

# Without Violence: Frédérick Leboyer's Significant Encounters in and with India

**Abstract.** This chapter examines a selection of works by Frédérick Leboyer (1918–2017) that engage with Indian cultures and spiritual traditions. Leboyer was a French gynaecologist-obstetrician most famous for promoting “childbirth without violence” (*Pour une naissance sans violence*, 1974) in Francophone and international contexts, as well as a poet, photographer, and filmmaker. This contribution situates Leboyer’s life and work as a micro-history example of an encounter between Europe and India. Leboyer visited India several times in the 1960s onwards and became a disciple of Neo-Vedanta teacher Svāmi Prajñānpad (1891–1974), whom he writes about in *Portrait d’un homme remarquable* (1991). The Frenchman acknowledges a sacred and spiritual dimension of childbirth in many of his works. At a time when few dared question medical protocols enforced on birthing women, Leboyer insisted on the importance of breathing and called attention to the baby as a significant person in the process. He also contributed to the dissemination of techniques such as baby massage and prenatal yoga. The recontextualisation of Leboyer’s individual trajectory presented here focuses on his encounter with his spiritual master and with two mothers in India. It argues for the significance of such encounters in the broader circulation of practices between India and Europe at the intersection of well-being, spirituality, religion, medicine, and maternal health.\*

**Keywords.** religion, mother, childbirth, obstetrics, India

Frédérick Leboyer (1918–2017) was a gynaecologist-obstetrician most famous for his revolutionary works on childbirth. Historians of medicine and scholars focusing on the cultural aspects of birth know him as the promoter of “childbirth without violence” and as a key figure in movements of resistance against the hyper-medicalisation of childbirth in Western countries from the 1950s onwards.<sup>1</sup> Leboyer was also an author, poet, photographer, and filmmaker. His work often mentions the sacred and spiritual dimensions of pregnancy, birth, and the mother-child relationship<sup>2</sup> that his Western

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1 Mentions of Leboyer in general works on the history of childbirth can be found, for instance, in Cesbron/Knibielher 2004: 153–154; Charrier/Clavandier 2013: 193; Rivard 2014: 245–246.

2 Leboyer 1976a (*Shantala: Un art traditionnel; Le massage des enfants*) and 1978 (*Cette lumière d’où vient l’enfant*), two of his earlier works, as well as his portrait of his spiritual

biomedical training and professional environment overlooked or regarded as irrelevant to the prevailing, biomedical models of healthcare at the time.

Many references to spiritual, religious, or philosophical traditions in Leboyer's work on childbirth are linked to religious expressions and practices emerging from South Asia, particularly pertaining to Hinduism and Buddhism. Though allusions to non-Indian religious or philosophical systems such as Christianity, Judaism, and Daoism are also present (for instance, in *Le sacre de la naissance*, 1982), this chapter focuses on the influence of Indian cultures and spiritual traditions on his life and work. The few historians of childbirth that have analysed Leboyer's contributions have rarely considered religion and the impact of his travels to and stays in India on the development of his philosophy of birth.<sup>3</sup> Neither have scholars focusing on the micro-histories of encounters between India and the West paid much attention to him as a key figure.

Through analysing the published work of Leboyer and information about his life,<sup>4</sup> this contribution makes the case for considering him as an important actor in the transmission of knowledge and practices from India. The recontextualisation of his individual trajectory and of specific encounters he had in India will contribute to an assessment of their significance for the broader circulation of practices between India, Europe, and the world, at the intersections of well-being, spirituality, mental health, women's health, medicine, and religion. As such, Leboyer stands in contrast with other key figures of India-Europe encounters in the field of medicine, who often remained in alignment with missionary work or colonial imperatives, attempting to bring Western biomedicine to India rather than learn from traditional systems of healing (e.g. Ayurvedic medicine) or practices (e.g. of traditional birth attendants such as *dātī*).

The structure of this chapter follows Leboyer's encounters with three significant persons in India. This focus on his meeting with his spiritual teacher and with two Indian women, in addition to his general observation of mothers in India, allows us to uncover four transmissions to the Western world through his publications and films. The first transmission, pervasive throughout his work since the first publication, in 1974, of *Pour une naissance sans violence*, is the requirement of non-violence in childbirth, inspired by the notion of *ahimsā* (non-violence). The other transmissions are three practices that can be articulated with key moments of maternal life that Leboyer focused on throughout his career: yoga during pregnancy, breathing during childbirth, and massage of the baby.

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master (*Portrait d'un homme remarquable*, 1991) will be discussed in more detail in this chapter. However, many of his later works (e.g. Leboyer 1979, 1982a, 1983, 1988, 1996, 1997, 2006, 2007, 2009, and 2012) contain religious references.

3 Rapoport 2013; This 2013; Morel 2016. Also those cited above in footnote 1.

4 During the last years of Leboyer's life, his wife Mieko Leboyer convinced him to write his autobiography which, according to information I received from her, is going to be published soon. See footnote 5 for a list of obituaries.

After situating Leboyer's life trajectory in section 1, I focus on his Neo-Vedanta teacher Svāmi Prajñānpad, whose ashram he frequently visited, and on their encounter. As a close disciple who had witnessed his everyday life at the ashram, Leboyer writes about him in *Portrait d'un homme remarquable* (1991). I then discuss in section 2 significant encounters Leboyer had with two women of India, one unplanned and the other carefully scheduled for artistic and pedagogic purposes: first, his encounter with Shantala, a mother massaging her baby in the slums of Kolkata; second, his photographic work with Vanita, the second daughter of the famous yoga teacher B. K. S. Iyengar. Finally, the chapter ends with further considerations on the role played by Leboyer in such transmissions of practices and ideas regarding pregnancy and maternal health, with spiritual aspects that are now starting to be integrated even in post-secular, Western biomedical contexts that have become more inclusive of spiritual dimensions in healthcare.

