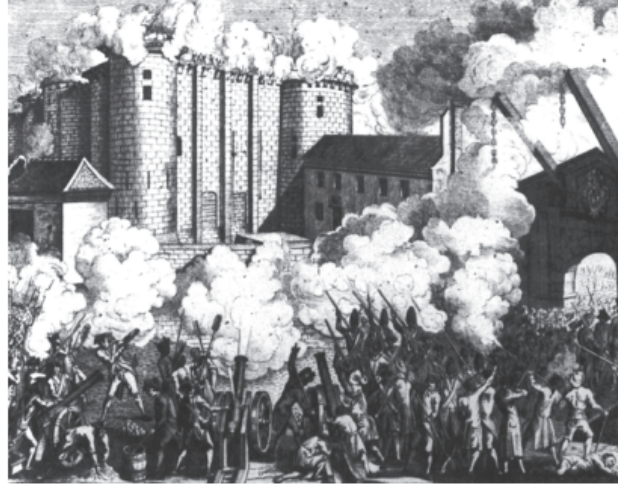# ◆ Background: Why Did the Revolution Begin?

In 1789, France was in a state of crisis:

- The treasury was empty due to long wars and extravagance of kings.
- France had supported America in its war with Britain, increasing debt.
- Taxes were raised, but only the Third Estate had to pay — which created anger.
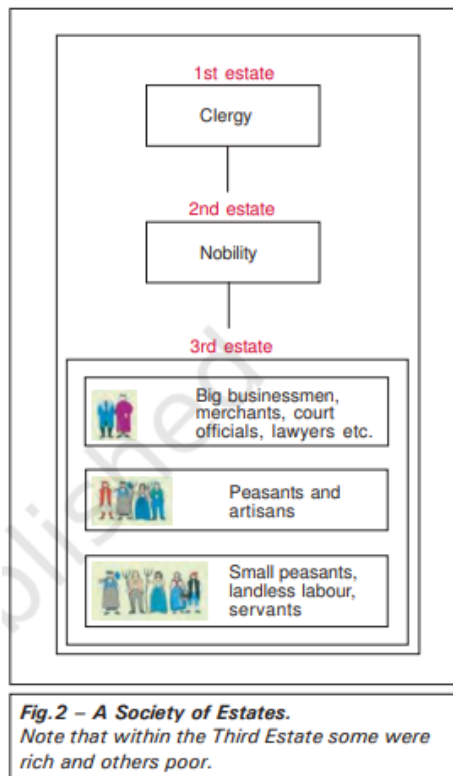

📘 **Definition: Old Regime**
The political and social system in France before 1789.

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◆ French Society in the 18th Century

French society was divided into 3 estates:

1. 🟩 First Estate → Clergy (Church priests): No taxes, had privileges
2. 🟨 Second Estate → Nobles: No taxes, feudal rights over peasants
3. 🟥 Third Estate → Everyone else (peasants, workers, middle class): Paid all taxes

Fig.2 – A Society of Estates.
Note that within the Third Estate some were rich and others poor.

Only the Third Estate carried the burden of all state taxes (e.g., taille, tithes).

📘 Taille → Direct tax to the state
📘 Tithes → Tax to the Church (1/10 of produce)

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◆ Economic Crisis & Subsistence Problems

France's population rose → food demand ↑
But food production couldn't keep up → Bread prices ↑
Wages didn't increase → Poor suffered

📘 Subsistence Crisis → When basic survival becomes difficult due to rising prices and low income.

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◆ Growth of the Middle Class & Enlightenment Ideas

A new educated class emerged — merchants, professionals, lawyers.

They promoted new ideas:

- John Locke → Against monarchy's divine right
- Rousseau → Government based on Social Contract
- Montesquieu → Separation of powers (Legislature, Executive, Judiciary)

📘 Their ideas inspired people to demand liberty, equality, and democracy.

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◆ The Estates General & Formation of National Assembly (1789)

King Louis XVI needed to raise taxes → called Estates General after 175 years.

- Each estate had 1 vote (unfair)
- Third Estate demanded voting by head → King refused
- Third Estate walked out and formed the National Assembly
- They took the Tennis Court Oath — not to disperse until a constitution was made

Fig.5 – The Tennis Court Oath.
Preparatory sketch for a large painting by Jacques-Louis David. The painting was intended to be hung in the National Assembly.

This was the beginning of the revolution.

