



February 1, 2011

India makes a clean start with first laundromat

By STEPHANIE NOLEN
From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

Country's first laundromat a big draw for urbanites tired of hassling with the washing maid

Satya Chaudhary was doing his best to look like an old hand, but when he stuffed all his lights and darks into the washing machine together, he gave himself away: the man had never done his own laundry in his life.

And in that, he was not alone: many clients at QuickClean, India's first-ever laundromat, have never done theirs before either.

Laundry is no mere household chore in India, but a vocation: every neighbourhood has a *dhobi*, a washerman, who is a fixture, often pressing clothes with a coal-filled iron at a stand at the end of the block. Urban families in the middle-and-upper classes either send their clothes out to the *dhobi*, or employ a "washing maid" who comes a few times a week.

But Anshul Gupta, the entrepreneur behind QuickClean in New Delhi, is betting on young people such as Mr. Chaudhary, whose lives are sharply different from their parents', and whose need for clean clothes are not met by the old ways.

Mr. Chaudhary, 22, works in back-office services for a big American bank. He works long, long hours and lives alone in a small bachelor flat. "My washing maid did not come the last two weeks so it was really a bad situation," he said, with the pained expression of a man over-acquainted with his socks.

Tired of hassling with the renegade maid, on Saturday he resolved to do his own wash, and tracked down the gleaming glass storefront of QuickClean in a narrow alley of a working-class neighbourhood popular with students.

An hour later, he had paid about \$3.25, been talked through the workings of a small bank of stainless-steel machines, and was leaving with a bag of fluffy if lumpy folded clothes.

"I've seen it in movies and I had in my mind, 'Why is India not having this?' " a beaming Mr. Chaudhary said. "It's innovative."

Entrepreneur Mr. Gupta, 24, first encountered the laundromat when his work as a chartered accountant took him to the United States for a few months last year. Startled at first by the idea of doing his own laundry with strangers in a public place, he soon came to think the idea could fly in a rapidly changing India.

"People here are moving towards Western culture, and this is part of that," he said, with a gesture around his spotless white premises. Young people such as Mr. Chaudhary are less likely to live in extended families where there is always someone to manage the *dhobi*, he noted, and they work long hours. "In the old days females did the washing - now both of the couple are working and nobody wants to do the laundry."

Mr. Gupta's parents were initially aghast at his business plan. "You know in India, an accountant is a proper job, and with PriceWaterhouseCoopers

, that's something. My parents said, 'Who will pay 150 rupees and take one hour to do their own laundry?' "

But his folks reluctantly put up the cash - and two months later, with the second QuickClean outlet choked with customers, three new laundromats in the works, and more than 120 requests to franchise, they are pleasantly surprised.

"Now they are even sending the washing from home," Mr. Gupta said, grinning at this ultimate seal of approval.

He said he had to import the industrial washing machines - and the crucial add-ons for coin operation - from the Czech Republic, because neither is available in India. He gambled on that investment after a market survey found that people were tired of managing the relationship with maid or washerman, and also frustrated that the hand-washing many do - which involves vigorous whacking of the clothes against cement as a cleaning technique - ruins clothes.

Mr. Gupta is targeting "students and bachelors" and trying to lure them in with hip music (Sheryl Crow, on Saturday), free WiFi Internet access and a TV screen full of Bollywood music videos.

Recognizing that few of his clients have ever done their own laundry - or, for the low-income clientele, never done it in a machine - Mr. Gupta has posters with "Seven Laundry Rules" including "Unbutton shirts" and "Make sure nothing is left in the pockets." There is also an on-site laundry master, hired away from a large hotel laundry for his expertise with machines, to give advice on those stubborn stains.

At 150 rupees for a six-kilogram load, the laundromat costs less than a *dhobi*, who charges about 25 rupees per item washed and pressed - but not cheaper than a washing maid, who will typically be paid 500 rupees a month to do a nearly unlimited amount of laundry. Nevertheless, the efficiency of starting and finishing the process within an hour (a concept not often encountered in India) clearly appeals to QuickClean customers.

Rody Shakhel, a 30-year-old nightclub singer who lives in the neighbourhood, spotted QuickClean the day it opened and came in with a single jacket - she assumed it was a drycleaner. "They explained to me, 'Ma'am, it works like this,' " she said - and soon she was back with armloads of clothes. She has a three-year-old who burns through three or four outfits a day, clothes she once washed by hand in a plastic tub in her small apartment, then trudged up four flights of stairs to dry on the terrace.

"This place is my favourite hangout now," Ms. Shakhel said, then added: "Although I think they should serve coffee."

CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc



The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.

You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425?icx_id=icopyright/?artid=1891116 into any web browser. CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc and Globe and Mail logos are registered trademarks of CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc. The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.