## 1 Biography of Leboyer

Alfred Lazare Lévy was born on November 1st, 1918, in Paris, to Jewish parents: Judith (née Weiler), an artist, and Henri Lévy, a businessman. Little is known about his life besides through obituaries,<sup>5</sup> interviews,<sup>6</sup> and what can be gleaned from reading his books (in which he rarely writes about himself).<sup>7</sup> In a 1977 interview, when a Quebecois journalist “asks precise questions about his childhood, his teenage years, he refuses to answer under the pretext that the story of his life is not interesting”.<sup>8</sup> From various sources, however, some coherent details do emerge.

As a boy he had spent a summer in Brighton in the UK where he developed a love of the English language. During World War II, the Jewish family fled to Mégève (in the free zone of France). To avoid persecution, he changed his name. He then trained in medicine at the University of Paris and became an obstetrician. He delivered thousands of babies through commonly used medical methods of the time, including twilight sleep.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of the 1960s, in France and other Western countries, notions of authority and power were prone to be challenged: not only the authority of the state but also the power that the medical establishment exercised on women. As

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5 Greusard 2017; Lalonde 2017; Lucas 2017; Moorhead 2017; Smith 2017; Tessler 2017.

6 De Gramont 1977; Bideaut 2017.

7 What is known about his own, traumatic birth will be considered below. Morel 2016 provides a more detailed biographical sketch.

8 De Gramont 1977: 39. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

9 Twilight sleep is a state of partial narcosis or stupor, but without total loss of consciousness. In this particular state induced by injections of morphine and scopolamine, birthing women would still respond to pain, but not remember it.

part of Leboyer's cultural context of practising medicine and travelling to India were social, sexual, and political elements such as access to contraception and abortion amid an era of sexual revolution and so-called "sexual liberation" along with the rise of "free love", and, in France, "Mai 68". In the North American context more specifically, this same period saw the rise of hippy culture, the civil rights movements, and, later, mass protests against the Vietnam War, as well as the rise of countercultures often drawing inspiration from a cluster of elements deriving from an exotically constructed, spiritual "East" (Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Zen, etc.).<sup>10</sup> On both sides of the Atlantic, some strands within the so-called "natural" childbirth movement integrated spirituality in their discourses and practices. The best-known American example is *Spiritual Midwifery*, a book published in 1975, one year after Leboyer's *Pour une naissance sans violence*, by "The Farm" community's famous midwife, Ina May Gaskin (born in 1940).

During his first or one of his earliest trips to India, Leboyer met with Svāmi Prajñānpad (1891–1974).<sup>11</sup> Further research would be needed to uncover precise evidence about the frequency and duration of his stays in India, but it appears that his visits to India were regular throughout the 1960s. Leboyer was part of a group of French disciples,<sup>12</sup> several of whom mention him in their texts or interviews. By the early 1970s, his perspectives on life, spirituality, healthcare, and childbirth had changed significantly: not only his practice of medicine in France but also his regular visits to India certainly had played a role in this, as the rest of this chapter will argue. He was ready to share his views with the world in a context where this created a lot of antagonism.

Possibly because of the strong criticism he received after publishing his first book, *Pour une naissance sans violence*,<sup>13</sup> he stopped practising medicine and resigned from the national (French) board of physicians (*Ordre des médecins*).

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10 See, for instance, Oldmeadow 2004; Lardinois 2007. Many have explored this encounter with a focus on the twentieth century.

11 In an interview (Verain 2018), Colette Roumanoff, wife of Daniel Roumanoff, confirms that Leboyer was present at the ashram. Roumanoff first met Svāmi Prajñānpad in 1959. Morel 2016 situates Leboyer's meeting with Svāmi Prajñānpad in 1962, and a website run by the Indian master's disciples confirms 1962 as the date of Leboyer's first encounter (Disciples de Svami Prajnanpad n. d.). Daniel Roumanoff's book, *Svāmi Prajñānpad. Biographie*, also confirms January 1962 as the date Leboyer encountered "Svāmiji" (Roumanoff 1993: 267). Research interviews conducted in the summer of 2022 suggest, though, that the first encounter could in fact have taken place earlier. The life of this spiritual master is discussed in the following section.

12 See below, section 3.

13 Criticism came from his colleagues in gynaecology in general, from physicians who were also open to less medicalised childbirth (like Cheynier, see below, and also see Cheynier 1978), and from feminists who perceived his approach as forgetting the mother. For a detailed analysis of the reception and criticism of his work, see Rapoport 2013; Morel 2016.

He went on to devote his life to writing, photography, and poetry. In addition to his literary work, Leboyer also produced a movie, *Naissance*, coinciding with his 1974 book, in which he developed his theory of virtual non-intervention in the birth process. It won first prize from the Centre National du cinéma. His later film *Shantala* corresponds to the 1976 book of the same title, on baby massage. In 1982 he would then also film *Le sacre de la naissance*.<sup>14</sup> His books (see the list of references at the end of this chapter) were translated in many languages.

