

Transcending Life through Romance: Mumbai Tiffinwalas and the Lunch Box

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Abstract

In a metropolitan city like Mumbai, a city that moves on wheels, a city that gives pan local and pan global experience, often gives feeling of isolation and alienation to her citizens. The absurdity of fast moving life in a metro often leads to universal question, 'why do we exist?' The answer lies in optimistic attitude of Mumbai Dabbawalas/ Tiffinwalas whose coping mechanism teaches us how to live and enjoy every single moment of life. They flow with the flow of life by maintaining self respect and dignity. The city plays a role of a protagonist who steers us to 'never say die'. The Dabbawala or Tiffinwallas have crossed the boundaries of publicity. Right from Prince Charles of Wales, England to a case study of Harvard management students have shown their keen interest in the management skills of the semi-literate and non-technical dabbawalas. The present paper is a humble attempt of describing Mumbai city in brief. Life of Mumbai dabbawalas would be described through socio-cultural and financial aspects. Being a teacher of literature, I would like to describe Mumbai and dabbawalas through a Bollywood movie *The Lunch Box* that has won accolades in national and international film festivals. The movie is a bittersweet romantic comedy in which Mumbai city life is portrayed with her special attribute 'dabbawala'. The movie depicts a story of two unknown people who get connected through misplacement of tiffin and their romantic letter friendship finally helps them to transcend life in the search of the 'self'. Their journey started from absurdity and boredom of cactus land that gradually turn into lands of roses and finally transcends them to spiritual quest for 'know thyself'.

Key Words: Mumbai, alienation and isolation, dabbawalas, the lunch box, spiritual quest, transcendentalism

TRANSCENDING LIFE THROUGH ROMANCE: MUMBAI TIFFINWALAS AND THE LUNCH BOX

A journey of all rational and sensible human beings starts from ignorance to knowledge. Romanticism and transcendentalism are the steps that one has to come across in his/her life. Transcendentalism is closely associated with an individual's identity, temperament, philosophy and spirituality whereas romanticism was an intellectual and artistic movement of eighteenth century that deals with emotional upheavals. Every individual's journey of life moves from romanticism to transcendentalism. Immanuel Kant's transcendental philosophy shows strong faith in power of divinity and individuality. Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of transcendentalism deals with wisdom and self realization. The present paper is a humble attempt to describe a life in metropolitan cities in general and Mumbai city in particular. Mumbai Dabbawalas/ Tiffinwallas are management Gurus (masters) of the hi-tech world of today. The researcher would like to describe socio-cultural aspect of Dabbawalas. The life of Mumbai inhabitants and the Dabbawalas will be described through a Bollywood movie *The Lunch Box*. The protagonists' romantic association led them to find their real self that

transcends their present and future. Let us describe the world's densely populated metropolitan city Mumbai in brief.

Mumbai, a primate city of gold and dreams, a city of all worldly pleasures and evils, commercial capital of India, is located on Salsette Island that consists of a group of seven islands and twenty-two hills on the western Arabian coast of India. These islands later on merged into one large island in eighteenth century. The name of the city is driven from Mumba Devi, the Goddess of local Koli fishing community. There are evidences of human habitation since Stone Age. It was ruled by several dynasties till the entry of Portuguese and Mughals. King Ashoka of Maurya dynasty made the city a Hindu and Buddhist religious center. According to 2011 census the population of Mumbai was 12, 479, 608. Among them nine million people are slum-dwellers. Dharawi is recorded as the biggest slum in Asia. The city is known for her architecture like Gateway of India, Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus, Naval Dockyard, Mumbai Stock Exchange, Mount Mery's Church, Prince of Wales Museum, Jahangir Art Gallery, Asiatic Society of Mumbai and so on. The city is approachable from all sides and offers all options of transportation. The city's deep water harbor is the largest port of the nation. One can get maximum education and research options in Mumbai. People of all religions, castes and creeds are living happily for years together. Mumbaiteas celebrate all festivals with great enthusiasm. Ganapati festival, Holi, Dahihandi and King Shivaji's birthday 'Shivjayanti' are some of the well-known festivals celebrated by masses as social festivals. Wada-Pav and Zunka Bhakar are the local Marathi dishes available in cheaper rates. Islamic terrorist groups selected Mumbai for terrorist attacks due to her financial and commercial prosperity and multiple transportation options. In spite of several terrorist attacks Mumbaiteas never give hope. They are the role models of never say die. Dabbawalas are the integral part and oxygen of the city without which the city will become breathless.

