendants of the soldiers of the warrior king Shivaji. Hence, they possessed inherent strength and courage to do this task on a daily basis. Mahadu Bacche was surprised by the response he got from the villagers and hence, the *dabbawalas* came into force.

Dhondiba and Raghunath Medge were prominent members of this association. Both father and son have contributed a lot for the benefit of this association. They put in all their lives’ hard work and knowledge into making this organization even more efficient. Dhondiba Medge was the first to get into this business. He was a man of great leadership qualities. He did not only provide for his huge family (35 to 40 members), but also look over the functioning of the *dabbawalas* as the President of the Association. His main job was to ensure harmony amongst the *dabbawalas* and solve all disputes. They had to follow strict rules and regulations. Any form of misbehaviour was to be addressed and discussed immediately. He would also use

force when needed. He was yet, a very humble man and was always ready to help those in need. He would never hesitate to step out of his comfort zone to help someone. While he was working as the President of the Association, his son, Raghunath was completing his education. He was the first *dabbawala* to have a Bachelors of Arts Degree and have a little knowledge of law. Most *dabbawalas* have studied till 7th or 8th grade before they started earning for the family, which made Raghunath the most educated man in the association. Having gone through a rough childhood and lost his father in the year 1980, he had a tough time accepting his duties as the new President of the Association. However, he soon got on track and followed his father's footsteps and led the association with the same zest as his father. He brought upon many changes that benefited the association, such as, the coding system, the system of *Mukadam*, and many more.

There are some factors that made their service one of the finest and smoothest in the world. The *dabbawalas* travelled long distances to deliver food from homes to offices and back. Punctuality was one of the key features of the *dabbawalas*. They travel 25 km by public transport and 10 km on foot. Hence, they were greatly dependent on Mumbai's suburban rail network. The efficiency and punctuality of the rail network ensured the same for the *dabbawalas*. A change in weather did not affect their punctuality. They continued their work with the same precision and dedication every day. Every *dabbawala* was in charge of a limited number of transactions at a time. They delivered the *dabbas* to the respective building or floor with the help of a crate. Clients came, identified their *dabba* and collected it. After they've finished their meal, they put the *dabba* back inside the crate. Due to this system the probability of error reduced even further. Additionally, the crates in which the *dabbas* are carried are low cost and do not carry much value. Hence, there is no theft of the *dabbas*. Finally, an essential factor of their success is the bond that they share with each other. Since most of them come from the same region, they share a bond of brotherhood and trust that cannot be found in any other corporation in the world. This is what makes their organisation unique.

Just like any other organisation, the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association (NMTBSA) also faces certain difficulties when it comes to the survival of the association. In a booming economy like India's, people are always in the lookout for

higher paying and more challenging jobs. It is tough to maintain employees and prevent them from job hopping. The *dabbawalas*, however, have managed to overcome this challenge efficiently till date. The employees take pride in their job and share a closely-knit bond with one another. They consider their job not only challenging but also meaningful. Another challenge faced by the association is maintaining punctuality. With the growing pollution and drastic weather changes, the delivery times get affected. The *dabbawalas* are known for their punctuality.

The *dabbawalas* have survived through all political, economic and cultural changes in the country. They have adapted to all the changes in the society and have also been an inspiration to many entrepreneurs. They have become the epitome of hard work and dedication (Patel & Vedula, 2006). Despite their achievements, there are certain negatives to system of the *Dabbawalas* Association. As mentioned earlier in the report, Raghunath Medge had a Bachelor of Arts Degree. He was forced to become the President of the association due to the untimely death of his father. As his father was such a strong member of the association, the *dabbawalas* looked forward to work under his leadership which gave him no choice but to take the post. Unable to juggle between his work and studies, Raghunath had to sacrifice his dream of becoming an advocate for the sake of the Community (Bondre, 2011).

2.1.2 SOCIO CULTURAL ASPECT

In the vast bustling city of Mumbai, where congestion and traffic are robust across the streets, there exists a century-old system of transporting *dabbas* or tiffin's or lunch boxes from one end of the vast city to the other in an economically efficient and timely manner. This system has stood strong against the rapidly increasing population of Mumbai and has managed to withstand all factors that could take it out of functioning with changing times. A major factor in play that supports this age-old system, helping them maintain quality is the strong bonds and close-knit culture held by this Community. Researches that have been conducted so far on this subject have been primarily focused on the structure created and implemented by *dabbawalas* in its economic aspects rather than other fields.

What stands out is the nature of the very profession of a *dabbawalla* as it is one that has been passed on from one generation to another with its core values being preserved by upcoming generations. This holds true even for the customers of a particular *dabbawala*, that is, the future lineage of a customer will serve as customers for the future lineage of the *dabbawalla*. This showed a sense of heritage, tradition and loyalty involved in the profession. The creation of the identity has helped a number of members receive livelihood and social stance in modern day society.

The *dabbawalas* have helped improve economic conditions of uneducated people that migrate to Mumbai. Given that the population is always on the rise, the need for *dabbawalas* will also simultaneously increase. Thus, the Community has paved the way for migrants to improve their economic conditions by allowing them to take part in the profession and hold similar cultural identity. The *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai have established themselves firmly into the roots of the city with it becoming an essential part of the city's functioning and identity.

Traditional *dabbawalas* didn't have a hierachal system present, but in modern Mumbai the Unionization of *dabbawalas* took place to ensure that the ever-growing network is put under supervision to ensure that value systems and quality are maintained overtime. The *dabbawalas* played a major role in transporting food to immigrants in the past thus providing a livelihood and social stance to the unskilled worker working as a *dabbawala*. The *dabbawalas* never did cook food throughout the existence of the profession but simply served as a delivery service boasting transportation of more than just food but instead a sense of security and familiarity for its customers. Another prominent factor in the rise of *dabbawalas* was the cotton mills that employed a large number of workers that used the service to get food given that it was a cost-efficient way to get warm food. Thus, it was also labourers that popularized the service. It is this very social aspect that shows the true nature of our country, where there exists a service of a specific type within a class, but it caters to millions of different social and economic backgrounds. One would see a *dabbawala* collect the box of a corporate tycoon and also collect the box of an employee on a construction site, bringing to notice the unity that the service has brought in society barring differences between customers with all being viewed as one and the same. The *dabbawalas* serve the elite and the underprivileged without disparity. Thus, it

brings out the factor of providing the city of Mumbai with an identity, where equality stands beyond disparities. Their aim is simply to ensure that no one is forced to go hungry.

The *dabbawalas* also helped provide unemployed women with occupations with a stable income. The Annapurna Mahila Mandal women's association formed with the goal of employing battered women to set kitchens that cook and sell meals providing steady jobs to the same. The association heavily relied on the *dabbawalas'* service to enhance and hold onto their consumer base along with the idea of empowering women workforce. The increase in business was due to an efficient delivery and reliable service being present; allowing the association to grow and further employ more women and helping them improve their social stance. The Annapurna Mahila Mandal Women's Association was initially formed by the women that were employed in Khanawals, that is, small kitchens that made cheap food which was made and delivered by women to mainly cotton-mill workers. One of the major changes with the formation of the association was the inclusion of *dabbawalas* into the equation which further enhanced their outreach from just mill-workers to schools, offices and banks. Thus, the *dabbawalas'* established network gained a tag of being reliable and familiar across different professionals widespread in the city of Mumbai. The role played in helping the Annapurna Mahila Mandal Women's Association achieved success. This showed the prowess of the service and the intent present due to the close-knit culture present in enhancing outreach of a simple meal-making organization. *dabbawalas* have played a huge role in providing occupations to unskilled labourers and women across Mumbai. The service also allowed setting up of organizations that relied directly on the service provided by *dabbawalas*. These organizations better the conditions of the underprivileged by providing a social stance, which is indirectly due to the reliant service that is the *dabbawalas*. The rise of Mumbai as the financial capital and increased number of offices surged the reliance on the *dabbawalas* to ensure that there are smooth deliveries across the city.

With a lot of heritage present in the occupation and economic effects brought in by the service, *dabbawalas* of Mumbai can be seen as an essential component to the growth of the city to the urban forest it is today. However it puts to question, the fact that if the heritage is maintained is growth a possibility. With organisations opening

up to the concept of adapting to change by modifying a few core values which in turn produce growth; is it indeed logical for the *dabbawalas* then to hold on their age-old trends and lose out on the opportunities to grow as not just a Community or organisation but as an identity. The *dabbawalas* are one of the biggest contributors to the development of the city of Mumbai overtime, with the service acting as a backbone for social entrepreneurs to function effectively and efficiently across the city. With the story of their service being a known fact to everyone, there appears a lack of knowledge in understanding how their socio-cultural aspects like value systems and rigid beliefs have helped the Community sustain so far in the city.

In conclusion, the dynamic of the Community is such that each domains effectiveness and vastness is interdependent on the changes taking place in other domains. Thus, if the *dabbawalas* ceased to adapt their culture to changing times it could impact other domains in time. Given that steps have been taken by the Community (Unionisation) to culturally progress with time, the effect and timing of these changes can only be observed with time.

2.1.3 OPERATIONS ASPECT

The application of the function of a supply chain is very principle upon which the operation of the *dabbawalas* occurs. Whether the communal riots are looked at, or the massive deluge of July 2005 that hit Mumbai, the *dabbawalas* proved and have continued to prove their resilience to external disturbances. According to existing literature on this area of study as well as the voice of the *dabbawalas*, it is very evident that the importance of a set-in-stone internal framework that dictates the plan of action cannot be more emphasised.

The 5,000 or so *dabbawalas* in the city have an unbelievable service record. Each working day they transport excess of 130,000 lunchboxes all through Mumbai (Business Standard, 2017). Applying Daniel Pink's three-factor motivation theory, the *dabbawalas*, have the autonomy of adopting their individual working style and patterns if the organizational goal of delivering customers their respective *dabbas/tiffins* at the correct time is met. The "correct" time is defined by the customer who is consuming the home-cooked food and through this lens it is very plausible to

state that *dabbawalas* prioritize their customers (lean towards the “customer is king” philosophy) much like other corporate businesses running delivery service platforms that are usually online and application based.

A partial dependence on the railroad framework (train network) that makes request in any case. Swarmed trains make conveying *dabbas* troublesome, and office employees do not frequently eat out, due to the cost, an inclination for home-cooked diets persists which is again accentuated by the low quality offered by in-house cafeterias and/or cheap cafés and restaurants that exist nearby. It is strictly because of this reason that office employees have their lunches arranged at home and dropped off by the *dabbawalas* after the mid-morning peak hour that typically makes travel difficult but may also give rise to certain unforeseen disasters such as the spillage of food items or any other inconvenience faced by the *dabbawalas* as they gear up for their busy schedule for the day. After all, any discrepancies and mishaps on behalf of the *dabbawalas* themselves is something that is very much against their work ethics, principles and Community values.

On some random day, a *dabba* changes hands a few times. Toward the beginning of the day a *dabbawala* lifts it up from the client’s home and takes it (alongside different *dabbas*) to the closest prepare station, where it is arranged and put onto a wooden crate as indicated by its goal. It is then taken for sorting to the station nearest to its goal. There it is arranged again and allocated to another specialist, who delivers it to the correct office before noon. Towards the evening the procedure keeps running backward, and the *dabba* is retrieved from the office/workplace and then returned to the client’s home.

The *dabbawalas* basically oversee themselves regarding enlisting, coordination, client securing and maintenance, and compromise. This causes them to work effectively and minimize expenses as the nature of administration high. All specialists add to a beneficent structure that gives protection and intermittent monetary guide—for instance, when a *dabbawala* needs to supplant a bike that has been stolen or is broken it is unrecoverable.

Each *dabbawala* is a business person who oversees arranging costs with his own clients. Be that as it may, overseeing councils set rules at costs, which consider factors, for example, the separation between a client's living arrangement and office and the separation between that office and the nearest railroad station. Since *dabbawalas* possess their associations with clients and tend to work in a similar area for quite a long time, those connections are by and large long haul, confiding in ones.

To pass on data, the *dabbawalas* depend on a code, which shows the area where the *dabba* must be conveyed. The first part is a gathering of characters on the edge of the cover: a number for the *dabbawala* who will make the conveyance, an in sequential order code (a few letters) for the place of business, and a number showing the floor. The second—a blend of shading and shape, and on a few occasions, a theme—demonstrates the station. Clients supply little packs for conveying their *dabbas*, and the variety in the sacks' shapes and hues enables specialists to recollect which *dabba* must reach which client.

Even with an efficient coding system, workers still have a small margin of error for certain tasks. The allotted time for picking up a *dabba* at a house, for example, might be only 30 to 60 seconds, and any number of small delays could easily have a cascading effect that slowed thousands of deliveries. So, to stay on schedule, each group has two or three extra workers who fill in wherever they are needed, and all members are cross-trained in different activities: collecting, sorting, transporting, finance, and customer relations.

The *dabbas*, for example, are all generally a similar size and tube-shaped. To urge clients to accommodate, holders cost an extra charge when, say, they are large to the point that they require unique taking care of. Abnormal compartments that meddle with the conveyance task are essentially not acknowledged. This consistency permits the *dabbas* to be stuffed rapidly onto boxes, which are likewise a standard size with the goal that they can be effectively stacked onto trains.

The *dabbawalas* entirely watch certain principles. For example, they don't eat until the point that they have finished every one of their deliveries. *Dabbawalas* are fined or let go for rehashed missteps and carelessness. Clients are likewise chosen in a

manner in alignment the procedure. The individuals who are over and over late in having their *dabbas* prepared for pickup and don't react to alerts are dropped from the organisation.

The *dabbawalas'* homogeneity likewise has an influence. In a time when numerous organizations take a stab at decent variety in their workforce, the drawbacks of the *dabbawalas* are minor enough to be disregarded. There are focal points to consistency: It makes a solid personality and sets limits that are fundamental in an exceedingly factor condition. So, the tenets cannot be rigid to the point that they do not consider adaptable reactions to issues that happen each day. In the end for the *dabbawalas*, it is all about equalization. Throughout the years, the *dabbawalas* have gotten a lot of suggestions for expanding their incomes or enhancing their tasks. Nevertheless, the proposals are normally dismissed after watchful examination uncovers their effect.

This is not to imply that the *dabbawalas* contradict change. They recognize they should adjust to significant patterns clearing India, for example, the detonating quantities of ladies entering the workforce. This move could majorly benefit their business as they will have an extra pair hands and a broader perspective to base their business against. Regardless, *dabbawalas* are not concerned with minuscule constraints such as having only 40 seconds to stack the boxes of *dabbas* onto the train at significant stations and only 20 seconds at between time stops. Their worries may be of a much greater degree. They are confronting challenges as their market experiences a change. Be that as it may, with sensible changes in accordance within their Community-based organization, they may keep on achieving astounding outcomes.