Between 1982 and 2000 he lived in London. There, in 1998, he met Mieko Yoshimura, the woman who would later become his wife. They married in 2005, when he was eighty-six years old and she fifty. Though this was a first marriage for both of them, they were too old to procreate, and Leboyer would later say that he could not know personally “one of the greatest privileges life holds”.<sup>15</sup> He also stated in an interview, a few months before his death: “an unfortunate truth is that I did not have a child”.<sup>16</sup> After retiring to the village of Vens in Switzerland he published one last book in 2009, titled *The Art of Giving Birth with Chanting, Breathing and Movement*. He died on 25 May 2017.

At a time when few dared question hyper-medicalised protocols enforced on birthing women, Leboyer insisted on the importance of breathing and called attention to the baby as a significant person in the process. During the twentieth century, in several countries, a small number of physicians started advocating for change in the medicalised and interventionist practices of childbirth. For instance, Grantly Dick-Read (1890–1959), a British pioneer of the so-called “natural childbirth” movement, published a book titled *Natural Childbirth* in 1933.<sup>17</sup> Dick-Read advocated education for pregnant women so that they would know what to expect, feel less apprehensive, and thus experience a childbirth “without fear”. The 1953 French translation of his work, by Jean-Marc Vaillant, transforms “without fear” into “sans douleurs”,<sup>18</sup> which further contributed to amalgamating Dick-Read’s approach with that of others in the movement for the humanisation of childbirth. Another example is that of Fernand Lamaze (1891–1957), who is associated with the idea of “painless childbirth”, also along the lines of preparing women and their partners.<sup>19</sup> Yet another key actor in this movement was Michel Odent (born

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14 The 2008 DVD titled *Naître autrement* features all three movies (Leboyer 2008; also see Leboyer 1976b, Leboyer 1977, 1982b).

15 Moorhead 2017.

16 Bideaut 2017. The original sentence in French is : “[U]ne regrettable vérité, c’est que je n’ai pas eu d’enfant”.

17 This work was retitled *Revelation of Childbirth: The Principles and Practice of Natural Childbirth* in 1942, and then finally *Childbirth Without Fear* (with the same subtitle) in 1944. Moscucci 2003: 170.

18 Dick-Read 1953.

19 Michaels 2014.

in 1930), who, like Leboyer, had to leave France where such ideas were not well received. Later, Jean-Marie Cheynier, medical director at the famous Maternité des Bluets and a staunch critic of Leboyer's method,<sup>20</sup> suggests through the title and content of his book that birth can be a "celebration" (*Que sa naissance soit une fête*, 1978). These approaches all try to shift the focus away from fear and pain in childbirth, anchored in Western culture through particular readings of Genesis 3:16 where God states to Eve that he "will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children". Alternatives to such apprehensions are rooted in trusting "Nature", the female body, the process of birth itself, or in a psychoprophylactic doctrine emphasising "consciousness".<sup>21</sup> In the already secularised French context of the mid-twentieth century, Leboyer draws heavily on spiritual elements from non-European, Eastern spiritual sources. Through doing so, his focus is not to reintroduce a notion that women should invoke some divine or suprahuman help to go through childbirth but rather, he insists that childbirth must be apprehended in a different way. He insists not on prayers but practices: postures, breathing, and chanting, and on the benefits that these practices may bring to the newborns and their mothers. Leboyer's rigour in condemning the birth methods of his time and his determination to make radical changes led to some of the gentler birthing practices of today, though he was certainly neither the first nor the only one to have demonstrated an interest in "alternative" birthing techniques and positions. From the 1970s and 1980s onwards, depending on their national contexts,<sup>22</sup> physicians began to listen to and integrate some of the changes suggested by Leboyer and others: warmth, soft sounds, and low lighting replaced the cold, noisy, and brightly lit delivery room of the hospital. Fewer persons were to attend the birthing mother and those that were there intervened less actively.

## 2 Meeting with Svāmi Prajñānpad (1891–1974)

Leboyer writes about Svāmi Prajñānpad in *Portrait d'un homme remarquable* (1991) and collected his sayings in *Svāmi Prajñānpad pris au mot: les aphorismes* (2006). Other volumes offer translations (English to French) of the dialogues between the two men.<sup>23</sup> This spiritual master is certainly one of the reasons for Leboyer's travels to India. Svāmi Prajñānpad is not as famous as contemporaries

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20 Cheynier 1976.

21 Vuille 2015 provides a detailed history of the "invention of painless childbirth" in France between 1950 and 1980.

22 See, for instance, Rivard 2014, for a history of childbirth in Québec, where Leboyer's ideas were also received. Also see Vuille 2015 for the general context and Morel 2016 for a broader discussion of the impact of Leboyer's legacy of forty years.

23 Svāmi Prajñānpad 2011, 2019.

such as Ma Ananda Moyi (1896–1982), Ramana Maharishi (1879–1950), or others who had attracted a significant number of foreigners as disciples. Retracing Svāmi Prajñānpad’s biography and teachings is beyond the scope of this chapter, but some key biographical information will allow us to better situate him.

Most information about Svāmi Prajñānpad comes from his French and Indian disciples,<sup>24</sup> especially Arnaud Desjardins and Daniel Roumanoff,<sup>25</sup> as well as from an entry on him in a volume on contemporary spiritual masters.<sup>26</sup> Roumanoff “discovers” Svāmi Prajñānpad during his travels in which he meets with other spiritual masters.<sup>27</sup> As early as 1959, a core group of French disciples starts forming around Svāmi Prajñānpad. This group will grow to include Roumanoff’s wife Colette, Arnaud Desjardins (whom he meets and becomes friends with while in India), his wife Denise Desjardins, Frédéric Leboyer, and a few others. How the group met and knew each other remains largely undocumented.