This innovative practice of 'Dabba' started with a British official in pre-independent India who wanted homemade lunch. The initial service to the British official later on became hardcore business of Mumbaiteas. Dabbawalas represent innovative practice of Mumbai city dwellers. School syllabi have included lessons on the functioning of Dabbawalas. It can be considered as the best six sigma rating organization. In the English textbook of std. eleven, MSBSHSE, a lesson Mumbai Dabbawalas starts with following lines:

"Hungry? Would you like to have a fresh, hot meal from home? Most managers don't have that choice. It's either a sandwich, a pizza or a restaurant, unless you live in Mumbai, that is, where a small army of 'dabbawalas' picks up 300000 lunches from homes and delivers them to students, managers, and workers every working day at their desks, 12.30 pm on the dot. Served hot, of course. And now you can order over the internet." (Yuvakbharati: A Coursebook in English, p. 72)

Who are these Dabbawalas? 'Dabba' is a Marathi word which means tiffin and 'Walla' is a person who delivers tiffin. The world is resting on the pillars like information technology and communication skills but our Dabbawalas are running business of millions without using technology and communication skills. Now they have their website through which one can order tiffin. Isn't it interesting and appealing? It is a large service supply chain of the local semi-literate people who supply hot food without having corporate training like for instance institutes like CII, IIM and IITs have.

Mumbai Dabbawala or Tiffinwallas have crossed the boundaries of publicity. Right from Prince Charles of Wales, England to a case study of Harvard management students it has been proven that management skills of the semi-literate and non-technical dabbawalas have caught attention and accolades from the rest of the world. The Prime Minister Narendra Modi has nominated dabbawalas with great pride and honour in 'Clean India Mission' because of their popularity as social reformers. Lot of research has been going on the logistics of Dabbawalas. Prakash Bachche, a dabbawala has entered in Guinness book of world record for carrying three tiffin crates at a time on his head. Almost all prestigious newspapers have written columns on Mumbai Dabbawalas. The dabbawala collects hot homemade food lunch box from the residences of workers and employees and delivers it to their working places by using bicycles or railway trains and returns it to residences before the workers reach their homes. Although the city has suffered due to several socio-economic calamities Dabbawalas survived for one and half century and will survive due to their dedication and honesty.

The Tiffin box system is based on three tier structure namely executive committee, Mukadam, and Dabbawalas. They are known for their reliability and ethics. The Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Supplier Association, NMTBSA, is 120-year-old logistics system that consists of 5000 members. The system is based on a colour-coded notation on the lid that helps to identify its owner, destination and Dabbawala. Once the Dabbawala picks up the tiffin he moves fast with either bicycle, local trains and sometimes on feet. They can be called as disciples of Mahatma Gandhi in walking speed because they found uncatchable to team of BBC crew:

“ Following our dabbawala wasn't easy, our film crew quickly lost him in the congestion of the train station. At Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus we found other fast moving dabbawalas, but not our subject... and at Mr. Bapat'sayurvedic Pharmacy, the lunch had arrived long before the film crew.” (Yuvakbharati: A Coursebook in English, p. 72)

The statistical data provides recruitment details that in 2003 there were 5000 recruits, 175,000 clients, 350,000 deliveries with the turnover of 380 million per annum. The Dabbawalas cover an area of 75 km of Mumbai suburbs that runs of suburban railway network. Most important aspect of the system is that it is governed by, for and of the dabbawalas. Coding system covers abbreviations for collecting points, colour code for starting station, number for destination center, and markings for handling Dabbawalas at destination, building and floor. The collection and distribution take place in an interesting way. Firstly the dabbawala takes the tiffin for residence and brings it to a sorting place, where he and other collecting dabbawalas sort the lunch boxes into groups. Secondly the grouped boxes are put in the coaches of trains, with markings to identify the destination of the box. The markings include the railway station to unload the boxes and the destination building delivery address. At each station, boxes are handed over to a local dabbawala, who delivers them. The empty boxes are collected after lunch or the next day and sent back to the respective houses.

