



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-XI, Issue-IV, July 2025, Page No. 812-816
Published by Scholar Publications, Sribhumi, Assam, India
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>
DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.v11.i4.111



The Making of the Historical from the Personal: Exploring History from the Biography of Louis Braille

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Received: 19.07.2025; Accepted: 21.07.2025; Available online: 31.07.2025

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Abstract

The remarkable biography of Louis Braille (1809-1852) by Swapan Mukhopadhyay in Bengali titled "Life of Louis Braille" (2009), serves as a historical testament through the nuanced exploration of the social, cultural and national contexts of its time.

This biography is not merely a personal account of Louis Braille's life, but a 43-year documentation of the French history, providing insight into the social psychology of 19th-century France as well as the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities during that era. With its description, Louis Braille's biography thus plays a crucial role to decipher the flow and changes in the historical discussion of person with disabilities. The documentation and description of the invention of Braille system by Louis Braille (derived from Napoleonic-era military communication codes) vis-à-vis his own personal lived experiences, revolutionized literacy for the persons with visual disabilities, creating a new milestone in the history of education. This supports, historian Ashin Dasgupta's notes on how literary representations of historical events via biographies offer a unique perspective that complements traditional historical accounts, then historians functioning as mere spectators of events.

Using the biographical work by Swapan Mukhopadhyay, in my paper I will discuss how biographies can become literary historical resources, offering a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between individual lives, the broader historical contexts, their key inventions and non-mainstream issues like disabilities. I will thus elaborate and examine biographical narrative in "Life of Louis Braille", with dual focus on uncovering the socio-political history of France and excavating the social history of individuals with visual disabilities.

Keywords: Biography, History, People with blindness, Braille, Education.

The remarkable biography of Louis Braille (1809-1852) was written by Swapan Mukhopadhyay. It is in Bengali and titled "Life of Louis Braille" (লুই ব্রেইল)¹. It had been published in the year 2009. This book explores the social, cultural, and national contexts of that time in a nuanced way. I would like to discuss how this book serves as a historical testament.

Time plays an important role in historical research. This biography is not just a personal story of Louis Braille. It is also a 43-year record of French history. It offers insight into the social mindset of 19th-century France. It also highlights the lived experiences of people with

disabilities during that time. The biography includes detailed descriptions. This makes it useful for understanding how views on disability changed over time. It helps trace the historical discussion around people with disabilities so far. The book describes how Louis Braille invented the Braille system. His invention was inspired by military communication codes used during the Napoleonic era. Braille's own life experiences shaped his work. His system changed literacy for people with visual disabilities. It marked a major turning point in the history of education as well.

In this paper, I will analyze the biographical work of Swapan Mukhopadhyay to show how biographies can function as important literary and historical sources. They provide a deeper understanding of how individual lives are connected to broader historical events and contexts. Biographies also highlight significant inventions and draw attention to marginalized issues, such as disability. Specifically, I will examine the narrative in "Louis Braille". My discussion will focus on social history of people with visual impairments.

Historians are the viewer of historical events; their general duty is to describe the events from the outside. But The right of the writer to enter into the events; the inner truth of life is possible only in literature. Historians have not completely abandoned literature. Many renowned historians have said that events cannot be properly understood unless the human mind is understood. The analysis of human mentality and social psychology is a major effort in the study of history in recent times. The idea that history is a science is well known and appreciated. Historian Ashin Dasgupta has emphasized that this neglected statement that history is literature is not negligible.ⁱⁱ Daniel R. Meister explores the long-standing tension between biography and academic history. He contends that biography, though historically marginalized in academia, especially in Canada, deserves recognition as a legitimate and essential subfield of history – what he terms Historical Biography.ⁱⁱⁱ Here I would like to explore the Louise's biography as a literary source of the study of history of people with blindness as well as historical biography.