Yogeshvar Chattopadhyay was born on 8 February 1891 in Chisurah, a small village of Bengal situated near the ancient French trading post of Chandernagor. Prajñānpad, meaning “seat of knowledge”, is the name he will take later in his life, as a spiritual master. His orthodox Brahmin family imparted him with a traditional, religious education. Later, he would question authority and tradition and reject them if he did not find them justified, going as far as burning his Brahminical sacred thread. After finishing his secondary studies in 1912, he attended the University of Calcutta where he completed a degree in physics. He joined Mahatma Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement but also wanted to participate in popular education. Over the years, he taught at educational institutions in several locations, in “universities” known as *vidyāpīṭha* where students could receive both a Western and a traditional Hindu education. Living a rather austere life, Yogeshvar Chattopadhyay took a vow of poverty: he possessed only a few garments, lived on very little, and did not eat much. He imposed this ascetic-leaning lifestyle upon the wife whom his older brother had arranged his marriage with.

In 1921, he met Nirālamba Svāmī (1877–1930), who later became his guru, in Channa, north of Calcutta. Nirālamba Svāmī (Jatindra Nath Banerjee) was an Indian nationalist and revolutionary who fought for the independence of India and closely associated with Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghose, 1872–1950). Jatindra Nath Banerjee turned to spirituality after revolutionary activities were suppressed and later became a yogi and spiritual master, including for (the future) Svāmi Prajñānpad.

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24 Roumanoff 1993: 237–288 dedicates an entire chapter of Svāmi Prajñānpad’s biography to the disciples, Indian and French.

25 Roumanoff 1993.

26 Solt 2002: 241–245.

27 He writes about his spiritual explorations in India in Roumanoff 1990.

While Yogeshvar Chattopadhyay was teaching English literature, Indian philosophy, and physics at the Kashi Vidyāpīṭha, he read the work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). This was a revelation to him as he was then searching for links between the Upaniṣads and his daily life experience. He saw in psychoanalysis a missing link and a way to bridge the narrow individual consciousness, trapped by the ego, and the expanded consciousness mentioned in the Upaniṣads.

In 1925, leaving his wife and young daughter behind, he moved to the Himalayas as a *saṃnyāsī*.<sup>28</sup> Due to poor health, damaged by excessive fasting, and confronted by his elder brother who had come to bring him back, he returned home and resumed teaching. In 1928, now with a few students turned disciples, he created a practice to work on the emotions, in part inspired by Freud’s psychoanalysis. His French disciples later used the English word “lying” to name this practice,<sup>29</sup> which is performed while lying down in the dark, in contrast with the “sitting” practice, which consists mostly in a dialogue in a seated position.

After his guru Nirālamba Svāmī died in 1930, Yogeshvar Chattopadhyay took on the role as spiritual master. Svāmī Prajñānpad settled in at the ashram in Channa, where he died in 1974. He was described as teaching *adhyātma yoga*, a yoga “turned towards the self”. His disciples explain that Svāmī Prajñānpad was, in fact, not lecturing or giving sermons; indeed, not “teaching” at all. Leboyer writes that “Swamiji did not teach anything, neither Yoga, nor music, nor dance”.<sup>30</sup> Rather, this *svāmī* was inviting interlocutors to answer personalised questions. Disciples also stress that his life advice was offered on a one-to-one basis rather than addressed to a group through sweeping generalisations. Svāmī Prajñānpad encouraged his disciples to say “yes” and accept whatever comes in life, since everything changes constantly. Through his traditional Brahmanical education and scientific training, in addition to having read the works of Freud, Svāmī Prajñānpad operated a form of synthesis between Indian and Western thought. Drawing from Advaita Vedānta and psychoanalysis in his work on emotions and feelings, he guided disciples in overcoming personal obstacles in their spiritual path.

Leboyer had conversations with Svāmī Prajñānpad, practised sessions of “lying”, and exchanged letters with him. Leboyer relived his own, very traumatic birth, “during [his] psychoanalysis”.<sup>31</sup> He was born post-term and his mother was held down during labour, an instrumental birth with forceps. In a 1977 interview, he states:

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28 There is mention of this episode in Leboyer 1991: 67.

29 Edelmann et al. 2000; Desjardins 2001.

30 Leboyer 1991: 99. Leboyer’s text in this book is poetry and often foregoes punctuation marks.

31 De Gramont 1977: 39.

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During my psychoanalysis, I relived my own birth. I have had an atrocious birth [. . .]. While reliving it, I discovered that it was not out of kindness that I would put to sleep my birthing [patients]. In preventing them from suffering, from shouting, from screaming, it was the suffering of my mother, it was her screams and my own screams too, that I was trying to erase. It was very hard to discover this . . . very . . .<sup>32</sup>

