As a young woman of twenty-five years, I wrote a romantic ode of praise to Indian femininity entitled “The Land Where God is a Woman.” I had just arrived in India and was as besotted with the country as only a mad passionate lover could be.

Forty years down the line, times have changed. Both my beloved India and I are four decades older. Having been deeply involved practicing and teaching classical Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga, as well as the ancient Dravidian dance form Bharat Natyam, I have interacted intensely and personally with thousands of Indian women - the young, the old, married, unmarried, professionals, housewives, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, villagers and urbanites.

During this time, I have witnessed a sea-change in the Indian woman’s character and attitude. I undertook an interesting exercise recently, re-reading my essay “The Land Where God is a Woman.” It was a measure of social, spiritual, personal and cultural change, not only in the feminine psyche of India, but also in my own world view.

My essay “The Land Where God is a Woman” began thus:

“I think that every woman on earth who sincerely desires to discover the truth of her femininity should spend some time in India, the land where God is a woman. Mother India has a feminine soul, worships God as Divine Mother, and contrary to those who come away with superficial impressions, here it is the woman who rules the house and the land. The secret lies in the tremendously potent, womanly power of submission. Remaining entirely feminine from tip to toes, with all the soft and submissive qualities associated with her sex, our Indian woman is the strongest force in our society, the pole about which the family pivots. She endures - she outlasts - she persists - she remains firm and calm - and in the end, she triumphs. All resistance is futile before the power of her submissive endurance.”

The phrase that strikes me now in the above passage as ringing false is “potent womanly power of submission.” I watch the aggressive in-your-face attitudes of modern female media stars, college youngsters, even village women who wear their arrogance and feistiness on their chests with T-Shirt slogans like “Don't tread on
me" and I realize that subtle Indian womanly psychological tool has evaporated into thin air. Defiance, rebellion, me-first, get-out of my way - brashness is the new weapon of choice. How has this happened and so quickly, in less than two generations? The next few paragraphs in my old essay produce some clues.

"Many are the customs, ceremonies and thought patterns in this ancient Hindu land within which the Indian woman lives which stimulate and foster the growth of the feminine Shakti within her psyche. From birth to death, the soft gentle customs, the definite social boundaries within which she securely moves, produce and educe that exquisite femininity, which seems to be her birthright. From the crudest village belle carrying water from the local well in her bright brass pot, gleaming in the sun, to the thrilling graceful movements of our most talented Bharat Natyam dancers, there is no doubt - an Indian woman is a woman, in thought, deed, action and word.

From childhood, our young girls are surrounded with the soft and gentle things of womanhood, sparkling gold ornaments which brighten even the darkest face, cascades of sweet smelling flowers in the long, lovely hair, brightly coloured ribbons for the single plait trailing proudly down her back, jingling arm bracelets and tinkling ankle bracelets, brightly coloured sarees, which cover the body securely, demurely, yet highlight the slight figure and its graceful movement."

The modern, Christianized materialistic ethic which dominates the entire Indian educational system has robbed the woman-child of her own cultural customs, ceremonies and dress codes and replaced them with Western, egoistic, shallow illusions and ambitions. Gone with the wind is the saree! Most college students feel acutely uncomfortable in that elegant garment. Gone is the long hair. It is a bother! Gone are the flowers in the hair, the lovely gold jewelry and ankle bracelets. There is no time in the mad rush for school, college, roller skating classes, Karate, piano lessons, art classes - to learn to draw a Kolam (Rangoli) at the front gate of the house in early morning. No time for Pujas, for classical arts. No time to brush and plait long hair! No time for Pujas or prayers! No time even to purchase a string of flowers to decorate the hair!

Many New-Age Indian women no longer value their cultural ideals in thought, word, or deed - they prefer to be clones of the latest soap opera heroine or hit cinema star. Those days I had rejoiced in the immense love I felt and saw being showered on the young ones, by the entire joint family structure. I saw it as a cocoon from which the magnificent butterfly of soft spirituality could emerge. I eulogized this amazing womb of love.