2.1.4 ECONOMIC ASPECT

Of the five thousand *dabbawalas* in the field, it is evaluated that eighty-five percent are unskilled (The Hindu 2016), and that fifteen percent have finished instruction till the eighth standard. As the cost for present day instruction develops, the *dabbawalas* regularly swing to low pay employments to satisfy the low pay of being a *dabbawala*. Some *dabbawalas* additionally also parallelly work as cab-drivers. This is frequently

done to accommodate the people within the family while some regularly do it to finish tutoring. Numerous progressions are being made however, as the trust for the association has begun giving English courses. The same number of the clients presently talk in English. Although such little changes are occurring in the association, Mumbai is creating changes in a substantially quicker pace.

The extension of an economy connected to the administration segment advanced the development of new social classes, including a Marathi-talking white-collar class, which ended up vital for Mumbai's future. Although generally consigned to the lower rungs of the social ladder and occupations without status, the Marathas are demographically the biggest ethnicity. They presently started to request a more critical job in basic leadership forms concerning city approaches. The statement of this interest for financial and social portrayal advanced close by the vanishing of great types of work association. There was over each of a character compose obstruction, a conceivable vehicle of new types of majority rules system yet in addition of existing apprehension towards the spread of foreign influence and religious fundamentalism.

Bombay's human, social, and semantic assorted variety made it a driver of activities for developing a strategy for correspondence open to every one of its occupants. Understanding that Bombay was and still is a city of settlers is essential to translating its social stratification. The clear majority who came to look for work in the city maintain a bond with their place of birthplace. Work in the city has normally been sporadic and business conditions regularly problematic, so ties with the provincial country are normal, filling in as a security net in case of joblessness. The securities kept up with these provincial regions were a transitional stage in the arrangement of the urban work drive in the early time of Bombay's industrialization, but at the same time were an essential hazard administration methodology. The region ('P. (2016, November 03). Changing food habits hit growth of Mumbai *dabbawalas*. (Retrieved from [https://www.thehindu.com/business/Changing food-habits-hit-growth-of-Mumbai-dabbawalas/article13547844.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/business/Changing-food-habits-hit-growth-of-Mumbai-dabbawalas/article13547844.ece)) one of a kind urban configuration is supported by the way that the work circumstance in Bombay is dubious and unpredictable, and that the labouring classes keep up ties with their place of birthplace. These towns are both a steady wellspring of enlistment for modest work and a sort of outlet valve for abundance work during emergency. Numerous urban

specialists routinely send home cash or merchandise, along these lines clutching the status and rights recognized for their situation in the family.

2.2 GAPS IN THE EXISTING LITERATURE

Based on the reading of the existing literature, it was concluded that a number of gaps existed in the current academic literature on the *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai. These gaps did not only standout to be, crucial for comprehending the current conditions of the *dabbawala* Community but also critical for a better understanding of social dynamics of the Community. These gaps have further contributed to shaping the objectives and the research statement of this project. The gaps have been broadly classified into three subsets, that is on the basis of the branch of academia they deal with.

The first branch is history. A discrepancy has been noticed in the existing literature on *Dabbawalas* with regards to the origin of this delivery system. While, some authors such as Shivani Pandita claim that the delivery system was started to fulfil the needs of a Parsi financier, others claim that the system was put in place to satisfy the Indian clerks of the British administration who had a growing desire to have home-made food. It must be understood that the history of a service or a product plays a vital role in apprehending the present situation. Not only is it necessary to observe the shifts and disruptions that have taken place over a period of time but also to know and understand the very origin of such systems.

The second branch revolves around the socio-cultural literature. To an extent, one can find reviews and articles on the ethnic composition of the *dabbawalas*. It can be noticed that a superficial amount of documentation is available on the socio-cultural aspects of the *dabbawalas* such as - that the most *dabbawalas* identify themselves as the members of the '*Varkari Sampradaya*' and closely associate themselves with the 'Maratha' culture which is why they are commonly spotted with the 'tilak' on their foreheads and wearing the "Gandhi cap".(Ghodake,2016) However, there is a substantial lack of information on the internal culture and lifestyle. Research regarding the group following among the Community members and untold values that are concerned exclusively to the Community members are pivotal details that seem to be partially absent from the earlier works on the *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai. Another

gap that was noticed is the lack of data on the gender dynamics of the Community. No extensive work has been done that follows the gender relations of the Community and thereby creating a large hiatus in regard to the socio-cultural aspect. Further, a few academicians challenge the notion of the *dabbawalas* being ‘illiterate’. They believe that the definition of literacy, very colloquially is the ability to converse and understand ‘English’. And hence, the labelling of the *dabbawalas* is disputed. To add to this, it must be noted that most of these *dabbawalas* are trilingual. However, with respect to formal education, most of these men ‘drop-out’ by 7th or 8th grade. Added to this- the advent of technology and an attempt by governing bodies to formalise informal sectors, it has become important to be a member of the formal education society. Hence it becomes important to understand, how the *dabbawalas* accommodate and adapt to these changes. And thus, it is seen as a major gap in the existing literature.

The third branch where a number of gaps were observed is the economic branch of academia. Here, economics as a term is used to refer to the financial, monetary and commercial elements of the Community. It has been comprehended that the *dabbawalas* plan to stick to their ‘traditional’ jobs of just delivering tiffins and want to avoid the use of technology in their work environment. It is not hard to believe this mindset could be hindering their growth progression and is preventing the system from being more efficient. However, there is no substantial data on the same to make a conclusion. Therefore, it can be seen as a gap that must be filled in order to create concrete information about the ‘trade’ of the *dabbawalas*. Some scholars claim *dabbawalas* to be an entrepreneurial success. The system has sustained itself for years and has made for them a name parallel to the word Mumbai. However, they believe that the *dabbawala* system as a social entrepreneurship model has succeeded but has not be articulated about. There have been claims by certain authors such as Ganapathy, who believe that the *dabbawalas* are a social-entrepreneurship marvel. Further, he adds that if their system is understood and replicated in this arrangement, it would create more successful social entrepreneurs. Despite such claims, there is a lack of resources to confirm these claims.

The *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai, though extensively examined and researched about the research has substantially been on the economic and commercial aspect. The gaps are

a testimony to the fact that, not enough socio-cultural research has been conducted on this delivery system. Thus, shaping the research statement towards understanding and getting better insight into the Community's lifestyle and social structure.

CHAPTER 3

3.1 FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF DABBAWALA COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

The *Varkari Sampraday*, a Community completely soaked in culture, are devotees of *Vithal*, also known as *Vithoba*, who believe that service to man is service to God. The white Nehru *topi* adorned by the men of the Community is not only a mark of identity, but also signifies purity and the willingness to be of service. With goodwill to help, this Community provides members to the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust, also popularly known as the *Dabbawalas*. The *dabbawala* Community believes that it is discipline and hard work that has gained them recognition in society today. While it is mandatory for them to wear the Nehru *topi* on duty, they also strictly abide by other work ethics that are applicable in corporate houses around the globe. Any misconduct is penalized and is monetarily punishable. It is the faith of the people in the service that has led them to keep their services flawless. Although they prove to be humble by crediting their immense success as a supply chain system to their customer base and the general population of Mumbai, they also take great pride in their global achievements such as winning the Six-Sigma Certificate, being mentioned in the Guinness Book of World Records for carrying the most number of tiffin crates on the head, or about the fact that their Union heads were invited to London for the Royal Wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. (Ulhas Shantaram Mukhe, personal communication, October 2, 2018)

The research required an understanding of the socio-cultural aspects of their Community. There has been immense research on the business system that the *Dabbawalas* employ which has received a lot of praise worldwide. However, not much information is available on their social life. In this research we were inclined towards studying the roles of the women and children in the *Varkari* households, how they contribute to it, and what their future notions of the Community were. Interviewing the families helped explore recurring traits in the members of the Community. The religious beliefs of the *Dabbawalas* were also looked into, as social research would be incomplete without venturing into their religious beliefs and analysing how this affects their daily life and business model.

Deeply embedded in the *Varkari* nomenclature are the attributes of patience and tolerance. As mentioned in the earlier findings, the attitude the people of Mumbai possess towards the *dabbawalas* is not what one might imagine. The seemingly pleasant and good-tempered people of the *Varkari Sampraday* have had to surpass many social obstacles to reach a state of bliss and ignorance they are at present. In the past, individuals and groups have had the opportunity to indulge in “othering” the *dabbawalas* about their distinct attire; especially about the white Nehru *topi*, which may be peculiar to the eye in the first glance. An anecdote of one *dabbawala* describes the encounters as “a juvenile set of fury attacks” (Shankar, personal communication, October 1, 2018), claiming that they have now grown used to the critics of their pristine white appearance. Non-violence takes importance over many other requirements of *Varkari* rules.

The *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai have gained a stark reputation for being confident individuals who attain a sharp ‘presence of mind’, equipped enough to make complex decisions about the inculcation of technology in their business. Their idea of utilizing bikes for transportation was however, disposed of as their system framework around the Mumbai local is cost efficient enough to make deliveries in time while also ensuring that no *dabba* ever gets lost. Many individuals left this service post the 'Jamnabai blast in 1992'. As an aftermath to the blast, their deals lessened radically.

Trying to cope up with the global norms of today’s world, the *dabba* Community have also embraced digitization by coming up with the concept of the ‘Digital *Dabbawala*’. However, from conversations held, and opinions heard, the *dabbawala* Community does not seem to completely embrace modern ideas such as feminism. Stauchly believing in the fact that the job is strength and vigour oriented, the Community is a male monopoly to this date. Unlike other family run businesses, the *dabbawala* Community, although a venture of the men of the *Varkari Sampraday*, have never considered involving women of the household to make Union decisions. When questioned about their thoughts upon their children continuing with the same tasks, the men might encourage their sons but definitely would not allow their daughters to step into this Union.

The *dabbawalas* are a male oriented Community where barely any female *Dabbawalas* exist. As stated by the women of the Community themselves, females and the children of the Community were, and to this day are barely given any power in the decision-making process, whether of the household or of the Union. The *Dabbawalas* never discussed business matters at home, reducing any possibility of the involvement of women and their children, who are educated enough to help improve the services.

Women *Dabbawalas* are a rare sighting and there have only been 4-5 in the history of the *Dabbawalas* service. This is primarily because the males of the Community are of the opinion that their job requires intense physical labour of carrying 30-40 kgs of *dabba* weight and hence cannot be handled by women. They further added that the travel in the Mumbai Local is a tedious task, especially in the peak hours which coincide with the delivery hours of the *Dabbawalas*. They believe that women would struggle to cope up with the various uncomfortable circumstances which could hamper the efficiency of the service. The age-old principle of the division of labour between the man and woman of the house as the bread earner and home keeper respectively, is still prevalent in the Community; and is accepted by both the sexes. When given the suggestion that the women could be provided with specialised training, the male members scoffed at the idea and dismissed it with the justification that the women wouldn't manage as efficiently as them. Another observation that proved male dominance in this Community was that the women of the household were only allowed to speak to interviewers in the presence of the man of the house, and some males would even dictate the answers to the questions directed to the women. This was a reoccurring phenomenon when they were questioned about what their opinion would be if given the opportunity to work with their husbands as *dabbawalas*. But was also met with a lot of disapproval from the male members present in the room, leading to a concord that the thought had never occurred and that both the husband and wife were happy with their current status. Their mannerisms and expressions during such questions spoke volumes about the Community, and led to the resolution that the men of the Community were uncomfortable with the women having an opinion and decision making powers like them.



Figure 3: The past and present in one frame- the ex and current Presidents of the Dabbawala Union

During the interviews conducted with the families, it seemed highly probable that what the family members were saying was rehearsed. Most women were reluctant to answer questions and kept looking at their husbands, as if indirectly asking for permission. They showed complete devotion towards their husbands and were unwilling to answer questions which seemed new. Covering their heads with the veil of their saree as a form of respect to the males as well as the elders in the house, they practiced various rituals in order to shield the health of the male members of the household. They believe that only if their service to their husbands is unblemished, the men will be able to carry out their duties proficiently. One of the *dabbawala's* wife said, "We feed our husbands so that they can feed others" (Anonymous, personal communication, October 5, 2018). During some interviews the men kept responding with key words to the questions asked to the women, providing them with the direction their answers should follow. Though they attempted to make this look discrete and natural, it eventually became evident that they were subjugating the honesty of their answers. Although this practice appeared to be a common household norm and was initially dismissed, it became evident that their answers were rehearsed and remained consistent, across households. In some cases, the wives were not even allowed to speak. Women who were comparatively younger in age and were married into the *dabbawala* household, appeared much more confident and outspoken. One

woman also spoke about her desire to start a family business with her husband, where she would cook the meals and her husband would deliver. She confessed that the only thing holding them back was the lack of basic amenities required for this kind of business such as space, to which the *dabbawala* agreed (Anonymous, personal communication, October 4, 2018). On being asked, he added that the other *dabbawalas* would encourage and support them through this. This added clarity on the idea that the Community was willing to help the female members start their own businesses or to work in other areas and earn money but were not willing to allow them to work in the same business that their husbands were a part of. A standard notion about women that men of this society possess is that a woman can do basic chores that are her duty to do and convert them into an income source, however, she cannot be a part of a similar earning strata as her husband.

They had a similar mind-set about their children being in this business. During an interview, a *dabbawala* claimed that to be able to carry out this service, continuous hard work, dedication, and effort was crucial (Maooli, personal communication, October 4, 2018). Most of them believe that the newer generation did not possess such willpower. While some held this generalised opinion, others didn't want their children to enter this business due to the limited earning potential of the job. Most families wanted their children to study and have better jobs to attain a standardised lifestyle, better than their present conditions. This suggested that the *dabbawalas* from a particular family would eventually reduce, causing a decline in the number of *dabbawalas* in a Union in the future. However, a counter argument that emerged to this inference is that other people from different regions of the state or country may join the business in search of labour oriented jobs, which do not require much education.

Two children belonging to the *dabbawala* household were also questioned. While one was to appear for his higher secondary examinations, the other was pursuing her Bachelor's degree in Business Administration (BBA). Both individuals appeared unsure about what to say when questioned about their opinions on various factors. They stayed quiet and kept looking at their father for his inputs. They only spoke after receiving an affirmative nod from their father, the *dabbawala*. The elder sibling admitted to having the will to pursue arts and not commerce, to which her mother

added that her skills were extraordinary, and that she would have had a bright future in that field. The daughter also asserted that she had no say in the decisions related to her career and was expected to oblige by her father's choice (Anonymous, personal communication, October 4, 2018). This reflects poorly not only on their family but also on their Community where a child being forced to study certain subjects to fulfil their parents' dream is a common thing. She also admitted to being fascinated by the work of the *dabbawalas* and would be interested in working alongside her father. She understood the amount of physical labour required for the job and was willing to put in extra effort if she received some special training for it. However, when asked to make a choice between working with her father as a *dabbawala* or pursuing a BBA, she would choose the latter. The younger child, on the other hand, wasn't directed into any particular education stream. It was his decision to take up commerce and unlike his elder sister, he was completely against working as a *dabbawala* with his father. He aspired to start his own business or to work in some company. His approach towards his father's business was that of disinterest. He hadn't thought about using his education to bring about any change in the *Dabbawala* business. He was strongly inclined towards music and knew how to play few instruments, an artistic talent his mother was very proud of. In a family where both children were interested in creative fields, they were driven to enter a field which would ensure well-paying jobs. This showed the father's strong influence in the family and how the man of the house had the final word when it came to important family decisions. It also projected the family's opinion on the *dabbawala* services and its relevance in the near future.