The biography of Louis Braille, written by Swapan Mukhopadhyay, contains important information about the education of the people with visual disabilities in the form of a table. The author mentions some important years and events of the time of Louise Braille in the form of a table at the end of the biography of Louis Braille. It is very important to mention that events in order to facilitate the discussion of the present paper.

The institutional history of the people with visual disability in France is long-standing. The year was 1260 when Louis IX of France first established an institution for the people with blindness. The institution was originally built to shelter 300 French knights who were forcibly blinded during the Crusades. But Mukhopadhyay has mentioned that the institutional initiative for the education of the people with visual disability in France began in the eighteenth century. In 1771, While Valentine Haüy saw eight blind boys dancing at a fair in Paris to make the audience laugh, He decided to establish a school for educating children with blindness. Hence, in the year 1784 Valentine Haüy set up Royal Institution for Blind Children.

In 1786, a group of blind boys from the Royal Institution demonstrated their finger reading skills in front of Louis XVI, emperor of France, who was impressed and promised to patronize the Institute. The historic French Revolution of 1789 brought about a failure of the promise. Valentine Haüy was subsequently removed from the position of principal of

the Institution. While writing the biography of Louis Braille, Swapan Mukhopadhyay has necessarily brought in the context of other European countries just as he has incarnated the previous history.

A comparable test can be found in Swapan Mukhopadhyay's writings. He wrote that in England the first school for the blind was established at Liverpool, in 1791. Schools for the children with blindness were established in 1804 AD in Vienna, Austria and in 1806 AD in Berlin, Germany. Valentine Haüy and his close associate, a student, migrated from Paris to Prussia and there they set up another school for the wellbeing of people with blindness. In the year 1807 they went to Russia and there they established a small school for children with blindness. The first school for the blind was established in America in 1837.

Mukhopadhyay also mentioned that in the first half of the nineteenth century, several institutions were established in various European countries for the education of the blind by the initiative of kind-hearted people. However, no simple method of reading and writing for the people with blindness was invented. Louis Braille, the inventor of the most common, simple method of reading and writing for the people with blindness, was born in the first decade of the nineteenth century, i.e. in 1809.

By 1814, Louis was completely blind. That year, France was at war with Russia. During the war, Napoleon's general Charles Barbier used a novel method of communication to send messages from one place to another in the army. The messages could be understood by touching. They were not written words, but symbols. This method of symbols was known as 'night writing'. Who knew that these symbols would one day be the source of the discovery of the Braille system in the world of blind people?

Louis Braille was the inventor of the Braille system. When Louis was taking lessons at the blind school in Paris, one day, General Charles Barbier explained his 'night writing' method to the students and teachers. And inspired by that, in 1824, Louis Braille invented his own method of writing and reading the French alphabet at the age of only 15.

In 1827, a grammar book in French was published using Louis's dot system (Braille). In 1828, Louis was appointed as an assistant teacher at the institution where he had previously studied. Because of his talent for music, he presented his own six-dot system of musical notation to the public in 1828. In 1829, Louis first published a booklet explaining his six-dot system and explaining how to write, read, and memorize musical notation with its help. Then in 1833, he was appointed as an organist in a school. He worked as an organist for the rest of his life. The year was 1834, when Louis saw that his own Braille system, which he had invented, was not being adopted in his own school, so Louis exhibited his six-dot writing system at the 'Exhibition of Industry' in Paris. In 1835, Louis contracted tuberculosis. But a three-volume history of France was published in Braille in 1837.

On May 14, 1838, the deplorable condition of Royal Institute for the Blind Youth in Paris was described in the National Assembly of La Martinière and a proposal was made to move the institute by building a new school building.

In 1839, Louis, with the help of the sighted persons, tried to arrange for the printing of letters using the Braille system by machine. In this way, he invented a new method of printing ordinary letters in embossed form, which he called 'raphigraphy'. In 1841, Foucault invented the 'raphigraphy' typing machine. Foucault invented the Braille typewriter in 1877.

