Why PAFI Was Born

From an Individual Quest to a Collective Vision: Looking Back to Understand the Journey

In my first essay in this series, *From Policy to Purpose: Reflections on Public Policy, Public Affairs and the Future of India*, I reflected on the evolution of public affairs and public policy in India and their growing importance in our country's development journey. I also promised to share the story of how the Public Affairs Forum of India (PAFI) came into being.

This is that story: of an individual quest that gradually became a collective vision, of an idea that evolved into a formal institution, and of a professional community determined to change not only how public affairs was practised in India, but also how it was understood and regarded.

Looking back, I realise that PAFI was born out of a simple but important conviction: public affairs deserved greater recognition, credibility and professional standing in India. The relationship between business and government was too important to be left to informal networks, occasional interventions or the handling of immediate problems. It needed knowledge, strategic thinking, ethical standards and a community of professionals committed to raising the quality of engagement.

An Individual Quest

The idea of PAFI was entirely my own quest.

After spending 27 years at the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), I left to explore how the public affairs function could develop into a recognised and respected profession in India.

At the time, public affairs was understood rather narrowly in much of corporate India. It was often associated with corporate affairs, obtaining government licences and permissions, managing regulatory relationships, or firefighting when a company encountered a problem. The function was frequently viewed as tactical rather than strategic, and its importance was not always recognised by Indian companies and their owners.

Multinational corporations, by contrast, had increasingly come to regard public affairs as a critical interface between business and government. They understood that public policy, regulation, and the wider stakeholder environment could profoundly influence corporate strategy, reputation, and long-term success.

I believed Indian companies needed to develop the same understanding. Public affairs was not simply about gaining access to government or resolving an immediate issue. It was about understanding the policy environment, anticipating change, building relationships based on trust, representing legitimate interests responsibly, and contributing constructively to better policy outcomes.

Before convening the first formal meeting to discuss PAFI, I met several people working in public affairs, corporate affairs, and policy-related roles. I wanted to understand how the function was being practised, the challenges professionals faced, and what might help them develop a stronger collective identity.

These conversations reinforced my belief that a common platform was needed. Individual practitioners were doing important work, but opportunities to exchange experiences, establish shared standards, build professional capabilities, and explain the value of public affairs to businesses, governments, and society remained limited.

The idea was not to create another industry association or networking club. It was to help build a profession.

The First Meeting: May 2008

Around May 2008, I held the first formal meeting to share and discuss the idea of establishing PAFI. Over coffee, I met Prema Sagar, Harish Krishnan, and Dr. K. C. Ravi. The idea had already taken shape in my mind; this meeting was an opportunity to put it before others, discuss its possibilities, and explore how it might be developed.

What mattered was the prospect of bringing together people who understood the importance of the function and were willing to invest their time and effort in building something for the larger professional community.

The other four founding members who subsequently joined us were T. S. Vishwanath, Rahul Sharma, Raman Sidhu, and Rajeev Batra. Together, the eight founders formed the nucleus of what would eventually become the Public Affairs Forum of India.

We did not begin with a large institutional plan, substantial funding, or an established secretariat. We began with a shared purpose and the conviction that the profession needed a stronger voice.

Building with the Support of Friends

The early years were sustained by goodwill, generosity, and personal commitment. PAFI began, in many ways, like a startup: we had an idea and enthusiasm, but very limited resources.

Friends and well-wishers opened their offices and made their conference rooms available for meetings. The Tata Group, Jubilant Bhartia Group, Genesis, and Cisco were among those who generously provided finances and facilities. These gestures were enormously valuable, enabling a fledgling professional community to meet regularly and begin building its identity.

Prema Sagar and Jyoti Sagar provided important support, including resources, staff assistance, and moral encouragement. Their contribution extended well beyond the initial phase and remained particularly important through the years up to 2014. Prema became PAFI's founding President and the only one who served a two-year term.

In the early days, secretarial assistance from Medha and Anita, then both with Genesis (now Burson), helped keep the work moving. Later, the support and contribution of Lakshmi helped bring greater continuity and stability to the institution.

We also benefited from people who believed that a stronger public affairs profession would serve a wider purpose. In early days, Minister Suresh Prabhu, Dr Rajiv Kumar, Dilip Chenoy, Vishnu Mathur, Vinnie Mehta, Sanjay Singh, Sanjaya Baru, and Amitabh Kant were among those who supported and encouraged the effort. Anil Padmanabhan, Ajay Singha, Shivnath Thukral, and Subho Ray were also part of the wider circle of people whose engagement and encouragement helped the community develop.

