

The French Revolution

The French revolution is a landmark in the history of Europe and the world. It ended the monarchical system in France. The slogan of French Revolution i.e. liberty, freedom and equality became important ideas of the new era.

French Society During the Late 18th Century

In 1774, Louis XVI of Bourbon family became the king of France. He was married to the Austrian Princess Marie Antoinette. When Louis XVI became the king, he got an empty treasury. Long years of war and maintenance of the court of the Palace of Versailles were the main reasons of it.

Louis XVI helped thirteen American colonies to gain their independence from Britain. As a result of this, more than 1 billion livres¹ were added to the debt which had already risen to more than 2 billion livres. The lenders who gave the credit began to charge an interest of 10 per cent on loans.

To meet the expenses like maintain the army, the court, running government offices and universities etc, the state was forced to increase the taxes. However this measure was not sufficient as French society was divided into three estates in 18th century and only members of the third estate paid taxes.

The society of estates was part of the feudal² system of the middle ages. The society and institution of France before 1789 is considered as old regime³.

Chapter Syllabus

- French Society During the Late Eighteenth Century
- The Outbreak of the Revolution
- France Abolishes Monarchy and Becomes a Republic
- Did Women have a Revolution?
- The Abolition of Slavery
- The Revolution and Everyday Life

1 Livres Units of currency in France at that time, which was discontinued in 1794.

2 Feudal A social system that existed during the middle ages in Europe. In this system, people were given land and protection by a noble and had to work and fight for him in return.

3 Old Regime The term Old Regime is usually used to describe the society and institution of France before 1789.

The three estates of France at this time were:

First Estate (the Clergy)

- It comprised of the group of persons, who have special functions in the Church. They owned vast land and wealth.
- They enjoyed certain privileges by birth, like exemption from paying taxes to the state.
- The Church levied a tax, called 'Tithes' from the peasants, which comprised of one-tenth of the agricultural produce.

Second Estate (the Nobility)

It comprised of rich, aristocratic people of the state. They also enjoyed the privilege of exemption from paying taxes to the state.

They enjoyed feudal privileges, i.e., feudal dues, which they extracted from the peasants.

Third Estate

- It comprised of the rest of the population, i.e., businessmen, merchants, court officials, lawyers, peasants, artisans, landless labourers, etc.
- They had no privilege as they had to pay direct taxes called 'Taille' to the state as well as a number of indirect taxes levied on articles of everyday consumption, like salt, tobacco, etc.
- Peasants made up about 90 per cent of the population in France. Only a small number of them owned the land they cultivated.
- 60 per cent of the land was owned by nobles, the Church and other richer members of the third estate.
- Peasants were forced to work in the houses of nobles and their lands, to serve in the army or to participate in building roads.

The Struggle to Survive

During 1715-1789, the population of France increased rapidly which led to rapid increase in demand for food grains.

Insufficient production increased the price of bread. But the wages of the workers did not keep pace with the rise in prices.

Situation became worse when bad weather conditions reduced the harvest. This condition created 'subsistence crisis'.

A Growing Middle Class

In the 18th century, a new social group emerged who were known as the middle class.

They had become rich by expanding of overseas trade and manufacturing goods like woolen and silk textiles. In addition to merchants and manufacturers, there were lawyers and administrative officials, who were educated. They believed that no group of society should be privileged by birth.

Philosophers like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Montesquieu considered that middle class was solely responsible for evolution. They spread the ideas of freedom, equal laws and opportunities for all.

The ideas of Philosophers were as follows:

- John Locke in his 'Two Treatises of Government' criticised the doctrine of divine and absolute right of the monarch (king).
- Rousseau in his book 'The Social Contract' proposed the form of the government based on social contract between people and their representatives.
- Montesquieu in his book 'The Spirit of the Laws' proposed the concept of separation of powers between the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. This model of government was accepted in the USA, after the thirteen colonies declared their independence from Britain.

These ideas were spread among the people through the books and newspapers. With the news that Louis XVI planned to impose more taxes to meet the expenses of the state, it provoked anger and protest against the system of privileges among the people.

The Outbreak of the Revolution

On 5th May, 1789 Louis XVI called for an assembly of the Estates General⁸ to pass the proposals for new taxes.

First, second and third estates sent their representatives. The first and second estates sent 300 representatives each, who were seated on rows facing each other on two sides.

Third estate sent 600 representatives. They were more prosperous and educated than first and second estates members but they faced discrimination and had to stand at the back.

Peasants, artisans and women were denied entry to the assembly but they sent their demands and grievances through representatives.

The members of the third estate demanded that voting should be conducted by taking assembly as a whole where each member should have one vote. But the king rejected this proposal and members of the third estate walked out of assembly in protest.

National Assembly of Third Estate

On 20th June, 1789, the representatives of the third estate assembled in the hall of an indoor tennis court in Versailles.

