

Introduction:

French revolution started in 1789. The series of events started by the middle class shook the upper classes. The people revolted against the cruel regime of monarchy. The revolution put forward the ideas of liberty, fraternity and equality.

The revolution began on 14th July, 1789 with the storming of the fortress – prison the Bastille.

The Bastille – the fortress prison was hated by all, because it stood for the despotic power of the king.

The fortress was demolished.

Causes of the French Revolution:

Social Cause:

French Society during the Late 18th Century.

The term ‘old regime’ is usually used to describe the society and institutions of France before 1789.

The society was divided in to three estates.

1. 1st Estate: Clergy [Group of persons involved in church matter]

2. 2nd Estate: Nobility [Persons who have high rank in state administration]

3. 3rd Estate: [Comprises of Big business men, merchants, Court officials, lawyers, Peasants and artisans, landless labour, servants]

First two classes were exempted from paying taxes. They enjoyed privileges by birth. Nobility classes also enjoyed feudal privileges.

Only the members of the third estate had to pay taxes to the state.

Direct tax called taille and also a number of indirect taxes which were charged on articles of everyday consumption like salt or tobacco.

A tax called Tithes was also collected by the church from peasants.

Economic Causes:

Subsistence Crisis:

The population of France rose from about 23 million in 1715 to 28 million in 1789.

This increased the demand for the food grains. However, production could not keep pace with the demand which ultimately increased the prices of the food grains.

Most workers work as labourers in the workshops and they didn't see increase in their wages.

Situation became worse whenever drought or hail reduced the harvest.

This led to the scarcity of food grains or subsistence crisis which started occurring frequently during old regime.

Political Cause:

Louis XVI came into the power in 1774 and found empty treasury.

Long years of war had drained the financial resources of France.

Under Louis XVI, France helped the 13 American Colonies to gain their independence from the common enemy, Britain which added more than a billion livre to a debt that had already risen to more than 2 billion livres.

To meet its regular expenses the state was forced to increase taxes.

Growing Middle Class:

The 18th Century witnessed the emergence of social groups, termed the middle class who earned their wealth through overseas trade, from manufacturing of goods and profession.

This class was educated believed that no group in society should be privileged by birth.

They were inspired by the ideas of the various philosophers and became a matter of talk intensively for these classes in salons and coffee – houses and spread among people through books and newspapers.

The American constitution and its guarantee of individual rights was an important example for political thinking in France.

Philosophers and their contribution in revolution:

John Locke: Two Treatises of Government in which he criticized the doctrine of divine and absolute right of the monarch.

Jean Jacques Rousseau: Social contract in which he proposed a form a government based on a social contract between people and their representatives.

Montesquieu: The spirit of the Laws. In which he proposed a division of power within the government between the legislative, the executive and the judiciary.

The outbreak of the Revolution:

Louis XVI called an assembly of the Estates General to pass his proposals to increase taxes on 5th May, 1789.

The first and second estates sent 300 representatives each, who were seated in rows facing each other on two sides, while the 600 members of the third estate had to stand to the back.

The third estate was represented by its more prosperous and educated members only while peasant, artisans and women were denied entry to the assembly.

Voting in the Estates General in the past had been conducted according to the principle that each estate had one vote and same practice to be continued this time. But members of the 3rd estate demanded individual voting right, where each member would have one vote.

After rejection of this proposal by the king, members of the 3rd estate walked out of the assembly in protest.

On 20th June, the representatives of the 3rd estate assembled in the hall of an indoor tennis court in the grounds of Versailles where they declared themselves a National Assembly and vowed to draft a constitution for France that would limit the powers of the monarch.

Severe winter destroyed the food crops which resulted in increase in the price.

At the same time, the king ordered the troops to move to Paris. 14 July, the agitated crowd stormed and destroyed the Bastille.

Due to fear, peasant in several districts affected the castle of nobles, looted hoarded grain and burnt down documents containing records of manorial dues.

Large number of noble fled from their houses to neighbouring countries.

Louis XVI finally recognized the National Assembly and accepted the constitution.

France becomes a constitutional Monarchy:

* The National Assembly completed the draft of the constitution in 1791 which main object was to limit the powers of the monarch.

The powers were now separated and assigned to different institutions like the legislature, executive and judiciary which made France a constitutional monarchy.

Active citizens comprises of only men above 25 years of age who paid taxes equal to at least 3 days of a labourer's wage.

France Abolishes Monarchy and becomes a Republic:

Louis XVI had signed the constitution, but he entered into secret negotiations with the King of Prussia.

Rulers of other neighbouring countries too were worried by the developments in France and made plans to send troops to stop the revolutionary events taking place.

Before this could happen, the National Assembly voted in April 12 1792 to declare war against Prussia and Austria.

The revolutionary wars brought economic difficulties to the people.

Political clubs were established by the people wished to discuss the government policies and plan their own forms of each.

Political clubs sprang up to discuss government policies and plan their actions.

Jacobin club grew in popularity. It included less prosperous sections of society.

Maximilian Robespierre led the club.

An insurrection was planned by Jacobins. King's place was stormed royal guards massacred and king was held as hostage.

Assembly voted to imprison the royal family and held elections with men above 21 years enjoying voting rights.

Newly elected assembly called convention was set by abolishing monarchy and declaring France as Republic.

Later king and the queen were executed.

The Reign of Terror:

Robespierre followed the policy of severe control and eliminated the incomes of Republic.

Guilty were guillotined.

Policies by Robespierre:

Robespierre ceiled the wages and prices.

Rationing of meat and bread.

Peasants sell their grains to government at fixed prices.

Shutting down of churches and converting them into barracks and offices.

His policies were too harsh to be followed.

A Directory Rules France:

Fall of Jacobins gave way to prosperous middle class to capture power.

New constitution took away voting rights of non – propertied sections of society.

State to have two legislative councils which would appoint an executive made of five members.

It further gave way to Napoleon a military dictator.

Did women have a Revolution:

Women actively participated in events that brought important changes in French society.

Being disappointed by the constitution of 1791 they demanded right to vote, elected to Assembly and hold public offices.

It was in 1946 when women won right to vote.

The abolition of slavery:

Abolition of slavery was one of the revolutionary social reports by Jacobins.

Napoleon reintroduced slavery in 1804.

It was in 1848 when slavery was abolished in French colonies.

The Revolution and Everyday life:

Various laws were passed by the revolutionary governments to practice liberty and equality in everyday life.

Censorship was abolished.

Freedom of speech and expression became a natural right.

View and ideas travelled widely into the countryside.

Plays, songs and festive processions that contained ideas like liberty, justice and philosophy widely attracted educated people.

Rise and fall of Napoleon:

Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself in 1804.

Initially he was seen as a modernizer and liberator.

Introduced laws like protection of private property, uniform system of weights and measures etc.

Later come to be viewed as invader.

Defeated in 1815 at Waterloo.

Legacy of French Revolution:

Ideas propagated by the French Revolutions like liberty and democratic rights were widely popular to Europe.

Colonies got influenced by the idea of freedom and worked to get out of foreign captivity.

In India too, the ideas spread by French Revolution became a benchmark to attain freedom from British rule.