These contributions remind me that institutions are rarely built by their founders alone. They grow because others are prepared to lend their time, credibility, resources, and ideas to a purpose they believe in.

From an Idea to an Institution

The journey from the first meeting in May 2008 to formal registration in July 2012 took approximately four years and two months, spanning five calendar years. This period allowed the idea to mature and the professional community to take shape before the institution acquired a formal structure.

During these years, the informal group began meeting regularly through what became known as the PAFI Monthly Dialogues. The gatherings were modest in size, but they served an important purpose: providing a space for practitioners to discuss policy developments, share experiences, and learn from one another.

People began looking forward to these monthly meetings. Their value lay not only in the subjects being discussed or the speakers invited, but also in the opportunity to meet colleagues in an informal setting, exchange experiences, and connect with others facing similar challenges as they worked to establish the credibility of the emerging profession.

The dialogues helped build trust and a sense of community. They demonstrated that there was an appetite for a more structured professional platform and that the idea could be sustained through regular engagement.

Formal registration in 2012 was a significant milestone, but it was not the beginning of PAFI's story. By then, the community, relationships, and purpose had already been developing for several years.

From a Community to a National Platform

PAFI was formally launched on 25 September 2013, with a panel discussion titled *How to Work for a Vigorous Economy in an Unsettled Polity*. The choice of subject reflected the environment in which public affairs was evolving: businesses were operating amid changing political and economic conditions, and constructive engagement between business and government was becoming increasingly important.

The next major milestone was the first PAFI National Forum, held on 18 September 2014, under the theme *Engaging Stakeholders: Creating Value, Altering Perceptions*. Minister Suresh Prabhu inaugurated the session on the changing landscape of public affairs in India.

The Forum gave PAFI a larger national platform, bringing together policymakers, business leaders, public affairs practitioners, and other stakeholders to discuss the profession's role and the issues shaping India's economic and policy environment. Support from the Tata Group, Cisco, Hindustan Lever, Genesis, and the Jubilant Bhartia Group helped us take these early initiatives forward.

The Annual Forum subsequently became a defining feature of PAFI's work. It created a regular opportunity for dialogue across sectors and institutions while helping establish public affairs as a subject worthy of serious professional and policy attention.

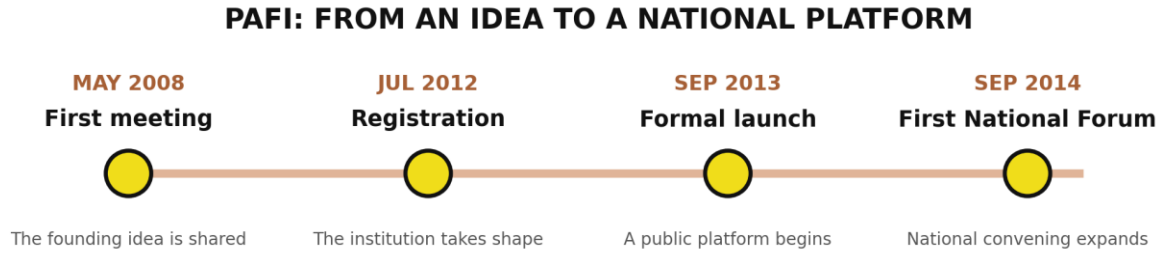


Figure 1

What PAFI Sought to Change

PAFI's purpose was never simply to give practitioners a place to meet. We wanted to change how public affairs was understood and practised.

For too long, the function had been viewed through the narrow lens of access, permissions, relationships, or the management of immediate problems. Such activities may sometimes be necessary, but they do not capture the full contribution public affairs can make.

Public affairs must be strategic. It requires an understanding of how public policy is developed, how institutions function, how stakeholders perceive an issue, and how decisions can affect an organisation's future. It calls for the ability to anticipate change, assess risks, build coalitions, and engage policymakers on the basis of credible evidence and legitimate arguments.

It must also be ethical. Professional standing cannot be built on relationships alone. It depends on transparency, integrity, respect for institutions, and a clear understanding of the responsibilities that accompany engagement with government.

In my article ***No, Public Affairs Is Not Lobbying***, I argued that public affairs should not be reduced to a narrow or transactional conception of lobbying. The profession encompasses policy understanding, stakeholder engagement, advocacy, reputation, risk management, and the ability to build constructive relationships across the public policy ecosystem.

