



The French Revolution (Easy Notes for class 9th)

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Introduction:

The terms like Liberty, equality and fraternity are common in the contemporary world. Although, there was a time when people could not even think of getting such basic rights. People had to obey the order

of autocratic monarchs and face hardships due to lack of basic amenities. In Europe, a feudal system existed. Moreover, the colonization process throughout the world violated human rights. Eventually, all these things changed when French people broke the notion of '[Divine rights of the King](#)' and revolutionized the biased political system. Therefore, it becomes important to know the history of [The French Revolution](#). So, let's begin studying the eighteenth century French society.

1. French Society During the Late Eighteenth Century:

In 1774, Louis XVI or Louis Auguste of the Bourbon family became the king of France. He had a wife named Marie Antoinette (Austrian princess). During his reign, french people faced economic crises which enraged people and hence, the french revolution broke out. Now let's discuss the main causes; *social, economic and political*.

Social condition in France during the Old Regime:

- There was a **system of estates** in French society.
 - The first estate consisted of Clergymen.
 - Second estate was of nobility.
 - And the rest of the French citizens, excluding women and children, were part of third estate.
- The first and second estates enjoyed feudal privileges. Whereas the third estate had to just serve them
 - **For Example:** The third estate paid two types of tax; *Tithes to the Church* and *Taille to the state*. But clergy and nobility had exemption from any such taxes.

Economic condition in France:

- In the Old Regime, people faced **subsistence crises** and **struggled to survive**.
 - Population of France rose from about 23 million in 1713 to 28 million in 1789.
 - The rate of **population growth** exceeded the production of grains. Thus, this led to price rise and unemployment.
 - **Wage rates** were low.
 - The year of **bad harvest** added the problem.

Political condition in France:

- Louis XVI, when came into power, found his treasure chamber empty due to long years of war.
- He was already running out of financial resources, yet he aided the thirteen American colonies to gain independence from the common enemy, Britain.
 - As a result, he became liable to pay back the debt of approximately two billion livres with 10 percent interest.
- Moreover, in order to meet regular expenses such as the cost of maintaining an army, the court, running government offices or universities, the state had to increase taxes.

A Growing Middle Class Envisages an End to Privileges:

- Earlier, peasants and workers revolted against increasing tax and food scarcity. However, they did not get much success due to lack of means and programmes for bringing change in the social and economic order.
- In the Eighteenth century, a new social group emerged.
 - Lawyers, administrative officials, philosophers, merchants, were all termed as the middle class.
 - They were educated and did not believe in privilege based on birth.
 - They earned wealth through overseas trade and manufacture of goods such as woollen and silk textiles.
 - These groups put forward the ideas like freedom and equal laws and opportunities for all.
 - **For Example:** Philosophers like John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Montesquieu contributed through their writings.

	John Locke	Jean Jacques Rousseau	Montesquieu
Book	Two Treatises of Government	Social Contract	The Spirit of the law
Main Ideas	He criticized the doctrine of the divine and absolute right of the monarch.	He proposed the government based on a social contract between people and their representative.	He proposed a division of power within the government between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary.

2. The Outbreak of the Revolution:

Economic, political and social causes forced Louis XVI to increase taxes. However, according to the Old Regime the monarch could not impose taxes on his will alone. Thus, he called the meeting of the Estate General to pass proposals for new taxes. On 5 May 1789, all three Estate Generals gathered at the hall in Versailles.

Note: Last time, the Estate General meeting held 175 years back in 1614

Estate General:

It was a political body to which the three estates sent their representatives.

1. **First Estate:** Clergy
 - 300 representatives and 1 vote.
 - Priests represented first estate.
2. **Second Estate:** Nobility
 - 300 representatives and 1 vote.
 - Aristocrats represented 2nd estate.
3. **Third Estate:**

Commoners.

- 600 representatives and 1 vote.
- Prosperous and educated members represented the third Estate.
- However, peasants, artisans and women were denied entry to the assembly. They could only list their demands in letters.