Love is the essential soil in which femininity blossoms, and here in this land, all children are surrounded and flooded with this warm, joyful emotion which softens and makes gentle. Physical contact is constant, from infancy through early childhood as all little children, both boys and girls, are constantly held, caressed,
petted, pampered, carried about by brothers, sisters, aunties, uncles, grandfathers, grandmothers, mothers, fathers and even the next door neighbours. Everyone loves a baby. That powerful, pure love pours like a cascade of sunlight into the hearts of the young. For the girl-child, it makes her heart soft and fulfilled with human love, enabling her to pass on to her own children what she herself received as a child.

Now days, the nuclear family is the norm. With both parents working, who has time and patience to nurture the baby and the children? Nurseries, crèches and day schools, are convenient cold-storage units for mothers busy making money or “fulfilling themselves” in a career or profession. Parental attention and nurture is now a luxury and not a necessity. Many a child seldom sees its parents from morning to night, locked as they are in classes, tuitions and structured activities. Should that routine find a few empty slots, the space is filled with cinema, television programmes, pop music, computer and video games.

“Birth and death are common, intimate experiences in every child’s life in the India extended family. The woman is the closest to birth and hence, perhaps she has a better understanding of death as well. Her roles are well-defined, even as a child – she is to become the core of the household life, the strength, the centre around which the family revolves. She is protected - well protected - from the harshness of external life, from the struggle for material survival. In her youth her father attends to her worldly, external needs; her husband in her middle years; and her son in her old age. She does not need to fight, or to compete with others for her survival, either physically or psychologically. Thus, that powerful, aggressive hardness so common in women brought up in Western society, is rare in the more gentle, refined East. She can retain her purity and innocence right through her life, as she is protected and guarded from those forces which would coarsen, and harden and cheapen her.”

Because the modern woman is no longer “protected” (nor does she want such protection) she develops an aggressive hardness which enables her to survive in the dog-eat-dog, fiercely competitive academic and professional world. Softness and submission is a vice in such structure, and femininity is a liability.

Women no longer seem attracted to the Indian idea of beauty. Short hair, casual western dress, T-shirts, short sleeves, the so-called salwar kameez which resembles more the kind of dress Christian missionaries used to foist upon converts to their faith, are more the norm. One rarely sees a young woman with flowers in her hair, wearing gold jewelry, dressed in a saree, even at weddings and social function.

“The natural feminine impulse and love for decoration and beauty finds fulfillment in a thousand ways in the sensitive household and cultural arts of Hinduism. The elaborate Kolams, (floor decorations which are actually Yantras, designed to attract
positive forces to the household, made with rice flour), body adornment, with the
traditional manner of wearing the hair long and plaited with flowers, the Bindu, eye
makeup, gold ornaments, the gracious and lovely saree; classical Carnatic music,
classical Carnatic singing, the study of which is actually a Yogic science of control
of sound vibration; classical instrumental music particularly the veena; the Bharat
Natym, or the ancient dance tradition of India; the performance of daily Pujas and
other cyclic rituals, which are a form of Yoga-like discipline involving Dharana,
concentration; Mantra, uttering of sacred sounds; and sometimes for more evolved
women, Dhyana, meditation; the emphasis on the preparation and serving of food,
and it’s great importance in the family life; in some families, the performance of
Yoga asanas, are a few of so many ways within the Hindu tradition, of so many
disciplines and arts and studies, by which the body, mind, emotions and spiritual
side of a woman can be fulfilled without even stepping out of the door of her own
house. As the Japanese mystic says, ‘Without moving from my room, I can
comprehend the Universe.’"

Along with Western style education, life style and dress has come Western-style
thought patterns, attitudes and emotions. The Western concept of the ultimate
importance of individual over the collective, the need to succeed, to prove oneself
the best, the desire to embrace all experience and to enjoy all pleasures no matter
what the cost, the pursuit of the fulfillment of desire, as a legitimate life goal,
even if it harms others, is now part and parcel of the educational system. "Me-First!
You Last!" is the motto! "Self before All!" The Western glorification of rebellion
against authority and disrespect and disregard for the wisdom of age is a virus
which has now infected Indian womanhood. One witnesses this on the streets, in
the colleges, in the work place, even in the house where daughters disrespect
mothers, and mothers, disrespect grandmothers. No relationship is sacred, and the
authority of elders has been lost. The young girls scorn their mothers,
grandmothers, college professors, even their Gurus. "Who are you to tell me?" “You
don’t know anything! Leave me alone” The war-cry of the American teenager now
reverberates in the Indian psyche.

