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## EFFECT OF LOCKDOWN ON DABBAWALAS OF MUMBAI AND MITIGATION MEASURES

**Geeta M. Joshi and Sucheta V. Joshi**

Dabbawalas [as called in Hindi for workers who carry lunch boxes to office workers] operating in Mumbai have a long history dating back to 1890. Long working hours and travel time, as well as a lack of quality and hygienic food in and around the workplace, were primarily responsible for the rapid growth of the business of providing lunch boxes throughout Mumbai. These services not only provide homemade, high quality food to office workers but also result in significant savings on daily food costs. Despite having a six-sigma rating in 1998 indicating their supreme efficiency in services, they suffer from many challenges being part of a neglected informal sector. The pandemic and consequent lockdown that started in March 2020 severely affected the business of Dabbawalas, resulting in the complete stoppage of work for several months. The current study aims to analyse and estimate the impact of lockdown on dabbawalas, along with an assessment of the assistance/relief measures provided by NGOs and the government during the lockdown period. The analysis is based on a sample of 150 dabbawalas detailing various parameters. The study shows that agriculture is still perceived as a sector to fall back on as an alternative source of income. NGOs are found to be instrumental in helping the Dabbawalas through their crisis. Finally, the paper concludes that drawing the government's attention to the sector by making them part of the beneficiaries of various health and other skill development programmes to weather unforeseen financial shocks would go a long way towards the sustainability of this sector and uninterrupted services to society.

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### Introduction

Mumbai *dabbawalas* [as called in Hindi for workers who carry tiffin (i.e. lunch box) to office workers] have been operating in Mumbai since 1890 from British rule. The service started with a Parsi Banker needing home cooked food in his office and gave this responsibility to the first

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ever dabbawala. It was the effort of Mr. Mahadeo Havji Bachche who started the present mode of distribution of dabbas (lunch boxes) with 100 *dabbawalas*. Factors such as long travelling time, long working hours, unavailability of food in the workplace, unhygienic and unhealthy road side food, affordability, diversity make the system of *dabbawalas* inevitable. Currently, there are 5000 *dabbawalas* distributing tiffins (<http://mumbaidabbawala.in>) and all are a part of Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association (MTBSA). The *dabbawalas* deliver lunch boxes in suburbs of Mumbai from Virar to Churchgate and from Ambarnath to Dadar using hub-and-spoke system of foot, bicycle, handcart, and train based transport. In addition to the delivery of tiffin, *Dabbawalas* have started the kitchen from which the tiffins are delivered to the needy people. This initiative is useful especially for those who have come to the city in the search of employment and / or do not have family support.

Mumbai *dabbawalas* are supposed to have a six-sigma rating of 99.9999; that is, less than one mistake in every six million deliveries (<http://mumbaidabbawala.in>). Mumbai *Dabbawalas* are a part of the informal service sector of the Indian economy since they are not covered under the tax bracket and any social insurance. 78.5 per cent of the employment is generated in the informal sector in India (Mehrotra, 2019).

According to an article by Sankari (2021), announcement of lockdown in the late March, 2020 imposed a ban on travel across India which meant no travel in the city of Mumbai also. Government also banned travel by train which is a backbone of the dabbawalas business. These circumstances resulted a huge loss of livelihood for the dabbawalas. Most of them returned to their native places and started practising agriculture for their sustenance. The article also reports that those who stayed back in the city had to take up jobs of a driver or a vegetable vendor and many had to sell their jewellery for the two square meal a day. Citing a report from News18 (Desk, 2021), wives of those dabbawalas who lost their lives to COVID had to take up jobs of housemaids. In view of increasing economic gap between formal and informal sectors, which spiked up during pandemic, it was imperative to study the impact of lockdown on this unique and valuable segment of informal sector. Government and social intervention through NGOs for the upliftment of this sector were also assessed in this paper.