Further research is needed to determine if Leboyer also—or perhaps *first*—relived his own birth in psychoanalysis sessions conducted in France or in his “lying” sessions at Channa. This question of his mother and of birth is present in his exchanges with Svāmi Prajñānpad: maternal figures are evoked in the letters, at least one of which questions the position of the spiritual master as a “maternal substitute”.<sup>33</sup> Leboyer himself describes him with maternal attributes and attitudes.<sup>34</sup> As we will see below (in section 3.2) with the figure of Vanita, for Leboyer the maternal encompasses many aspects, beyond the purely physiological act of giving birth and also beyond that of the nurturing mother: the aspect of the mother as the one who teaches the child can also be highlighted in Leboyer’s descriptions of both his spiritual master and of the Indian women from whom he learns techniques (baby massage, chanting, and yoga). In his biography of Svāmi Prajñānpad, Leboyer compares his spiritual master to Confucius,<sup>35</sup> a very classical, though not Hindu, figure of the master-as-teacher. He also uses the metaphor of milk-ties between the mother and the child she nurses, equating the strength of the ties between him and his disciples to those created by breastfeeding: “Through this silence, there was something that [. . .] seemed to bind us to him as firmly as milk can bind a mother to her child”.<sup>36</sup>

Svāmi Prajñānpad died in 1974. Prompted by Daniel Roumanoff, his disciples later met in Kolkata. The letters that they were willing to share were photocopied and Roumanoff transcribed and translated them, along with recorded conversations. He then wrote his doctoral dissertation in religious studies on Svāmi Prajñānpad at the Sorbonne and, later, published several volumes.<sup>37</sup> Also in 1974, now in his mid-fifties, Leboyer published *Pour une naissance sans violence*. Soon after this, he stopped practising medicine. Yet his impact on the field of gynaecology

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32 My translation. Original: “Au cours de ma psychanalyse, j’ai revécu ma propre naissance. J’ai eu une naissance atroce [. . .]. En la revivant, j’ai découvert que ce n’était pas par bonté que j’endormais mes accouchées. En les empêchant de souffrir, de crier, de hurler, c’est la souffrance de ma mère, ce sont ses cris, et mes cris à moi aussi que j’essayais d’effacer. Ce fut très dur de découvrir ça . . . très . . .” (De Gramont 1977: 39).

33 Svāmi Prajñānpad 2008: 108.

34 Leboyer 1991: 11, 69.

35 Leboyer 1991: 108.

36 Leboyer 1991: 11.

37 Patrick 2020; Roumanoff 2002a, 2002b.

and obstetrics continued since, now free of the ideological and administrative constraints of the *Ordre des médecins*, he was able to make his many transmissions of knowledge through the flow of conference presentations, books, poetry, and photographs accessible to the general public and impact the movements advocating for a less medicalised childbirth in the West. Leboyer brought elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religious and spiritual traditions to the West not through academic courses or medical textbooks, but through literature and art.

### 3 Leboyer's encounters with two mothers in India

India, Hinduism, religions, spiritualities, philosophies, encounters, mothers, childbirth: writing this chapter on Frédérick Leboyer's little-known meeting with and inspirations from India was a great way for me to connect two strands of my research interests: the first one on Indian religions and cultures, which I first developed under Maya Burger's guidance, and the second one on the religious and spiritual aspects of motherhood and maternal experiences, which I explored more recently, after leaving the Université de Lausanne. This chapter is also a way to acknowledge the impact of Maya Burger, as a professor, on my scholarship and research interests. Indeed, without her influence, this chapter could have ended with the above considerations about the encounter between a relatively unknown spiritual master of India and a French physician more open to spirituality than most of his medical colleagues and countryfolk. However, studying<sup>38</sup> and then working under Professor Burger's guidance has sparked my interest in women's history, that I now root in feminist approaches. From her, I learned to pay attention to details and to the margins, expanding my lines of questioning to areas beyond that of strict specialisation, with an open mind. While frowned upon in some more conservative disciplines, broader intellectual endeavours were and still are welcome in religious studies, where I now situate myself. As Professor Burger often reminded her students, of course, there is no such thing as a monolithic "Hinduism" or perhaps even "India": from both sides, apprehensions of "the other" are always mediated in some way, through objects, texts, persons, or experiences with the senses. She certainly examined all of these aspects of encounters in her classes and publications, sometimes provocatively,<sup>39</sup> going beyond the most evident, most

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38 When I started studying religions at the Université de Lausanne in the early 2000s, Maya Burger was the *only* woman professor who taught me. She was also the only one to feature feminine figures and women in her courses on Hinduism and in religious studies.

39 For instance, Professor Burger asked if William James, a key contributor to the psychology of religion, would have allowed his wife to mount his funeral pyre ("William James aurait-il permis à son épouse de monter sur son bûcher funéraire?"); see Burger 2007.

famous names—often those of men only—searching the margins and dislocating the narrow frameworks of Orientalism, Indology, and religious studies.

Following the invitation of the editors of this volume, I thus ask *who else* could be a “significant other” in this rarely studied part of Leboyer’s life and work. Mothers in India, generically, could fit this description, but the last part of this chapter will focus on two particular women who were significant for Leboyer’s thought and role in transmitting knowledge and practices beyond South Asia while acknowledging their origin as well as their spiritual aspects. The first woman is a mother of two, massaging her baby in a slum of Kolkata, and the second is the then-pregnant daughter of one of the most famous yoga teachers at the time, who also taught Leboyer.

### 3.1 Shantala/Post-partum: A mother massaging her child

*Shantala: Un art traditionnel; Le massage des enfants* (1976, translated in English in the same year as *Loving Hands*, fig. 1) provides key information on an encounter with a woman whose practice, image, and name will become significant in the life of Leboyer. This woman is a mother massaging her baby in a slum of Kolkata. Her name, Shantala, will designate the method of baby massage that Leboyer writes about and illustrates with his photographs in his often republished and translated book. This section outlines the structure of this book and highlights a few key points of this encounter with a significant other.

