



From Policy to Purpose – Reflections on Public Policy, Public Affairs and the Future of India

“We did not set out to build an organisation. We set out to help build a profession”

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Every profession reaches defining moments. Moments when it pauses—not to celebrate itself, but to reflect on its purpose, its values and the responsibility it carries for the future.

As the Public Affairs Forum of India (PAFI) enters its nineteenth year, this feels like one of those moments.

Eighteen years ago, when a small group of us came together to establish PAFI, our conversations were never about creating another institution. They were about a profession that was still searching for its identity in a rapidly changing India. We shared a simple conviction: India needed a credible, ethical and non-partisan platform where people working at the intersection of business, government and society could engage with one another—not merely to advocate, but to learn; not merely to influence, but to understand; not merely to represent interests, but to contribute to the larger public interest.

Looking back today, it is evident that what united us was not the ambition to build an organisation. It was the belief that India needed to strengthen a profession – **that profession was Public Affairs.**

At the time, Public Affairs was often viewed through the narrow lens of government relations or regulatory engagement. Yet many believed it had the potential to become something much larger—**a profession rooted in ethics, informed by evidence and dedicated to strengthening the relationship between business, government and society.** Eighteen years later, that conviction feels stronger than ever.

As PAFI steps into its nineteenth year, these reflections are offered not as a history of the institution, nor as an account of one professional journey. Those stories deserve to be told, and perhaps they will be in time. What follows is something more enduring: a collection of reflections shaped by more than four decades of conversations, experiences, friendships and lessons learnt—sometimes through success, often through setbacks, but always through dialogue.

Every institution has a story. Some are remembered for the milestones they celebrate. The fortunate ones are remembered for the values they preserve and the people they inspire. Institutions, like individuals, eventually come of age. Their early years are spent establishing credibility; the years that follow are about building character, creating legacy and ensuring that the principles on which they were founded continue to guide future generations.

Perhaps that is why anniversaries matter less than values.

Over four decades of working at the intersection of business, government and public policy, one lesson has remained constant: lasting progress is rarely created by louder voices. It is created through better conversations. Public Affairs has never really been about files, regulations or meetings. At its heart, it is about understanding people, building trust, encouraging dialogue and creating the conditions in which good ideas can evolve into good public policy.

Along the way, India itself has undergone an extraordinary transformation—from a tightly regulated economy to one of the world's most dynamic and aspirational nations; from policy scarcity to policy innovation; from looking inward to engaging confidently with the world. Few generations have had the privilege of witnessing such profound change. That journey has reinforced an enduring belief that thoughtful public policy can expand opportunity, encourage enterprise and improve lives on a remarkable scale.

Yet institutions alone do not shape progress. **Ideas matter. Leadership matters. Above all, what ultimately endures are relationships of trust**—relationships that enable people with different perspectives to work together in pursuit of a larger purpose. Such relationships are never built overnight. They are built patiently, conversation by conversation, decision by decision, and year after year. That, to me, is the true essence of our profession.

It is also the reason these reflections are being written.

The hope is that PAFI Perspectives becomes more than a publication. It should become an ongoing conversation—one that continues in boardrooms and classrooms, in government offices and corporate corridors, among experienced practitioners and young professionals taking their very first steps into this profession. If these reflections encourage better conversations, they will have achieved their purpose.

Because if four decades have taught anything, it is this: **Better public policy rarely emerges from louder voices. It almost always emerges from better conversations.**

Why I Still Believe in Public Policy

Looking back over more than four decades, surprisingly few policy documents come readily to mind. What remain are the people, the conversations, and the moments when disagreement gradually gave way to understanding; when listening achieved far more than speaking ever could; and when relationships built patiently over time proved stronger than positions defended in the moment. Those experiences have shaped an understanding of Public Affairs far more profoundly than any policy paper or regulation ever could.

They have also reinforced one enduring conviction. **Public policy is ultimately not about governments. It is about people. Its purpose is to improve lives.** That simple belief first drew me towards this profession and continues to inspire me today.

Few generations have been fortunate enough to witness India's transformation as closely as ours has—from economic liberalisation to digital public infrastructure; from financial inclusion to unprecedented infrastructure expansion; from a nation seeking opportunity to one increasingly helping shape global conversations. Each phase has demonstrated that thoughtful public policy does far more than regulate change. At its best, it enables change.