### Literature Review

It is well known that COVID19 and the resulting pandemic has adversely affected the Indian economy causing increase in

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poverty, job losses in informal sector, and negatively impacting health and environment as well. In their research paper, Aneja and Ahuja (2021) make a remark that all the sectors of the Indian economy are affected disproportionately due to COVID19. It further says that while agriculture has shown a very positive performance, the manufacturing sector, tourism and transport and hospitality sectors are affected very adversely. The paper mentions the possibility of widening the income inequality with greater effect on migrants, casual and informal workers. Domestic violence and mental illness are other major challenges. Though positive effects like better quality of air, water and wildlife are observed during this period, sustainability of these post normalcy is a concern and is very doubtful.

Majority of the employment in India is generated in the informal sector. Analysis of the impact of COVID19 on this sector is imperative. Most of the impact of COVID19 on the whole economy as well as the informal sector comes from the aversion behaviour (Shekar & Mansoor, 2020). However, as a work strategy, only 15% of informal workers against 44 per cent of the formal workers can work from home (Estupinan & Sharma, 2020). The paper estimates that 104 million and 69.4 million informally employed workers were at risk of job loss in Lockdown 1.0 and Lockdown 2.0 respectively. Total wage loss in the formal sector is Rs.53.26 billion and for the informal workers is Rs.811.22 billion. Informal workers suffered more losses than formal workers i.e., 22.62 per cent of the wages in the informal sector were lost while the formal workers lost 3.66 per cent of the wages. The paper compares wage loss suffered by the informally employed workers with the annual union budget allotted for employment guarantee schemes like MGNREGA in 2020-21.

A study by Balaji and Anil (2018) enlists several challenges faced by the labourers in the unorganised sector in India. The list includes challenges such as no social security, low literacy among the labourers, low incomes, vulnerability to diseases and a high level of stress. To quote the authors, "The foremost initiative through the government is the unorganized labours social security act, 2008, but the truth is quite shocking because the act has been proved a tiger without teeth." Above that the social security measures that are open to organise sector are not available for the unorganised sector.

A widening gap between the unemployment among men and women is observed during the pandemic (Kumar & Srivastava, 2021). A study by Chakraborty (2020) of 176 women workers from the informal sector in Delhi captures the nature of their employment and daily

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life challenges amidst the lockdown. The paper reports an increase in the household responsibility of domestic chores as well as burden of the child care and elderly work. It also mentions that around 83 per cent of women respondents experienced a severe income drop. There are similar results shown in the sector specific studies. All the construction workers lost their paid jobs while 97 per cent of the street vendors have expressed that no source of income was available for them during the lockdown. The paper also highlights the causes of loss of income such as inability to go out, police patrolling, fear of contracting the disease as well as the unavailability of protective equipment. The paper expresses the possibility of provision of benefits to these women through some form of minimum employment guarantee programmes.

Multiple strategies are required to protect the informal sector from the adverse impact of pandemic. Since the social security measures do not reach the majority of the vulnerable population including the informal sector, Shekar and Mansoor (2020) recommend integration of the informal sector into the formal sector of the economy by transferring aid to the informal sector. It would transform the informal sector into a self-sustained growing sector, permanently delinking it from government aid. For integrating informal sector into the economic policy, they suggest a three-pronged approach: providing support to stimulate the productive development of micro-enterprises by facilitating their access to the market and productive resources; the social well-being of workers in the informal sector; regulatory improvements in favour of the informal sector may lead to the integration of informal sector activities into the economic development policies. Aneja and Ahuja (2021) express the necessity to adopt innovative measures to overcome the adverse effects of the pandemic along with various monetary and fiscal policy measures by the Government of India and Reserve Bank of India already in place.

### Research Methodology

The paper is based on the primary data. The primary data is collected by using a questionnaire method. Sample size is 150 and collected by a convenient sampling method.