Mumbai dabbawalas started an innovative social service called Share My Dabba. Mumbai dabbawalas with the help of NGOs decided to feed street children with homemade fresh nutritious dabba food. One of the drawbacks of fast growing metro cities is increasing number of slum dwellers. Mumbaitees often quote that no one remains jobless and hungry in this city due to which a huge number of migration takes place. Children of slum dwellers don't get proper food. They Dabbawala foundation and the Happy Life Welfare Society decided to collect leftover food and distribute it among hungry street children. The Stickers of 'share my dabba' are sent to the customer's mail ID by the Happy Welfare Society. The lunch box owner sticks it on the lid and fresh 'leftover' food gets distributed to poor and needy. The dabbawalas separate

the boxes on which the sticker is placed. The food is separated and immediately distributed to hungry street children. The owner gets satisfaction of not wasting food and empty stomachs quench their hunger as well. Dabbawalas are next to God for these growing children because Service to Man is a service to God.

The dabbawalas maintain their identity by following native Marath culture. They call themselves the Mawalas/soldiers and successors of King Shivaji the Great. They have to follow dress code or otherwise they have to pay fine. The dress code includes white shirt and pyjama/trousers and a Gandhi cap. They put Gandh or Tilak on their forehead which is a sign of a Warkaree. Warkaree is a person who is a devotee of local God named Vittal. Varkaree Sampraday is a social organization of the devotees of Lord Vittal from Pandharpur. Turning to audio-visual presentation of life in a metro like Mumbai with her Dabbawalas the researcher is supporting her statement with a movie The Lunch Box. It starts as well as ends with the dabbawala with various shades of life in a cosmopolitan metro city.

The Lunch Box, written and directed by Ritesh Batra, located in and around Mumbai city, is a bittersweet romantic comedy. It has been produced by Anurag Kashyap, and released on 19th May 2013 in Cannes International Film Festival and journeyed through all film festivals. The movie is nominated for BAFTA Film award in 2013, won best screenplay award and Jury Grand Prize in Asia Pacific Screen awards, Ritesh Batra, the director won the Film Fare award for best debu director and best film award, canvas audience award in Ghent International Film Festival, best film in London film festival, the church of Iceland award in Reykjavik International film festival, best first feature film in Toronto Film Critics Association Award, best screenwriter in Asian Films award, won grand golden Rail award in Cannes Film Award, got Muhar Asia-Africa Special mention in Dubai International Film Festival, got best film award in Amazonas award and so on. 'Dabba' was the title that was decided initially but was replaced by The Lunch Box. It is a short art film of one hour fourty-four minutes. The cast and crew of the movie is as follows. The main character Saajan Fernandis is enacted by Irfan Khan. Nirmat Kaur is playing Ila, a female lead role. Her husband Rajeev is portrayed by Nakul Vaid as one of the minor characters. Nawaziddin is playing a supporting role of Mr Sheikh and his wife Meherunnisa is enacted by Shruti Bapna. Mrs Deshpande Aunti, enacted by Bharati Acharekar, though physically absent, is audible through her dialogues. Dabbawala who frequently comes and goes is enacted by Sadashiv Pokarker. Dabbawala at Saajan's office is enacted by Baburao Sankpal.

It is a story of mundane bourgeois life in metropolitan city like Mumbai. The plot is centered around a middle class house wife named Ila, her husband and her daughter living in a small one BHK flat with minimum amenities. On the other side a man named Saajan, chief accountant in a government office lives lonely life of a widower. Ila and Saajan get connected through a Tiffinwalla who delivers Ila's husband's tiffin on wrong address. Saajan gives 'a letter complement' for homemade hot food prepared by Ila by saying 'thank you'. Ila is forced to answer to Saajan's letter by her neighbor Mrs Deshpande. It gives birth to a letter friendship that develops into a strong bond of girlfriend and boyfriend kind of indirect relationship. The common thread for friendship is isolated and alienated life in cosmopolitan city. She being a bored and deceived wife due to her husband's extra marital affair and he, being a widower start to share each-other's worries through letters. Initial negative tone for 'why do we exist', gets changed into positive attitude such as 'life is meaningful'. Romance through letters lead them to search their identity.

The script moves around two characters who stand in contrast with Ila and Saajan. Mr. Sheikh, portrayed in contrast to Saajan, is a young and enthusiastic junior assistant accountant who enters into the life of Saajan as a trainee and Saajan as his trainer. Sheikh knows nothing about accounting and Saajan is very competent accountant. He has been to Saudi and some other nations whereas Saajan has spent his life in Mumbai so far. Saajan believes in 'speak less and act more' whereas Mr Sheikh speaks more and acts less. Mr Sheikh gets things done by hook or crook. On the other hand Saajan believes in sincerity and hard work. Practicality of Mr Sheikh wins in the end and idealism of Saajan is defeated in the point of view of materialistic world.