When the new building of the Institute was inaugurated in Paris on February 22, 1844, the blind boys and girls found a somewhat healthier environment in this residential school. At this time, the writing system invented and developed by Louis at the Institute was demonstrated at the opening ceremony. Louis's students bear witness to the outstanding success of his method.

Louis died of tuberculosis on 6 January 1852. He was buried at his village, Coupvray. After Louis's death, in 1854, the Braille system received official approval and recognition for the education of the blind throughout France. At an international conference in 1878, Braille was recognized worldwide as the best writing and reading system for the blind. From the above discussion of Swapan Mukhopadhyay's work, we would say that it explores the contested relationship between biography and social history, advocating for the integration of individual life stories into historical inquiry to enrich our understanding of broader societal changes. Stanley Wolpert (2010) wrote that history has illuminated every field of human endeavor—science as well as the arts—embracing countless modern disciplines, expanding its focus on change over time to comprehend entire nations, cultures, and civilizations, each far more complex than any individual life. But at its best, biography is the finest form of history^{iv}, as it humanizes through the study of individuals' lives, decisions and contexts.

Nick Salvatore^v outline that many historians dismiss biography as unfit for historical analysis because it is bounded by the subject's lifespan, ignoring broader temporal change. Critics argue that biography is too personal or subjective, with literary theorists contending that objectivity in biography is an illusion and psychological critics (like Erik Erikson) criticizing biographies lacking psychological depth. Salvatore defends biography as a powerful lens for examining the interaction between individual agency and social structure. Salvatore introduced the concept of "social biography", seeking to understand how individuals live, interact with, and sometimes alter the social structures they inherit. Mukhopadhyay's work, *Life of Louise Braille*, aim to connect private life with public influence and societal dynamics.

A rigorous biography demands deep archival research into not only public but also private life – workplaces, and communities – to uncover intersections of class, race, gender, and belief. Nick Salvatore concludes that biography is a legitimate and valuable mode of historical writing, capable of capturing the dynamic interplay between personal lives and larger social transformations. He urges historians to embrace this approach to avoid history's "condescension" toward the lives of the less powerful and unknown.

While working on Swapan Mukhopadhyay's biography of Louis Braille I read two other biographies of Louis Braille in parallel, *Louis Braille: The Boy who Invented Books for the Blind* by Margaret Davidson^{vi} and *The Reading Fingers: Life of Louis Braille, (1809-1852)* by Jean Roblin^{vii}. In a comparative analysis of these three books, the distinctiveness of the biographical work written by Swapan Mukhopadhyay is clearly noticeable. The uniqueness of Swapan Mukhopadhyay's book lies particularly in its last segment. The inclusion of a chronological table of events and timelines at the end of the book sets it apart from the other two. In my opinion, its historical value is undeniable.

Roderick J. Barman (2010)^{viii} pointed out the matter of marginalization of biography in historical studies. He argues that since 1950 biography has been the stepchild of history. Despite its popularity with the public, most professional historians view it as simplistic or

non-academic. Barman also outlines five guidelines or caveat for writing effective biography. 1. Understand “what makes people tick” – reconstruct motivations and personality. 2. Ensure sufficient and appropriate evidence – avoid speculation where sources are thin. 3. Maintain distance from the subject – avoid bias from sympathy or hostility. 4. Avoid ulterior motives – don’t use the subject to push ideological or personal agendas. 5. Integrate the individual with their historical context – explore interactions between character and circumstance. These five characteristics are clearly seen in Mukhopadhyay’s work. It could illuminate broader social, political, and cultural structures. It is especially valuable for exploring counter-discourses, subordinate groups, or neglected individuals. From the above analytical discussion, it can be said that biography is both a source (offering rich personal data) and a methodology (for understanding life within structure-agency framework)^{ix}. This argument also applicable for the biography, ‘*Life of Louis Braille*’, by Swapan Mukhopadhyay.

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