First, the dedication of the book is telling, once more, of the reverence shown by Leboyer to mothers and of his understanding of the country “India” as a mother, with again an emphasis not only on the birthing or nurturing mother but on the “teaching” mother or “mother-teacher” from whom Leboyer “learned so much”:

I dedicate this book  
to my mother.  
To all mothers.  
To Shantala.

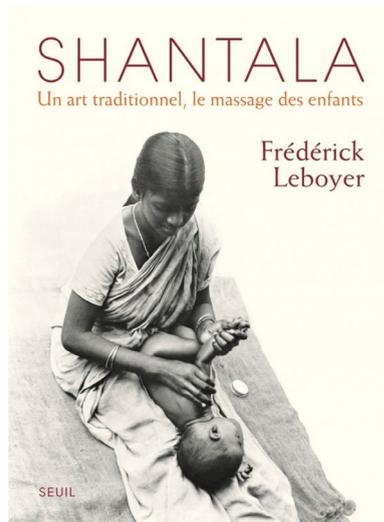


FIGURE 1 Cover of *Shantala*, Frédéric Leboyer © Éditions du Seuil, 1976. This cover is that of the 2018 edition.

And, through her,  
to India,  
my second mother  
from whom I have learned so much.<sup>40</sup>

The book starts with an introductory section (pp. 11–23), of mostly poetry. The central and major section of the book (pp. 25–97) follows, with the subtitle “Technique”, accompanied by explanatory texts and many of his photographs of Shantala with a baby. Then comes a section on bathing (“Le bain”, pp. 99–104), and then more “Details” (pp. 105–121), a farewell (“En guise d’adieu”, pp. 123–138), and finally, a surprising last section, titled “And who is Shantala?” (pp. 141–153) that provides most information (on pages 145–146 and 151) about her. Shantala is the woman who inspired Leboyer to transmit and promote these specific techniques of baby massage to Western parents for whom this was a novel—and probably still frowned upon—practice. While it is not possible to pinpoint exactly where such baby massage techniques come from, as they were and probably remain widespread throughout India, it is likely that these were particularly developed in areas where other types of therapeutic or well-being massage, such as Ayurveda, were practised. Unlike in its contemporary Western reception, where parents (mostly mothers) learn from books, videos, or classes, in its Indian context of origin, this type of baby-massage technique was likely handed down informally, in familiar settings, from the older women (mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, aunts, etc.) to the new young mothers, who learned by watching and practising.

At the very end of the book, Leboyer describes his encounter, in the slum of the Pilkhana neighbourhood, with the woman he names “Shantala”. No other indication confirms if this was her real, given name, or if Leboyer created a pseudonym to designate her, maybe with the intention of protecting her real identity. He will use her name to designate this traditional massage practice. He first insists on the context of Kolkata and the poverty of the city, “the most deprived of all the cities of this India which is said to be so unhappy. Calcutta, a place of misery, not to say horror”.<sup>41</sup> In contrast with this evocative description, the pictures never show the mother and her child in their context. The focus remains on their bodies and on Shantala’s massaging gestures. Shantala, he writes, was a woman, paralyzed from the waist down, hosted by the charitable association Seva Sangha Samiti, with her two children. From this information, we can infer that she belonged to

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40 My translation. Original: “Je dédie ce livre / à ma mère. / A toutes les mères. / A Shantala. / Et, à travers elle, / à l’Inde, / ma seconde mère / de qui j’ai tant appris” (Leboyer 1976a: 9).

41 Leboyer 1976a: 145. The original text in French reads: “la plus déshéritée de toutes les villes de cette Inde qu’on dit si malheureuse. Calcutta, lieu de misère pour ne pas dire d’horreur.”

the most underprivileged class of Indian society. In a brief acknowledgements section,<sup>42</sup> Leboyer shares some information about Seva Sangha Samiti, about which he writes that it was close (“très voisine”) to Frères des Hommes, a French non-confessional and non-political organisation founded in 1965 but concerned more specifically with India. Leboyer thanks Léo and Françoise Jalais and mentions their work in Pilkhana (in Howrah), and their proximity to a key religious figure at the time, Mother Theresa, “living, like her for the poor, with the poor, and sharing their poverty.”<sup>43</sup>

Leboyer describes seeing Shantala in terms that are reminiscent of a religious vision or epiphany:

The glory of light and the miracles of love, who will tell them!  
Suddenly, in the midst of sordidness, I was given to contemplate a spectacle of the purest beauty!<sup>44</sup> [ . . . ] It was like a ritual, so serious was the thing and attired with an extraordinary dignity. [ . . . ] I was as if blinded by so much beauty and love.<sup>45</sup>

Leboyer then invokes the biblical text of Job (probably Job 38:2, in a rather uncommon translation) and proceeds to quote a Buddhist-inspired song on the theme of the lotus plant rooted in the mud but blooming its flowers out to the light.

Not all European photographers at the time would have secured the informed consent of the person in their photographs, but Leboyer writes that he did indeed ask for Shantala’s permission to take pictures, which she granted. He then returned the next day, and then again on many more days,<sup>46</sup> just to observe, or perhaps even contemplate, and learn from her massages of the tiny body of her baby boy. One day, Leboyer proceeded to actually take photographs, but with the full awareness that this was an impossible task: “As a painter would try to catch in flight, to surprise, to halt, to grasp the ungraspable, the moving, the elusive secret of beauty”.<sup>47</sup> Leboyer also edited a movie with the same name, distributed by Gaumont. The Shantala massage is now broadly practised in Western countries, taught in parents and babies groups and post-natal classes as well as through video sharing websites

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42 Leboyer 1976a: 155.

