

## 9<sup>th</sup> – French Revolution I



The French Revolution is known as a landmark in the history of Europe and the world. It led to end of monarchy in France. A new system of governance was introduced.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen during the French Revolution announced the coming of a new era. The slogan of French Revolution liberty, freedom and equality became important ideas of new era.

### French Society During The Late 18th Century

In 1774, Louis XVI of the Bourbon family became the king of France. He was 20 years old and married the Austrian princess Marie Antoinette. 'When he became the ruler, he found an empty treasury, because years of wars and an extravagant lifestyle had drained the financial resources of France. The cost of maintaining court at the immense palace of Versailles also added to the problem. To maintain court he took more than 2 billion livres loan.

Under, Louis XVI France helped the thirteen American colonies to gain their independence from their common enemy Britain. The war added more 'than a billion livres to a debt. Due to this situation, credit lenders of state began to charge 10% interest on loans. It became difficult for the French Government to meet its regular expenses such as maintaining army, the court, etc. Thus, the government was forced to increase taxes.

### Structure and Social Status of French Society in 18th Century

In the 18th century, French society was divided into three estates

(i) The First Estate (clergy) Members of this estate had vast land and wealth. They were exempted from paying tax and enjoyed certain privileges by birth.

(ii) The Second Estate (nobility) Members of this estate also enjoyed privileges by birth and were exempted from paying taxes. They enjoyed feudal privileges such as extraction of feudal dues from peasants.

(iii) The Third Estate The rest of the population constituted the third estate (businessmen, merchants, lawyers, peasants, artisans, landless labour, servants, etc). Members of this estate had very few privileges and had to pay taxes. Peasants were important part of this estate who constituted about 90% population. Only a few of them owned land. 60% of land cultivated by peasants was owned by nobles and rich members of third estate. They served lords, in army and in construction work.

The Church took taxes called tithes from the peasants. All members of the third estate had to pay taxes to the state. This included taitle, a direct tax and a number of indirect taxes imposed on articles of everyday consumption like salt or tobacco. This estate alone had burden of financing activities of state.

**The Struggle to Survive:** During 1715-1789, the population of France increased from 23 to 28 million. This led to a rapid increase in demand for food grains. But the production did not increase.

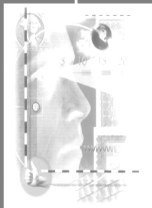
The price of bread rose rapidly. It was the staple diet of the majority. Most workers were employed as labourers in workshops, whose owners fixed their wages. Their wages did not keep pace with the rise in prices. So, the gap between the poor and the rich widened. It became worse when bad weather conditions reduced the harvest. This frequently created a subsistence crisis.

### A Growing Middle Class Envisages an End to Privileges

In the past, peasants and workers had participated in revolts against increasing taxes and food scarcity. But they lacked the sources and programmes to carry out full scale measures that would bring about a change in the social and economic order. This was left to the groups of the third estate who had become prosperous and had access to education and new ideas.

### Emergence of 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. In





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.

### Role of Philosophers on Emergence of Middle Class

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

- John Locke in his book 'Two Treatises of Government' criticised the doctrine of the divine and absolute right of the monarch.
- Rousseau carried the idea forward, proposing a form of government based on a social contract between people and their representatives.
- Rousseau in his book, 'The Social Contract', argued against the idea that monarchs were divinely empowered to legislate, as he asserted that only the people, who were sovereign, had that all-powerful right.
- Montesquieu in his book 'The Spirit of the Laws', stressed the concept of separation of powers between the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. His concept of separation of powers was a great instrument against the despotic autocratic rule of French emperor.

### Impact of Ideas of Philosophers

The model of government given by Montesquieu was put into force in the USA after the thirteen colonies declared their independence from Britain. The American Constitution and its guarantee of individual rights was an important example for political thinkers in France. People discussed the ideas of philosophers generally in salons and coffee-houses and were spread among people through newspapers and books. These were frequently read aloud in groups for the benefit of those people who could not read or write. Soon the news spread that Louis XVI had planned to impose further taxes to meet the expenses of the state. This generated anger and protest against the system of privileges.

### Exercise I

- 1 How many American colonies got independence by the help of Louis XVI?
- 2 How much debt was increased because of the war in France?
- 3 How was the French society in the 18th century divided?
- 4 Name the direct tax of the third estate to the state in the French society.
- 5 What was criticised by John Locke in his book 'Two Treatises of Government'?
- 6 Fill in the blanks with suitable words/phrases.
  - (i) The tax called tithe was collected from the French peasants by the \_\_\_\_\_
  - (ii) A subsistence crisis occurs when the basic means of \_\_\_\_\_ are endangered.
  - (iii) \_\_\_\_\_ were the new social group in the 18th century who emerged as a rich class through expansion of overseas trade.