An important discovery made during the research about the *dabbawalas* was their various associations, such as advertising for organizations like Hajmola. They receive a commission for promoting and appropriating tests for these organizations. Whenever questioned about competition, they referred to the fact that the development of Zomato and Swiggy, has had no impact on their business as their intended interest groups are altogether different. They likewise clarified their guideline about serving home cooked food. This is one reason for the auspicious structure of their business. Theirs is the main administration that conveys home cooked nourishment, which is the bedrock of their sustenance in the unforgiving business industry. The *dabbawalas* have been staying as a family for as long as they

can remember. They are also considered the epitome of association, care and holding, which urges them to wear down basic appreciation. Having same arrangement of acknowledged principles and dress make them exceptional.

The *Dabbawalas* are very proud *Varkaris*. They claim to strongly abide by all the values and traditions of the *Varkari Sampraday*. As mentioned earlier, some of them include, visiting the temple on a regular basis, not indulging in any sort of addiction, treating everyone with respect and considering each other as equals. The Community is extremely religious and have temples in the middle of the society they live in, as well as have various religious pictures and idols in their homes. Over time however, this dedication towards certain rituals may have diluted. They now no longer visit the temple on a regular basis. They instead believe that God resides in their hearts and service to mankind is service to Him. During an interview, the mother of a *dabbawala* mentioned that her husband, also a *Varkari*, had died of alcohol poisoning (Anonymous, personal communication, October 5, 2018). This indicated that one of the most important values which stated that the people of the Community must not indulge into any vices such as alcoholism, smoking or other harmful activities, was violated. As of religious traditions, they hold *baithaks* and network occasions where they travel to Pandharpur or have mass sittings where they serenade *shlokas* and sing psalms. This is a stage used to produce tranquil and otherworldly vibrations, while as yet staying in contact with their underlying foundations and culture.

The *dabbawalas* had also emphasized on how they treated everyone in the Community with respect and considered them as equals. They do so when it comes to each male member of the Community but evidently not otherwise as they consider women incapable of joining their services or giving opinions regarding business or Community decisions.

An utmost intriguing piece of information opens up certain controversial and unexplored aspects of the *Dabbawala* Community. Whilst on the train journey from Dadar West Railway Station, we awaited the arrival of Mr. Navnat Pashankar, who is the owner of Sunita Tiffin Service and had hired his cohort of *Dabbawalas*. This undertaking was initiated in addition to his work as a *Dabbawala*. However, as the business grew, he decided to make it a full-time affair and discontinued working as a

Dabbawala. In saying so, he is still very much a part of the Mumbai ‘*Dabbewale Union*’, the official organisation.

A peculiar finding made by our team during one of the train journeys was about the asymmetry of information being shared by Mr. Navnat and his uncle. When we asked Mr. Navnat about the thoughts the *Dabbawala* Union had about his independent catering enterprise, he replied by saying “they have no problems at all, and are in fact happy that the burden of hiring people from the same native place has now fallen onto me instead of the Union”. However, his uncle presented a very different ‘truth’ to the research group. He said “When someone starts an enterprise of their own, they have to pay about 1 lakh rupees to the Union as a permission fee”. Instantly upon his comment, he was shushed to silence by Mr. Navnat , who whispered, “they are not supposed to know this”. At first, this piece of information was startling. There seemed to be no common ground for thinking and behaviour between the *dabbawalas* and there seems to exist a clear sense of individuality, unlike what is portrayed. This interview with Mr. Navnat and his unnamed uncle (who happened to be the Senior *Muqqadams*) was recorded on video and transcribed as a permanent evidence of this fact.

Furthermore, there are two key points that arose post this interview. It gave rise to a debate about the harsh permission fee that would have set back Mr. Navnat and his family controlled business back significantly on financial terms. The reason for levying a permission fee can be explained in terms of his uncle’s justification, that the Union is simply trying to protect the existing customer base and to ensure that much of the prospective target customers are spared by the expanding business housed within the Community of the *Dabbawalas*. The close-knit and people-centric nature of the trade may be hampered as according to the Union this detachment initiates envy and dissatisfaction. *Dabbawalas* employed under the Union have now decided their own terms and are earning higher profits as compared to the fixed salaries they received at the onset of their careers.

Owing to research, massive change seems to have occurred in basic ideals of the Community such as their policy on honesty. While Mr. Navnat had wished to conceal the fact about the monetary impositions made by the Union on his business, his uncle

was rather upfront and appeared confident enough to share this delicate piece of information. People of recent generations have become sound of their surroundings, ensuring that their honesty and ignorance doesn't become the reason for their downfall.

In a world driven by money, it is key to ensure that political correctness is maintained. Mr. Navnat and the generation of the current *Dabbawalas* that he represents, might even lie or as an equivalent of the act even conceal the truth. They have learnt now to not trust easily as their livelihoods and purpose in the ever-changing city of Mumbai is solely supported by their business. This instance showed us the extent to which the *Varkaris* may or may not limit themselves. The key *Varkari* attributes, such as honesty, are disappearing in the present Community of *Dabbawalas*, as there is a sea change in the landscape surrounding their trade. Senior individuals, like the *Muqqadams*, are conceived to be gullible and are very likely to be forced out of the Union if they disclose any confidential information about the *Dabbawalas*, who have now strayed away from their idealistic image portrayed to society. Selfishness and self-progress have taken priority over the erstwhile proper Community way of life that is quickly breaking down. The *Varkari Dabbawalas* are struggling to find footing in their rapidly diminishing trade and have been forced into other jobs in the informal sector such as drivers and/or cooks, as their Union fails to financially support the rising salary demands, with the costs in the operating base of Mumbai taking a hike.

Continuing the equality aspect of their religious norms, the *dabbawalas* show that they treat everyone in their Community with respect. Previous existing research papers claim that there exists no hierarchy in the *Dabbawala* Union. During the on-field research conducted, a certain amount of permission fee was paid to Mr. Vilas Shinde, the PR and Marketing Head, to follow and observe a *dabbawala* around the city for an entire day; leading us to believe that the *dabbawala* Community is money minded and not purely a socialist organization. In addition to that when another *dabbawala* was interviewed, he also asked for a permission fee. On being told that the money had been given to his head and he could collect it from him, he started getting anxious which was completely unexpected. In this anxious state, he told us that the heads couldn't be trusted with the distribution of the permission fee. He further

explained that it was very difficult to get the money from the heads and there was no guarantee if he would receive it at all. This piece of information was astounding. The only conclusion drawn from this interview was that there exists a hierarchy in their business with a possibility of slight corruption.

A reason why the Community still exists could be that the workers of the Union are provided with the feeling of belongingness and respect. As most of these men are uneducated, the *dabba* Community is their only way to earn money and respect while still being part of the *Varkari Sampraday*. This feeling of belongingness is crucial to them as the Community provides a family ambience, far away from the hometowns of the *dabbawalas*. The *dabbawalas* seem to have adapted to the lifestyle of an urban lower middle class family as majority of the households had both the man and woman of the house going out to work. While the men are okay with their wives and children also entering the earning sphere of the house, they hold the notion of the *dabba* Services being male dominated as it has been so traditionally, ever since the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust came into existence. This could also be a reason why unlike staunch followers of *Vithoba*, most *dabbawala* families do not go to the temple everyday nor carry out daily rituals associated to the lord. To continue to feel as part of a group which is like a faux-family and will help them when need arises, they indulge in small activities similar to that of the staunch *Varkaris*, such as adorning the sacred thread, following a vegetarian diet and not allowing poultry items into the household, having a corner of their residence dedicated to their God, etc. However, the idea that their religious beliefs are now getting diluted and are only followed so as to have societal support can be reinforced by the fact that some *dabbawala* households had admitted to not strictly following rituals of the *Varkari Sampraday*, such as consuming meat. Tobacco consumption and gambling is also prohibited in the *Varkaris* but cigarette boxes and playing cards were spotted in the households and in the office of the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust, restating that the *Varkari Dabbawalas* have also, like various other communities, been affected by urbanization and modernization.

The children of the *Dabbawalas* have never even considered joining the Union professionally as an option. A topic probably never put on the table for discussion, most of the children belonging to these households are educated and wish to pursue

desk jobs that will pay them well. This is a reflection of the conditions that the *dabba* Community living in the slums of Mumbai face. Most *Dabbawalas* who are strictly against their children entering this business believe that working for the Trust has earned them respect, however respect alone will not provide for a luxurious lifestyle that most people aim to achieve. The off springs of the *Dabbawalas* who are now old enough and are on the verge of making career decisions, had never thought about using their education and contributing to the Trust. This showcases thinking where the newer generation is of the opinion that in the time of online delivery services, the *dabba* Community does not have a secure future, which they could be a part of.



Figure 4: The evolving future of the community- the Dabbawala and his children

CHAPTER 4

4.1 FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS OF THE CATERERS INTERVIEWS

The *dabbawalas* have a wide range of people that they cater to and this includes a few businessmen who have started tiffin service in the city of Mumbai. This is a fairly new concept that has only been around for the last 15-20 years. This is also a new business for the *dabbawalas* as they usually deliver individual tiffins/*dabbas* to customers and are never were involved with catering businesses where the tiffins need to be delivered in a wholesale form (I.e. a large number of tiffins from one sender). The caterers are fairly new and so there has not been a lot of research regarding the relationship between the *Dabbawalas* and the caterers. There are various caterers in the city as of today. To name a few, Magic-O-Meal, HappyGrub, Bhakti catering service, Sunita caterers and tiffin services, etc. are the ones that were considered for the research. There are various stakeholders in the catering service as well and each of them have different opinions on the *Dabbawala* Community. The size of the business also effected the relation between the two parties. The three major types of stakeholders in the catering business are: large scale operations, housewives and *dabbawalas* turned caterers. Though all of the following employed the *dabbawalas* to deliver their product each have a different opinion and experience using the services provides by them.

The large-scale corporations are the largest and the most consistent users of the *dabbawala* service. Magic-O-Meal is one such corporation that claims to be the first in the tiffin business sector in the city of Mumbai. The company, which was founded by Mr. Alok and his partner as they had seen a need for service that provided tiffins, customized to the consumers need and specifications at varied costs. Mr Alok was an MBA student and after graduation had worked in Reymonds for two years before starting his own business in the catering industry. Mr. Alok had been working with the *dabbawalas* since the start of the organization in 2010 and was able to give valuable insight on their business model and their inside workings with other businesses. He believed that the *dabbawala* service was the only reliable source of transporting tiffin services across the whole of Mumbai and further added that it was cheaper. He also said that other services were not allowed to flourish with the

existence of the *dabbawalas* and even went on to say that the *dabbawalas* revolted against competitive companies and didn't let them function efficiently. Mr. Alok believed that the *dabbawalas* had a fair pricing system and also said that large companies like his give them huge business so they are always given a decent price, which is below that of the normal deliveries. He also stated that it was very important to have good relations with the *dabbawalas* as they were his only choice when it came to his tiffin service business. Though he did talk a lot of positives of the *dabbawalas* service there were always negatives that also have to be looked at such as the lack of communication skills within their service. Mr. Alok said that this had damaged his company to an extent as he believed that due to the lack of communications among the *dabbawalas*, the consumers felt distant and may not want to continue with the service provided with this brand. He also said that another way to think about this was by fighting with the consumers and not taking feedback from them at all. Mr. Alok had also told us that the *dabbawalas* have a lot of fights with the consumers and this had caused him to lose consumers as well as get bad reviews that led to less consumers subscribing to his service. The second problem faced by the corporations was that the *dabbawalas* take a lot of vacations during the year at their own will, which led to creating a huge gap in the companies functioning as there wouldn't be any deliveries and as the customers have already paid for the service and still did not receive any lunches they would receive a bad impression of the company in their mind and stop subscribing to them. Mr Alok mentioned that the *dabbawalas* would not give them any prior notice so that they could warn the consumers in advance and this would reflect as the company's fault and not that of the *dabbawalas*. The final problem that Mr. Alok mentioned was that the *dabbawalas* were prone to misplacing *dabbas* and even went on to say that, "the *dabbawalas* are not even one sigma let alone Six-Sigma certified" (Alok Mody, personal communication, October 3, 2018). He also told us that the *dabbawalas* made at least seven mistakes in a month. This was new information as no research paper has previously mentioned instances of mistakes or inefficiency within the *dabbawala* Community. He had said that he needed to hire a sales representative just to take care of these situations and it was very hard for them to deal with the *dabbawalas* so much so that they had to cut down their reliance on their tiffin service business from 100% to just 5% of their business and moved on to corporate catering and school cafeteria catering instead. Mr. Alok also said that if he had a choice, he would choose an alternative service if it was

available (Alok Mody, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Information was found that was in alignment with what Mr. Alok said through another business-man in the same field. Mr. Dhrumil, Director of HappyGrub, has been a part of the catering industry for the last 5 years and is in association with the *dabbawalas* for almost 3 and half years. He agreed with most of the statements made by Mr. Alok and further added that the biggest disadvantage with the *dabbawalas* was that they were stringent in their beliefs and were not willing to adapt with the change in the times. He added a few more problems that he had faced working with them such as the *dabbawalas* not returning the *dabbas* in a few instances and how his company had to switch from using dabbas to aluminium containers, so they were more convenient and there was no need to wait for their dabbas to continue their business. He also said that he only used the *dabbawalas* for long distance deliveries and because they knew the local areas like the back of their hands. He further believed that if he had the choice similar to Mr. Alok he would also choose a different form of delivery for the *dabbas*. During research, it was also found that Mr Dhrumil himself was a consumer back in his school days and thus he also helped in understanding the change in the *dabbawala* service that has taken place during these years (Dhrumil Modi, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