Profile of the sample respondents is as follows:

Out of total 150 respondents, 148 were males and 2 were females. Range of the age group of the respondents was 21- 80 years. Maximum *dabbawalas* (36%) from the total respondents belong to the age group 30 to 40 years and 25.33 per cent belong to the age group of 40 to 50

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years. There are 13.33 per cent, 13.33 per cent, 8 per cent and 4 per cent *dabbawalas* each from the age groups 20 to 30, 50 to 60, 60 to 70 and 70 to 80 respectively. Number of respondents receiving primary education, secondary education, SSC, HSC, Undergraduates and no education are 27 (19%), 46 (33%), 35 (25%), 16 (12%), 5 (4%) and 21 (7%) respectively.

74 per cent of the *dabbawalas* have a number of family members in the range of 4-6, 15.33 per cent have family members in the range of 1-3, 8 per cent 7-9 family members, 0.67 per cent 1 member in the family.

Majority (58.67%) of the *dabbawalas* distribute the tiffins in the central region. 24.67 per cent of the *dabbawalas* distribute the tiffins in the Western region and 16.67 per cent in the harbour region. 65 *dabbawalas* from the sample joined this profession during the years 2000-2010 while there are 30 *dabbawalas* who have joined this profession during 1950-1990. During 1990 – 2000, 20 *dabbawalas* joined the profession. 37 *dabbawalas* joined this profession during the period 2010-2020.

#### Objectives of the research paper

1. To estimate and analyse impact of the lockdown on *dabbawalas* in Mumbai;
2. To explore the scope of assistance by NGOs and the Government to *dabbawalas*;
3. To gauge the expectations of the *dabbawalas* from the government as well as the society at large.

To analyse the objectives, descriptive statistical methods are used such as averages, percentages, graphs, etc. for data analysis. Correlation between age, number of family members, proportion of dependent family, years of experience, income before lockdown, income during lockdown 1 and 2 as well as income post May 21 is calculated by using Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient. Regression analysis is used to predict self-reported anxiety, acidity, sugar and blood pressure with age, family members and income before lockdown taken as predictors.

#### Results and Discussion

##### Estimation and Analysis of impact of lockdown on *Dabbawalas* of Mumbai

###### A. Measurement of effect on Income

Chart 1 shows the trends in income of *dabbawalas* during the four reference periods: income before lockdown, income during lockdown 1, income lockdown 2 and income post May 2021.

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Values of Spearman's Rank Coefficient of Correlation with significance levels are given in Table 1. The table shows that as age of respondents is increasing level of education is found to be reducing. Another significant observation is larger is the size of the family of the respondents lower is the level of education in them. Age and income during lockdown 2 and income post May 2021 are negatively correlated indicating that as the age of the respondents is rising, incomes in the above reference periods are falling. Income before lockdown, income during lockdown 1, lockdown 2 and income post May 2021 are positively correlated with each other.

Relatively younger dabbawalas are found to be more educated in the given sample. Income earned by relatively younger dabbawalas is higher as compared to their older colleagues. Those dabbawalas earning relatively higher incomes pre lockdown have been observed to do so during lockdown 1 and post May 2021.

When asked about the experience of financial crisis during this period, 147 (98%) of the *dabbawalas* have expressed their consent over the experience, while only 1 (0.67%) respondent has refuted the experience of financial crisis. 2 (1.33%) of the respondents did not express their opinion on this. As a result, 19 (12.67%) are facing the problem of indebtedness.

