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TASTE CASE - Mumbai's dabbawalas take their annual break

It's that time of the year when the city's lunch chain comes to a stop, forcing people to try other options

B Y S AUMYA R OY, S UDHA M ENON AND S AGAR M ALVIYA

MUMBAI



Tiffin time: A dabbawala balances a mindboggling number of tiffin carriers on his head. He'll be back at work after the jatra celebrations.

S uraj Gaon's oily street concoctions, including fried fish, chicken and egg, were never more popular than now. His pavement food stall, in Mumbai's central business district of Nariman Point, is so busy, that he has barely time to talk.

It is the same for other food stalls in Mumbai, as workers from neighbouring offices have no real choice—at least for five days.

That is because the famous dabbawala service, that unerringly delivers home-cooked meals across the city, is on its annual leave.

Mumbai's nearly 5,000 dabbawalas deliver up to 200,000 lunches everyday to the city's office-goers. Their faultless service has become a symbol of the city's always-on-the-go spirit.

But, when Mumbai's 'menon-wheels' take a holiday, the financial capital's workforce is left on a loose end for lunch.

For some, it means a few days of lugging lunch through rush hour commutes. "I leave home before 7:30am every day," says Kishore Joshi, a lawyer at Nishith Desai and Associates, a Nariman Point-headquartered law firm. "So my wife prepares a simple lunch for me the night before." But Joshi is not complaining—"Everyone takes a holiday sometime." For many others, it

is an opportunity to break healthy diets and indulge in streetside or restaurant treats.

But for the dabbawalas, whose logistics have been the subject of many articles and some management case studies, the annual holiday, usually in the last week of March, is a major highlight of their lives.

"This is the only time of the year that we get to have some fun and bond with our family and friends. We have holidays packed with activities," says Raghunath Medage, president of the dabbawala's association.

The holidays are also spent visiting the family temples and joining the annual pilgrimage to the Khandoba temple in Pandharpur.

Almost 50,000 people, including the visiting dabbawalas and their families, mostly from western Maharashtra, have joined the pilgrimage, called jatra, since Friday.

With the celebrations expected to continue till Wednesday, travelers en route to Nashik, where the jatra passes from, are likely to run into hundreds of villagers packed into state transport buses, trucks and even bullock carts, heading for a day of fun.

Typically, this can mean anything from morning pooja at the village temple to a gaav jevan or village lunch, where the entire village gets together to partake of a typical Maharashtrian meal.

Medage says families of the dabbawalas will travel to each village where the jatra will be held over the next couple of days.

Village squares come alive to the sounds of traditional folk and devotional music, or the more elaborate tamasha, which is a form of folk theatre.

The last evening before the dabbawalas head back to the city is sometimes tinged with sadness for those who typically leave their families behind in the villages and work alone in the city for the rest of the year.

Those who don't turn up for work on 5 April are typically fined Rs100 per person.

Back in Mumbai, not everyone will be pleased to have the dabbawalas back. Gaon's fried food stall is currently raking in Rs4,000 a day, double what it normally does. Shankar Ugade, who runs a stall for vada pav, a popular snack of potato patties stuffed in thick bread, is using 100kg of potatoes everyday, compared to the usual 80kg.

Restaurants in the business districts say that sales are up because of the double effect of dabbawalas being away and the fiscal year-end when employees could up end up working longer hours as they close their financial accounts.

"People definitely stay in office longer, and order snacks and meals during the fiscal year-end," says Aruna Murkar, secretary of Kutumb Sakhi, a woman's collective, which runs homely lunch stalls across the city. "Bankers usually come early and order our vada pav or stay late and order our vada pav and bhajiyas. So March-end is always a good time for us." saumya.r@livemint.com

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