They declared themselves a National Assembly. They also declared to draft a new Constitution for France that would limit the powers of the monarch.

The representatives of the third estate were led by Mirabeau and Abbé Sieyès.

Mirabeau was born in a noble family, but discarded his feudal privileges. Abbé Sieyès was originally a priest. He wrote an influential pamphlet called 'What is the third Estate?'.

Revolt Starts at the Bastille

In France, due to severe winter, harvest was severely affected, which led to the increase in price of bread.

The bakers exploited this situation and stored supplies. After spending hours in long queues at the bakery, crowds of angry women raid the shops.

On 14th July, 1789, an agitated crowd destroyed the Bastille. The Bastille was hated by all French people as it symbolised the dominating power of the king.

In the countryside, rumours spread from village to village that the lords of the manor⁷ had hired the gang of robbers to destroy the ripe crops. After hearing this rumour, peasants attacked chateaus⁹ in many areas of France.

The peasants looted stored grain and burnt documents containing records of manorial dues. Due to all these, a large number of nobles moved to neighbouring countries.

End of Special Privileges

As a result of revolt on 4th August, 1789, France under Louis XVI passed the law for abolishing the feudal system of obligations and taxes.

The members of clergy were also forced to give up their privileges.

Tithes⁹ were abolished and lands owned by the Church were seized by authority.

By this, the government acquired assets worth at least 2 billion livres.

France Becomes a Constitutional Monarchy

The National Assembly completed the draft of the Constitution in 1791. Its main objective was to limit the powers of the monarch.

Now, the powers were separated and assigned to different institutions like the Legislature, Executive and Judiciary.

This change of powers made France a constitutional monarchy.

The Laws Made by the National Assembly

Under the new Constitution, the laws were to be made by the National Assembly. The assembly was indirectly elected i.e. active citizens voted for a group of electors, who in turn chose the assembly members.

The highlights of the changed system were:

- Men who were above 25 years of age and who paid taxes equal to at least 3 days of a labourer's wage were given the status of active citizens, i.e. they had right to vote. The remaining men and all women were classed as passive citizens.
- To qualify as an elector and then as a member of the assembly, a man had to belong to the highest group of taxpayers.
- The Constitution began with a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, such as the right to life, freedom of speech, freedom of opinion and equality before law. These were established as 'natural and inalienable' rights and it was the duty of the state to protect these rights.

Check Point 01

- How many American colonies got independence by the help of Louis XVI?
- How much debt was increased because of the war in France?
- Name the direct tax of the third estate to the state in the French society. *(Taille)*
- Who formed the 'National Assembly' in France in 1789?
- In the Constitution of 1791, the powers were divided among legislative, executive and _____.
- It was the duty of the state to protect each citizen's natural right.

7. Manor: An estate consisting of the Lord's lands and his mansion.

8. Chateau: Castle or stately residence belonging to a king or nobleman.

9. Tithes: Taxes levied by the Church, comprising one-tenth of the agricultural produce.

4. Taille: Tax to be paid directly to the state.
Subsistence crisis: An extreme situation where the basic means of livelihood are endangered.
Estates General: A political body in which the three estates sent their representatives.

France Abolishes Monarchy and becomes a Republic

Rules of France's long-reigning monarchs were worn out by the developments in France. They made plans to send troops to put down the events taking place since 1789.

The National Assembly declared war against Prussia and Austria in April 1792. Thousands of volunteers joined army for the National Assembly.

The patriotic song sung by volunteers was the *Marseillaise* which was composed by the poet Rognon de L'Isle. It was sung for the first time by volunteers from Marseilles as they marched into Paris. It later became the National Anthem of France.

A large segment of the population was convinced to carry the revolution further, as the Constitution of 1791 gave political rights only to the richer section.

People used to discuss government policies and their own plan of action in political clubs. The most successful of these was the club of Jacobins, which got its name from convent¹⁰ of St Jacob in Paris.

The Jacobin Club

Members of the Jacobins club belonged mainly to the less prosperous sections of society. They included shopkeepers, artisans, cooks, shoemakers, watch-makers, printers, servants and day-labourers. Their leader was Maximilien Robespierre.

They dressed differently by wearing long striped trousers similar to those worn by dock workers. It was a way of declaring the end of the power held by the masters of knee breeches.

They came to be known as 'sans-culottes' meaning 'people without knee breeches'. Sans-culottes men wore a red cap that symbolised liberty.

The Convention: Newly Elected Assembly

On 10th August, 1792, the Jacobins attacked the Palace of the Tuilleries with large number of Parisians.

They killed the King's guards and held the King himself as hostage for several hours. Later, the assembly voted to imprison the royal family.

Elections were held in August, 1792 and now all men above 21 years of age were allowed to vote regardless of their wealth.