A second interesting perspective was received from Mr. Navnat Pashankar who was a *dabbawala* before he had chosen to start his own catering and tiffin service called Sunita Caterers and Tiffins in Mumbai. He had a lot of insight about the *dabbawala* family and the process of leaving the Union and starting his own business. He had been a *dabbawala* for 12 years before he decided that he wanted to change profession and become a businessman and has been working in this business for the past 5 years. Mr. Navnat claimed that the *dabbawala* Union was happy with his decisions as it gave them more business. However, an older *dabbawala* with him claimed that a sum total of Rs.1,00,000 was to be paid for a *dabbawala* to leave the Union to start his own business (Anonymous, personal communication, October 4, 2018). Mr. Navnat currently cooks the food himself with the help of his wife and even delivers the *dabbas* with a handful of other *dabbawalas* from the Union. His business produces about 150 *dabbas* a day and all of them are delivered by the *dabbawalas* all across Mumbai. Mr. Navnat also mentioned that the *dabbawala* Union also helped his business by sometimes putting up advertisements for his company and helped him in

the distribution of pamphlets, which he used as a mode of promotion for his brand. He is also a follower of the *Varkari Sampradai* like most of the *dabbawalas* and is a believer in the Lord *Vitthal*. He said that he was initially not a follower of the *Varkari Sampradai* but had later converted to it. He had also mentioned that it was by choice and that it was a belief and anyone could be a part of the movement. Mr. Navnat also told that there has been a lot of change in the *dabbawalas* as a Community and believed that they were well educated as compared to the previous generation and had more opportunities. He went on to say that the life of a *dabbawala* was filled with hardships and if he had the chance he would not want his children to continue in his footsteps and would encourage them choose their own path. He stated that the *dabbawala* system was very efficient as the Community worked diligently and believed that they are doing good for the Community as well. Mr. Navnat also said that his business was not only good for his family but also for the Community of the *dabbawalas*. He further went on to say that if he closed his business it would negatively affect the earnings of all the *dabbawalas* involved (Navnat Pashankar, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Another important and new perspective into the world of the *dabbawalas* was a housewife who had started her own catering company. This helped get insight into how smaller companies worked with the *dabbawalas*. Bhakti Sawant being a self-made entrepreneur along with her comrades was involved in selling dried spices namely black pepper and dried red chillies. She had toiled her way to become successful. However, the sole idea that changed her fate and vastly improved her prospects was a catering and delivery business. Her target audience continued to be based around corporates who lack the access to healthy, tasty and yet reasonably priced home-cooked meals. The fact that her business peaked was because she had just advertised her business on “Google” and had received a lot of key intent from potential customers. The major constraint that Bhakti found, that was may be impairing to the fast growth spurt of her business were poor logistical conditions. *Dabbas* reached the house of customers late which was not very good for her company. Moreover, delays at corporate offices would mean more damage as most of the orders were from single income, working middle-class men that worked in such offices and had very stringent work and break hours. Learning about the *dabbawalas* was a game-changing discovery. Going via autorickshaws by herself to either

residential apartments or to deliver tiffin boxes to employees in the corporate sector proved to be anything but time-effective, hassle-free and lucrative or more correctly known to be financially viable. “The *dabbawalas* charged a high fee”, Mrs. Sawant said, although there were rarely any complaints from the customers’ end about misplaced or undelivered dabbas or tiffins. Mrs. Sawant’s business flourished through the idea of availing to the service on the advice of a customer of hers in the Goregaon area of Mumbai. Mrs. Sawant leaned to the fact of the matter that customers would prefer to go the extra mile (monetarily) to ensure that hot, fresh food is delivered daily in a reliable fashion. An area of fascination that came up was when asked for Mrs. Sawant’s thoughts on the empowerment of women by making a comparison to what we had heard and recorded prior to this interview about the role of women at *dabbawala* residences. The findings from the homes of *dabbawalas* suggested that women played the role of a supporter rather than the ‘primary provider’ which had been assumed by the man of the house. What came as a surprise was the benevolent open-mindedness with which Mrs. Sawant addressed the matter by saying “Yes, financial independence gives them freedom to do what they want they do not need to ask anyone else for money if they want anything for themselves. Now I earn so everything is going well” (Bhakti Sawant, personal communication, October 4, 2018). With a rise in financial freedom comes power which seems to only function in a top-down spiral in the secret and tight-knit communities of *dabbawalas* that do not look for a change in the status quo and disregard the possible delight of new avenues for growth.

4.2 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE CATERERS INTERVIEWS

After almost a century of strutting their business solely against their Unique Selling Point (USP), that is the delivery of home-cooked food only, the *dabbawalas* made a move towards incorporating caterers into their business. The necessity for this is out in the open. With the drastic change in the structures of their consumer households, most households no longer have anyone to cook for them while the members are out at work. If *dabbawalas* continues to rely only on the *dabbas* that came from households, their business would fall sharply. Therefore, they have incorporated a few catering services into their system. These are mostly ones which provide food which

is home-cooked on a large-scale level for multiple consumers. This ensures that the *dabbawalas* stay as close to their roots of business as possible. Interestingly, perspectives about the *dabbawalas* that comes from catering services distinctly vary from the perspectives of consumers/non-consumers. More so, there are differences in perspectives of based on the size of business.

The *dabbawalas* are no doubt one of the cheapest and most affordable forms of food delivering systems that one can opt for. Their capacity to reach out and deliver into different parts of Mumbai makes them a very convenient choice for catering services. Nevertheless, there are a lot of aspects about the service that do pose as a hindrance to their services. Large-scale companies usually face the problem of lack of proper communication skills among the *dabbawalas*. This lack results in a communication gap between the service and the consumers. This gap then leads to a loss in business for them. The aspect of how courteous the *dabbawalas* are with respect to their consumers is also questionable when it comes to the behaviour that they showcase with the consumers of the catering services. Getting into fights with the consumers is not a rarity when it comes to the consumers of the catering services. Moreover, catering services also complain that making mistakes is an event which happens on an average of once a week. There have also been cases where the *dabbawalas* forget to bring back the *dabbas* from their consumers to the catering company. So as to not endure this loss every time this mistake takes places, catering companies shifted from using steel *dabbas* to aluminium *dabbas*. Companies have also reduced their initial 100% reliance on the *dabbawala* service so as to protect their own reputation (Alok Mody & Dhrumil Modi, personal communication, October 3 & October 4, 2018).

There could be two major causes for this stark difference in the quality of service between working for caterers and working on a retail level. The first could be that delivering *dabbas* on a whole-scale basis (from catering companies) takes more effort from the side of the *dabbawalas* which is why, they are more prone to making mistakes within them. Adding to which, a reason given by Mr. Dhrumil himself was that they do make mistakes because the majority of the *dabbawalas* are not well-educated and hence adjusting to the same efficiency that they hold with the retail market might get a little difficult for them (Dhrumil Modi, personal communication, October 4, 2018). Also, the *dabbawalas* have recently started joining hands with

caters and maybe looking into their needs is an adjustment procedure that they are still going through. A second reason, however, for carelessness in the service when it comes to caterers, could be the lack of accountability. This is also the reasons that the people within the catering service seem to think is more likely. When *dabbawalas* deliver on a one-to-one basis, they are directly answerable for any mistakes that take place. However, when mistakes take place within the deliveries of the catering service, they are not answerable. Any error is the responsibility of the catering service. This makes the system less efficient and more relaxed for the *dabbawalas*.

Interestingly, *dabbawalas* also seem to have a sense of inferiority towards other professions. An associate with the owner of the Sunita catering service, who was once a *dabbawala* himself claimed that on leaving the *dabbawala* service, he had to pay Rs. 1,00,000 to the Union. The Union claimed to be happy with his decision of leaving and starting his own business. However, on being pressed on the reason for the change in profession he gave very vague answers. Regardless of changing his profession, he continued to use the help of the service for his delivery. He also used the help of the service to advertise his service towards the beginning of his business. He strongly believed that he was helping his Community even if he was not directly a part of it because of the wages the *dabbawalas* helping him got from his service. He strongly believed that him leaving his business would have an adverse impact on the *dabbawala*'s income (Navnat Pashankar, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

As a part of the *dabbawala* during some part of his life, he had some form of cohesive understanding on the lifestyle of the *dabbawalas*. He himself was a follower of the *Varkari Sampraday* and agreed that till date most of Community followed this spiritual pathway. He also emphasized on the level of effort it took for the *dabbawalas* to provide their service. There was no doubt that they were in fact doing work which was extremely strenuous. He also had an understanding of the dynamics within the family and the role of gender within the family but preferred to not make much of a comment on it. Regardless of the praises, he clearly stated that he wouldn't encourage his children to take up this career even if they wanted to. His reasons for this weren't made very clear. He did however claim with confidence that the *dabbawalas* were doing the Community a large service by helping their meals reach the consumers on time (Navnat Pashankar, personal communication, October 4,

2018). In essence, it almost seemed as if praises about the work and the passion that the *dabbawalas* are supposed to have for their work seemed so deeply engrained within the Community that even if they point out negatives, they force the positives about themselves out-weight their negatives.

As opposed to the large-scale catering companies, small-scale companies did not seem to have as many complaints. From the perspective of a housewife, who had recently moved into the arena of running her own food delivery business, the *dabbawalas* seemed a perfect choice. While she had tried to deliver her home-made food on her own initially, it started taking a toll on her business. Owing to a large part of her client base, it became necessary that she rely on other services so that they got their meals on time. She did claim that mistakes were made on a regular basis, but that did not, in her opinion, impair in any way their certificate of the Six-Sigma. The food delivering system is efficient and timely and that has the most crucial impact on her business.

As a workingwoman, the owner of the Bhakti caterers had a few very strong opinions on the role of gender within the society. When asked about the role of women within the *dabbawala* families she said it was unfortunate that women were not allowed to work, and that it stopped them from gaining their independence. She described how her independence had helped her significantly. She also claimed that what her husband thought about her working was unimportant as it was her life and only, she had right over it. She believed that such should be the case of the women within the *dabbawala* Community (Bhakti Sawant, personal communication, October 4, 2018). Empowering of the women would stop the top-down system of power dynamics almost that exists within their Community. Such changes could be beneficial to the *dabbawalas* for the future of their business as they will have additional pair of hands to work with them.

In essence, the shift of the *dabbawalas* to incorporate tie-ups with their business have had results that are not congruent with existing ideas of the Community. There has been a shift in perspective when it comes to their behavior with consumers. It could be possible that they do consider the consumer of utmost importance but only when they are directly involved with the consumer. When they are running the delivery for

someone else, they don't feel any sense of responsibility towards them. This is surprising since they claim that the consumer's needs are most important no matter what the situation. There is evidence for them going out of their way to fulfil the needs of the consumers. Here however, they tend to show carelessness. This could be adverse for the future of their survival. The changing societal structure within the consumer base would mean that their survival would depend on businesses like catering services. Getting negative reviews from them might tell on the future of their business.

CHAPTER 5

5.1 FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS OF THE TEMPLE GOERS INTERVIEWS

A crucial part of understanding the *dabbawala* Community and culture is to understand their roots. Since the *dabbawalas* are a part of the *Varkari* Community, understanding the norms and values within them gives insight into the customs and norms of the *dabbawalas*. *Vithoba* temples are the prime places of worship for the *Varkaris*. Their main deity is *Vithoba* or *Vitthal*, an incarnation of *Vishnu*. A major aspect of their Community is their choice to set themselves apart from the larger society. *Varkaris* can be recognized most prominently through their visible symbols like their necklace made from *Tulsi* beads, the black *tika* on their forehead and the white cap worn by men. In addition to this, they also show a preference for white clothing. The value for each of these symbols varies among worshippers. While some believed the *Tulsi mala* has therapeutic cooling abilities, other believed that it signified their connection with God. Similarly, the black *tika* was considered a mark of their vow to worship Lord *Vithoba* as a part of the *Varkari* Community. It is common to see the *dabbawalas* follow these traditions while they leave for their work in the mornings.

One of the most auspicious times of the year for the *Varkari* Community is the *Ashadhi Ekadashi*. It is the 11th lunar day in the Hindu month of *Ashadha*. It is considered important because it is believed that Lord *Vishnu* goes into rest for the next four months. During this time, all *Varkaris* are expected to attend the annual *Vari* at Alandi, Maharashtra (Karve, 1962). If they miss this of any reason then they are expected to attend the *Varis* at Pandharpur and Dehu, which are considered to be half as significant as that in Alandi. This ritual consists of carrying the idol of Lord *Vitthal* in a palanquin, along with chanting of hymns, folk songs and hand percussion instruments like *dhols*. It is known that the *dabbawalas* take leave from work to attend the annual *jatra*, but they coordinate their deliveries and absences in a way that does not impede their service. All the *dabbawalas* do not take leaves at the same time but take them in shifts. However, apart from their annual visit to Alandi, the *dabbawalas* are not known to have visited the temple in itself very often. This could

be attributed to their hectic schedules, owing to which they do not find the time to attend the daily *puja* or weekly *bhajan* at the temple.

The *dabbawalas* themselves claim that they follow the rituals and traditions of the *Varkari* to the fullest. They also claimed that even though they did not mind people from other communities joining their business, it was better if people from the same Community worked together. It would make business more efficient. However, the people at the temple claimed that the *dabbawalas* could not be considered authentic *Varkari* as they did not indulge in the traditional practices that they were required to perform. They did not visit the temple and often indulged in practices that are considered vices in the *Varkari* Community. No practices of societal wrong were considered allowed within the Community and any sort of negativity was supposed to be left behind when entering the temple (Ano Arun, Nithin, Athan, Rohan, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

An important aspect- to know about the *Varkari* Community is that they started as a movement. They are a spiritual movement group, who have a set of norms and values that they follow. It is not directed by religion or caste. According to the people at the temple, anyone can become a *Varkari* as long as they follow the virtues, which is expected of them. These virtues include, maintaining a high-level of self-tolerance and self-discipline. It was highlighted that an individual must train himself to be able endure any hardships that he may come across in his life. It is also viewed as unfavourable if an individual chooses to put his own needs and problems over others (Arun, Nithin, Athan, Rohan, personal communication, October 2, 2018). This attitude would help understand why for the *dabbawalas* servicing the needs of the consumer is much beyond just a delivery system. It understands the needs of the consumer beyond just a delivery system. They put the needs and necessities of their consumer above their own hardships.

The *Varkari* Community also believed that it was essential for everyone to have a *Guru* (spiritual teacher) so that under his guidance people could move towards the enlightened path of becoming a *Varkari*. The *Guru* helps people who have recently come to be the part of the Community take vows to abstain from addictive substances, non-vegetarian food and to follow rituals without fail. The ultimate motto for

Varkaris is to make the world a better place to live in by adopting values such as kindness, unity and purity and discarding social and personal vices. Thus, indulging in alcohol, cigarettes and drugs are absolutely prohibited in the Community, but corrective actions taken against malefactors were unclear from the interviews taken (Arun, Nithin, Athan, Rohan, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Art in the form of *bhajans* and *kirtans* has flourished and forms a large portion of daily worship rituals as can be observed after the evening *puja* is done in the temple. *Bhajans* are sung on weekends or on special occasions while *kirtans* are to be done on festivals and *Ashadhi Ekadashi*. *kirtans* also consist of some dancing in addition to the singing and recitation. Both comprise of various musical instruments like the *tabla*, the *manjira* (a kind of cymbal), and *harmonium* played by both men and women. The folk songs and hymns have been passed down to devotees chanting them at temples, written in books handed to people attending the *bhajan* and the most popular ones being chanted at Pandharpur.



