



Brewing Success: The Role of Branding, Marketing, and Sustainability in the Rise of Indian Coffee Brands – A Case Study of Blue Tokai

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Research Question: To what extent have branding, marketing, and sustainability strategies influenced the success of new Indian coffee brands, with Blue Tokai as a case study?

Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which branding, marketing, and sustainability strategies have shaped the success of new Indian coffee brands, with a focus on Blue Tokai Coffee Roasters as a case study. India's coffee culture has evolved from a regional, tea-dominated market to a lifestyle-oriented consumption trend, driven by urbanization, rising disposable incomes, and changing consumer preferences. Blue Tokai exemplifies how Indian-origin brands can differentiate themselves by integrating culturally resonant storytelling, minimalist design, and transparent sourcing practices while emphasizing sustainability through recyclable packaging, biodegradable capsules, and waste repurposing initiatives. The study highlights the interplay between purpose-driven branding and conscious consumer engagement, showing that premium product quality alone is insufficient for market success. By combining global specialty coffee standards with localized experiences, Blue Tokai has democratized specialty coffee in India, establishing a model for domestic brands to compete on both national and international stages.

Keywords: Blue Tokai, Indian coffee brands, branding strategies, marketing strategies, sustainability, specialty coffee, consumer engagement

Introduction

In a country where tea has been a favourite for years, is coffee slowly stealing the show?

Coffee was brought to India by Baba Budan in the 17th century, originating from Yemen, and was first introduced in Karnataka (Mercanta, 2022). Due to this, it was primarily cultivated in the southern parts of India and soon became a regional specialty. It grew as the filter coffee culture and was locally known as “kaapi”. However, during British colonial rule, tea took the commercial lead. Ironically, even though the British were the largest coffee consumers at the time, they turned to a nation of tea drinkers, allowing the British East India Company to establish tea as a powerful commodity in trade (Pettigrew and Richardson, 2014). The marketing was done so well that it became a widespread drink, especially among Indian workers, commonly known as “chai”. Although all social classes consumed tea, coffee was primarily limited to households in South India.

That being said, over the last 10-15 years, there's been a notable surge in the Indian coffee market. This sudden boom has been caused by urbanisation and the changing coffee culture, which the entry of international coffee brands like Starbucks and Costa Coffee has enabled. For years, these global brands dominated this space, and despite being one of the top ten largest coffee producers, Indian-origin brands had a minimal presence until recently. This gap allowed new brands like Blue Tokai to enter the market, appealing to the increasingly aspirational urban consumers, including young professionals embracing artisanal brews and cafe lifestyles. However, the challenge for such brands goes beyond a good cup of coffee - to stand out in the market, they must invest in creating a unique purpose and identity. This is made possible through effective marketing, storytelling, and sustainable strategies. In line with the aforementioned, this research paper aims to answer the following research question: **To what extent have branding, marketing, and sustainability strategies influenced the success of new Indian coffee brands, with Blue Tokai as a case study?**

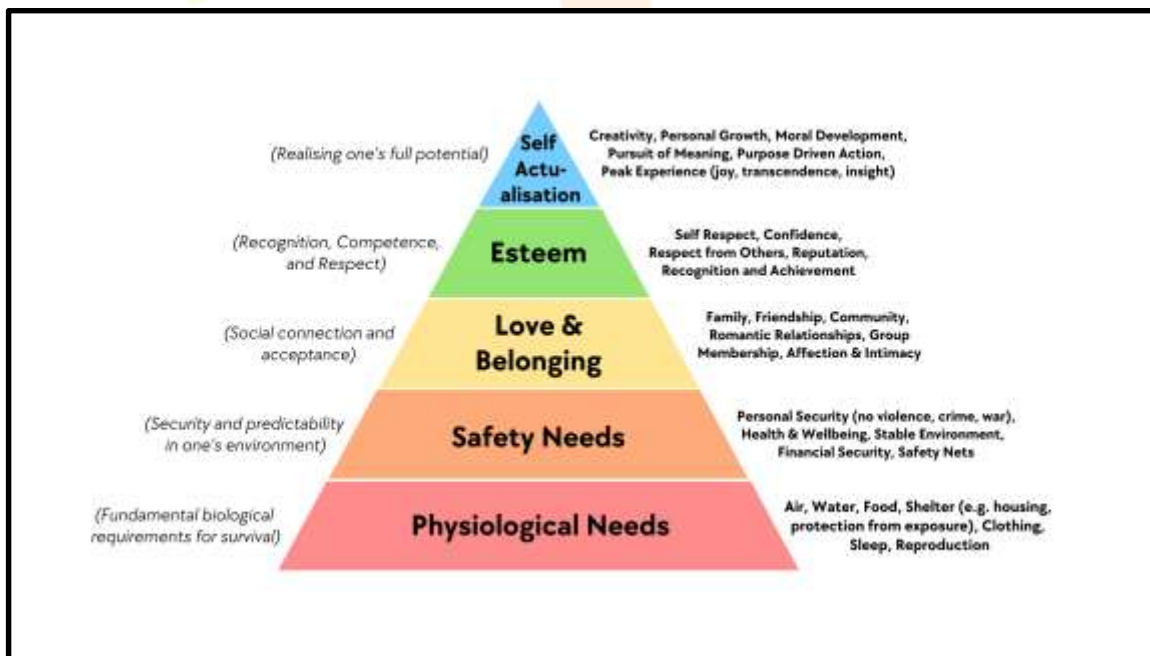
This paper argues that Blue Tokai’s success lies not only in the quality of its coffee but also in its strategic use of branding, relatable marketing, and sustainability practices that resonate with today's conscious consumers.