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◆ Storming of the Bastille (14 July 1789)

- Rumours spread that king will attack people
- People stormed Bastille prison for arms
- Bastille was a symbol of monarchy's oppression
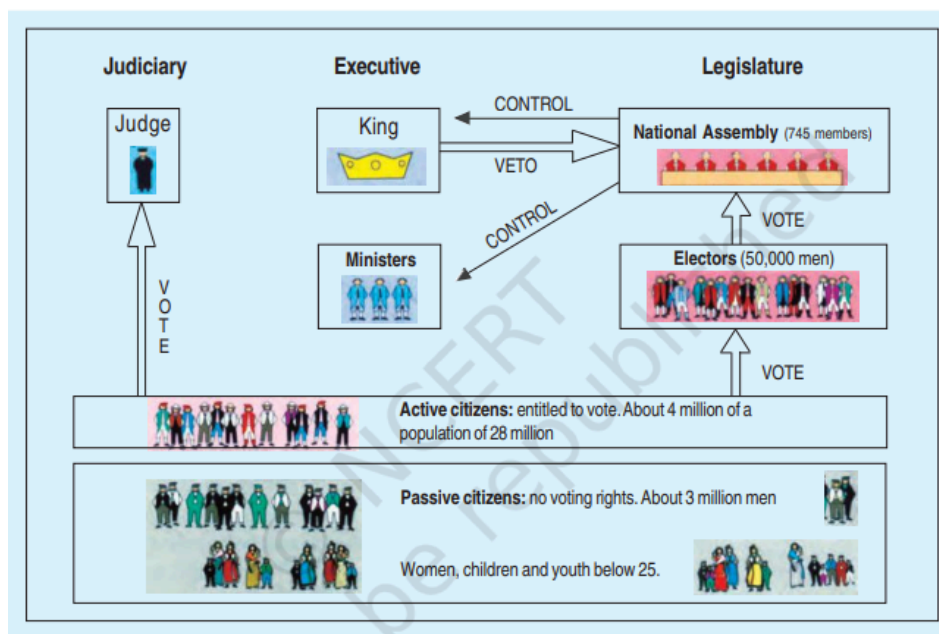- This event is marked as the start of the revolution

—

◆ France Becomes a Constitutional Monarchy (1791)

A new constitution was made:

- Separated powers into Executive (King), Legislature (National Assembly), Judiciary
- Limited the king's power
- Only "active citizens" (men above 25 who paid taxes) could vote

📘 Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen (1791):

- Men are born free
- Liberty, property, equality, justice = natural rights
- Sovereignty belongs to the nation

—

◆ France Becomes a Republic (1792)

- Political clubs like the Jacobins (led by Robespierre) demanded more equality
- They wore long trousers (sans-culottes) to show support for workers
- Stormed the king's palace
- Monarchy abolished, France declared a Republic
- Universal male suffrage introduced (all men could vote)

Louis XVI was executed in 1793 for treason.

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◆ The Reign of Terror (1793–1794)

📘 Led by Robespierre

- All "enemies of the Republic" (even his supporters) were executed by guillotine

- Strict controls on prices, speech, food
- Churches closed
- Citizens had to say "Citizen" instead of Sir/Madam

Robespierre was finally arrested and executed in 1794.

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◆ A Directory Takes Over (1795–1799)

- After Jacobins fell, power shifted to wealthier middle class
- New government setup: two councils + executive (Directory)
- Political instability led to rise of military ruler → Napoleon Bonaparte

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◆ Role of Women in the Revolution

- Women from the Third Estate worked hard and faced discrimination
- Started their own clubs, demanded right to vote and be elected
- Olympe de Gouges wrote Declaration of the Rights of Woman
- During Reign of Terror, women's clubs were banned

📘 Women got right to education, marriage laws changed
 But political rights came much later — women in France got voting rights in 1946.

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◆ Abolition of Slavery

- France had colonies in Caribbean → used African slave labour
- 1794: Slavery abolished by revolutionary government
- But Napoleon restored it in 1804
- Finally, slavery was permanently abolished in 1848
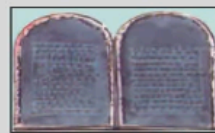
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◆ The Revolution's Impact on Everyday Life

- Censorship ended
- Freedom of press allowed
- Political ideas spread via songs, festivals, pamphlets
- Symbols (e.g., red cap, broken chains) were used to spread ideas

Reading political symbols

The majority of men and women in the eighteenth century could not read or write. So images and symbols were frequently used instead of printed words to communicate important ideas. The painting by Le Barbier uses many such symbols to convey the content of the Declaration of Rights. Let us try to read these symbols.

- **The broken chain:** Chains were used to fetter slaves. A broken chain stands for the act of becoming free.
- **The bundle of rods or fasces:** One rod can be easily broken, but not an entire bundle. Strength lies in unity.
- **The eye within a triangle radiating light:** The all-seeing eye stands for knowledge. The rays of the sun will drive away the clouds of ignorance.
- **Sceptre:** Symbol of royal power.
- **Snake biting its tail to form a ring:** Symbol of Eternity. A ring has neither a beginning nor an end.
- **Red Phrygian cap:** Cap worn by a slave upon becoming free.
- **Blue-white-red:** The national colors of France.
- **The winged woman:** Personification of the law.
- **The Law Tablet:** The law is the same for all, and all are equal before it.

🔷 Liberty, equality and justice became ideals of the people.

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◆ Legacy of the French Revolution

- Spread of democratic ideals in Europe
- End of feudal privileges
- Inspired freedom movements across the world (e.g., India)
- Led to rise of Napoleon, who later spread revolutionary ideas across Europe