**Table-1. Spearman Rank Coefficients of with significance levels**

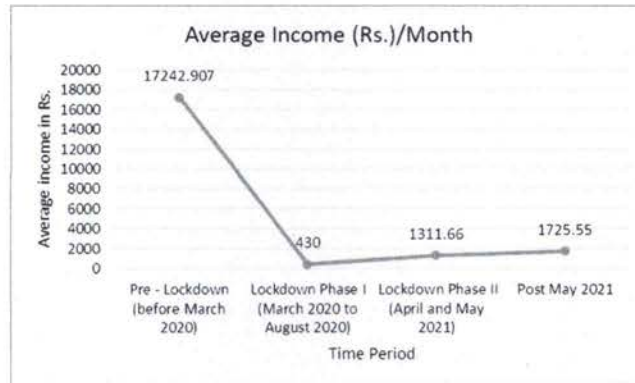
	Age	No. of Family Members	Proportion of Dependent Family	Years of Experience	Income Before Lockdown	Lockdown 1 Income	Lockdown 2 Income	Income post May '21
Education	<b>-0.46***</b>	<b>-0.22**</b>	0.22	<b>-0.33***</b>	0.15	0.01	0.08	0.07
Age		0.15	-0.07	<b>0.72***</b>	-0.15	-0.09	<b>-0.23**</b>	<b>-0.22**</b>
No. of Family Members			-0.06	<b>0.19*</b>	0	-0.06	-0.04	-0.04
Proportion of Dependent Family				-0.18	-0.09	-0.08	-0.04	-0.15
Years of Experience					-0.11	-0.02	-0.14	-0.06
Income Before Lockdown						0.11	<b>0.27***</b>	<b>0.29***</b>
Lockdown 1 Income							<b>0.36***</b>	<b>0.36***</b>
Lockdown 2 Income								<b>0.76***</b>

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**Chart-1. Impact of lockdown on the income of *dabbawalas***



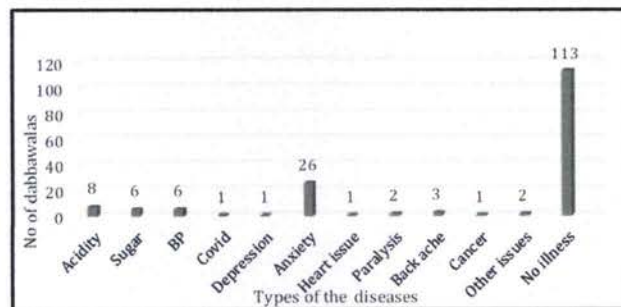
(Source: Data from field survey)

**B. Analysis of impact of lockdown on the health of the *dabbawalas***

Distribution of the types of health issues faced by the *dabbawalas* during pandemic is given in chart 2. It is to be noted that few respondents have suffered from more than one ailment.

Out of the different regression analysis run to predict self-reported anxiety, acidity, sugar and blood pressure with age, family members and income before lockdown. Other regression analysis showed that age, family members and income before lockdown did not significantly predict acidity, sugar or blood pressure. Table 2 depicts regression output for self-reported anxiety. Increasing family size predicted higher self-reported anxiety in participants [ $\hat{\alpha} = 0.31, p < .05 (SE = 0.14)$ ]. In other words, as the number of family members increased, participants expressed higher (self-reported) anxiety disorders.

**Chart-2. Distribution of types of health issues suffered by *dabbawalas* during lockdown**



(Source: Data from field survey)

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**Table-2. Regression Output for outcome - Self-reported Anxiety**

	$\beta$	Std. Error	z value	p-value	95% CI (Lower Bound)	95% CI (Upper Bound)
(Intercept)	-2.04	1.13	-1.80	0.071	-4.32	0.15
Age	0.00	0.02	-0.25	0.803	-0.04	0.03
<b>Family Members</b>	<b>0.31</b>	<b>0.14</b>	<b>2.21</b>	<b>0.027*</b>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.62</b>
Income Before Lockdown	0.00	0.00	-0.36	0.719	0.00	0.00

(Source: Data from field Survey)

### C. Analysis of any other complementary job/ business undertaken during lockdown

A complementary employment or a business worked as a buffer against the risk of losing the main job / business and the financial problems suffered after that. It was found from the responses of the *dabbawalas* that only 25 i.e., 16.67 per cent were doing additional jobs or businesses to earn some extra money and feed themselves and their families while 45 (30%) respondents were not involved in any complementary jobs / business. 80 (53.33%) *dabbawalas* preferred to not reveal the information.

Distribution of nature of the complimentary jobs taken by the respondent's during lockdown is given in Table 3. It shows that most of the jobs taken up by the respondents did not require any kind of formal training or a particular skill set. Agriculture sector has once again proved to be an alternative means of livelihood during challenging times and a solution to the unemployment in the urban areas. Reverse migration (from cities to rural areas) is observed during lockdown.