Mrs Deshpande, Ila's upstairs neighbor, is portrayed as a well-wisher and strong supporter of Ila. Mrs Deshpande is a middle aged lady who devotes and sacrifices her life for her husband who is in coma for last fifteen years. In spite of age difference Ila and Mrs Deshpande develop friendship due to absence of loving and caring partners in their lives. Mrs Deshpande is a typical house wife who believes that husband is next to God. Ila, though represent young generation, doesn't dare to go against patriarchal framework of the Indian society. Her mother is the third meek and mild Indian woman portrayal who surrenders herself to her cancer patient husband's service. All women are the victims of male dominated patriarchal society.

The indirect love relationship of Saajan and Ila finally comes to a dead stop when they decide to meet. Their intimacy increases with a search for 'why do we exist?' Ila asks Saajan to meet in person in a hotel near Matunga. Saajan gets ready by clean shave but notices that he has become old with grey beard. He reaches to the hotel in time where Ila is waiting for him. He finds Ila very young and beautiful. He doesn't find himself as a suitable match for her. Hence he doesn't want to disclose his identity. Ila feels insulted and disappointed. Saajan answers about his decision to Ila,

I don't know when I became old... may be it was morning... may be it was many many mornings ago. May be I had forgotten something in the bathroom before I would have found out sooner. Life kept on going and left me in this emotion. I kept on rocking back and forth as through left and through right. But then before I knew it, no one buys yesterday's buttermilk Ila. (movie script)

Their plans that they revealed through letters of starting new life in Bhutan meet bubble end. She gives her final try to catch him in his office but in vain. He also tries to catch her in her house with the help of dabbawala but in vain. She decides to go as per her plans and he decides to spend his after retirement life in Nasik. Misplacement Of tiffin finally places their lives in order. Both decide to lead a life of their own choice. They got the answer of 'why do they exist'. They decide to live life for their own sake and as per their own terms and conditions. Boredom of life is actually a way of living. Letters are not mere piece of sharing emotions but they also contain philosophy of life in metros. Saajan, means a lover in Hindi, that suggests irony of situation. He is fifty-five but wants to be loved by someone. Ila, being young neglected house wife and mother tries to find solace from her boredom through lunch box. The lunch box is playing a role of God who knows everything but remains silent. Two unknown souls living at extreme ends of the city get connected through lunch box and fall in love. The wrong delivery finally allows them follow the longing of their souls.

Mumbai city is shown with local colours like Khima Pav, a glass of tea, parathas, local dress of saree and Punjabi suit, cricket fever of children who play on roads, traffic jam, crowded local trains, life in small congested flats, sharing and helping nature of the neighbours, flat's window is a window to the world for Mrs Deshpande, Coma patient Mr Deshpande, mechanical boring

routine of house wives, monotonous government jobs without comforts, metro city with crimes and blasts, vendors and peddlers on roads and her special feature "Mumbai Dabbawals", and so on. Saajan answers to Ila's letter that contains Mr Deshpande's sad story of a coma patient about changing lives in a metro,

Life is very busy these days. There are too many people and everyone wants what the other else is. Years ago you could find a place to sit every now and then. But these days it is difficult. If Mr Deshpande wakes up now he will see the difference and probably go in his original sense... . When my wife died she got a horizontal bread bar. I tried to buy a bread bar for myself what they offered me is a vertical bar. I travelled whole my life by sitting in trains and buses but now I'll have to stand... (movie script)

The Lunch Box is a story of every one of us. We dream something else and we get something else like 'man proposes and god disposes'. It uncovers the spice of life by showing different types of lives. They have to live life by adjusting and compromising on every single step. Lunch metaphorically is a plate full of variety of dishes likewise life of every one of us is full of different passers-by. Box stands for Mumbai that assimilates and acculturates cosmopolitan multicultural variety with encoded messages on its lead and gives birth to a new human being who is experiencing pan-local and pan-global life. Life's journey is like catching a train. Sometimes you catch up wrong train and feel that everything is messed up but the train reaches to right destination with a pleasant surprise. Ila and Saajan's love go beyond physical union as they decide to search their true self and real identity. They transcend their lives through romance. Spiritual poverty and material affluence of common human being gets defeated in the end as both of them decide uncommon way. Their spiritual quest for 'knowing thyself' finally transcends them into happy and contented souls.

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