As you saw, each estate had one vote despite the fact that the third Estate had more representatives. So, the third estate demanded for 'one member, one vote' in the meeting. But when king rejected the demand, all the members of the third estate walked out of the assembly in protest.

- On 20th June, representatives of the third estate assembled in the hall of *indoor tennis court* in the grounds of Versailles.
- They declared themselves a *National Assembly* and swore not to disperse till they had *drafted the constitution* for France that would limit the powers of the monarch.
- Mirabeau, a noble and Abbe Sieyès, a priest led the third estate.
 - Where **Mirabeau** delivered **powerful speeches**, **Abbe sieyès** wrote influential pamphlet called '**What is the Third Estate**'?

While the National Assembly was busy at Versailles drafting a constitution, the rest of France was in a state of turmoil.

Why the rest of France was agitated?

1. **Increase in food prices:** Severe winter destroyed the food crops which led to rise in bread prices.
2. **Hoarding of bread supplies:** Bakers often hoard supplies. This resulted in shortages of food in the real economy.
 - As a consequence, crowds of angry women, who spent long hours standing in a queue, stormed into the shops.
3. **Rumors in Paris and countryside:** At the same time, the king ordered troops to move into Paris to control uprising. But rumors spread that king would soon order the army to open fire upon the citizens. Thus, on 14th July, the agitated crowd stormed and destroyed the Bastille. In countryside also, the rumors spread that the king has sent Lords of manor to destroy the crops.

Recognition to National Assembly:

Finally, after facing the revolts from subjects, Louis XVI gave recognition to the National Assembly and accepted the principle that his powers would from now on be checked by a constitution.

Changes brought by National Assembly in 1789:

- On 4 August 1789, Assembly abolished the feudal system of obligations and taxes.
- Members of the clergy were also forced to give up their privileges.
- Assembly abolished tithes and confiscated the lands owned by Church.

France becomes a Constitutional Monarchy:

- The National Assembly completed the draft of the constitution in 1791.
- It had two main **objectives**:
 1. Limit the power of monarch.
 2. Separation of power among different institutions- the legislature, executive and judiciary.

How was the political system under the Constitution of 1791?

- Indirectly elected National Assembly got legislation powers.
 - In this, only **active citizens** could vote.
 - Men above 25 years of age
 - who paid taxes equal to at least 3 days of a laborer's wage.
 - Moreover, to qualify as an elector and then as a member of Assembly, a man had to belong to the highest bracket of taxpayers.
- Kings and royal ministers made up the executive branch.
 - King had **Veto power**.
- The third institution remained independent from executive and legislature i.e Judiciary.

Changes in the constitution of 1791:

- Constitution began with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.
- Natural and Inalienable rights were given to every citizens.
 - **For Example:** Right to life, freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, equality before law.
- State became responsible for protecting natural rights of citizens.

Revolutionary journalist during French Revolution: Jean-Paul Marat influenced people through his newspaper L'Ami du peuple. In his works, he raised voice for poor citizens.

3. France Abolishes Monarchy and Becomes a Republic:

- Although Louis XVI had signed the Constitution, he entered into secret negotiations with the King of Prussia.
- Rulers of other neighboring countries made plan to send troops to put down the events.
- Before this could happen, the National Assembly voted in April 1792 to declare war against Prussia and Austria.
- Thousands of volunteers thronged from the provinces to join army.
- People saw this was as a war of the people against all the kings and aristocracies in Europe.
- Volunteers of Marseilles sung the patriotic song 'Marseillaise' during their march towards Paris.
 - It was composed by the poet Roget de 'Isle.
 - The Marseillaise is now the national anthem of France.

Impact of Revolutionary Wars in 1792:

1. **Economic losses:** Due to war, people faced economic difficulties.
2. **Women's dual responsibilities:** While the men were away fighting at the front, women were left to cope with the tasks of earning a living and looking after their families.
3. **Political inequality:** The Constitution of 1781 gave political rights only to the richer sections of society.
4. **Formation of political clubs:** Circumstances were such that people began to establish political clubs. The most successful of these clubs was that of Jacobins.