Figure 5: The most auspicious moment in a Varkari calendar – The night of Ekadashi

The demographics of people who visit the temple were noticeably even. It was observed that most of the worshippers attending these *bhajans* and *kirtans* belonged to the older age group, that is, 45 years old or above. Although there were more male worshippers in the temple, only a few women sat for the *bhajan* as compared to the larger number of women singing the *bhajans*. It is done in alternation with recitation of holy texts and explanation of the same by the local preacher. On some days, there were specific dress codes to be followed such as white *topi*, *kurta* and *pyjama* for men and white sarees for women while on other days the worshippers attended in everyday clothes. It could be understood that there is no compulsion for visiting the temple daily or regularly, as most devotees visit after their professional and household work for the day is finished or depending on their free time. It is also a place for socializing and catching up with fellow worshippers from the same Community and building a network of likeminded individuals (Manisha Prakash Shinde & Anonymous, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Speaking of likeminded, their collective attitude seemed a mix of progressive and regressive values. There was no caste or class-based discrimination in the Community, or in places of worship, as all the interviewees at the temple claimed. Anybody could become a *Varkari*, regardless of their religion, caste, class, age or gender. This equality of treatment of fellow *Varkaris* is reflected in their social norm of touching each other's feet as a sign of respect and as a form of acknowledging the divine within the person whose feet are being touched, to reap their blessings. Hence, children were taught to touch feet as an integral part of expressing respect to anyone, even strangers. Men also touch elder women's feet as a courteous way of following the social norm of minimal contact with the opposite gender, yet respecting and seeking blessings.

However, their perception of certain other social situations isn't as liberal. They are especially rigid about the intermixing of unmarried boys and girls; be it a romantic relationship or even as good friends. They insist on recognizing only one relationship between the two: marriage. Live-in relationships and casual relationships are a strict taboo and youngsters are forbidden to indulge in pursuing romance before marriage. Also, from their answers, a tinge of misogyny was visible as they did not seem to support the women being employed out in the workforce and would rather they stay at

home to cook and clean for the household. When asked about whether they had ever used the dabbawala service, the slightest hint of reproach for the clients of *dabbawalas* was noticed among the male devotees in the temple. According to them, the service was for indolent wives who could not prepare tiffins on time to send it with their husbands, so they needed the *dabbawalas* service to deliver the tiffin later on at a convenient time (Arun, Nithin, Athan, Rohan, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Traditions are continued with modifications as cultures evolve. Changes over the generations could not be observed first-hand because of time and location constraints, but it was evident that there was some dissatisfaction with the way the teenagers and working population in the present-day scenario seemed to have neglected their traditional roots. Collective affirmation was received from all interviewees that parents needed to induce in their children the value of the previous and spiritual path taken by the *Varkaris*, to keep the tradition alive. As the *Varkaris* do not all work in the same profession, children are not pressurized into taking up the profession of their parents or any particular profession either. They are introduced to the *Varkari* rituals and traditions by their parents in childhood and then by a Guru that they find ,who has accepted them as a disciple. Small kids accompanied their parents to the temple and participated actively in the rituals or other activities going on while their elders were more interested in playing with the other children who had come. Very few teenagers were noticed visiting the temple, a subject of scorn among the older devotees who brushed it off by stating that it was the parent's duty to show their children the right way. They believed that stepping back from which has resulted in low rates of temple visits by youth and possible diminution of cultural values. However, they did accept that the youth have a higher workload due to which they cannot manage to make time for the temple's *bhajans* or *puja* (Manisha Prakash Shinde & Anonymous, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Many older *Varkari* women had tattoos or markings on their hand. For example: tattoos of traditional symbols like the lotus, *Aum*, or *Tulsi* leaf in addition to other designs were frequently seen on the forearms and hands of older *Varkari* women, but such permanent markings were not observed on the younger generations of *Varkari* women. Some of the oldest men had ear piercings and wore a small earring while dressing predominantly in white *kurta* and white *pyjama* or *dhoti*. But this was not the case in the youth and middle ages,

wherein men did not have any markings, earrings and the white *kurta* had been replaced by the white shirt in most cases. The *dhoti* or *pyjama* was absent as pants and jeans took over. However, most women still visited in the traditional *saree*, and almost all of them were married.

Although a lot about the cultural heritage of the *Varkaris* and *dabbawala* Community could be gained from interactions in the temple, yet there were some shortcomings too. For example, much could not be learnt from the perspective of women due to their reluctance to answer and also it did seem like the men took charge of answering the questions posed. Thus, most views expressed are from the point of view of elderly males. However, it was enriching to explore the *Varkari Sampradaya* thriving in the bustling city of Mumbai.

5.2 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE TEMPLE GOERS INTERVIEWS

During the research on understanding the socio-cultural aspects of the *dabbawala* Community, the most visited and the most famous temple among the people of the *Varkari* Community was considered. Since, the *dabbawalas* are believed to be a part of the *Varkari* Community, studying the communities' culture, traditions and their deity was important. The temple that was visited is known as *Shree Vitthal Rakhumayi Mandir* and is located in Wadala, Mumbai. The temple was built around 400 years ago and Sant Tukaram laid down the foundation of the same. The temple gained historical importance because of Sant Tukaram since he was a well-known poet-saint in the 17th-century who also preached under the banyan trees, that can still be noticed inside the temples premises (Maskeri, 2016). The President Mr. Shashikant Govind Naik heads the temple for 77 years (Sawant, 2016). While in conversation with the male worshippers who were associated with the Bhakti group, who worked and held events in the temple, it was understood that they were not informed about the president and that Mr. Mhatre was the head of the committee in the temple and he was the one who managed all the operations of the temple. Further, it was also understood that the visitors and devotees in the temple were not aware of the founders of the temple, but were aware of the significance that the temple held.

The temple was founded as a replica of the temple in Pandharpur and was built with the intention of providing the same sanctity and peace to the devotees who couldn't visit *Vitthal* temple in Pandharpur (Sawant, 2016). Through the findings, it was proved that the temple provided positive vibes and a lot of energy, which drove the devotees to visit the temple again and again (Rohit, personal communication, October 2, 2018). The two main idols in the temple were that of Lord *Vithoba* and goddess *Rakhumai*. It is believed that the Varkaris brought in the idol of Lord Vitthal/Vithoba from the Chandrabagha river which is located in the south of Mumbai. Whereas the idol of goddess *Rakhumai* was built much later and is currently just 50 years old (Sawant, 2016). The temple is also a home to other lords, namely Lord *Ganesha* and Lord *Shiva*. The visitors of the temple believe that the idols in the temple are considered as the "most favorite disciple that is not selfish, admits God's power and uses the life that god has created for them. The idol caters to the *Varkari* person" (Baliram Tukaram Jadav, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

As part of on-field research, the temple was visited twice. The first visit to the temple, the basic schedule of the *bhajans*, *mantras* and the *aartis* that take place in the temple was clarified. The temple proceedings usually began in the evening after 5 PM. It was the time when the *pujari* came to the temple, and the devotees who recited the *Dnyaneshwari* also visited the temple for the same. While the recitations and the mantras that the devotees recited were documented, simultaneously it was also understood that there was going to be the monthly *Ekadashi puja* 2 days later, for which good information on the preaches and the meanings of the recitations could be gained. While on visit, it was observed that people from different communities did also visit the temple, and their interviews were taken in order to get their views on the *Varkari* Community and what Lord *Vithoba* meant for them. In response to which, it was found that people found serenity when they visited the temple and described the *Varkaris* to be honest, hardworking, 'sweet/friendly' and full of positive energies. The *Vitthal* temple like all temples is a place where all are considered to be equal. The devotees of the temple strongly felt that the temple doesn't discriminate between castes, religions, genders, and people from different cultural communities and these categories are all 'man-made concepts'. They believed that the temple is open for one and all, and everyone is *Vithoba*'s child. It was through this ideology that they believed that even the '*Varkari Sampraday*' is a Community which is not governed by

social or ethnic factors but is a movement of the mind (spiritual) that the body then subscribes to and follows. Further to which, they also claimed that anyone and everyone could become a *Varkari* themselves, if they follow their guru's sayings and abide to the Community rules. Giving an example for which, they claimed that a religion of a person, e.g. a Muslim, does not deny the right for him/her to become a *Varkari*. Thus, using this, they help prove that discrimination as whole is a farce in their Community and they do not believe in the same (Baliram Tukaram Jadav, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

From the literature that was read earlier and the information that was gained from the point of contact, it was understood that all *dabbawalas* are from the *Varkari* Community and the *dabbawalas* in fact came into the market as a 'sangadhan' or organization that was laid down by the *Varkari Sampraday* (Roncaglia, 2013). In order to thus understand the *Varkari* Community, along with talking to the *dabbawalas* and their families, insights from the visitors/worshippers of the *Vitthal* temple were recorded. While on the two visits to the temple, men and women from the *Varkari* Community as well as people who were from different other communities were encountered. Furthermore, in conversation with them, the *Varkaris*, their behaviour and their link with the *dabbawalas* was also understood. The insight received about the *dabbawala* Community in relation to the members of the *Varkari* Community at the temple proved very interesting. A key conflict that arose was between the claims of the *dabbawalas* themselves as being true member of the *Varkari* Community. However, claims by the devotees of the temple stated that they weren't as true to following the *Varkari* norms and traditions as they claimed to be.

The *Varkaris* are originally from Pandarpur, which is a small town in the south of Maharashtra, near the banks of Chandrabagha river (Maskeri, 2016). The *Varkaris* are distinguished by their simple and friendly behaviour. They are seen to be as people with lot of contentment and happiness with what they have in their lives. According to the visitors of the temple, for people in general, "money is everything in life, but the *Varkaris* purpose of life is different and they enjoy on their own" (Rohit, personal communication, October 2, 2018). It is difficult to distinguish the *Varkaris* from other people, they wear a *topi* which is a symbol of their identity and also have a *tulsi mala*

along with them that they wear around their neck, other than that there is no specific surname or any distinct feature that distinguishes them from the others.



Figure 6: A reflection of a true Varkari Dabbawala

While on field, through observations it was also noticed that *Varkaris* had a black *tika* on their forehead at all times, they wore white almost every time and the women in the Community did not wear a specific jewellery but just a garland at all times. Furthermore, it was found that their entire look that would stand as their recognition had a meaning behind it. The black mark/*tika* is put on as a holy matrimony between the couple, which is regarded as loyalty between the couple. Moreover, the mark also prevented the *Varkaris* from any kind of evil intentions on harming a person and guards from negative vibes and envy. The *tulsi* mala is a symbol of safeguard, they also believe that wearing this mala has a scientific explanation for it, since *tulsi* improves blood circulation in the body. Hence, it is considered as a divine herb and is highly medicinal in nature. Finally, the white attire and the white *topi* is worn to keep their bodies cool. They believe that a *Varkaris* life is pure and so is their mental sanctity and physical hygiene, which is because of their devotion to their god. They believe in spirituality and understand the meaning of life in a spiritual way. Additionally, it is of utmost importance for a *Varkari* to have a guru who is a spiritual leader who is not seen by the followers or disciples, but is there to guide their behavior. Additionally, there are no evil or malicious thought when referring to a woman (Arun, Nithin, Athan, Rohan, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Researchers have also researched upon the aforementioned information and no contradiction has been seen over the past years on how they carry themselves. Keeping this information in mind, it can be inferred that since the *Varkaris* are looked upon as people who are content and are known for their simple and friendly behavior. The general association of a *dabbawala*'s behavior is also supposedly friendly and they are seen as very hardworking. However, it is also understood while in conversation with other stakeholders, that the *dabbawalas* are friendly to their consumers but show different attitudes to the stakeholders that they have larger business with, for example the caterers. In one of the findings, it can be inferred that there was contradictory information regarding *dabbawalas* behaviour towards their stakeholders or their associations. The caterers did find a few *dabbawalas* rude, but also feel that it is a part of human nature and thus people change. Moreover, the information that was given by the visitors of the temple were a product of the preaches that they listen to at the temples on the regular basis and in some cases as a result of personal experience. Hence, proving that the information about the entire *Varkari* Community being sweet/friendly and directly associating the same to the *dabbawalas* is an error.

Any human behavior cannot be generalized to each and every one in the Community and it should be looked at as a separate entity for separate individuals. Furthermore, while in the group discussion with the *Varkari* male worshippers visiting the temple, on questioning them if they had any relationship with the *dabbawalas* and if the *dabbawalas* were from the *Varkari* Community. In response to this, we found that there were speculations whether the *dabbawalas* were from the *Varkari* Community. A member from the Community even made a point that if 'a person is dressed in white and wears a *topi* and a *tulsi mala*, he shouldn't be considered as a Varkari' (Arun, Nithin, Athan, Rohan, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Thus, leading to question if the information that was looked into was even reliable. Additionally, while at the temple on both days as well as on *Ekadashi*, no *dabbawala* came to visit the temple. It was strange since the information about the temple was given by the *dabbawala* Community themselves. Hence, leading to believe that even though the *dabbawala* culture began by the *Varkaris*, the intensity to which the practices were followed have reduced and very few or close to none of the

dabbawalas still remain true *Varkaris* as suggested by the men at the temple. One may argue that it would be biased to the claims of only one side or that the *dabbawalas* don't have the time to come to the temples. However, temple timings are maintained in a manner that allows for everyone to come after work hours. The *dabbawalas* still visit the temple on a rarity. What is more interesting is that the current heads of *dabbawalas* did use to visit the temple when they were younger. Therefore, as seen even through findings, with the coming in of younger generations, the rigidity with the traditions are being followed has reduced significantly.

It is a general understanding that temples that are constructed for specific religions have certain rules laid down by their religious Community for their people. What stands common for most temples is the dress code for every Community. It is believed that one should be appropriately dressed when they enter any temple and a few temples do encourage the idea of their followed dress codes through letter headings in the premises. For example: when a person visits a *dargah*, the men and women are supposed to cover their heads with a handkerchief or a stole. This can also be seen when a person visits a *Gurdwara*. In the Hindu Community as well, when people do the *puja*, the women do have their heads covered with a stole. All of which is seen as a sign of respect. Having this in mind, it was necessary to understand if there were certain rules that were laid down for the people visiting the *Vitthal* temples as well.

As observed by a regular visitor of the temple, they believe that, there are no specific rules in the temple regarding any dress code, comfortable clothing is encouraged and people themselves are mindful about the way they should be carrying themselves (Rohit, personal communication, October 2, 2018). However, some women feel that girls are not appropriately dressed when they visit the temples, which attracts too much unnecessary attention. Hence, hinting that there should be a set dress code in order to maintain decency (Manisha Prakash Shinde & Anonymous, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Through the observations, the contradiction in the information that was found here could be a sign of generation gap. The former statement/observation was made by a man in his 30s while the later was made by two women who were in their 50s and 40s respectively. What is seen as decent for a 30-year old might be considered indecent for a 50-year old. Hence, causing disparity in

their ideologies. This information is considered significant, since it is important to understand that with time cultures in itself have diluted with furthering generations. This was a small observation of a generation gap, however with changing times, the gap in the ideologies that two generations hold is only increasing, which is leading to changes in the culture and traditions in itself.

