Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)

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Dr. Schweitzer was a French-German scholar, born in Kaysersberg, Alsace; a sickly child, in contrast to his later extraordinary robustness. Without doubt, he was a great and multifaceted man of his or any time. He had four different careers, viz. philosophy, music, medicine and theology. He wrote learned books on Bach, religion and history of civilisation and was world’s foremost authority in organ music, being a renowned organist. He knew a great deal about tropical zoology, anthropology and agriculture and was an expert carpenter, mason, veterinary surgeon, dentist, draughtsman and pharmacist.

By the time he was 26, he had graduated as a doctor in philosophy, theology and music. Then, at 30, he abruptly abandoned his three careers, in order to become a doctor. Schweitzer worked at his medical studies at the University of Strasbourg from 1905 to 1912 and became an MD at 38. These were the most fatiguing and difficult years he had ever spent. Medical education was grueling enough and yet, he started work on the scholarly edition of Bach’s organ music, while giving concerts all the time, to meet the expense.

Schweitzer then decided to go to Lambarene, situated along the Ogowe River, Gabon (French Equatorial Africa). He wanted to be a medical missionary for the rest of his life as he wanted to “give something in return” for the happiness that he enjoyed.

In 1912, he married Helen Bresslau, who had studied nursing, in order to be able to help him in Africa. They arrived in Lambarene in 1913, finding conditions extremely unfavourable, in giant forests, thickly populated with pythons, gorillas and crocodiles. He practically established his hospital with his bare hands, starting from scratch. African patients suffering from malaria, leprosy, elephantiasis, etc. were not always easy to handle. Patients came from miles around, often with their families.

Except for trips abroad to civilisation, he remained there for the rest of his life. His hospital received financial as well as voluntary personnel support from all over the world. During the time, thousands of Africans received medical treatment and health education. Schweitzer had phenomenal influence on people wherever he went, resulting in dramatic change in their lives. He was awarded Nobel Peace Prize in 1952, for his exemplary ‘reverence for life’.