### D. Performance evaluation of the respondents' complementary jobs or business

Though few *dabbawalas* (25) took up complimentary jobs, 3 (12%) suffered from losses even in those jobs or business. 9 (36%) could survive without facing any loss in their complimentary job / business. However, 13 (52%) out of 25 respondents who shared the information about their complimentary job or business during lockdown, chose not to reveal the information on the loss/profit.

Existence of complementary occupation is proved to have a positive impact on the health of the *dabbawalas* while absence of complementary occupation among them has contributed to their miseries during the lockdown.

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E. Steps taken by the *dabbawalas* and their family members to face the financial challenges during lockdown:

Varied responses are given by the *dabbawalas* on steps taken by them and their family members to cope up with the financial challenges during lockdown when the business of distributing dabbas was in doldrums. Categorisation of the nature of these steps is given in Table 4.

The pandemic and the resulting lockdown have highlighted the need of both husband and wife in a family working for their livelihood to meet high cost of living in the urban areas. The families of *dabbawalas* having a sole breadwinner are living under miserable conditions.

**Table-4. Distribution of Nature of steps taken by the *dabbawalas* and their family members to cope up with the financial challenges during lockdown.**

*(Figures in the parentheses are percentages.)*

Sr. No.	Nature of steps taken	No. of respondents
1	No efforts	23 (15.33)
2	Took up a job	68 (45.33)
3	Borrowed money	10 (6.66)
4	Used savings	1 (0.66)
5	Migrated to village	27 (18)
6	Asked for help from others	13 (8.66)
7	Response not given	8 (5.33)
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>150</b>

*(Source: Data from the field Survey)*

F. Only 1 (0.67%) respondent having a Provident Fund Account underlines the peculiar feature of the unorganised sector in India of being 'out of the coverage' of social security network.

**Table-3. Distribution of the respondents that have undertaken the complementary jobs/Business**

*(Figures in the parentheses are percentages)*

Sr. No.	Types of the Complementary Job / Business	No. of respondents
1	Agriculture	4 (16)
2	Sale of the spare parts of cars	1 (4)
3	Coolie	1 (4)
4	Helper	2 (8)
5	Security Guards	7 (28)
6	Labour	4 (16)
7	Milk delivery	4 (16)
8	Vegetable vendor	2 (8)
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>25 (100)</b>

*(Source: Data from the field survey)*

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### **Estimation of scope of assistance to *Dabbawalas* by the Government and the NGOs**

Since India is a welfare state, the role of the government in protecting the workers from the unorganised sector during exceptional problems like the pandemics and consequent lockdown plays a key role. However, looking at the vastness of this sector, efforts by the government may fall short. Role of the NGOs, then, becomes vital in this case. *Dabbawalas* being a part of the unorganised sector, too suffered from precarious conditions. Following analysis shows a review of the support extended by the government and the NGOs to the *dabbawalas* during the lockdown.

#### **A. *Estimation of scope of assistance to Dabbawalas by the Government***

Out of the 150 respondents, only 2 persons received help from the government in the form of ration and money.

#### **B. *Estimation of scope of assistance to Dabbawalas by NGOs***

Number of recipients of assistance from NGO'S: 70 *dabbawalas* (46.67%) received help from the NGOs while the remaining 80 (53.33%) did not receive any help from the NGOs.

Form of assistance received from the NGOs:

67 *dabbawalas* (out of 70) (95.7%) received groceries from the NGOs. Only 1 *dabbawala* received monetary help from the NGOs.

While the government has failed to provide help to the *dabbawalas*, the NGOs have proved to be the helping hand for the *dabbawalas*' survival.

### **Analysis of expectation of *dabbawalas* from the government and the society**

Since *Dabbawalas* otherwise act as a lifeline of Mumbai during normal period for the working population, now they expect support from the government and the society during this pandemic.

#### **A. *Expectations of dabbawalas from the government***

Table 5 shows the analysis of distribution of expectations of *dabbawalas* from the government.