Moreover, another finding that was found was based on the rules that had been laid down for the *Varkaris* to follow. The rules mentioned by the male worshippers in the temple included three major rules. First being, a person who claims to be a *Varkari* should perform devotional acts such as prayer on a daily basis. Secondly, dating is not tolerated, it is almost blasphemous in their culture if someone claiming they are *Varkari* is or has previously been involved in a live-in relationship or any kind of relationship for that matter. Only if the couple is married, legally they are expected to follow the rules, casual relationships are not permitted. Lastly, the vices of life, including the consumption of cigarettes, alcohol and non-vegetarian food should be strictly avoided (Arun, Nithin, Athan, Rohan, personal communication, October 2, 2018). These rules have been laid down for many years and *dabbawalas* being *Varkaris* are believed to follow them, however through the other findings it was also noticed that *dabbawalas* have been indulgent in the usage of tobacco. On a general basis, they are expected to abstain from any behaviour that is considered to be societally wrong. Which is also a value that has changed in certain aspects of the *dabbawalas* behaviour. This has been noticed while on-field as well as through a conversation with the other stakeholders like the consumers and caterers. Hence, it can be inferred that the rules laid down are not being followed as stringently as it was supposed to, which could be seen as sign of weakening of cultural values or hinting to the fact that *dabbawalas* have changed from an only *Varkari* Community to people from different backgrounds working together.

During the time at the temple, there were many women worshippers in the temple as well, but only a few women agreed to give interviews. While some gave reasons like they had to head back home early, others were just not comfortable talking. In the few interviews taken, their views on the *dabbawalas* and their service and also views on the *Varkari* Community was recorded. The women were *Varkari* themselves and were proud in sharing their Community's values and disciplines. When asked about the

women's role in the Community, the questions were ignored or were answered in one or two sentences. Speaking on behalf of the women Community, they believed that the *Varkari* women believed in seeking happiness and satisfaction. When asked if women in their Community worked, one of the women said that she worked to run their family and to support her husband, while she also took care of her house. Hence, she believed that it is a woman's wish if they want to work as well as it would depend on the family circumstances, that would abide them to work (Manish Prakash Shinde & Anonymous, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Hence, making the entire thing personal and situational. Additionally, when the male worshippers were asked the same questions, they responded that they would allow women to work if the women of the family wished to, however they also believed that women in their houses would never wish on it. Moreover, they also claimed that serving the men was similar to showing devotion to God (Arun, Nithin, Athan, Rohan, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Hence, it could be inferred that women in the Community were also seen inferior to men and the power dynamics between the genders was also evident. This however is contradictory to the information provided in the literatures on *Varkaris*. The foundation of the *Varkaris* is credited to the saints who have contributed a lot to the Marathi literature and have helped in bringing the essence of the *Varkaris*. Many of the *bhajans*, and *mantras* that are recited in the temples are a creation of the saints. According to the famous poems written on *Varkaris* by saints like Dyaneshwar, the god '*Vitthal/Vitthoba*' and Sant Dyaneshwar are referred to as "*mauli*" which means 'Mother' in Marathi by the *Varkaris*, hence showing that a lot of importance is in fact given to the women in the Community (Karve, 1962). However, the current scenario leads for something else to believe. Moreover, this was noticed on visiting the *dabbawala* households that the women in the Community were not agreeing to give interviews or even talk in general unless their husbands or any male member of the family is present in the house. This can be inferred to the fact that women in the *Varkari* Community are also treated as an inferior gender and the power in the house is of the male member. Hence, following the paths of patriarchy.

At large, most devotees at the temple agreed that with the changes in current day lifestyles, the cultural values that were once stringently followed had seen a fall. Most of the elders at the temple felt strong negative feelings towards these changes and

believed that the current generation was moving away from the spiritual *Varkari* path. This was seen evidently even within the *dabbawala* Community, where their initial behaviours, which were once much glorified through previous literature has seen stark changes in the current day scenario. Certain aspects of the same don't change, like the role of women in the society. However, as seen through literature on the *Varkari*, what is stated in paper is not always executed in practice. Nevertheless, on the whole, like societies do, there has been a weakening of culture over time. Behaviour and values that were once attributed to the *dabbawalas* have seen changes based on time and context.

CHAPTER 6

6.1 FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS OF THE CONSUMERS AND NON-CONSUMERS INTERVIEWS

“Consumer is the King”: A research on the *dabbawala* Community is incomplete if their consumers are not taken to be as a major stakeholder in understanding the social and cultural aspects of the Community. While conducting the research, a good sample size of active consumers, consumers who left the service (past consumers) and non-consumers were taken. This enabled to study different social groups and their perspective on the lives of the *dabbawalas*. In the process of interviewing this group of stakeholders of the *dabbawala* services, certain patterns were discovered in the thought process of individuals, thus, after analysing the data thoroughly, five subgroups clearly emerged: the housewives, the office goers, the lower income office goers, the childhood users and the non-consumers.

The *dabbawalas* as an association have evolved over the years, trying to keep up with the current generations. Through our research, it was found, that ideas of the *dabbawalas* being ‘traditional’ and ‘backwards’ did not hold true completely. While earlier, the *dabbawalas*, expanded mainly with the help of the word of mouth, in recent times, they have a proper running website for one to avail their service. All one has to do is, raise a ticket on the website and one *dabbawala* will get in touch with them within 24 hours. The *dabbawalas*, along with this made changes in the way of delivery with time. Earlier, a set tiffin was required for the services to be conducted. However, with time this has changed, and due to the variety of lunch boxes and the change in eating patterns, the *dabbawalas* started providing bags to the consumers with certain codes, which inscribe the name of the consumer and their office, which made it easier for the consumer to send any kind of food or beverages to their family in convenient storage boxes.

Through research, it was found that the service of *dabbawalas* is still been availed by many new consumers. When questioned about the reason behind this, varied reasons were understood. Some consumers opted the service because the female member of the household is a working woman and hence doesn’t get time to prepare her food, further for which her mother sent her *dabba*s through the *dabbawala* (Shalini Mishra,

personal communication, October 1, 2018). Moreover, the reason also included consumers preferring home-cooked food because of the quality difference in home-cooked food and food available in the office canteens.



Figure 7: Giving each Dabba an identity of its own

However, for the non-consumers this reason was considered the opposite where they preferred canteen food and hence refrained from availing the *dabbawala* service. Furthermore, it was also important to understand the changes that *dabbawala* could imply in order to attract other non-consumers to avail the service, hence the research also aimed at questioning certain factors that would persuade the non-consumers. The findings for this question resulted in understanding that it depended on individual preferences and the conditions for which would persuade them to avail the service. For e.g., one of the non-consumers stated that if their cook/maid came late for work, which would result in delay in lunch would compel them to avail the service (Chandrashekhar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Moving with time, is always considered to be good, the *dabbawalas*, changed only a few aspects of their economic cycle, however, the socio-cultural values remain the same to their consumers even today. The consumers for years have experienced the same interaction and the same efficiency from the service. The modernity failed to move the crux of punctuality and efficiency and constant good conduct from the

dabbawala serving them. Families subscribing to the service for more than 40 years face no change in their daily interaction over the years. Furthermore, consumers also find them approachable and very hardworking. Mentioning instances, they further state that the *dabbawalas* provide their service even in strikes and also during heavy rains. If they are to take holidays, they pre-inform the consumers and arrange for a replacement on their behalf. When the entire service is closed during the time of *vari* in *Ashadh Ekadashi* they inform beforehand and the consumers make their own arrangements (Shalini Mishra, personal communication, October 1, 2018). The consumers also claim that they have not experienced any mistake from the *dabbawalas* side, and also shared instances wherein the *dabbawalas* even bought food and delivered it to the consumers in the office when their lunch was not prepared for any reason (Chelina Madwani, personal communication, October 4, 2018). While on field it was also observed that the one of the *dabbawalas* was putting in a small note/card inside one of the *dabbas*, hence delivering a sort of happiness along with food. Hence, proving their efficiency, dependableness and trustworthiness in most cases.



Figure 8: A little treat with every lunchbox – satisfying the customers and the patrons

The *dabbawalas* maintain a strictly professional behaviour with their consumers, not involving in a lot of personal interactions with them. The only kind of interaction that

all the consumers unanimously have is limited to the *dabbawala* informing them about the absence, or any kind of change in the supply chain method of the service. This limited interaction leads to understanding the consumers' perception about the *dabbawalas* as being efficient, well-connected and about their high communication skills. While most of the consumers interviewed did have a positive notion towards their behaviour, a few of the past consumers did have some negative experiences as well. While in conversation with one consumer, he strongly stated that the *dabbawalas* are intoxicated most of the times and they do pick up fights (Bimlesh, personal communication, October 4, 2018). This might seem as something that is common about human nature, however past researches on them have shown that they are high believers of the *Varkari* who are thought to refrain from drinking, smoking or indulging in ill-behaviour (Karve, 1962). Furthermore, he also mentioned that it would be difficult for anyone to recognize them even if they were intoxicated because "everyone tries to be decent in front of others" (Bimlesh, personal communication, October 4, 2018). Another aspect that was targeted was in terms of the problems that past and present consumers might have faced with them, in response to which it was found that two *dabbas* needed to be kept out of which one would come back the next day. This led to problems of *dabba* smelling and hygiene issues. Also, while most consumers did appreciate and mentioned their high communication skills, there were a few who talked about their lack of communication in terms of picking up *dabbas* the next day. However, these problems for them did not stand as a major difficulty or a major concern and *dabbawalas* stood as a necessity in most cases.

Moving ahead, in order to understand their value systems and traditions and to target the cultural aspect, stakeholders' opinion on the *dabbawalas* and their behaviour was taken. For this, most responded by saying that they are considered to be a close-knit "Marathi" community. There were also a few who were aware of their deity "*Vitthoba/Vitthal*" because of the leave that they took during *vari*. Additionally, when the non-consumers were asked, they explained that it is based on 'hear-say' that their value is the fact that they deliver food, and this is creating a major impact on people. What also adds to their advantage is the fact that they are aware of the locality which not many delivery firms are aware of, thus leading them to be the best at what they do. Another perspective on the value system was understood when a non-consumer stated that "World has changed, if we went ahead to see who is from where, we'd just

stay hungry". Thus, emphasizing the impact that the *dabbawalas* have created among the population which has been portrayed through the different lens of communication. Therefore, conclusively most people in this group of stakeholders did lack the knowledge and opinions on their value systems and very little information was gained for the research.

In contrary, the consumers did not fail to have an opinion on the gender dynamics of the Community. While most consumers believed that the system was highly sexist and leaning towards the male dominance in their Community, each described it in a different way. Some subtly pointed out that women were maybe a part of other administration and management activities while others bluntly called it "male chauvinism" (Kritika Saraf, personal communication, October 3, 2018) and the Community being closed to accepting both men and women as working individuals in the same or similar domain. While understanding reasons behind the lack of women in the service, consumers and non-consumers in general responded by saying that the service is physically taxing, since it required carrying numerous *dabbas* on heavy wooden cartages and travelling long distances in trains on a regular basis. Hence, making it difficult for women



Figure 9: Armed and ready to deliver happiness

Some consumers also showed angst on the issue and mentioned that it was because women in the Community were not encouraged or even ‘allowed’ to work, hence showing the power dynamics among gender in the Community. It was also found that, the service was such that it indirectly demanded the female of the house to stay back and prepare lunch for their husband and children affecting the society at large. From the interviews conducted, all the women, whether they were homemakers or not, they had the responsibility of making food for their family, and with the increase of work pressure, many of them had to discontinue the service. Hence, showing the essence of patriarchy still being present, even though the thought processes are deeming to change.

Moving ahead in talking about the sustenance of the *dabbawala* service, the crux of the service is home cooked food being delivered to the office goers, which is a service unique in its nature, different from all the new mushrooming food delivering systems. Thus, people with particular food habits or preferences have no choice but to avail the services of the *dabbawalas*. The consumers consider the service as a high-end brand and due to the lack of same alternatives, the consumers do not but have the only option to use this service. However, the service is extremely restrictive in nature, only applying to the areas with the local trains connected, thus, only so many people can encash the service so unique in nature. In contrary to this, there were also opinions that stated that *dabbawalas* could get deliveries for people having to cover large distances between their homes and offices, hence only increasing the necessity of the service in future as well. Thus, believing that they would in fact sustain for a long period of time.

While most of the consumers who were unaware of the above negatives believed that the service would suffice for a long time, on the other hand, it was also found by the non-consumers, who are primarily were young office goers, who completely derail the service, emphasising on the fact that there is no future for a food delivery system like this. The upcoming generations losing the value for the home-cooked food, always wanting to try variety, and lacking the infrastructure for someone to prepare the lunch boxes for them, will not resort to a service of the *dabbawala*, instead use the modern applications. Adding to this, it was also found that when questioned on a situation of price hike in future and their response to whether they would avail the

service or not, the responses showed that the consumers would be willing to pay more to avail the service later too, leading to understanding that the *dabbawala* service would in fact sustain, because of their Unique Selling Point (USP) and because it is convenient and efficient for majority of consumers.

The *dabbawala* as a Community, seem to satisfy the consumer, however, there is a huge vacuum in between the two stakeholders of the same service and shows the world, knows the Community only for the economic achievements and not who these people who have mastered an economic marvel are and live like. The *dabbawalas*, have branded themselves in a certain way and have created an image about themselves which has persisted over time and continues even today, irrespective of whether it holds true today or not. Therefore, from this group of stakeholders, the major themes that can be gauged upon are of gender dynamics, the changing society and hence the changing needs, the impact of growing competition on the *dabbawala* service as well as the *dabbawala* behaviour with the consumers in comparison to their Community beliefs.

6.2 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE CONSUMERS AND NON-CONSUMERS INTERVIEWS

For over a century now, the *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai have been providing a service to the city that has made life easier. Such as any other business model the major factor keeping the *dabbawalas* of Mumbai functioning is its avid consumer base which remain subscribed to the service regardless of changing times giving rise to technologically-advanced delivery systems. This also brought the need to conduct interviews to understand where the *dabbawalas* were lacking. Amidst data collection on field, the team managed to come across an array of consumers and non-consumers with questions putting in account the relationship or importance of the *dabbawalas* with this group of stakeholders. The consumers using the service ranged from people who had recently shifted to Mumbai, to those who had been using the service for years. Engaging with them helped in gaining knowledge about the kind of changes that the *dabbawala* Community has seen over the past years. The questionnaire for the interview revolved around the stakeholder's (consumers and non-consumers) relation and perspective regarding the *dabbawalas* in aspects of time, interaction,

anecdotes, frequency of use, prior interaction, price, awareness, values, culture and Community. It is also interesting to note that the perspectives gotten from different users, based on the duration they have made use of the service and the economic background they come from is quite varied. Nevertheless, there existed certain ideas which were common among all consumers and non-consumers. Moreover, the data collected asserted the importance and value that the *dabbawalas* held to the interviewee's, with many perspectives also asserting the value of home-cooked food for a few of them.