There are those Western-educated and Western-oriented persons who are
horrified at what they call the "lack of freedom" of our Indian woman. They believe
her to be limited in her experience with men, with the business world, with the
intellectual world community. In the West, it is believed “all experience is good and
teaches us something.” In the Eastern way of viewing life, it is rather thought that
certain experiences do not evolve an individual, but rather hamper growth and
development, and even kill certain qualities and sensitivities. It is not necessary to
experience everything for oneself, in the Eastern way of thinking, for those who
have gone before in time, through their experience, have laid out a safe and
fruitful path for succeeding generations to follow. Thus, the Indian lives according
to this “tradition” or the discoveries of wise men about the essential meaning of
life, how it should be lived, and the proper attitudes to be cultivated according to
the circumstances of one's life. In the more than 10,000 years of continuous
civilized tradition here in the East, certain ways of living, thinking, and feeling have
been discovered which produce personal peace and happiness, harmonious social
relationships and spiritual development. These have been codified into "traditional
customs and traditional attitudes and responses" to all the major events of an
individual's life in this world. The modern free-thinking West, a mere infant with a
civilized history of only about 3,000 years, has come to believe that all experience
is good, that all experience will bring its own lessons. In the East, behaviour is
confined by customs and traditions within certain limits, and thus the individual is
protected from experiences which would only destroy, harm, and de-sensitize the
individual. It is believed in the East that "that which is broken, can never be
mended'. Whereas, the Western mind has made all its efforts in medicine, science,
psychology, and technology, in trying to "repair" the damage caused by destructive
experiences, whether of the individual, the family, the city, the country or the
world in general.

The yearning for spiritual experience has been more or less snuffed out by the New
Religion called Consumerism. Indian women are the latest converts and like most
converts, are more loyal to this New Religion than those "born to the faith."

Material possessions, brand names, cell phones, trendy clothes, night clubs, stylish
vehicles, high-end coffee hang outs, pubs, all are much sought after "objects of
desire." The man's measure - and the woman's measure too - is increasingly being
taken by what she/he has, not what she/he is.

"Of course, the Eastern mind has never placed much value on worldly experience for
its own sake, but rather only as a means to spiritual development. One of the
greatest sages of our age, Sri Ramana Maharishi, of South India spent his entire
life from the age of 11, nearly sixty years, in and around the holy mountain
Arunachala. It would be difficult to write his autobiography in the Western sense,
for he had very few "external experiences." But his "Inner Life" was immensely rich
and deep. So also, the Indian woman. Her external life in most cases is much more
limited than her Western counterpart. But her inner experience, her spiritual
development, her emotional fulfillments and her sensitivity are very often, thanks
to the Yogic nature of the Hindu culture within which she lives, much deeper and
much more profound."

Because of all these developments, I can no longer remark, as I did forty years ago
that India is the land where is God is a woman.

"She is fortunate indeed to be born in India, the home of Yoga and the land where
God is a woman. In India, God is worshipped as Divine Mother and she takes many
forms. She is fierce, powerful and vengeful as Kali; benevolent and kind as Durga; a
warrior queen as Meenakshi; a seductive temptress as Kamakshi; an eternal virgin as
Kanya Kumari. She stimulates the artistic impulse as Saraswathi and distributes wealth as Lakshmi. There is an aspect of the Goddess to be worshipped for every occasion, to be invoked for every need. But above all, the Hindu Goddesses are wonderfully feminine, with voluptuous figures, decorated in the most gorgeous of sarees and intricately formed gold ornaments. By her Hasta Mudra (hand gesture) and the sweet serenity of her face, she attracts her devotees as the bee is drawn to the lotus. Not only that - she beckons her devotees to emulate and merge with the powerful feminine Shakti of which she is a manifestation. "Without a vision, the people perish." The women of India have constantly before them a feminine ideal of the greatest charm to emulate."