43 Leboyer 1976a: 155.

44 Leboyer 1976a: 146.

45 My translation. Original: “La gloire de la lumière et les miracles de l’amour, qui les dira ! Voilà que, soudain, en plein sordide, il m’était donné de contempler un spectacle de la plus pure beauté ! [ . . . ] C’était comme un rituel, tant la chose était grave et revêtue d’une extraordinaire dignité. [ . . . ] J’étais comme aveuglé par tant de beauté et d’amour.” (Leboyer 1976a: 147).

46 Leboyer 1976a: 151.

47 Leboyer 1976a: 151. The original text in French reads : “Comme un peintre essaierait de prendre au vol, de surprendre, d’arrêter, de capturer l’insaisissable, le mouvant, le fuyant secret de la beauté.”

and social media platforms. A google search with the keyword “Shantala” yields dozens of different results, in several languages. Furthermore, recent scientific reviews<sup>48</sup> of paediatric therapeutic massages in the “Shantala” style have recorded its positive effects.

### 3.2 Vanita/Pregnancy: Prenatal yoga postures

Frédéric Leboyer’s frequent visits and extended stays in India might have contributed significantly to the change in his views on childbirth. As pointed out by Johanna Moorhead, Leboyer

noticed that while the wealthy women in India gave birth in busy, brightly lit hospitals that resembled maternity units in Europe, poorer women who could not afford hospital deliveries often had much easier births; and he also noticed that the way women moved in their daily lives facilitated these deliveries.<sup>49</sup>

The moves and postures of some Indian women sweeping the floor or squatting as part of their daily tasks inspired him to write another book in which a woman is central. Thanks to her and the many anonymous women he observed, through Leboyer’s work, many Western pregnant women and parents were presented with a key component of Indian culture: yoga.

Just like with Shantala in Kolkata, we know her name: Vanita. Whereas Shantala was a woman of lower socio-economic background in the Pilkhana slum, from the key information provided by Leboyer assumptions about Vanita’s background can more easily be verified. She is the second daughter of the famous yoga teacher Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar (1918–2014), a family that Leboyer describes as “strictly vegetarian Brahmins”.<sup>50</sup>

The book, first published in 1978 as *Cette lumière d’où vient l’enfant*, rapidly translated as *Inner Beauty, Inner Light*, has become a classic text on prenatal yoga. Leboyer demonstrates how pregnant women can practise specific yoga postures or breathing techniques throughout pregnancy and in preparation for birth, with long-lasting benefits. The book is illustrated with his own photographs, taken in Poona,<sup>51</sup> of Vanita, showing her daily practice a few days before giving birth and then, after birth, with her son (Fig. 2).

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48 Machado 2021 cites and references several such studies conducted in Brazil from 2014 to 2018.

49 Moorhead 2017.

50 Leboyer 1978: 283.

51 Leboyer 1978: 185.

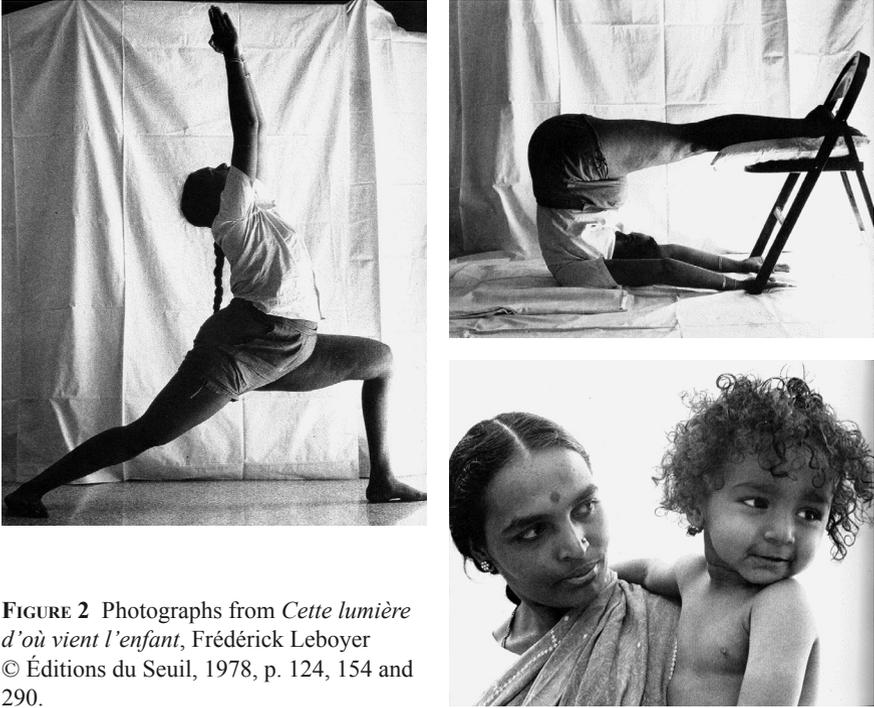


FIGURE 2 Photographs from *Cette lumière d'où vient l'enfant*, Frédérick Leboyer © Éditions du Seuil, 1978, p. 124, 154 and 290.

