

THE MONSOON IS THE SEASON FROM JUNE TO SEPTEMBER, WHEN STRONG WINDS BLOW OFF THE INDIAN OCEAN, BRINGING VERY HEAVY RAINS!



Tiffin is an old British word for lunch, and a tiffin box is a special metal lunchpail that has small stacking sections for different kinds of food.

There are more than two thousand tiffin boys in Bombay, India, and their amazing lunch-delivery service has operated for more than seventy-five years. The tiffin boys take great pride in their work, and they rarely fail to make a delivery.

WHEN THE TRAIN stopped, the dozen tiffin boys standing in the baggage car knew what had happened. The monsoon rains had washed out the tracks ahead, and the boys would have to find another way to get to Bombay to deliver their hot lunches.

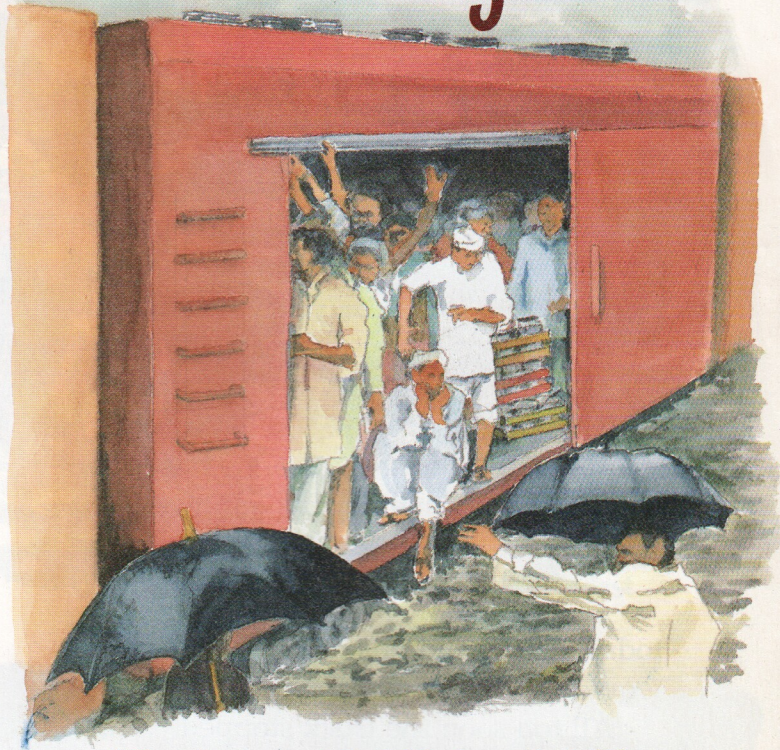
Hari, the tiffin boy closest to the open car door, was the first one to grab his wooden rack filled with tiffin boxes. He leaped off the train and hoisted the heavy rack onto the white cotton cap he wore. Balancing the load on his head, he hurried off the muddy railway bed and onto the highway that led to the bustling city.

The warm monsoon rain soaked through Hari's long shirt and dhoti. Each passing bus, truck, and car sent a fan of water toward him as he tried to flag one down. If he failed to find a ride into the city soon, his tiffin deliveries would be late. Every day office workers in Bombay relied on Hari and the other tiffin boys to deliver hot, home-cooked lunches from their wives in the suburbs. Not once in five years had Hari been late.

Finally a truck hauling a load of melons pulled to the side of the road. "Hop in back, *dabbawallah*," the driver called out.

# Tiffin Boy

by  
Douglas  
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"Thank you, sahib," Hari replied, lifting the rack off his head and climbing onto the pile of melons.

Relieved to be headed toward Bombay once more, Hari leaned back for a moment of rest. Yet as the truck zipped along the highway, he suddenly cried out, "Aieeee! The banker!"

His thoughts were on Mr. Sangaris, to whom he made his last delivery each day. At noon Mr. Sangaris always stood outside his office in the Central Bank of India waiting for his lunch of mutton curry, rice, and chapati. If the tiffin was not there on time

PHOTI ARE LOOSE TROUSERS MADE BY WRAPPING A LONG CLOTH AROUND THE WAIST AND TUCKING IT BETWEEN THE LEGS. SAY IT: *POE-TEE.*



*DABBAWALLAH* IS THE INDIAN NAME FOR A TIFFIN BOY. LITERALLY, IT MEANS "BOX MAN."



*SAHIB* MEANS SIR. SAY IT: *SAH-IB.*

*MUTTON CURRY* IS A STEWLIKE DISH OF SHEEP'S MEAT AND VARIOUS SPICES.