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52 (34.67%) expect the government to permit them to travel by the local trains so that they can continue delivering the tiffins as trains are the most convenient mode of transport for the timely delivery of dabbas. While 40 (26.67%) expect the government to provide them all the basic necessities, 38 (25.33%) expect the government to assist them financially. 7 (4.67%) expect employment from the government for them and 2 (1.33%) expect medical help. 9 (6%) expect the government to give their children free education. Only 2 (1.33%) did not mention their expectations from the governments.

**Table-5. Distribution of types of expectations of *dabbawalas* from the government during the pandemic**

*(Figures in the parentheses are percentages.)*

Expectation from the government	No. of Respondents
Financial assistance	38 (25.33)
Basic necessities	40 (26.67)
Education for their children	9 (6)
Employment	7 (4.67)
Medical help	2 (1.33)
Permission to commute by local trains	52 (34.67)
Not Mentioned	2 (1.33)

*(Source: Data from the field Survey)*

**B. Expectations of *dabbawalas* from the society during the pandemic**

Table 6 shows the distribution of expectations of *dabbawalas* from the society.

70 (46.67%) *dabbawalas* expect help from the society in the form of basic needs like groceries and also financial help. 65 (43.33%) want help in the form of jobs. Expectations in the form of educational help and medical help are from 3 (2%) *dabbawalas* each. Employment from the society is expected by 2 (1.33%) *dabbawalas* while 4 (2.67%) *dabbawalas* expect any form of help from the society. 3 (2%) *dabbawalas* have recorded that they do not have any expectations from the society. According to them, when even the government has failed to help them, it is obvious that the society would not help them.

- 149 (99%) *dabbawalas* showed willingness to join the same occupation again when everything resumes to a new normal.

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**Table-6. Distribution of expectations of *dabbawalas* from the society during the pandemic**

(Figures in the parentheses are percentages.)

Expectation from the society	No. of Respondents
Basic needs	70 (46.67)
Financial Assistance	65 (43.33)
Support to children's education	3 (2)
Medical aid	3 (2)
Employment	2 (1.33)
Any form of help	4 (2.67)
No expectations	3 (2)

(Source: Data from the field Survey)

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Several research papers dedicated to studies on unorganised labour have time and again proved that despite the sector being the largest provider and generator of employment, there have been few efforts on the part of the government to improve their quality of life. The current study conducted reiterates the fact that *dabbawalas*, being part of the unorganised sector, are no exception and suffer from the perils of this sector like complete lack of social security measures and gender bias in favour of males. Recent government efforts to kickstart the process of building a national database of workers in the informal sector (Sharma, 2020) is a step in the right direction. However, it also shows a long way to go. An updated database of the informal sector and linking their profiles with Aadhar would provide them with relatively more protection in the future too, against any unforeseen calamities. Another notable development at State Government level is the in principle acceptance of Mumbai *Dabbawalas* in the "unorganised sector" (Ganapatye, 2020). On registration with the unorganised workers' board, *dabbawalas* could benefit from various government schemes like Pradhan Mantri Shram Jiv Yojana, Ayushman Bharat Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Insurance Schemes, Pradhan Mantri Security Insurance Scheme, etc. As a result of running schemes such as micro insurance that cover the most vulnerable sections of society, there is a need to expand its penetration and coverage to include categories such as *dabbawalas* in order to provide reasonable financial protection. Another measure which can be implemented at central government level is imparting training under various skill development programmes, as in a knowledge driven economy, this will work as a cushion to absorb financial shocks like the current pandemic. The government can rope in NGOs for effective implementation of various

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schemes, which will ensure that intended benefits have trickled down to dabbawalas. The effective implementation of various improvement measures will act as a catalyst for expanding their services to more locations and offices in Mumbai, which is continuously extending its territories. This would also result in more employment generation for the dabbawalla community/sector. However, the situation is slowly returning to normal. Hence, a study can be undertaken on Mumbai Dabbawalas' employment patterns and socio-economic conditions post pandemic. A similar study on the estimation of the impact of COVID-19 on various other informal sectors could also be a topic of further research.

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