The newly elected assembly was called the Convention. It abolished monarchy on 21st September, 1792 and France was declared a Republic.

Louis XVI was sentenced to death by a court on the charge of treason¹¹.

On 21st January, 1793, Louis XVI was executed publicly at the Place de la Concorde. After some time, the Queen Marie Antoinette was also sentenced to death.

The Reign of Terror

The period from 1793 to 1794 is referred to as the 'Reign of Terror' in France. This was due to the policy of severe control and punishment followed by Robespierre.

During this period following events took place:

- Many people were arrested and tried by a revolutionary tribunal (court). These included all those people who were considered enemies like nobles, clergy and members of political parties of republic by Robespierre. If the court found them guilty, they were guillotined¹².
- Peasants were forced to transport their grain to the cities and sell it at the prices fixed by the government.
- The use of expensive white flour was forbidden. Meats and breads were rationed.
- People were forced to wear the *bonnet d'égalité* (equality bonnet), a kind made of white wheat.
- Instead of Monsieur (Sir) and Madame (Madam), all French men and women were called as Citizen and Citizeness (ma'am).
- Churches were shut down and their buildings were converted into barracks or offices.
- Due to the hard policies of Robespierre, even his supporters left him in the end. He was finally convicted by a court and guillotined in July, 1794.

A Directory Rules France

After the fall of the Jacobins, the wealthier middle class won power. A new Constitution was introduced which denied the vote to non-propertied sections of society.

It provided for two elected legislative councils. These councils appointed a Directory, an Executive made up of five members under the Jacobins.

Sometimes the Directors clashed with the Legislative Councils and the councils often dismissed the Directors. This political instability paved the way for the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, a military dictator. Despite of all these changes, the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity remained inspiring ideals that motivated political movements for France and the rest of the Europe.

Women in Revolution

Women played a very significant role in the French Revolution. Most of the women belonging to the third estate worked for a living.

They worked as seamstresses¹³ or laundresses, sold flowers, fruits and vegetables in the market, employed as domestic servants in rich family etc.

Only the daughters of nobles and wealthier members of the third estate could study at a convent.

Besides caring for their families, the French women had to cook, fetch water, stand in queues for bread, look after the children, etc. Their wages were always lower than the men.

Women in France were disappointed with the Constitution of 1791. It reduced them to passive citizens who had no political rights.

They demanded political rights, viz., Right to Vote, to be elected to the assembly and to hold political office. To express their own views and demands, women started their own political clubs and newspapers.

There were about sixty clubs of women in French cities of which, 'The Society of Revolutionary and Republican Women' was the most famous.

Laws Passed to Improve Women Lives

In the early years, laws were passed to improve the lives of women. The changes occurred by their laws were:

- Women gained access to education with the introduction of state schools and a system of compulsory education for girls.
- Women could no longer be forced into marriages by their fathers and they could marry according to their will.
- Marriage was now a contract which could be registered under civil law.
- Divorce was made legal. Both men and women could apply for it.
- Women could train for job, become artists or run small business.

¹³ Seamstresses: A woman who earns her living by sewing.

French Women Got Right to Vote

During the Reign of Terror, the government ordered for the closure of women's clubs and banned their political activities. Many prominent women were arrested and executed.

Women's struggle for voting and equal political rights was carried on through an international suffrage movement during the late 19th and early 20th century. Finally in 1946, French women won the Right to Vote.

Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793)

Olympe de Gouges is felt to be the most important of the politically active women in revolutionary France. She proposed a new constitution and the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen.

In 1791, she wrote a Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizens, in which she demanded the same rights for women as the National Assembly.

In 1793, Olympe de Gouges criticised the Jacobin government for hardly taking down women's clubs. She was charged the Imperial Convention, which charged her with espionage, then shot, she was executed.

The Abolition of Slavery

The greatest social reform made by the Jacobins government was to abolish slavery in French colonies.

The French colonies in the Caribbean like Martinique, Guadeloupe and San Domingo were important suppliers of tobacco, indigo, sugar, coffee, etc.

The French needed workers for plantations in its colonies but the Europeans did not want to work in harsh, unknown lands.

Thus, a three way trade in slaves started between Europe, Africa and America in the 17th century. This was known as triangular slave trade.

French merchants travelled from the ports of Bordeaux or Nantes in the African coast, where they bought slaves from local chieftains.

These port cities owed their economic prosperity to the flourishing slave trade.

Throughout the 18th century, there was little criticism of slavery in France.

After long debates, the National Convention passed a law in 1794 which declared slavery illegal and freed all slaves in France's overseas colonies.

After ten years, Napoleon reintroduced slavery to please the plantation owners who considered enslaving African blacks as their right.

¹⁰ Convent: Building belonging to a community devoted to a religious life.

¹¹ Treason: Betrayal of one's country or government.