Leboyer dedicates the book

To all women  
To all mothers  
As a token of friendship  
of veneration.<sup>52</sup>

and to B. K. S. Iyengar, who wrote the preface.<sup>53</sup> After an unacknowledged quotation from the philosopher Shankaracharya as an epigraph, Leboyer starts by clearing up a common misconception and stating that Iyengar is not his “Master”. Then, of Vanita, he writes:

And who is Vanita?  
Vanita? She is the woman.  
One and innumerable.  
Impenetrable.

52 My translation. Original: “À toutes les femmes / à toutes les mères / en gage d’amitié / de vénération” (Leboyer 1978: 9).

53 Iyengar’s preface appears on pages 11 to 14. Iyengar himself appears in the photographs on pages 280 and 283.

[. . .]  
She is beauty,  
its fascination,  
its mystery.  
[. . .]  
Vanita?  
She is Kali.  
She is Durga.  
She is India.<sup>54</sup>

Leboyer compares or equates Vanita to two famous and often complementary Hindu goddesses with maternal characteristics, Kali and Durga, to which he adds a third, India, the English name<sup>55</sup> for the then free and independent country where he took the pictures of this pregnant woman. In just a few pages, Vanita goes from “the woman” (*la femme*) to goddesses frequently referred to as mothers (“Kali Ma” and “Durga Ma”). At the end of this section of the book, titled “Who is Vanita?”, Vanita stands for the whole country. Leboyer does not consider Vanita as his “master”, but he certainly learns from her. The following section (pp. 280–285) is about *le maître* (the master), and it is only then that Leboyer reveals to his readers that Vanita is the second daughter of B. K. S. Iyengar.

Many other philosophical, spiritual, and religious references can be spotted throughout the book, written in a poetic style and richly illustrated, from Vanita’s postures to portraits of the Buddha at the end of the book.<sup>56</sup> *Āsanas* are carefully described and Leboyer frequently insists on breathing,<sup>57</sup> a theme which he will then further develop in *L’art du souffle* (1983). There is, of course, much more to this particular reception of yoga through a maternal body, and to Leboyer’s poetic and photographic transmission of this practice which, he writes, is “not gymnastics”, “sport”, or “therapy”,<sup>58</sup> than the limited scope of this chapter allows me to explore further.

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54 My translation. Original: “Et qui est Vanita? / Vanita? C’est la femme. / Une et innombrable. / Impénétrable. // C’est la beauté, sa fascination, / son mystère. // Vanita? / C’est Kali. / C’est Durga. / C’est India” (Leboyer 1978). The three collections of lines appear on pages 275, 277, and 279, respectively. The book is richly illustrated with Leboyer’s photographs of Vanita and the text itself is scarce, with few words on each page—a reminder to readers of the author’s poetic style.

55 Leboyer’s text is in French, but he uses the name of the country in English, “India”, and not the French “Inde” nor in Hindi or any other Indic language, which would be “Bharat” (as in the expression “Bharat Mata” for “Mother India”).

56 Leboyer 1978: 288–300.

57 Leboyer 1978: 183, 189, etc. Later, Leboyer will consider breathing and chanting together. His interest in prenatal and birth singing is associated with another Indian woman, Savitry Nayr (or Nair), who collaborated with him in developing a booklet of exercises, with an audio recording; see Nair/Leboyer 1987.

58 Leboyer 1978: 19.

## 4 Concluding remarks

In the terms suggested by the editors of this volume, not only does a spiritual master but also two<sup>59</sup> Indian women, whom we would not have known about without Leboyer's photographs and texts, qualify as "significant others" in these singular encounters. This chapter has explored them with a focus on this European man, rather than on these women. Leboyer makes them pose, and sometimes speak, through his texts and photographs. He carries their gestures and practices with him to the West. Striking is Leboyer's openness to meet with and talk to people of various backgrounds during his stays in India: his dear Svāmi Prajñānpad was a Brahmin, and Vanita, though not necessarily from a wealthy elite, also belonged to a Brahmin family whose name was famous in the yoga world, in India and abroad. Shantala, however, and probably other mothers whom he witnessed going about their daily lives, lived in a slum. Yet she too is featured prominently in one of his books, as a model for Western mothers to emulate through the practice of baby massage.

This initial and non-exhaustive exploration into Frédéric Leboyer's work has highlighted key elements that, through his poetic and photographic work, were selectively brought back from Indian cultures and transmitted to the West under his authority as a (former) physician. These include specific teachings of a broader philosophy inspired by Advaita Vedānta (as recorded from his and other disciples' dialogues and letters with their *svāmi*), key notions (primarily that of non-violence, *ahimsā*), and practices (baby massage, breath work, chanting, and yoga). The significance of Leboyer's work on how childbirth is apprehended today in most Western countries certainly deserves a more detailed assessment through a history of advocacy for "birth without violence" and towards less medicalised birthing processes. Leboyer's Indian inspirations, the legacy of his relationship with Svāmi Prajñānpad, and their direct influence on thought and practice could be further studied on the basis of the rest of his published work that the investigation for this chapter could not include, but also through conducting interviews with those who knew him well.

The origins and trajectory of the notions and practices that Leboyer's work and its reception brought to France, Europe, and other places might be lost to most who promote and practice them today, such as midwives, childbirth educators, doulas, and expectant parents. But the pervasive influence of several of these elements inspired by Indian cultures and religions can still be witnessed in many contemporary discourses and practices of pregnancy, childbirth, and the post-partum period.

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59 Further research into his biography might reveal other ones as well.

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