Jacobin Club:

- The members of the Jacobin club belonged mainly to the **less prosperous sections of society**.
 - Such as small shopkeepers, servants, artisans, daily wage workers.
- Their leader was **Maximilian Robespierre**.
- To look different, they started wearing *long stripped trousers* and *red cap* (symbol of liberty).
- These Jacobins came to be known as **Sans-culottes**, literally meaning 'those without knee breeches'.

France becomes a republic:

- On 10 August 1792, the Jacobins stormed inside the palace of the [Tuileries](#), massacred the king's guards and kept the king for several hours.
- Later, the Assembly voted in imprisonment of the royal family.
- Elections were held and newly elected Assembly was called the Convention.
 - Now, all men of 21 years and above, regardless of wealth, got voting rights.
- On 21 September 1792 it abolished the monarchy and declared France [republic](#).
- On 21 January 1793, Louis XVI (in the case of Treason) was executed publicly at the Place de la Concorde.

The Reign of Terror (1793-1794):

- Maximilian Robespierre followed a policy of severe control and punishment.
- He punished and guillotined all those he was suspicious of disloyalty to the government.
 - Such as ex-nobles, clergy, members of other political parties and even members of his own party who disagreed with his methods.
- Robespierre's government introduced laws for placing a [maximum ceiling on wages and prices](#).
- However, his policies were so persistent that even his supporters began to demand moderation.
- Finally, the reign of terror ended when Robespierre was convicted by a court.
 - In 1794, he was arrested and on the next day sent to the guillotine.

A Directory Rules France:

- Again, wealthier middle class took over the power.
- They introduced the new constitution in which non propertied men could not vote.
- New constitution provided for two elected legislative councils.

- Also, they appointed a Directory, an executive made up of five members.
 - It was because they did not want concentration of power in a one man executive as under the Jacobins.

Downfall of Directory:

1. **Political instability of Directory:** The Directors often clashed with the legislative councils, who then sought to dismiss them.
2. **Rise of military Dictator:** The above reason paved the way for the rise of a military dictator, Napoleon Bonaparte.

4. Did Women have a Revolution?

- From the very beginning women were active participants in the events.
 - **For Example:** [Olympe de Gouges](#) who was a politically active lady protested against the biased constitution. She wrote 'Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen'. Also, she criticized the Jacobin government for forcibly closing down women's clubs.
- They brought many changes in the French society.
 - Revolutionary women demanded the same political rights and formed their own political groups.
 - In order to get access in the education system, they asked to make schooling compulsory for girls.
 - Moreover, they led the demand for 'no marriage against will'.
 - They worked towards changing the system of marriage and Divorce. As a result, marriage became contract based and divorce became legal which could be filed by both women and men.
- Although, women got voting rights in 1946.

5. The Abolition of Slavery:

Atlantic Triangular Slave Trade: It was a triangular pattern trading system in which slaves were sent overseas to work in plantations. It operated between Europe, Africa and the Americas.

- The colonies in the Caribbean- Martinique, Guadeloupe and San Domingo- were important suppliers of commodities such as tobacco, indigo, sugar and coffee.
- However, there was a shortage of willing laborers from Europe. So, the trading of slaves from African colonies became common.

Convention of 1794: In 1794, Jacobin government brought some changes and abolition of Slavery was one of them. Although, soon after the invasion of Napoleon, the system changed.

Note: The slaves in the French colonies became free from slavery in 1848.

6. The Revolution and Everyday Life:

After the revolution of 1789, many changes came into the lives of people. Two most important changes were:-

1. The abolition of censorship.
2. Freedom of speech and expression.

Conclusion: The French people suffered losses, saw bad governance and instability. They began revolutions in order to abolish the despotic rule of the monarch, but unfortunately, ended up living under the dictatorship of Napoleon. However, their efforts did not go in vain. They left a long lasting impact on other European countries. Also, inspired people throughout the world with the ideas of Liberty and democratic rights.

Note: *Tipu Sultan and Rammohan Roy are two examples of individuals who responded to the ideas coming from revolutionary France.*

Category

1. Class 9th

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