Public policy is where ideas become institutions, intent becomes impact, and aspirations translate into better outcomes for millions of people. For that reason, it has never seemed appropriate to regard Public Policy as the exclusive domain of governments, or Public Affairs as merely another corporate function. Both exist in service of something much larger: creating the conditions in which societies can prosper.

That relationship has changed profoundly over the years.

There was a time when governments made policy, and businesses largely responded to it. Today, policy shapes markets, regulation influences competitiveness, technology advances faster than legislation, climate considerations influence investment, geopolitics reshapes supply chains, and societal expectations increasingly determine corporate legitimacy.

The external environment has become inseparable from business strategy. Understanding that environment is no longer optional. It has become one of the defining leadership challenges of our time. Increasingly, Public Affairs is not simply about understanding policy. It is about **helping organisations understand the world** around them—a world that is becoming more interconnected, more uncertain, and more complex than at any point in recent history.

Yet there are compelling reasons for optimism.

India's own journey demonstrates that periods of complexity often become periods of reform, innovation, and collaboration. As the country assumes a larger role in the global economy and international affairs, the quality of engagement between business, government, and society will become an even more important source of national strength. In that sense, the future of Public Affairs is closely linked to the future of India's development itself.

That is why faith in public policy has only deepened over time. Not because policies are always perfect, but because their purpose remains timeless: to improve people's lives. Everything else is secondary.

When Public Affairs Came of Age

One of the most remarkable changes over the past four decades has not been in public policy alone. It has been in the evolution of the Public Affairs profession itself.

When many of us began our careers, the profession was still finding its place. It was largely viewed as a specialist function responsible for engaging with government, interpreting policy, and helping organisations navigate an evolving regulatory landscape. Important work, certainly, but it was seldom regarded as central to business strategy.

That world has changed fundamentally. **Today, public policy no longer sits outside business. It shapes markets, influences investment decisions, determines competitiveness, and increasingly defines long-term organisational success.** The external environment has itself become a strategic business issue, and that reality has transformed the role of the profession.

A question that has surfaced repeatedly over the years is why organisations need a dedicated Public Affairs function when every Chairman, CEO, and business leader already engages with governments, regulators, and external stakeholders.

Experience offers a simple answer.

Every leader today must engage with the external environment. Very few, however, have the time to understand it in all its complexity. Their responsibility is to build businesses, inspire people, create value, and drive innovation. Increasingly, they must do so in a world shaped by geopolitics, geo-economics, technological disruption, societal expectations, and rapidly evolving public policy

We no longer operate only within markets, nor only within society. **Organisations today function at the intersection of geopolitics, technology, economics, and public expectations.** In a world that is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, understanding this external operating environment is no longer optional. It has become a strategic leadership imperative

That, perhaps, explains why the profession has evolved from being a specialist support function into a strategic leadership capability.

Today, the profession does far more than interpret policy. It helps leadership understand the external environment, anticipate geopolitical shifts, interpret policy signals, understand stakeholder expectations, and connect public policy with business strategy. Perhaps its greatest contribution is helping organisations see around corners and prepare for change before it arrives.

Public Affairs does not replace leadership. It enables better leadership.

One conversation from many years ago has remained particularly memorable. A respected CEO remarked, almost in passing, “I spend most of my time thinking about markets, customers, and competition. Increasingly, I find that my biggest challenges originate outside the company.”

That simple observation captured a profound shift. The external environment had become just as important as the internal one. It reinforced the conviction that the profession was quietly becoming one of the few disciplines capable of helping leadership interpret that changing landscape with confidence, perspective, and foresight. Perhaps that is its greatest contribution.

Another significant evolution has been the emergence of **Corporate Diplomacy**.

Businesses today engage not only with governments but also with regulators, investors, industry associations, multilateral institutions, academia, civil society, communities, and the media. Leadership in this environment requires far more than technical expertise. It demands judgement, perspective, credibility, empathy, patience, and, above all, trust.

The best practitioners understand both the language of business and the language of public policy. More importantly, they help each side understand the other. In many respects, they serve as bridges between two worlds—the world inside the organisation, with its ambitions, investments, innovation, and commercial priorities, and the world outside, shaped by public policy, regulation, and societal expectations. These worlds are no longer separate; they have become inseparable.

