The French Revolution

Question 1: Describe the circumstances leading to the outbreak of revolutionary protest in France.

Answer: Following are some of the causes which had a cumulative effect to result in revolution in France:

- **The war with Britain for an independent America:** This war led to mounting debt on the French monarchy. This necessitated imposition of new taxes on the public.
- **Privilege based on birth:** People got privileges and position based on their lineage and not on their merit. This led to resentment among common people.
- **Concentration of power among the privileged:** People belonging to the first and second estate had all the power and money. Masses were at the mercy of this privileged class.
- **Subsistence Crisis:** Rising population and less grain production resulted in demand supply gap of bread, which was the staple diet. Wages did not keep pace with rising prices. It was becoming difficult for people.
- **Growing Middle Class:** Because of increased overseas trade a new class emerged. This class was wealthy not because of birth but because of its ability to utilize opportunities. People of the middle class started raising their voice for an end to privileges based on lineage.

All of this led to a general sense of resentment among people. Certain thinkers of the period spread awareness through various media. Some from the privileged classes also advocated a switch to democracy. So, finally there was revolution in France.

Question 2: Which groups of French society benefited from the revolution? Which groups were forced to relinquish power? Which sections of society would have been disappointed with the outcome of the revolution?

Answer: Peasants and artisans of French society benefited from the revolution. Clergy, nobles and church had to relinquish power. It is obvious that those who had to forego power and privileges would have been disappointed. People from the first and the second estate must have been a disappointed lot.

Question 3: Describe the legacy of the French Revolution for the peoples of the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Answer: The ideas of liberty and democratic rights were the most important legacy of the French Revolution. These spread from France to the rest of Europe during the nineteenth century, where feudal systems were abolished. Further these ideas spread to different colonies of the European nations. Colonised people interpreted and moulded these ideas according to respective needs. This was probably like seed for an end of colonization in many countries. By the mid of 20th century major part of the world adopted democracy as

the preferred mode of rule and the French Revolution can be termed as the initiation point for this development.

Question 4: Draw up a list of democratic rights we enjoy today whose origins could be traced to the French Revolution.
Answer: The following fundamental rights, given in the Indian constitution can be traced to the French Revolution:

- The right to equality
- The right to freedom of speech and expression
- The right to freedom from exploitation
- The right to constitutional remedies

Question 5: Would you agree with the view that the message of universal rights was beset with contradictions? Explain.
Answer: The major contradiction in the message of universal rights as per the French Constitution of 1791 was the total ignorance of women. All rights were given to men. Apart from that the presence of huge number of people as passive citizens, without voting rights, was like not putting into practice what you preach. In other words it can be said that although the declaration of universal rights was a good starting point but it left much to be desired.

Question 6: How would you explain the rise of Napoleon?
Answer: After France became a republic in 1792, the then ruler, Robespeirre, gave more privileges to the wealthier section of society. Further, he was a sort of autocrat himself. This led to reign of terror for the following many years. After Robespeirre's rule came to an end a directory was formed to avoid concentration of power in one individual. Members of the directory often fought among themselves leading to total chaos and political instability. This created a political vacuum in France. This was a conducive situation and Napoleon Bonaparte took the reign of power as a military dictator.