The distinction between tactical and strategic public affairs is particularly important. A tactical approach responds to an immediate problem. A strategic approach seeks to understand why the problem has arisen, how the policy environment may evolve, and what sustained engagement could contribute to a better outcome.

PAFI was born from the conviction that the profession needed to make this transition and demonstrate its value through the quality of its work.

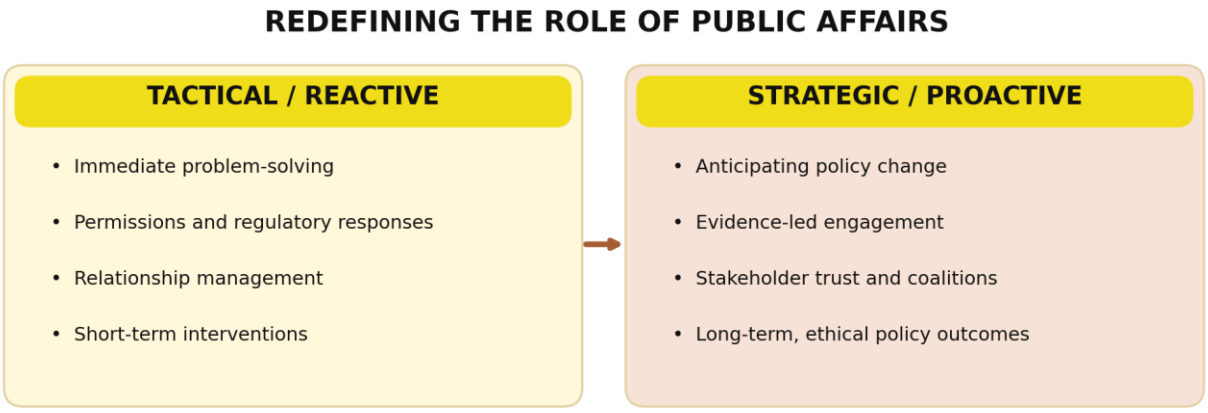


Figure 2

Ethics as the Foundation of Professional Credibility

One of PAFI's important contributions has been the introduction of a strict Code of Conduct. An organisation seeking membership is required to sign the code before applying to join.

This requirement reflects a basic principle: if public affairs is to earn the trust of governments, businesses, and society, ethical conduct cannot be an afterthought. It must be integral to the profession's identity.

A professional association must do more than bring people together. It must help establish standards, clarify expectations, and encourage responsible behaviour. A code of conduct provides a common reference point for members and signals that professional engagement should be based on integrity and accountability.

This is particularly important in a field that operates at the intersection of business and government. Public affairs professionals must understand their responsibilities to their organisations while respecting the public interest, the integrity of institutions, and the legitimate interests of other stakeholders.

Ultimately, the credibility of the profession will depend on how its practitioners behave, not merely on the positions they hold or the relationships they maintain.



Figure 3

Expanding the Boundaries of Public Affairs

As PAFI developed, so did our understanding of its role. What began largely as an effort to bring together corporate public affairs practitioners gradually evolved into a broader platform for dialogue, professional development, and institutional engagement.

Capacity building became an important part of this evolution. Building a profession requires more than bringing experienced practitioners together. It means creating opportunities for learning, mentoring, and the exchange of best practices, while preparing the next generation of public policy and public affairs professionals.

We have sought to support younger professionals and encourage greater engagement with educational institutions. The next generation must understand not only how public affairs works in practice, but also the policy processes, institutional frameworks, analytical skills, and ethical responsibilities that underpin it.

The role of women in the profession is equally important. A profession that seeks to understand and represent diverse perspectives must encourage diversity within its own ranks. Supporting women's participation, leadership, and visibility is essential to building a stronger and more representative professional community.

PAFI's membership and engagement have also expanded well beyond individual corporations. Industry associations, chambers of commerce, and bilateral business chambers form part of its wider ecosystem, both as

members and as supporters. Educational institutions have joined the conversation, helping connect academic thinking with the practical realities of policy and advocacy.

This broader participation matters because policy does not operate in silos. A regulatory decision may affect companies, industry bodies, investors, educational institutions, and communities in different ways. Bringing these perspectives together can contribute to a more informed understanding of policy challenges and possible solutions.