The array of consumers includes kinds, those that currently use the service and those that used it a while ago. While the other sample (non-consumers) consists of people that have never indulged in the service, taking into accounts their perceptions and reasoning for not using a *dabbawala*. Given that, both these group will have considerably less to no interaction with the *dabbawalas* it provides an insight into the public perception of the Community amongst other citizens of Mumbai. Since the type of research conducted was qualitative, there is a comparison drawn between the opinions of the interviewees. Across all interviews there are clear inferences that can be drawn with a large number of opinions being shared across different interviewees. The disparity in opinion, however, is credited to the diversity of the sample size with existing difference in economic backgrounds and period/time of using the service. The data collected (consumers) involved details about how long the service was used for, how the *dabbawalas* were contacted, how aware the consumers were about the service, what the opinion of the consumers was on the norms and values they could infer of the *dabbawala* Community, gender roles of the Community and feedback about the service. Whereas, the data collected for non-consumers provide insight on the use and nature of other delivery systems, if used by any interviewee. The backing of the information received here is considerable low, however, the opinions further enhance the knowledge regarding the visible cultural traits portrayed by the *dabbawala* Community.

The common questionnaire allowed for common comparing ground for the answers off all consumers and non-consumers, however inferences drawn with the help of additional follow-up questions via the semi-structured interview could be merely perceived as individual experience or opinion. For starters, generalizing the answers

received, the consumers as well as non-consumers had a rather positive tone towards the service provided by the *dabbawalas*. It was rare to find any disparity on the quality of service provided. The consumer satisfaction with the service was very high with majority of the sample size mentioning the importance of home-cooked meals with the value it held to them. Despite developments in the food delivery industry or “mushrooming” of companies in the field, there seems to be a clear comfort that consumers hold in dealing with the *dabbawalas*. The *dabbawalas* image of punctuality and friendly nature stands constant across all consumers, who in turn have a high reliance on the service. A major factor contributing to this is the fact that an individual stays a *dabbawala* to one consumer household consistently in collecting boxes for years, which helps the *dabbawala* enhance the relationship with the consumer. This human interactive approach provides a sense of reliability and comfort in consumers (especially homemakers). The impeccable punctuality, efficiency and lack of mistakes in the service is what makes it stand out. This holds even in the current day. All consumers agree without a shed of doubt that the service is always punctual. In fact, they work even when conditions adverse, like during strikes and heavy rains. For these reasons, even if the consumers face an inconvenience with the *dabbawalas*, they tend to overlook it. Certain households do face problems like the *dabba* of a certain day being delivered the next day, however, they don't feel the need to complain about the same (Shalini Mishra, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Moreover, the *dabbawalas*, though punctual are usually willing to wait for around five minutes for each consumer, without any fuss. Moreover, throughout the year, the *dabbawalas* are known to hardly ever take a leave. Even if they do take a leave, they inform the consumer much before time and there is always someone else who takes their place. Therefore, even during times of leave, work doesn't come to a standstill. Except during their auspicious occasion of *vari* where the *dabbawalas* go back to their village. However, this is also informed prior to the taking of leave so that for that period of time, consumers can make their own arrangements. This would explain further why any inconvenience can be over-looked by the consumers. Conclusively, there is a sense of satisfaction held by consumers with regard to the *dabbawalas* and the service, with primarily positive feedback and less-to-nil errors, keeping intact with previous research conducted on the supply-chain management system used by the *dabbawalas* of Mumbai.

Regarding the cultural perspective gauged by consumers whilst interacting, there appears a lack of knowledge present. However, through the basic interaction they have with them on a daily basis, majority of the sample group associated the *dabbawalas* as close-knit “Marathi” group. The *dabbawalas* were perceived as friendly, courteous, flexible and understanding in work whilst interacting with consumers. There have also been instances in which consumers have forgotten to prepare food and the *dabbawala* has been asked to buy and get simple foods, which have still been delivered on time (Chelina Madwani, personal communication, October 4, 2018). The opinion of non-consumers however is fairly different in comparison. The knowledge regarding behaviour and norms are in comparison far lesser than that of the consumer, given the lesser interaction with them. When it comes to looking into the consumer needs, the *dabbawalas* have been known to strongly believe that the consumer receiving his meal is their priority. Therefore, they try to make sure that the food gets delivered no matter what the circumstances. Often, from a purely business perspective the *dabbawalas* are perceived as a logistics company. However, in the eyes of most consumers and non-consumers, they are much more than that (Chandrashekhar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Moving on to inputs by past consumers, in most cases the responses are along the same lines as active consumers wherein recollection of behaviour and culture revolves around the minimalistic interaction kept. Although all experiences shared were along these lines, there were opinions of a past consumers that swayed adrift from the pattern seen. A major piece of information was the fact that the *dabbawalas*’ behaviour toward a past consumer changed once the business relationship ended. The change however wasn’t unanimous and made the behavioural trait seem more of an obligation on part of the *dabbawala*. Instances such as the brawl ensuing, which was witnessed by a past consumer backs the claim of obligatory display of certain behaviour (Bimlesh, personal communication, October 4, 2018). However, as mentioned, the incidence stands as an instance and cannot be made into a generalization given that majority of the consumers and past consumers provided data that drifts from the conclusion drawn through this anecdote. Gauging a perspective on their traditions and norms was fairly harder, but traits noticed by consumers include the uniform, that is with the cap and the *tilak*. Conclusively, active consumers of the *dabbawalas* were only aware of basic visual traits that could describe parts of the *dabbawala*’s norms and tradition. Thus, in general through different perceptions, the

dabbawalas are a well behaved, religious and a close-knit group of individuals with their particular norms such as their uniform public approach being noticeable.

Through this minimalistic interaction with the *dabbawalas*, consumers gauge that the *dabbawala* community as a whole would comprise of only positive aspects. Most consumers are aware that primarily, the *dabbawalas* belong to the same Community, even though they are not aware of what Community it is. All the interactions have indications only towards the work ethics and culture of their service. Many consumers have faced situations where the receiver of the dabba may have forgotten their phone or wallet, and the *dabbawala* has been asked to take along with the dabba. This adds to them becoming viewed as trustworthy and reliable. Thus, the judgement of their Community's value systems and life-style is made based on these work ethics. This could potentially be the halo effect, where individuals feel that a positive impression about one aspect of an individual or Community, would lead on overvaluing the individual or Community in other aspects as well (Sorcher & Brant, 2002). In this case, the consumers' knowledge about their work ethics led to them overvalues the values of the Community at large. Usually, this can be seen with non-consumers as well. Even though they have no interaction with *dabbawalas*, those who have lived in Mumbai for most part of their life has heard about them, either through media portrayal or through their interaction with other consumers. For most part, the *dabbawalas* are perceived as almost a saviour in the rush of everyday Mumbai life because they provide to people one of the most important needs of everyday life, their meals.

Nevertheless, there are differences in opinion about their value systems as well. The *dabbawalas* claim that they are not allowed to indulge into certain behavior because that would go against their Community beliefs. Indulgence in alcohol, tobacco, and getting into fights are considered strictly against their morals (Vilas Shinde, personal communication, October 5, 2018). Most consumers have no evidence for this but believe it must be true since the halo effect comes into play. However, a few consumers have made claims about seeing them indulge in such practices during work and have reported them coming to the work place to make their delivery while under such influences. These few consumers feel that there lies a stark difference between what the *dabbawalas* claim about them and their Community and what they actually

practice have a stark difference (Bimlesh, personal communication, October 4, 2018). It has been stated on multiple occasions in the past that the *dabbawalas* of Mumbai have a strict set of rules in place, which aligns with the beliefs of their Community.



Figure 10: A glimpse of a Mumbaikar's life

The organization holds every authority to fire or fine individuals who may be classified as ‘bad’ *dabbawalas* or perform repeated acts that are against the existing rules (Patel & Vedula, 2006). However, a few consumers claimed to have gotten into serious arguments with them, which has ended up extending beyond a one on one argument (Bimlesh, personal communication, October 4, 2018). The *dabbawala* in question has brought in support from his colleagues and matters have gotten quite aggressive. Since the *dabbawalas* are united as a Community and stand by each other, such acts don’t get reported.

Often, a shade of difference can be noticed in the claims of consumers from higher economic strata as opposed to those from lower economic strata. The biggest difference is in perceiving how courteous they are. Consumers in the higher economic stratum usually find *dabbawalas* to be friendly and courteous. The respects with which they talk to these consumers are always mentioned when describing them. However, people from lower economic backgrounds, don’t necessarily always feel the same. People from lower economic backgrounds have claimed that the *dabbawalas* aren’t as courteous or friendly. They don’t care as much about their customers as people from a higher income group seem to believe. They too, like

everyone else, are just doing their job, which is helping them in earning their daily bread. No interactions between the *dabbawalas* and these consumers give reason to believe otherwise. However, sometimes consumers from a lower income stratum seem to know more about the religious practices and beliefs of the *dabbawalas* as opposed to consumers in higher income groups. Their religious practices of praying to the god ‘*Vitthoba/Vitthal*’ does make people claim that they are ‘nice’ people (Suresh, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Nonetheless, there is still no hard and fast evidence in terms of interaction that confirms that the *dabbawalas* always give priority to the needs of the customer.

One reason for this could be the money that they receive from each household. Each household is charged differently based on the route they take, the distance of the house from the office and what background the consumer is from. Needless to say, consumers who come from a higher economic background pay more than those who come from lower economic backgrounds. With change in the fee for the service, the amount of courtesy shown may also seem as subject to change. While this is just an observation, a reason for this could be that the *dabbawalas* are not as satisfied with their work as they are always portrayed to be. The *dabbawalas* are always shown to be passionate about their work, with their priority only being the needs of their customers (“Take inspiration from work culture of dabbawalas,” 2017). Adding to this, they are known by the pride they take in their work, which is enhanced by the kind of recognition they receive. This is meant to nullify the impacts of the strenuous and risky work that they do (Krishnan, 2014). However, the income of the *dabbawalas* hasn’t shown much growth in the last few years. They earn up to Rs.12000-Rs.15000 a month. Further, the *dabbawalas* don’t have paid leaves. Therefore, often *dabbawalas* who take leaves apart from auspicious occasions, request customers to not report it at the main office so that their salary is not deducted (Mona Voria, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

One of the non-consumers interviewed told that he had spoken to a *dabbawala* once because he was in awe of their job and the kind of work they did. When he asked if the *dabbawala* was satisfied with his work, the *dabbawala* questioned how he would be when he was just barely managing to sustain his livelihood (Bunty Rao, personal communication, October 3, 2018)? This is in alignment with previous researches,

which have claimed that the earnings of the *dabbawalas* make it extremely hard for them to get by. Not only do they have to manage to sustain their living in the metropolitan city of Mumbai, but they also have to send money back home to their villages (Bansal & Thakur, 2007). This could explain a reason for differences in the level of courtesy, since there could lie a sub-conscious sense of gratitude towards households that contribute more to their earnings.

Another interesting aspect about the *dabbawala* that can be viewed through the lens of the consumers is the gender dynamics within the Community. The results showed few traits which were common among all consumer and no particular outlier as such was found. The fact that no consumer, active or past had ever seen a female *dabbawala* was a constant, the reasoning, when asked about varies from consumer to consumer. The opinions (of consumers) mainly followed two patterns, with one being the fact that the job of a *dabbawala* included a lot of heavy lifting and travel in overcrowded spaces, with speed of commute being fairly quick. Thus, consumers believed that since the job involved far more physical tasks, it was better suited for males to do. This opinion was shared by a few but backed in different ways, with a few consumers agreeing to this thought and others sharing the thought but rejecting the logic. People who rejected the logic went on explaining that if not in the process of the supply, women should at least be offered to help in administrative positions wherein their thoughts and opinions about running the business should be taken into account. Regardless, most consumers don't find this a major problem. To them the workings within the Community is not important because they don't feel impacted by it. Most of them believe that it is unfortunate that women aren't given equal opportunity, but also have a sense of resignation that this is how most communities work.

Additionally, the other opinion was the fact that the *dabbawala* Community is highly patriarchal in nature following and supporting the age-old philosophy of "*Man goes to work and woman cooks at home*". The opinion of 'male chauvinism' is one that is popular among the consumer group, with majority rejecting the logic that a physically taxing job is manly (Kritika Saraf, personal communication, October 3, 2018). The crux of the issue lies in the fact that, patriarchy is evident given that no woman *dabbawala* exists and neither is there a woman that is part of the *dabbawala* Union's

decision-making process. This evidential backing provided by the like-minded set of consumers makes it clear about the perception held by the consumers on the communal gender dynamics of the *dabbawalas*. Other data collected fails to refute the communal part, however, doesn't refute or back the claim of the *dabbawalas* promoting 'male chauvinism' in households. Conclusively, given the data collected, the internal gender dynamic of the *dabbawala* Community appear male centric to consumers, however, whether the mentality is promoted by the same Community is not inferable by the provided information.

Through the past century, a lot has changed in the city of Mumbai. One of its many changes has been in the face of food. With the coming up of multiple food delivery systems like Zomato and Swiggy, the sustainability of the *dabbawalas* is definitely up for questioning. Most of the non-consumers and newer generation of consumers believe that the sustainability of the *dabbawala* service is threatened. One of the primary reasons for this is the changing societal structure. With more people starting to stay away from home, either people have no one to cook for them at home or they have a housemaid, since most people have started working now. Either way, the essence of home cooked food is missing. For most people, a large part of making use of the service is the home-cooked food they receive. There is a lot of emotional value attached to the home-cooked food. For people who receive food made by cooks, the value of the food is not the same. Moreover, with the world moving faster, most of the younger generation believe that they crave variety. This is something, which businesses like Swiggy and Zomato can provide. Even if people are looking for healthy food, new places, which keep check on calories and health, are coming up (Chandrashekhar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Most office goers claim that the number of people ordering out has increased significantly and there has been decay in the number of *dabbawalas*. Thus, with their being other, perceptively better alternatives to this group of interviewees; the use of the *dabbawala* service does not seem likely for the individuals in question.

However, consumers who have been using *dabbawalas* for a prolonged period of time, usually claim that Swiggy and Zomato cannot be a competition to the *dabbawalas*. According to them, what the *dabbawalas* do is unique, and cannot be replaced by such businesses. In fact, to them, such businesses are on a very different

tangent when compared to the service the Mumbai *dabbawalas* provide. They also believe that the value of home-cooked food is not depreciating. They believe even if the current generation is seemingly leaning towards outside food, they will come around because nothing can out-weigh the advantages of home cooked food. However, while this might be true, they still agree that the number of *dabbawalas* in Mumbai has seen decay in the past few years. The difference lies in the younger generations believing that the service will die out if they don't craft their business according to current needs; while the older generations believe that they will pick up pace again.