The Coffee Culture in India

The Coffee Act of 1942 was enacted to regulate the Indian coffee market. This act sets out guidelines for the trade, processing, and production of coffee in the country. It further gave birth to the Coffee Board of India, which is managed by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and is responsible for promoting coffee production in the country and implementing the Act. These institutions have played a fundamental role in shaping the Indian coffee sector. They have protected farmers from price crashes and improved how coffee is grown and sold. They introduced better farming practices, expanded coffee to new regions, and still support small growers today with training and

subsidies. This has positioned India as the 7th largest coffee producer worldwide, producing around 3.7 lakh tonnes annually (Coffee Board of India, 2023). While the focus has almost always been on exporting coffee, India's domestic market is now turning to coffee as a favored beverage. This is evident in the creation of a strong coffee culture in the country. One of the key contributors to India's growing coffee culture is the rising income elasticity of demand, especially among the middle and upper classes. Income elasticity of demand refers to the measure of change in consumers' demand for a good or service resulting from a change in their income levels (Amin, 2024). For non-essential goods, such as specialty coffee, the YED is usually greater than one, indicating that the change in income and the change in demand are directly proportional. India's economic growth over the last two decades has created a larger urban middle class with higher disposable incomes (Roy, 2018). This shift reflects the consumer spending patterns, indicating that consumers are now more inclined to spend on lifestyle and experiences rather than just necessities. The increase in aggregate demand for artisanal coffee brands highlights this trend. Consumers are no longer just looking to consume caffeine; they're now seeking an experience.

To gain a deeper understanding of India's growing coffee culture, we can turn to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This explains the human motivation in the form of five tiers of a pyramid. The first two tiers focus on physiological and safety needs, including food, shelter, and financial stability. The following three tiers cover social, esteem, and self-actualisation. This can help explain why cafes and specialty coffee consumption have become increasingly embedded in Indian urban life.



Once consumers have satisfied their basic needs, they begin to seek fulfilment in higher levels. Cafes provide consumers with a “third space”, which is a place outside of home and the workplace, essentially a place where people can interact (Roberts-Ganim, 2023). This gives them a social environment for meetups, dates, collaborations, or

even just a casual hangout space. This fulfills their social belonging needs, even in today's era of rising urbanization and individualism. Socialization is crucial as it is the process through which people learn about their cultures and become fully functioning members of society (Barkan, 2016). Furthermore, social interaction is crucial for normal cognitive and emotional development.

As we progress to the esteem level, we observe that the type of coffee one drinks or where one drinks it can define a particular lifestyle. This is amplified by the fact that about 89% of Gen Z (Abdisamad, 2025) and 74% of millennials actively use Instagram (Notopoulos, 2024), where they share visits to aesthetically pleasing cafes or orders of rare brews, such as cold brew nitro or iced lattes, that can earn them social validation. It is not only about taste, but also about social belonging, with social validation serving as a form of psychological approval and recognition. In a collectivist society like India, where self-worth and identity are closely tied to acceptance and how one is perceived within social circles, such public displays take on added importance.

Lastly, the peak of the pyramid is the pursuit of autonomy and personal growth. With the rise of remote work and flexible schedules, cafes have evolved into unofficial co-working spaces. The act of choosing your space and your drink reflects the deeper modern urge to curate your own lifestyle. These spaces are hubs for creativity, from customizing drinks to posting about them, which simply evokes self-expression. Not only do customers play a part in this, but also the cafe, from its experimental menus to its decor. It provides a space that contrasts with the default life.