PAFI's engagement with state governments reflects another important dimension of this evolution. India's policy landscape cannot be understood through New Delhi alone. States are increasingly central to investment, industrial development, infrastructure, skills, innovation, and implementation. Engagement at the state level is therefore essential to understanding India's policy environment and supporting its development ambitions.

Over time, PAFI has also developed international linkages, including with the Public Affairs Council in the United States and with public affairs professionals in Singapore. These connections allow Indian practitioners to learn from international experience, exchange ideas about professional standards, and understand how the function is evolving across different markets.

Taken together, these developments reflect a much wider institutional canvas. PAFI's engagement extends from corporations to educational institutions, from industry associations to bilateral chambers, and from national policy conversations to state-level and international engagement.

This expansion brings both opportunity and responsibility. The broader the community, the more important it becomes to preserve a clear purpose, maintain high standards, and ensure that the platform remains useful to the profession as a whole.

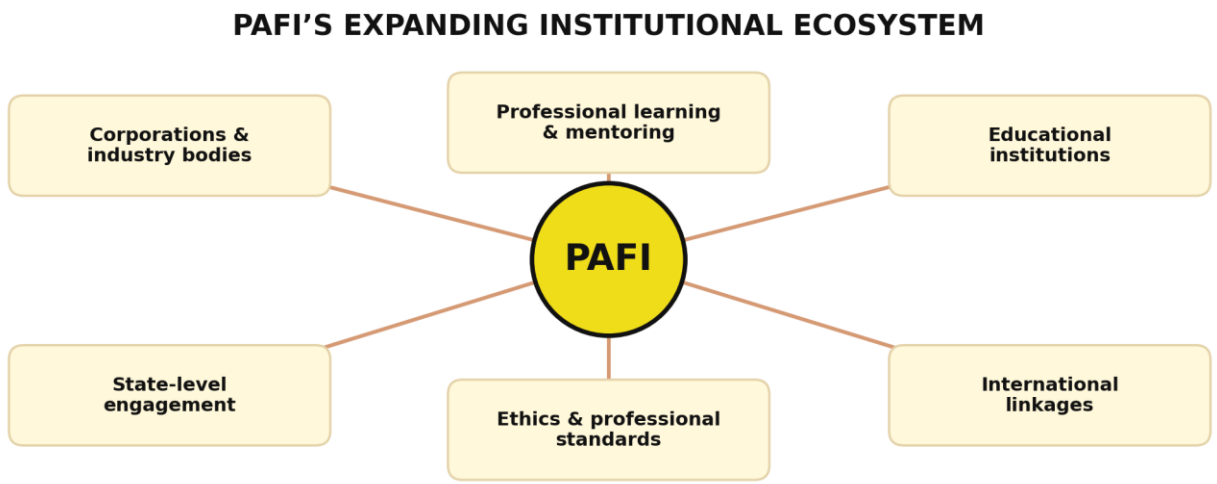


Figure 4

The Policy Pivot: An Idea Born at a Distance

Among PAFI's intellectual initiatives, *The Policy Pivot* deserves particular mention. The idea for the book came to me during one of my overseas visits.

There is something to the observation that when you are away from your country, you sometimes see it with greater clarity. Distance gives you perspective. You begin to recognise patterns, appreciate the scale of change,

and see developments that may be less visible when you are immersed in the everyday affairs of your own country.

It was during one such visit that I began thinking about how India's changing policy landscape, its evolving relationship between government and business, and its growing strategic ambitions could be brought together in a single volume. I felt there was a need to capture these shifts and invite people with deep experience and diverse perspectives to reflect on the direction in which India was moving.

When I shared the idea with Rahul Sharma, he readily agreed to join me as co-editor. His immediate enthusiasm helped turn a thought into a collaborative undertaking. Together, we set out to bring together 25 contributors whose experience and insights could illuminate different dimensions of India's policy and strategic journey.

With a foreword by N. K. Singh, *The Policy Pivot* brought together a wide range of perspectives. I contributed a chapter on the evolution of public affairs and public policy work, a subject closely connected with my professional journey and the founding purpose of PAFI.

I regard *The Policy Pivot* as a path-breaking effort in PAFI's evolution. It represented a step beyond convening conversations towards contributing to the intellectual foundations of public affairs and public policy. It sought to document a changing landscape, bring distinguished voices into conversation, and encourage a deeper understanding of India's policy journey.

For a professional institution, publishing such a volume is a statement of intent. It demonstrates a desire not only to participate in policy discussions, but also to create knowledge, record experience, and encourage informed debate.