While consumers are not always aware about the value and belief systems of the consumers, their opinions about the work culture and ethics also says a lot about the Community. Since most of the *dabbawalas* till date come from the same Community, if they display a pattern of behavior, it can be attributed to the larger picture of their Community. For most part of it, the biggest religion and identity of this Community, is their work. With changing times, a lot has changed within the Community. Even though they have not changed when the *dabbawalas* make claims, they have changed in practice. Like any Community, changes in the surrounding socio-cultural factors have influenced them. They are still just as efficient in terms of how they run their business, however, to keep up, they will probably need to change what they make their Unique Selling Point (USP). For years, home-cooked food has been their priority, but with change in the value of home-cooked food due to changing societal structure, their sustenance may be at a threat.

In conclusion, regarding opinions on cultural identity and gender dynamic of the *dabbawalas* there was very little difference in opinion from that provided by the group of stakeholders that were interviewed. It is also important to note that opinions and perceptions about the *dabbawalas* in general for this group of stakeholders would be mostly based on newspaper articles written on them or through the system of word-of-mouth among the population. Hence, certain personal encounters that the a few individuals might have faced are an important finding even though it is considered as minority. Moreover, given that the interaction of the non-consumers was bare-minimum, to say the least, it seemed that the public perception revolved around four aspects similar to that of the consumers/non-consumers, that is, Marathi-

dominated, patriarchal, close-knit and generally friendly to people outside their Community. With the perception being a pattern across both sets of interviewees, the public image of the *dabbawalas* is quite evident. The collected data revolves around three main themes, with those being, the culture of the *dabbawalas* being fairly subjective, the gender dynamic of the Community being patriarchal and the service of the *dabbawalas* being as efficient as described in prior researches conducted on the group.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The *dabbawalas* of Mumbai are a Community depending on many variables for their survival, from dynamic in households to their avid consumer base, from what religion and deity the Community follows to the structural changes in their business, it all links to form a web which the *dabbawalas* are heavily dependent on. This very interlinkage between different domains puts across the complex struggle faced by the *dabbawalas* with an aged yet successful business model at their disposal with globalization and technologically advanced services on the rise. The business model, however doesn't solely stand on its own, its success is primarily attributed to the culture and close-knit nature of the *dabbawala* Community, where the profession holds a place almost equivalent to godly status. This being said, this very 'status' appears to be on the decline, given the changing times and inflating costs, the feasibility of the profession seems to reduce as the years go by. Regardless of how noble or beneficial the service has been to the Community, there appears an air of caution with regard to the continuation of the service by upcoming generations. The fear factor of the profession being redundant with globalisation on the rise is on the cards given that most *dabbawalas* too have shown rather progressive thinking with changing times, with less than 50 percent of the upcoming generation not wanting to take up the Mantle of the *dabba* delivery system (Pramanik, 2012). Majority of the *dabbawalas* that gave interviews indicated that their next of kin isn't as inclined to take over the duty of a *dabbawala* but rather seek employment in other fields. A few also claimed that they wouldn't want their children to carry the mantle as it would hold a diminishing importance (Vilas Shinde, personal communication, October 4, 2018). Looking at it purely from an economic perspective, the profession of a *dabbawala* isn't a particularly well paying one (Chaudhary, 2017) and with inflation on the rise it would seem logical to ensure that upcoming generations look at better employment options in the future. With this conclusion being drawn on the profession, it displays a dilution in the culture and norms once upheld by the *dabbawalas*, with the Community foregoing what they once considered a nobility for better economic sustenance. In this seek for economic betterment, the product that is

the service of the *dabbawalas* appears to be in its declining stage of its product life cycle with its most important resource, that is, the *dabbawalas* reducing in number as years go by.

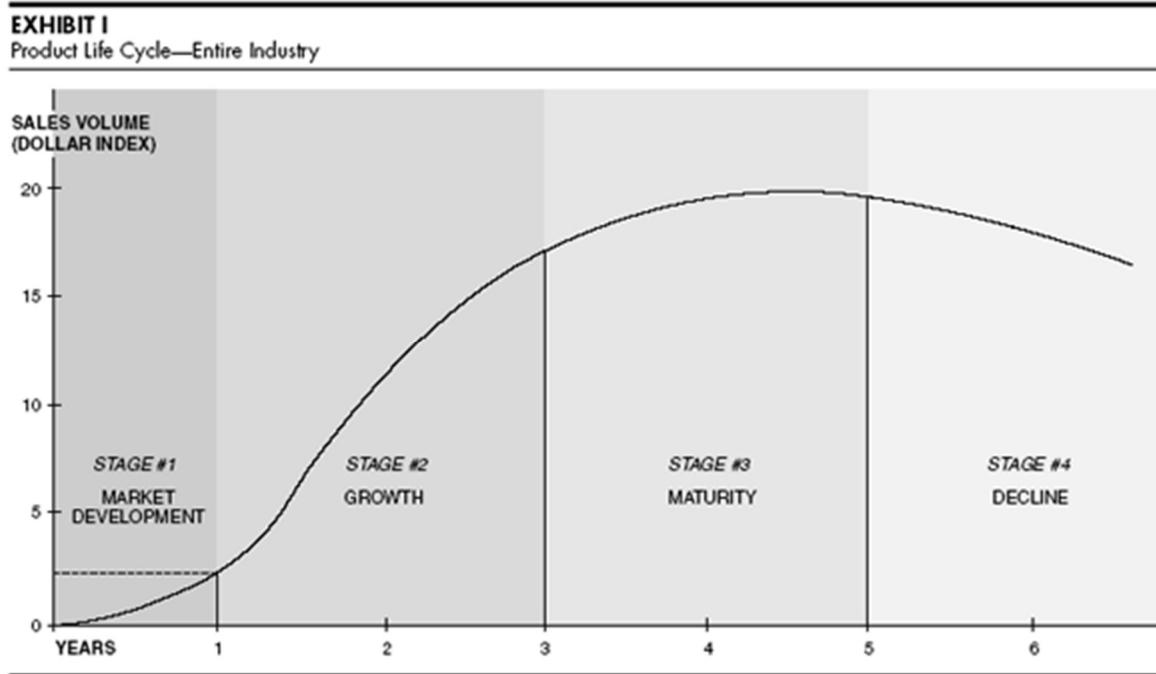


Figure 11: Product life cycle

The trade-off of having better income over holding on the values that were once responsible for the existence of the Community in the first place boasts a very practical approach shown by the *dabbawala* Community. The importance that the *dabbawalas* hold for their traditions face decline in these modern times, with it being portrayed different than what is actually in practice. An example of this is the fact that *dabbawalas* aren't considered 'authentic' members of the *Varkari sampridhay* whereas they are portrayed as proper followers of the norms and tradition held by *Varkari's*. Examples such as this put in perspective better ideas regarding the culture possessed currently by the Community, which appeared to be fairly vague in prior researches conducted on the Community. The major gap visible in prior researches predominantly revolved around lack of information about the Community's cultural attributes responsible for its survival. With the cultural attributes, responsible for the tremendous success received by the service and with the culture steadily diluting or

fading away from the Community, the survival of the Community's identity of being '*dabbawalas*' too will fade with it.

The most essential aspect of a functioning business is the consumer base, which in the case for the *dabbawalas*, is a strong suit for the survival of the service. With the consumer satisfaction of the *dabbawalas* at a high position, with consumers unable to imagine a Mumbai without *dabbawalas* there doesn't appear to be concrete reason for the service to stop. But then again, the question of adhering to changing times comes into play, with the upcoming generations of consumers uncertain to use the service. Consumer interaction is another aspect in favour of the *dabbawalas* with majority of the Consumers providing positive feedback regarding the behaviour of the *dabbawalas*, which in turn is a product of norms and values maintained over time by the *dabbawalas*. However, the main concept of home-cooked food being delivered to office-going individuals seems to have been modified with catering services also acting as users of the service. With this change being brought in, it puts to question the whole idea held noble by the *dabbawalas* of delivery of home-cooked meals being the essence of their service. The inclusion of caterers can be seen as a way to adapt with time, allowing expanding the already existing consumer base to individuals that live alone. This expansion however speaks against one of the core value systems (home-cooked meals) the *dabbawalas* abide by, hence, it brings to notice a case that displays a fading value of the Community due to changing times. Culturally, the Community appears to be drifting away from its roots, with the meaning of the profession changing with time. As newer generations come up, dilution in old traditions seems to be a trend, wherein core values that made the *dabbawalas* a successful entity. The drift can be seen as more of an adaptation to increase the effectiveness of the service in keeping consumers hooked on to the system.

Although the *dabbawalas* identify as *Varkari*, there was resentment shown toward the Community from temple-goers in the *Vithoba* temple visited. This in turn brought to sight, the vagueness in the fact that there appears to be a drift even in religious norms once equipped by the *dabbawala* Community. Resentment did not indicate that the *dabbawalas* weren't part of the *Varkari sampridhay*, but rather just helped confirm the very fact. The *dabbawalas* have been in exposure to fast growing city of Mumbai, wherein given the pace at which life moves and developments take place. This

exposure to change at large scales is a major contributor to the cultural dilution, bringing in a comparatively more practical approach to the life of the Community, with monetary benefit being a major goal. The Community's inclination toward bettering their economic conditions and status overshadows the inclination that *dabbawalas* once had to preserving their identity as. Amidst all the chaos of keeping up with modernisation, there is a clear shift in the identity of *dabbawalas*, wherein even they are able to see their service coming to a stop over the next decade (Vilas Shinde, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

A part of the interviewees were clueless when asked about the cultural identity of a *dabbawalas*, confirming the fact that there lies a gap in knowing of the cultural identity of the *dabbawalas*. The fieldwork conducted helped fill major chunks of that gap, via interaction with essential stakeholders that factored into their survival. The culture of the Community is largely dependent on its business model, where the Community members identify themselves and hold on to basic traits that were once held by previous *dabbawalas* regardless of whether their parents did the job or not. This in turn shows lack of room for cultural integration, to bring in a multi-cultural dynamic to the Community. The essence of the business lies in the culture of the city of Mumbai, which has allowed the system to develop overtime. The success of the system, as mentioned before, relied on many factors, with one being the culture and value system held by the *dabbawalas* and with that fading, the delivery service too would dissolve with it.

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GLOSSARY

1. *Ashadhi Ekadashi*: The 11th day of the lunar cycle in Hindu month of *Ashadha*.
2. *Dabba*: Tiffin.
3. *Dabbawala*: Delivery man for the tiffin box/ *dabba* in the city of Mumbai.
4. *Jatra*: The procession during which the idol is carried to Pandharpur, accompanied by music and dance by the *Varkari* Community (In this context).
5. *Mala*: Necklace (*Tulsi* mala: necklace made of *Tulsi* beads)
6. *Varkari Sampraday*: A Community of people who follow the spiritual *Varkari* movement that is governed by certain normative virtues that must be followed.
7. *Teeka /Tika*: Mark on the forehead
8. *Topi*: Cap
9. *Vari*: A yearly pilgrimage to Pandharpur.
10. *Muqqadams*: Facilitator.
11. *Baithak*: Sitting area.
12. *Shlokas*: Holy phrases.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire of: Dabbawalas in general

1. What is your name?
2. Where do you live?
3. Where are you from?
4. When did you come to Mumbai and when did you become a Dabbawala?
5. What is the process of becoming a Dabbawala?
6. Are you a part of *Varkari Sampraday*?
7. What time does your day start and end?
8. In your Community, do people pursue other job opportunities other than being Dabbawalas?
9. Would you want your children to join the same profession? Why?
10. Are there any female Dabbawalas? Will more join in the future?

Dabbawalas families

1. What is your name
2. Where are you from? When did you come to Mumbai?
3. Do you have children, what are they doing?
4. Do you want them to become Dabbawalas in the future? Why?
5. What about your wife? Is she employed?

Heads

1. For example, you changed the coding on *Dabbas* from colours to numbers?
2. What changes have you made in the service?
3. What are your new initiatives?
4. Do you think your society is different from others and if so how?
5. Why do you wear *topi*? What is the importance of the *topis*?
6. Do the women in your Community seek employment or prefer to be homemakers?

Devotees in Temple:’

1. What is your name?
2. How long have you been visiting this temple > what is the speciality of this temple?
3. Are you a *Varkari*?
4. Where are you from?
5. What is your profession?
6. What are *Varkari* traditions and rules to be followed? How do you identify a *Varkari*?
7. Have you attended annual *Vari*?
8. Are you related to the *Dabbawalas* / know any *Dabbawala* personally?

Caterers

1. What is your name?
2. When did you start this business? What is your business model?
3. How many *Dabbas* do you send out every day on average?
4. Who are your customers (target market)?
5. What kind of food do you provide?
6. What mode of delivery do you use to?
7. Have you used the *Dabbawala* service? If yes, for how long?
8. Do the customers pay you for the delivery or the Dabbawala directly?
9. How is your experience with the *Dabbawalas*? Does their performance affect the businesses' image?
10. Are there any alternatives available for delivery of your food? Have you tried them?
11. Will you prefer alternatives for delivery service or continue with *Dabbawalas*?
12. Do you believe that the introductions of start-ups like Swiggy effect the *Dabbawala* business?

Focus group

1. What is your name, age and profession?
2. For how long have you all been in Mumbai?

3. So, you said you use *Dabbawala* service only sometimes, how frequently do you use the service?
4. How did you get to know about the service of the *Dabbawalas*?
5. So, you said you use the service only sometimes, why do you use it just ‘sometimes’?
6. How was your experience with the *Dabbawalas*?
7. So, do you use Swiggy or Zomato? How is the service compared to *Dabbawalas*?
8. Have you seen a female *Dabbawala*?
9. Do you know about the *Dabbawala* Community, their value systems, their traditions or their deity?

Office-Goers/homemakers/consumers

1. Why do you use this service?
2. Do you find it convenient? If yes, Why?
3. How did you get to know about them?
4. What was the process you undertook to get in touch with them?
5. What day to day interactions do you share with the Mumbai *dabbawals*?
6. What is your perception of the value systems/traditions of the Community?
7. From your experience, what do you gauge about the gender dynamics about the Community?
8. Have you had any positive or negative incident that you remember vividly while using this service?
9. What do you Like and dislike about the system?
10. Why did you continue to use this service with the coming up of newer similar services?
11. Have you used other services? If yes, how has the service been in comparison?
12. If you don’t receive your *dabba* someday, what substitute do you switch to?
13. Would you continue to use the service if the prices increased?
14. What changes do you think can they make in their system with respect to the changing times?

Non-Consumers

1. Where are you from?

2. Are you aware of the dabbawala service: Yes/No?
3. What delivery system do you use/prefer?
4. Have you used the *Dabbawala* service before: Yes/No?
5. How do you carry home cooked meals for lunch?
6. Why don't you use the *Dabbawala* service? Or why did you discontinue/switch using the *Dabbawala* service? (mention non-delivery)
7. What would make you use the *Dabbawala* service? (If you have used it in the past only)
8. From your experience, what do you gauge about the gender dynamics about the Community?



Conquering the *Dabba* while discovering ourselves.

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