Perhaps that is the profession’s greatest value.

The measure of a successful Public Affairs professional is not the number of doors they can open, but the number of bridges they can build.

As the external environment becomes more dynamic, the profession deserves a stronger voice in the boardroom. This is not because every board requires another functional specialist, but because almost every strategic discussion today has a significant public policy dimension. Boardroom conversations increasingly revolve

around geopolitics, artificial intelligence, climate transition, trade, supply-chain resilience, data governance, corporate reputation, national competitiveness, and stakeholder trust. These are no longer simply external affairs issues; they are leadership issues that shape long-term strategy, organisational resilience, and sustainable growth.

For that reason, the profession has an increasingly important role to play in strategic risk management, corporate diplomacy, and long-term organisational resilience. Its value lies not merely in responding to change, but in helping organisations anticipate it.

Looking back over the past eighteen years, perhaps one of the most satisfying developments has been witnessing the growing respect, credibility and strategic relevance that the Public Affairs profession enjoys across India today. If there is one achievement that gives the Founders of PAFI the greatest satisfaction, it is not the growth of the institution itself, but the growing recognition of the profession by governments, policymakers, corporate leaders, regulators, academia, the media and civil society. While many individuals and institutions have contributed to this evolution, it is gratifying to believe that PAFI has also played a meaningful role in helping shape that journey

Perhaps that is one of PAFI's most enduring contributions—not merely organising dialogues, conferences and forums, but helping elevate the stature of an entire profession, one that is increasingly viewed not simply as an interface between business and government, but as a trusted bridge that enables better understanding, better policy and better outcomes for society

If PAFI has helped strengthen the credibility, relevance and professional standing of Public Affairs in even a small way, then it has fulfilled one of the purposes for which it was founded.

Perhaps the true measure of any institution lies not in the number of events it organises or publications it produces, but in whether it leaves the profession it serves stronger than it found it. That, ultimately, is the legacy every institution should aspire to leave behind.

Every profession ultimately earns its place not by seeking recognition, but by consistently demonstrating relevance. The growing stature of Public Affairs in India reflects precisely that journey.

Another encouraging sign of the profession's growing maturity is the remarkable diversity of talent it now attracts. Not very long ago, Public Affairs was a career that relatively few consciously chose. Today, it is increasingly viewed as a destination in its own right. Young professionals graduating from leading business schools, law schools and public policy programmes are choosing to build careers in this field.

Equally encouraging is the growing interest among former civil servants, diplomats, ambassadors, senior journalists, editors and other experienced leaders who bring decades of public service, institutional knowledge and strategic insight to the profession. Their presence has enriched both its credibility and its practice.

This is by no means unique to India. Across many mature democracies, former Ministers, senior policymakers and, in some cases, former Heads of Government, have gone on to serve as trusted strategic advisers, helping organisations navigate an increasingly complex policy, regulatory and geopolitical landscape. That global evolution reflects a broader recognition that understanding the external environment has become an indispensable leadership capability. India is now witnessing a similar transformation.

Perhaps the strongest indicator of the profession's future, however, lies in the growing academic interest it has generated. Institutions such as the Indian School of Public Policy (ISPP), Indian School of Business (ISB), the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), Ashoka University, Rishihood University and several other leading institutions now offer programmes in public policy, governance and public leadership. Many of these institutions have worked closely with PAFI over the years to promote executive education, practitioner-led learning, professional development and thought leadership, helping bridge the worlds of theory and practice. Together, they are building the intellectual foundations of a profession that will increasingly attract some of India's brightest minds—individuals who combine strategic thinking with public purpose, professional excellence with integrity and business leadership with a deep understanding of governance and society.

All of this augurs well for the future. It suggests that Public Affairs is no longer viewed simply as a specialised corporate function. It is steadily emerging as a recognised profession—**one that combines strategic thinking, ethical leadership, public purpose and a deep understanding of the relationship between business, government and society.**

Looking ahead, this evolution is only likely to accelerate. As India becomes a larger economy, a more influential geopolitical actor and a stronger voice in global affairs, the importance of the profession will continue to grow. Organisations will increasingly require leaders who can build trust across institutions, sectors and borders. That is where the profession will make one of its most enduring contributions.