### The Outbreak Of The Revolution

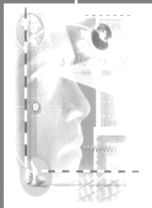
In the Old Regime, the monarch had no power to increase the taxes of his own wish. He had to call the meeting of the Estates General to pass the proposal. The monarch alone had the power to decide about the meeting. The last time a meeting had been called was in 1614.

### Assembly of the Estates General

Louis XVI called for an assembly of the Estates General on 5th May, 1789 to pass the proposal for new taxes. In Versailles, an attractive and impressive hall was prepared to host the delegates.

The first and second estates sent 300 representatives each, who were seated in rows facing each other on two sides. The 600 members of the third estate had to stand at the back. The third estate was represented by its more prosperous and educated members. Peasants, artisans and women were denied entry to the assembly but they sent their





demands and grievances through representatives. These were listed in some 40000 letters.

### **Demand for Voting in Democratic Way**

In earlier voting system of Estates General, each estate had one vote. This time also, Louis XVI wanted to continue the same system. But the members of third estate demanded that voting should be conducted by taking assembly as a whole. They demand that each member should have one vote but this proposal was rejected by the king. This idea was supported by Rousseau in his book 'The Social Contract'. After the rejection of this proposal the members of third estate walked out of assembly in protest.

### **National Assembly of Third Estate**

On 20th June, 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 swore 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. Mirabeau brought out a journal and delivered powerful speeches to the crowd to inspire them at Versailles. Abbé Sieyès was originally a priest. He wrote an influential pamphlet called 'What is the Third Estate?'

### **Revolt Starts at the Bastille**

While the National Assembly was busy at Versailles drafting a Constitution, the rest of France was in disturbance as severe winter brought bad harvest. It led to the increase in price of bread. Bakers exploited the situation by hoarding the supplies. After spending hours in long queues at the bakery, crowds of angry women raid the shops. At the same time, the king ordered troops to move into Paris.

On 14th July, an agitated crowd destroyed the Bastille. The Bastille was hated by all French people as it symbolised the dominating power of the king. The fortress was demolished and its stone fragments were sold in the markets. In the countryside, rumours spread from village to village that the lords of the manor had hired bands of brigands who were on their way to destroy the ripe crops. Peasants were caught by fear and madness hearing the rumour. They attacked chateaux across many areas of France.

The peasants looted hoarded grain and burnt documents containing records of manorial dues. Consequently, a large number of nobles moved to neighbouring countries.

### **End of Special Privileges**

Seeing the power of revolt, Louis XVI recognised the National Assembly. He accepted that his powers would be checked by a Constitution. On the night of 4th August, 1789, France passed the law for abolishing the feudal system of obligations and taxes. The members of clergy were also forced to give up their privileges. Tithes 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 are

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- 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 bracket of taxpayers.
- The Constitution began with a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.
- According to this declaration, the right to life, freedom of speech, freedom of opinion and equality before law were established as natural rights and it was the duty of the state to protect these.

### Exercise II

- 1 In the context of France, when did the fall of Bastille take place?
- 2 Who formed the 'National Assembly' in France in 1789?
- 3 Who wrote an influential pamphlet called 'What is the Third Estate'?
- 4 In the Constitution of 1791, the powers were divided among which three institutions?
- 5 The Declaration in the Constitution of 1791 established which rights as natural rights?
- 6 Which of the following are True or False?
  1. Abbe Sieyes was born in noble family.
  2. The 'Tennis Court Oath' was taken by members of all three estates.
  3. Passing of the law abolishing feudal rights and privileges by the National Assembly made France a constitutional monarchy.
  4. The Declaration of 'Rights of Man and Citizen' did not include the right to life.

### Timeline

Year	Important Event
1774	Louis XVI ascended throne of France.
5 <sup>th</sup> May, 1789	The king called an assembly of the Estates General to pass proposals for new taxes.
20 <sup>th</sup> June, 1789	Third estate representatives assembled and took the Tennis Court Oath. They formed a National Assembly.
14 <sup>th</sup> July, 1789	Storming of the Bastille; French Revolution started.
4 <sup>th</sup> August, 1789	National Assembly passed a decree to abolish the feudal system of obligations and taxes.
5 <sup>th</sup> October, 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 deGouges writes 'Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen'.
April, 1792	National Assembly voted to declare war against Prussia and Austria.