I no longer see, as I did forty years ago, incarnations of Saraswathi, Lakshmi or even Durga in my daily interactions. I see “Cool Cats”, and “Babes” and “Chicks” but I do not see the radiant Goddess!

I had concluded my essay long ago in these words. "As an exponent of Yoga, I am often asked to write and to speak on the subject of “Yoga and Women”. The basic advice I always give to women the world over is: look to India, to Hinduism, and especially its women; study the customs and philosophies carefully. Discover and develop femininity. Then, build a Yoga Life upon that powerful Shakti, unique to the feminine half of humanity."

As I ponder the suitability of these words I remain bewildered in this modern age. The Devi in modern India is a much married woman, sometimes even having a child out of wed lock, or a live-in-relationship. Extra-marital relationships are no longer rare. Divorce rates are rising as the woman demands her own satisfactions. The Young Indian woman wears blue jeans, she smokes. She also can drink alcohol without guilt. She is successful in her career. She does not tolerate domination by any one, least of all her husband or elders. She refuses to sacrifice her own pleasures for the sake of anyone else.

The young ladies have turned their backs on Sita. They remark caustically, "Why did Sita put up with such a male chauvinist?" They have chosen another path. Where does that path lead? I do not see the happiness, contentment and spiritual inner peace I witnessed so profoundly four decades ago. I see confusion, ill-health, stress, bad habits, selfishness, lack of humour, lack of real spiritual art or skill. I see obsession with false images, illusions created by media. I see disappointment, disrespect, self-obsession and egoism.

Perhaps such a trend is inevitable. One has to lose something, in order to appreciate its value. Perhaps the Indian woman has to lose that essential spiritual femininity, to be able to value it enough to cultivate it again, in a conscious manner.

Now-a-days when I speak of Yoga for women, my first clarion call is: return to the roots of your own culture! Restore the rhythm, regularity and repetition (Abhyasa)
of Puja and Hindu rites and rituals in daily life. Wear the traditional attire, jewelry and flowers. Grow your hair long. Cultivate the spiritual arts such as Kholams, music, dance and music. Celebrate the Festivals in a spiritual manner. Study the scripture. Chant the Mantras. Practice the spiritual disciplines of Yoga - Asana, Pranayama. Perhaps one cannot follow these as completely in days gone by. Times have changed. But at least, some link with past beauty should exist.

The Yogic science makes sense and is effective only in its cultural context. Divested of its roots, Yoga becomes nothing more than an ancient “keep fit exercise”, a balm that soothes, dulls and pacifies, but fails to transform.

Kundalini is a feminine force. That great potency may be actualized only when the human exists in a healthy state of polarity. Where a man is a man, and a woman is a woman. Only a Devi can unite with Shiva. Only a Shakti can unite with that high state of Cosmic Consciousness. Samadhi - Union with the Highest can occur only when the two poles of creation flow together in a state of harmonious interaction. Only when that polarity is achieved, can one find health, happiness and peace.

Yoga is an ancient science deep rooted in the marvelous wisdom of the ancient Rishis. These Rishis created cultural Samskaras (patterns) which produced not only social harmony but also personal mental and emotional balance and happiness. Today’s Indian woman must not reject her roots. She must seek to understand them. The tree of Yoga is rooted in the Samskrithi of the Indian culture. Without that anchorage, the whole edifice will fall in the very first turbulent wind which blows.

Yoga is a way of life. That way of life was part and parcel of the life style of cultured Indian family and social life since time immemorial. Modern, urban life everywhere is fragmented, chaotic, self-obsessed, ego-driven. People are hypnotized by the false images projected by media. The modern Indian woman must shake herself free of the mass hypnosis of consumerism, and the materialistic ethos and media indoctrination. She must claim her birthright as a descendent of a noble race of women. Her forbearers were Draupadi, Sita, Ahalya, Maitreyi, Gargi and the illustrious truly feminine personages of lore. With wisdom (Jnanam), discrimination (Viveka) and dispassion (Vairagya), she must cultivate those ancient virtues, skillfully weaving them into her own life style wherever possible, whenever appropriate. She must cultivate the field in which the Yogic qualities may flourish. Then, Yoga will truly become her crest jewel and she will be a Devi, a Goddess in the eyes of her family and society as a whole.