

Shashi Tyagi

**Co-Founder of
GRAVIS**

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**Leader of
Hands-On Gandhian Retreat**

**Institute of World Culture
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Shashi Tyagi is the co-founder of GRAVIS. She is a devoted and noted woman activist in India, and is a member of the governing boards and committees of many development organizations. At present, she is the administrative head of GRAVIS as its Secretary. With her immense field experience, particularly of working among women for their upliftment, she endows GRAVIS with valuable suggestions and guidance.



Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti (GRAVIS) or Center of People's Science for Rural Development is a voluntary organization that takes a Gandhian approach to rural development by working with the poor of the desert to enable them to help themselves. Since its inception in 1983, GRAVIS has worked with over 50,000 desert families across 850 villages in Rajasthan reaching a population of over 1 million, and has established over 1,100 community Based Organizations (CBOs). Through its outstanding field work, as well as its research and publications, GRAVIS has come to occupy a leading position amongst the voluntary organizations in Rajasthan with national and international level recognition.

GRAVIS was founded in 1983 by **Shashi Tyagi** and her husband, the late Laxmi Chand Tyagi. Inspired by their experience with the *Sarvodaya* Movement and by the yearning to do their bit for the poor and the underprivileged, the Tyagis began their efforts in Gagadi, a village located 60 kilometers away from Jodhpur in Rajasthan. The Tyagis' formal qualifications in agriculture and education, experience in social activism, and extensive direct exposure to life in the Thar Desert provided them the confidence to set foot on a challenging journey of social work in the region.

Two of GRAVIS's core principles are:

Gram Swaraj - Gandhian concept of "village self-rule"

Sarvodaya - Gandhian concept of "all rising but the last first".

The reason for such a challenging endeavor sprung from their deeply-held belief in Gandhian ideology. All around them lay the challenges of the harsh landscape, the discrimination against women and lower caste members, and the poverty of these communities. They knew there had to be another way from this. They found it in Gandhi ji's philosophy: a return to the self-sufficiency of the village community. Instead of relying on distant agencies to solve problems, Tyagi ji and

Shashi ji believed that it was critical to engage with the local people. So by bringing the whole community together and by lifting up the most marginalized residents first, GRAVIS began to forge a new vision of village life in the Thar.

Shashi ji writes: “When my husband the late L. C. Tyagi and I founded GRAVIS in 1983 with a few close Gandhian friends, we...faced many challenges in the earliest years. There were foot marches and breakdowns. There was no staff or outside resources. It was only our Gandhian ideology that sustained us through those difficult times. As the organization has grown, we have sought to instill those values in our team and community partners. As we move ahead towards our goal, all our actions will be guided by these same ideals.”

As an author of *The Story of GRAVIS* writes: “Shashi ji complemented [her husband] Tyagi ji's gentleness with a steely strength. Practical and down to Earth at work, she brought discipline to the administration. This toughness would prove essential, for the Thar Desert is not an easy place for a woman to work. Yet Shashi ji persevered as pioneer. She led by example, showing the villagers that a woman could stand up and speak on her own behalf. This example made a great impact on the villagers. Today many community leaders cite her fortitude as the reason for change in their own communities.

Her stanch resolve was matched by a generosity of spirit which the villagers themselves could easily understand. The desire to help the suffering and poor transcended working hours. Whenever she met someone who faced some difficult circumstances, she would do everything in her power to help. This caring nature helped improve the circumstances of many unfortunate people she encountered.”

Hard work, the spirit of service and commitment earned the the Tyagi's the trust of the rural community that was necessary to implement their ideas. Shashi ji is an inspiration to both the GRAVIS workers she guides and to the people of rural Rajasthan whom they serve.

In January of 2009, Shashi ji will lead the Hands-on Gandhian Retreat for the Institute of World Culture in Santa Barbara, California. There she will lead participants in a brief ashram experience, reminiscent of Gandhi's own ashrams. She will introduce participants to Gandhi's autobiography, unfold to them her own experiments in instantiating Gandhian practices, and engage them in dialogue about Gandhian approaches to global as well as personal matters. Taking time from her other work and traveling to California to lead Americans towards a more sustainable and non-violent lifestyle is another instance of Shashi ji's tireless and selfless service.