Therefore, India's coffee culture isn't just growing because people like coffee, but rather because it meets a spectrum of deeper psychological needs. That said, the rise of India's coffee culture isn't without its hurdles. With so many cafes popping up, competition is fierce, and since people can easily switch from one brand to another, loyalty is hard to build. Price sensitivity is also a major consideration; while the buzz around premium coffee is real, many consumers are cautious about treating expensive cafe drinks like a daily habit. According to The Pourover, a Starbucks latte can cost the equivalent of USD 4–5 in India, a steep price when 60% of Indians live on less than USD 3.10 per day (Pooler, 2024). Indian origin cafes are not much cheaper either – they typically price cappuccinos or lattes between ₹220 (approximately USD 2.50) and ₹400 (approximately USD 4.50), and premium brews can exceed ₹500 (more than USD 5). If the Indian consumer does not perceive substantial value for money, they are likely to forego consumption. Therefore, brands must strike a balance between affordability and experience.

Blue Tokai: A Case Study of a Successful Indian-Origin Coffee Brand

Blue Tokai was founded in 2013 by Matt Chitharanjan and Namrata Asthana (Blue Tokai, 2022). They were later joined by their third business partner, Shivam Shahi (FE Lifestyle, 2023). Blue Tokai Coffee Roasters has redefined

the way India consumes coffee. Their idea was simple yet revolutionary: why not create a brand within India that showcased the country's specialty coffee farms to Indian drinkers? Their mission statement is the following: "introduce our customers to the estates we directly buy our great tasting coffee from, roast the beans with care, and make high quality coffee more accessible through our cafes and our website. The coffee we roast is the coffee we like to drink, and we hope you like it too." Further, they aim to build a long-term relationship with the farmers. Their vision centers on creating a culture where Indian consumers appreciate fresh, traceable coffee while simultaneously strengthening local farming ecosystems. Through interviews, the founders emphasize that they aimed to "democratize specialty coffee" by reducing the distance between the farm and the cup (Chitharanjan, 2019). Today, Blue Tokai stands as one of India's most recognized specialty coffee brands, celebrated not only for its beans but also for its role in reshaping the country's cultural narrative of coffee drinking. As analyzed below, thoughtful branding, a strong digital presence, emotional connections, transparency, and sustainability all contribute to the brand's success.

The name Blue Tokai comes from the word "tokai" which means the tail of a peacock in ancient Malabari. This name pays homage to the Indian landscape while reflecting the brand's specialty identity. Blue Tokai deliberately positions itself as a specialty coffee company, differentiating itself from mass-market instant coffees by focusing on single-origin beans, transparency of sourcing, and artisanal roasting.



The logo features a peacock feather, symbolizing elegance and Indian heritage, making the brand stand out. Their packaging is equally distinct. As seen in the image to the left, the brand offers clean and minimalist coffee bags featuring subtle illustrations inspired by Indian folk art, such as Madhubani, which seamlessly blend modern design with cultural authenticity. Similar to the bags, the cups also feature the same logo with a blue background. The color blue reinforces both their name and identity, conveying calm, reliability, and a premium image, while standing out from the rest. The packaging is not only attractive but also designed to preserve freshness and clearly communicate product details, such as flavors or brew intensity (Performance Marketing, 2023). In fact, according

to a founder, the brand was highly focused on the packaging from day one, aiming to make it stand out. This commitment was evident in every detail, from hand-sticking labels to curating designs, as the brand did not compromise on it. Through these elements, Blue Tokai builds a brand story deeply rooted in India while upholding a global standard for specialty coffee.

Recognizing the importance of connecting with consumers through relevant platforms in today's digital landscape, Blue Tokai has successfully leveraged Instagram to establish a dynamic digital identity. With a following of over 120k+, as seen in the screenshot below, their bio emphasizes traceability and quality. The content strategy combines behind-the-scenes roastery videos, styled product photography, café highlights, and lifestyle imagery. Coffee is portrayed not just as a drink, but as part of a broader cultural experience, trustworthy, aspirational, and community-driven. This approach has made their brand highly relatable to a younger, urban audience seeking authenticity.