¹² Guillotine: A device for beheading a person by means of a heavy blade that is dropped between two posts resting on guides; widely used during the French Revolution.

These slaves were known as African Negroes¹⁴. Finally, slavery was abolished in the French colonies in 1848.

The Revolution and Everyday Life

After 1789, many changes took place in the lives of women, men and children in France. One important law that came into effect in 1789 was the abolition of censorship.

According to censorship, all written material and cultural activities could be performed or published only after they had been approved by the censors of the king. With the abolition of censorship and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, freedom of speech and expression became a natural right of man.

This led to the growth of newspapers, pamphlets, books and printed pictures. Freedom of the press gave voice to opinions and counter opinions.

Conclusion

In 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte, a famous French General, crowned himself Emperor of France.

He conquered neighbouring European countries, disposed dynasties and created kingdoms where he placed members of his family.

He saw himself as a moderniser of Europe. He introduced many laws such as the protection of private property and a uniform system of weights and measures provided by the decimal system.

Many people saw Napoleon as a liberator who would bring freedom for the people. But soon his army came to be viewed everywhere as an invading force.

Finally, Napoleon was defeated at the Waterloo in an 1815. Even after his defeat, ideas of Napoleon on liberty and modern laws continued in other parts of Europe.

The ideas of liberty and democratic rights were the most important legacy of the French Revolution which spread all over Europe. This led to abolition of feudal systems and freedom of colonised nations.

Tippu Sultan and Raja Rammohan Roy are some of the Indians who were inspired by the ideas of the French Revolution.

Check Point 02

1. Who composed the song 'Marseillaise'?
2. Who were known as 'Sans-culottes'?
3. _____ was defeated at Waterloo in 1815.
4. When was the monarchy abolished by the convention?
5. The Slave trade began in the _____.

Timeline

Year	Important Event
1774	Louis XVI ascended throne of France.
5th Mar. 1789	The king called an assembly of the Estates General to pass proposals for new taxes.
20th June 1789	Third estate representatives assembled and took the Tennis Court Oath. They formed a National Assembly.
14th July 1789	Storming of the Bastille, French Revolution started.
4th August 1789	National Assembly passed a decree to abolish the feudal system of obligations and taxes.
5th Oct. 1789	Women marched to Versailles and brought back King Louis XVI with them to Paris.
1791	National Assembly completed draft of new Constitution. Revolutionary woman Olympe de Gouges wrote 'Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen'.
April, 1792	National Assembly voted to declare war against Prussia and Austria.
21st Sep. 1792	Monarchy abolished and France declared a republic.
21st Jan. 1793	Louis XVI executed.
1793-1794	All slaves in French overseas possessions freed, but decision overturned by Napoleon ten years later.
Sep 1793-July 1794	'Reign of Terror'.
July 1794	Robespierre arrested and executed.
1804	Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself Emperor of France.
1815	Napoleon finally defeated at Waterloo.
1848	Slavery finally abolished in French colonies.
1946	Women in France won the right to vote.

SUMMARY

- When Louis XVI became king of France in 1774, the French treasury was empty.
- King was forced to increase the taxes to meet the regular expense of the court, maintenance of the army and payment of interest for the debt.
- During the 18th century, French society was divided into three estates: the clergy, the nobility and the rest of the population constituted the **third estate**. Only the third estate paid all the taxes.
- Rapid expansion of French society led to the **suburbanisation** where the poor masses of landless peasants and workers.
- A growing **middle class**, consisting of traders, manufacturers, lawyers, administrators etc., wanted to end the privileges of the nobility and the clergy.
- The ideas of great philosophers like John Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu influenced the French people.
- On 20th June, third estate declared themselves as a **National assembly**. Mirabeau and Abbé Sieyès were leading it.
- The people revolted due to price rise and attacked Bastille on 14th July 1789.
- France became a constitutional monarchy with the National Assembly drafting a new constitution in 1791. This constitution began with a declaration of the rights of man and citizen.
- In August 1792, the **Jacobins** who were less progressive section of society took over the government and declared France a republic, executing the king in January 1793.
- A **'Reign of Terror'** followed from September 1793 to July 1794, under the leadership of Maximilien Robespierre during which large-scale executions took place.
- After the overthrow of the Jacobins, a Directory ruled France, but was unstable.
- The significant participation of women in the revolution brought about many changes in French society, leading to many laws being passed to improve their lives. In 1804, French women won the **Right to vote**.
- **Slavery** was abolished in French colonies during 1794. Napoleon became the emperor in 1804 and introduced many new laws.
- Napoleon's reform measures impacted a large number of European nations, leading to abolition of feudal systems.
- The ideas of liberty and democratic rights were the most important legacy of French Revolution.

¹⁴ Negroes: A term used for the indigenous people of Africa living South of the Sahara. It is a derogatory term not in common use any longer.