The Public Affairs leader of the future will sit at the intersection of business strategy, public policy, and societal expectations. They will be strategic advisers, corporate diplomats, trusted counsellors, and builders of institutional trust. Above all, they will help shape the policy and business environment that encourages innovation, investment, inclusive growth, and national prosperity.

That, perhaps, is the profession's highest calling.

Because the profession succeeds only when business succeeds responsibly, governments govern thoughtfully, and society benefits meaningfully. Looking back, one question often comes to mind:

Has the profession changed so dramatically—or has the world finally caught up with what it was always capable of becoming?

There is every reason to believe that its finest years still lie ahead.

Public Affairs is not about finding a seat at the table. It is about helping build a better table.

Trust Travels Further Than Influence

If there is one lesson that more than four decades in Public Affairs have reinforced, it is this: **trust travels much further than influence.**

Early in a career, it is easy to assume that influence is the defining currency of Public Affairs. Experience gradually teaches a different lesson. Influence may open a door, but trust keeps it open. Influence may help win an argument, but trust builds enduring relationships. Influence can secure an outcome, but trust creates understanding. Influence is often temporary; trust endures.

Looking back, it becomes evident that almost every meaningful professional opportunity has begun not with influence, but with trust—trust earned patiently, built quietly, and sustained consistently over many years. It was never demanded, never assumed, and never taken for granted. It grew one conversation, one commitment, and one relationship at a time.

That, in many ways, is the real work of our profession.

Public Affairs is not merely about representing interests or advocating positions. At its best, it helps people understand one another. It creates the conditions for dialogue, especially when perspectives differ, and reminds us that lasting progress is rarely achieved through confrontation. It is achieved through understanding.

One of the greatest privileges of working in this profession has been the opportunity to engage with an extraordinary diversity of people—policymakers, civil servants, business leaders, regulators, diplomats, academics, journalists, entrepreneurs, and colleagues across industry. Over time, one lesson becomes abundantly clear. **Titles matter far less than trust.** Whether engaging with a Minister, a Secretary, a Chief Executive, a regulator, or a young management trainee, the principles remain remarkably similar. People respond to sincerity, respect preparation, appreciate honesty, and remember those who engage with humility, consistency, and genuine respect.

Another lesson has remained equally enduring. Few important policy conversations produce immediate outcomes, nor should they. **Good public policy deserves thoughtful discussion, evidence, respectful disagreement, and, above all, patience.** Some of the most meaningful conversations conclude without agreement, yet strengthen relationships because every participant leaves feeling heard and respected. The purpose of Public Affairs is not to eliminate disagreement; it is to make disagreement more constructive.

No single institution has all the answers. Governments do not. Business does not. Academia does not. Civil society does not. The most enduring solutions almost always emerge when these worlds come together with openness, intellectual honesty, and mutual respect. That is why dialogue has always occupied such an important place in this profession—not dialogue as an event, but as a habit; not as a tactic, but as a discipline of leadership.

Listening often proves more influential than speaking. Curiosity is more valuable than certainty. Humility is invariably more persuasive than rhetoric. These lessons cannot be learnt from books alone. They are acquired through experience—sometimes through success, often through failure.

Over the years, another conviction has only grown stronger. **Ethics is not an optional dimension of Public Affairs; it is its very foundation.** Without integrity, influence loses credibility. Without transparency, engagement loses legitimacy. Without trust, relationships become transactional. Once relationships become transactional, the profession ceases to serve its larger purpose.

Ethical advocacy has never meant avoiding disagreement. It means ensuring that disagreement is informed, respectful, and constructive. The objective should never be to win at any cost. It should always be to contribute to better outcomes—for business, for government, for society, and, ultimately, for India.

Young professionals often ask what qualities matter most in this profession. Many expect the answer to revolve around communication, negotiation, policy expertise, or stakeholder management. Important though all these are, they are not where the conversation should begin. It should begin with character—with integrity, credibility, curiosity, empathy, judgement, and, above all, trust.

Policy can be learnt. Technical knowledge can be acquired. Networks can be built. Trust, however, has to be earned every single day. It is slow to build, easy to lose, and extraordinarily difficult to recover once compromised. That is why it remains the profession's most valuable asset.