Moreover, strategic collaborations play a crucial role in expanding Blue Tokai's market reach. They have partnered with brands such as Got Tea and Suchali's Artisan Bakehouse to attract a diverse range of customers by catering to their needs, from coffee and matcha fusion to artisanal bakery products; they have it all. These collabs highlight versatility while increasing exposure to potential customers outside their usual niche.

Their direct-to-consumer model further strengthens customer loyalty. Blue Tokai offers online ordering, coffee subscriptions, and home delivery, making specialty coffee accessible nationwide. The packaging of the coffee beans enables customers to learn about the type of bean and the farms, emphasizing traceability and transparency.

Beyond investing in a unique identity and purpose, Blue Tokai has also demonstrated a strong commitment to sustainability. This has been evident through their innovative approaches to packaging, product design, and waste management. Firstly, the brand recognises that sustainable packaging goes beyond just the materials used, also encompassing their recyclability and accessibility. Multi-layered materials, which are often required to maintain product freshness, are typically difficult to recycle and end up in landfills. Therefore, to address this, the company has transitioned to single LDPE packaging, which is identified as being simpler for municipal recycling facilities to process and also reduces the environmental impact of its product (Blue Tokai, 2023b).

Beyond packaging, Blue Tokai introduced specialty coffee capsules that exemplify the brand's dedication to environmentally friendly practices. These capsules, typically available in packs of 10 and 40, are fully biodegradable and can decompose at home, providing consumers with a convenient and sustainable alternative to traditional single-use coffee capsules (Agronfoodprocessing, 2022). This innovation addresses a growing demand in India's coffee

capsule market while minimising the environmental waste, demonstrating the company's ability to combine market responsiveness with ecological responsibility.

Blue Tokai has also actively encouraged sustainable behaviour among its consumers. Through programs including the coffee sachet returns, blogs outlining how to reuse coffee grounds for composting, and incentives for bringing reusable cups to its cafés, the brand fosters a participatory culture of recycling and resource efficiency (Blue Tokai, 2023a). Blue Tokai has also partnered with eco-conscious brands like Switch Fix, where they provide their coffee grounds for repurposing into plant-based skin care products (Sharma, 2021), thereby extending the product life cycle and promoting circular economy practices.

Lastly, Blue Tokai's continual research into recyclable materials reflects a forward-looking approach to sustainability. The company engages with technical experts and packaging vendors to identify the most recyclable and feasible materials available in India, ensuring that any changes to its products not only meet environmental goals but also remain scalable for a growing consumer base.

Overall, by blending a strong purpose, Indian heritage, digital storytelling, collaborations, innovative distribution, and sustainability, Blue Tokai has created a sustainable business model that not only sells coffee but also nurtures a movement around conscious consumption in India.

Conclusion

The evolution of India's coffee culture reflects a shift from a tea-dominant society to one where coffee has become a symbol of modernity and lifestyle. It has historically been limited to South India; however, over the past decade, with the push of urbanization and rising disposable income, there has been a surge in coffee consumption among a new generation of coffee enthusiasts seeking an experience beyond mere consumption. By situating coffee within frameworks such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, we can see how it fulfils deeper psychological and social demands by offering both validation and individuality. At the same time, challenges such as price sensitivity, evolving consumer needs, and establishing brand loyalty in a competitive market necessitate careful strategic consideration for brands seeking success.

Against this backdrop, Blue Tokai stands out as a case study in how branding, marketing, and sustainability strategies have become as important as the product itself. The entry of international brands such as Starbucks and Costa Coffee initially helped establish the coffee culture in India, familiarizing consumers with the idea of coffee as an experience rather than just a drink. However, Blue Tokai, an Indian-origin coffee brand, differentiated itself by localizing this experience through strong storytelling with minimalist designs inspired by Indian art, while also being transparent.

Their name, logo, and packaging tie Indian heritage to global specialty standards, while their collaborations and social media presence reflect a modern, relatable lifestyle. Apart from branding, they also emphasize sourcing directly from farmers, investing in sustainable product packaging, and actively educating consumers on how to lead a more sustainable life. This demonstrates their commitment to sustainability and appeals to today's conscious consumers. Blue Tokai's ability to combine premium coffee with purpose-driven branding has allowed it to democratize specialty coffee in India.

Marketing, branding, and sustainability, therefore, influence the success of new Indian coffee brands to a great extent. Blue Tokai is a fantastic example of it. Their story demonstrates that success in today's market is not only about serving high-quality coffee but about crafting an experience that integrates cultural identity and social belonging. In doing so, Blue Tokai has redefined how coffee is consumed in India, paving the way for Indian-origin brands to compete on both local and global stages.

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