*CHAPATI* IS A FLAT, WHOLE-WHEAT BREAD BAKED ON A GRIDDLE.



Illustrated by K. Dyble Thompson

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today, Hari could imagine what the banker would think of him.

All too soon the truck stopped. "This is as far as I go, dabbawallah," the driver shouted.

Hari leaped off the truck and replaced the tiffin rack on his head. *Squish! Squish!* went his waterlogged sandals as he raced toward the center of the city.

A minute later a cart drawn by two bullocks pulled up alongside him. "Climb up next to me, dabbawallah," said the boy who was driving. "I'm going as far as the central market."

As the cart rattled along the road, Hari thought, If all goes smoothly from here, Mr. Sangaris will have his hot lunch on time.

Soon skyscrapers appeared on both sides of the road, and traffic became tangled. People with black umbrellas filled

the sidewalks. Outside the large, covered bazaar, Hari jumped off the cart. He hurried past the many stalls selling fruits, vegetables, curry powder, bolts of cloth, jewelry, and pots and pans.

Muddy rainwater flooded the narrow streets around the market. Hari waded down one street until he spotted a double-deck bus headed for the train station. Black fumes belched out at him as he leaped onto the bus's crowded back step. He wrapped one arm around the door handle while he held the tiffin rack with the other.

Soon the bus reached Victoria Terminus. Hari checked the station's clock. "Half past eleven—still on time," he told himself, weaving his way through the traffic in front of the station. "Not even a monsoon can stop a tiffin boy."

Across the street stood the tall office

BULLOCKS ARE YOUNG BULLS.



building where Hari made his first delivery each day. The manager of this building didn't approve of tiffin boys using the elevator, so he had to haul his heavy load up three flights of stairs.

Although all of the cylindrical tiffin boxes in Hari's rack looked identical, special symbols painted on the lids told him who the lunches were intended for. He quickly left the right one by the second door in the hall.

Out on the crowded sidewalks again, Hari heard horns blaring. A crowd had gathered on the corner. On the wet pavement lay a boy holding his leg. Hari could see the blue-and-yellow turban of a traffic policeman bent over the boy. The black taxi stopped nearby must have struck him.

Eager to get on with his deliveries, Hari started to cross the busy intersection,

when he heard the injured boy call out, "Dabbawallah!"

Hari turned. Now he noticed a half-filled tiffin rack dropped by the boy's side. He rushed over.

"I can't walk farther today, dabbawallah," the boy moaned. "And I haven't finished my deliveries."

"Don't worry," Hari said, inspecting the symbols painted on the boy's tiffins. "I can figure out your route." Then, without a second thought, Hari placed the half-filled rack on top of his own and hoisted the entire load onto his head.

It was not until Hari had gone in and out of three more office buildings and up and down ten more flights of stairs that he thought about Mr. Sangaris again. With these additional tiffin boxes, his last delivery would surely be late.



Within a half-hour Hari's two racks were almost empty, but by the time he reached Mr. Sangaris's bank, he knew it was after noon. The banker was not waiting in his usual place outside his office.

Quickly Hari snatched the last tiffin box out of his rack and placed it on the floor outside the office door. As he started to hustle away, the door opened.

Mr. Sangaris stood there frowning. "I thought dabbawallahs were supposed to be dependable," he snapped, placing one hand on his enormous belly. "You've kept me waiting, and I'm very hungry." Then he picked up his tiffin lunch and slammed the door.

Crestfallen, Hari trudged out of the bank. Now came an hour of rest before he had to retrace his steps and retrieve the empty tiffin boxes. Most days he spent this time at the train station chatting with other dabbawallahs. But today he walked down to Bombay Harbor and stopped beneath the great stone arch called the Gateway to India.

Leaning against the arch, Hari stared out at the dozens of ships in the harbor. He felt ashamed. All tiffin boys took great pride in their reputation for dependability, and he had let them down.

When Hari returned to the bank, however, he had a surprise. Mr. Sangaris stood outside his office.

"Dabbawallah," he called to Hari. "I want to apologize for what I said before. This morning things were hectic, and I took it out on you. For years now, you've been bringing me my lunches. It's so much better to get a home-cooked meal from my wife than to eat in fast-food restaurants. I appreciate your service, dabbawallah."

Hari's face broke into a smile. "Thank you, sahib," he said, quickly loading the banker's empty tiffin box into his rack.

He would return to the suburbs this evening, and in the morning he would pick up the refilled tiffin boxes from the office workers' wives. Then Hari, the tiffin boy, would start his deliveries once more. 