This commitment to documenting ideas and institutional experience continued through publications such as ***10 Years of the PAFI Annual Forum***, which captures the evolution of a platform that has brought together policymakers, business leaders, public affairs practitioners, and thought leaders over a decade.

Alongside these institutional publications, my regular articles and columns have sought to contribute to the wider discussion on public policy, public affairs, and advocacy. I have always believed that ideas must travel beyond meeting rooms and conferences. Writing offers an opportunity to question established assumptions, share experience, encourage debate, and help build a more informed professional community.

Together, these efforts reflect a larger ambition: that PAFI should not only participate in India's policy conversations but also help shape their quality and direction.

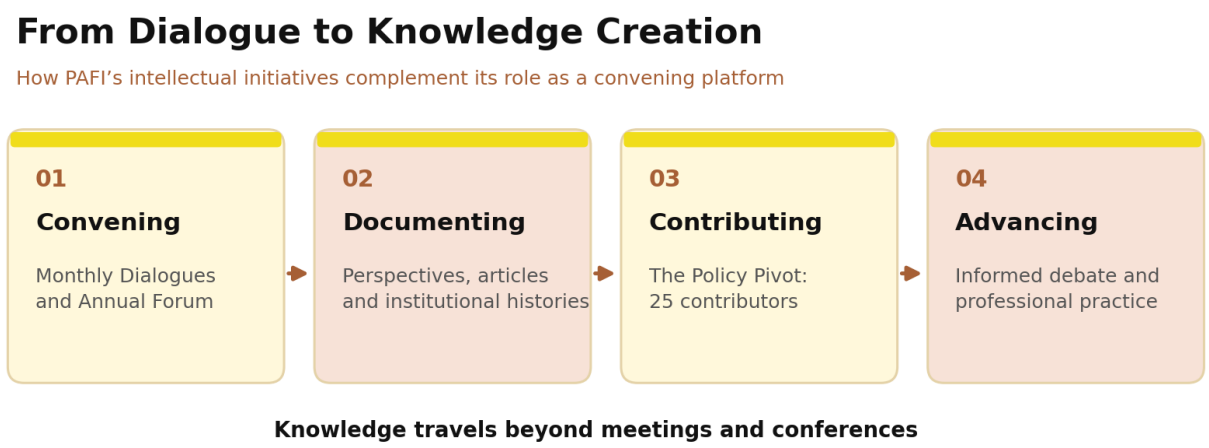


Figure 5

Institutional Stewardship: A Collective Achievement

While I have narrated PAFI's origins from my own perspective, its growth has always been a collective endeavour. The founders provided the initial impetus, but successive Presidents, Managing Committee members, Advisory Council and Steering Committee, the Secretariat, and the wider membership have contributed to the institution's development.

Each phase has brought new ideas, leadership styles, and priorities. The contributions of Past Presidents and committee members deserve collective acknowledgement, as do the people who have worked behind the scenes to organise meetings, sustain programmes, build relationships, and keep the institution moving forward.

The Secretariat has been especially important in translating ideas into action. Institutions depend not only on vision and leadership but also on continuity, organisational memory, and the often-unseen work of implementation.

PAFI's story should, therefore, not be seen as the achievement of any one individual. It is the cumulative result of many people who have given their time, energy, and professional credibility to a shared purpose.

That collective ownership is one of the institution's greatest strengths. It is also a responsibility for those who lead it today: to build on what has been created, remain open to new ideas, and ensure that PAFI continues to serve the profession rather than any individual interest.

Looking Ahead: Building a Profession for the Future

The environment in which public affairs operates is changing rapidly. Geopolitics, technological disruption, artificial intelligence, climate and sustainability concerns, new forms of regulation, and rising public expectations are reshaping the relationship between business, government, and society.

Public affairs professionals must therefore do more than understand legislation or maintain relationships. They must interpret a complex external environment, anticipate emerging risks, assess stakeholder expectations, and help organisations engage constructively with the institutions that shape their future.

The profession must also become more knowledge-led. Credible evidence, policy research, institutional understanding, and the ability to articulate legitimate interests are essential to effective engagement. The quality

of advocacy depends not only on the strength of an argument but also on the integrity of the process through which it is advanced.

PAFI's future lies in continuing to build these capabilities, preparing the next generation, encouraging wider participation, strengthening international linkages, and sustaining a culture of ethical engagement.

