

This custom started under British rule. Many of the British people who lived in India did not like Indian food. And they usually had servants, who would carry British food to them at lunch hour. This led to the idea of a service of the same kind for people who did not have servants. Indian food is very spicy, which is why British people did not like it.

Each Indian family uses its own blend of spices, which is why Indian people like to have food from their own homes. This home-cooked food is put into a metal box called a *dabba*, and is collected from the home by a box carrier, or *dabbawala*, usually on a bicycle. The lunchboxes are marked with a color or symbol which shows where they are to be delivered. They are brought to a center where they are sorted according to the marks, then taken to the nearest station, where they are put on the proper train. At the other end, they are picked up, sorted at another center, and delivered to the office by another *dabbawala* on another bicycle. After lunch, the boxes are sent back home by the same system.

The reason the marking system uses colors or symbols, and not letters, is that most of the *dabbawalas* cannot read or write. Yet they have been invited to lecture in business schools: the *Forbes* business magazine found that they make less than one mistake in six million deliveries. Between 175,000 and 200,000 lunchboxes are carried every day by 4,500 to 5,000 *dabbawalas*, each of whom is a part-owner of the business. They have no complex management, no high technology, and they know and are known by the people in their area. That is the reason Mumbai is like a village as well as a big city: this business is simple, personal, and on a human scale.