Looking ahead, there is every reason to believe that Public Affairs will continue to be defined not merely by influence, but by professionalism, ethics, and public purpose.

If that happens, the profession will continue to grow not only in stature but also in public trust.

Influence may change a decision. Trust can change an institution. Institutions, over time, help shape nations.

Looking Ahead

As these reflections draw to a close, the overwhelming emotion is not nostalgia for the past, but optimism for the future.

Few countries have transformed themselves as profoundly as India has over the past four decades. Few professions have evolved as significantly as Public Affairs. Both journeys are still unfolding.

Public policy creates opportunity, while Public Affairs creates understanding. Together, they create the conditions in which societies prosper. As India continues its journey towards becoming one of the world's leading economies, the need for trusted institutions, thoughtful leadership, and meaningful dialogue will only grow. Our profession is uniquely placed to contribute to that future—not because it seeks greater visibility, but because it helps organisations understand an increasingly complex external environment and engage with it responsibly.

There is equal reason for optimism about the next generation. The profession is attracting talented young people who bring fresh ideas, global perspectives, and a deep commitment to public purpose. They will inherit a profession very different from the one many of us entered. It is more respected, more diverse, more strategic, and more intellectually vibrant. Their responsibility is not merely to inherit that progress, but to strengthen it further.

For eighteen years, PAFI has sought to provide a trusted platform where conversations can flourish—where dialogue is open, respectful, and intellectually honest; where evidence matters more than rhetoric; where differences are valued rather than feared; and where trust is built one conversation at a time. Institutions are remembered not only for what they achieve, but for the values they choose to protect. The true measure of any institution lies not in the number of events it organises or publications it produces, but in whether it leaves the profession it serves stronger than it found it.

If these reflections encourage better conversations, inspire young professionals, strengthen institutions, or contribute, even in some small measure, to better public policy, they will have served their purpose.

Public policy has often reminded me of a river. It rarely follows a straight course. It twists, slows, gathers strength, and sometimes changes direction altogether. Yet, when guided by purpose, informed by dialogue, and sustained by trust, it eventually finds its way. Perhaps our profession is much the same.

This, however, is not the end of a story. It is the beginning of a continuing conversation. It is not simply my journey, nor merely PAFI's, nor the story of a single institution. It is a shared journey of creating space for conversations, encouraging dialogue over discord, welcoming different viewpoints with respect, recognising that informed debate strengthens both policy and democracy, and building a stronger, more ethical, and more respected profession of Public Policy, Public Affairs, and Advocacy in India.

Ultimately, this is a journey of institution building—not merely of organisations, but of ideas; not merely of policies, but of perspectives; not merely of advocacy, but of trust. It is a journey that belongs equally to governments, business, academia, civil society, and every professional who believes that dialogue is stronger than division, collaboration more enduring than confrontation, and trust the foundation upon which lasting institutions are built.

If these reflections contribute, even in a small way, to creating that space—for conversations, for dialogue, for diverse viewpoints, for informed debate, and for a deeper appreciation of the role that Public Policy, Public Affairs, and Advocacy can play in India's future—they will have fulfilled their purpose.

The journey continues. I hope all of us will continue to walk it together.

Continuing the Conversation

This essay marks the beginning of PAFI Perspectives.

In the reflections that follow, the focus will shift from the evolution of a profession to the story of an institution that has sought to serve it. They will explore why PAFI was created, the vision of its Founders, the stewardship of successive Presidents, the guidance of its Advisory Council, the dedication of its Managing Committees and Secretariat, and, above all, the confidence reposed in it by governments, business leaders, academia, civil society, and our members over nearly two decades.

More importantly, they will continue to explore the values that have defined PAFI from the very beginning—ethical advocacy, mutual respect, institution building, and the belief that open, frank, fearless, and respectful conversations remain indispensable to better public policy.

They will also reflect on the larger questions that will shape the future of our profession: the changing relationship between business and government; the rise of corporate diplomacy; the growing importance of geopolitics; the ethical responsibilities of advocacy; the role of technology and artificial intelligence; and the continuing need to build trust across institutions in an increasingly interconnected world.

Ultimately, they will seek to answer a simple but enduring question:

What does it really mean to build not merely an institution, but a profession?

Until then, thank you for being part of this continuing conversation.

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