Its engagement with educational institutions offers opportunities to connect academic research with practical experience. Its work with state governments can deepen understanding of India's diverse policy environments. Its international relationships can expose practitioners to new approaches while enabling Indian experience to contribute to global conversations.

Above all, PAFI must continue to demonstrate that public affairs is a serious professional discipline—one that helps businesses understand the policy environment, enables more constructive engagement with government, and contributes to better-informed public decisions.



Figure 6

From an Individual Quest to a Collective Vision

When I look back at the early meetings in 2008, it is striking to see how much has changed. We began with a small group, borrowed conference rooms, limited resources, and a belief that public affairs deserved greater recognition. Over time, informal dialogues became a formal institution; the institution created a national forum; and its work expanded into professional standards, capacity building, publications, educational engagement, state-level initiatives, and international linkages.

The journey has never been the work of one person. It has depended on founders, supporters, successive leaders, members, and colleagues who believed that the profession needed a platform of its own.

For me, the real measure of PAFI's progress is not simply its longevity or the scale of its events. It is whether it has helped change perceptions, raise professional standards, encourage responsible engagement, and create opportunities for future generations of public affairs and public policy professionals.

That was the purpose behind the original idea. It remains the purpose that should guide the institution as it evolves.

PAFI was born to help build a strategic, ethical, and collaborative profession—one that earns trust through the quality of its work and contributes constructively to India's policy and development journey.

The story of PAFI also raises a larger question: what does it mean to build not merely an institution, but a profession? It means creating shared standards, nurturing talent, advancing knowledge, and leaving behind something that can grow beyond its founders.

That, ultimately, is the collective vision we set out to build.

In the next essay in the PAFI Perspectives series, I will reflect on the evolution of public affairs in India—how the profession has changed, the milestones that have shaped its journey, the challenges it continues to face, and the opportunities that lie ahead. I will also examine how PAFI has contributed to this evolution by advancing professional standards, promoting ethical and strategic engagement, building capabilities, and fostering constructive dialogue between business and government. The essay will consider how far the profession has travelled towards greater recognition and credibility, and what more needs to be done to secure its future. This journey remains unfinished, with the next generation of public affairs professionals having an important role to play.

I would welcome your feedback on this essay. What resonates with you? What, in your experience, has helped or hindered the growth of public affairs in India? Your reflections, suggestions, and experiences will enrich this continuing conversation and help shape the perspectives that follow.

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PAFI

Advancing the Practice of Public Affairs, Public Policy & Advocacy

Further Reading

The following articles, publications, and institutional resources provide additional context for the ideas and experiences discussed in this chapter. The list will be curated and expanded as the PAFI Perspectives series develops.

1. **"No, Public Affairs Is Not Lobbying"** — *The Economic Times*, 2014. Available through the PAFI Views archive: https://pafi.in/pafi-views
2. **"As Lobbying Evolves into Advocacy, Public Affairs Takes on a More Critical Role in India Inc"** — *The Economic Times*, 2022. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/as-lobbying-evolves-into-advocacy-public-affairs-takes-on-a-more-critical-role-in-india-inc/articleshow/92732267.cms

3. **"Building Trust with Stakeholders"** — PAFI, 2022. https://pafi.in/pafi-view/building-trust-with-stakeholders
4. **"The Evolving Public Affairs, Policy & Advocacy Landscape"** — *The Economic Times*, 2023. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/the-evolving-public-affairs-policy-advocacy-landscape/articleshow/104349410.cms
5. **"Public Affairs & Advocacy — A Career Choice"** — *The Economic Times*, 2024. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/public-affairs-advocacy-a-career-choice/articleshow/110462041.cms
6. **"18 Suggestions at 18: Looking Back, Looking Ahead at India's Policy Crossroads"** — PAFI, 2025. https://pafi.in/pafi-view/18-suggestions-at-18-looking-back-looking-ahead-at-india-s-policy-crossroads
7. **"From Policy to Purpose: Reflections on Public Policy, Public Affairs and the Future of India"** — *PAFI Perspectives*, 2026. Available through the PAFI Views archive: https://pafi.in/pafi-views
8. ***The Policy Pivot*** — Co-edited by Ajay Khanna and Rahul Sharma, with a foreword by N. K. Singh and contributions from 25 contributors.
9. ***10 Years of the PAFI Annual Forum*** — PAFI publication documenting the evolution of the Annual Forum.
10. **"Our History, Our Story"** — Public Affairs Forum of India. https://pafi.in/history-and-journey/