

French Revolution Reading Material

Introduction

French revolution started in 1789. The series of events started by the middle class shaken the upper classes. The people revolted against the cruel regime of monarchy. This 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 Eighteenth Century

The term 'Old Regime' is usually used to describe the society and institutions of France before 1789.

The society was divided into three estates.

1. 1st Estate: Clergy (Group of persons involved in church matters)
2. 2nd Estate: Nobility (Persons who have high rank in state administration)
3. 3rd Estate: (Comprises of Big businessmen, 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 Tithe was also collected by the church from the peasants.

- Clergy and Nobility were 10% of the population but possessed 60% of lands. Third Estate was 90% of

the population but possessed 40% of the lands.

Economic Cause

Subsistence Crisis

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

- This increased the demand for the foodgrains. However, production could not keep pace with the

demand which ultimately increased the prices of the foodgrains.

- 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 foodgrains or Subsistence Crisis which started occurring frequently old regime.

- 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 thirteen American colonies to gain their independence from the

common enemy, Britain which added more than a billion livres to a debt that had already risen to

more than 2 billion livres.

- An extravagant court at the immense palace of Versailles also cost a lot.
- To meet its regular expenses, such as the cost of maintaining an army, the court, running government offices or universities, the state was forced to increase taxes.

Growing Middle Class

- The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of social groups, termed the middle class, who earned their wealth through overseas trade, from manufacturing of goods and professions.
- This class was educated believed that no group in society should be privileged by birth.
- They were inspired by the ideas put forward by 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 thinkers in France.

Philosophers and their contribution in revolution

- John Locke: (written a book named 'Two Treatises of Government') in which he criticized the doctrine of the divine and absolute right of the monarch.
- Jean Jacques Rousseau (written a book named 'Social Contract') in which he proposed a form of government based on a social contract between people and their representatives.
- Montesquieu (written a book named '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 at the back.
- The third estate was represented by its more prosperous and educated members only while peasants, 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 third estate demanded individual voting right, where each member would have one vote.
- After rejection of this proposal by the king, members of the third estate walked out of the assembly in protest.
- On 20th June, the representatives of the third 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.
- Mirabeau, a noble and Abbé Sieyès, a priest led the third estate.
- While the National Assembly was busy at Versailles drafting a constitution, the rest of France was in

trouble.

- Severe winter destroyed the food crops which resulted in increase in the prices. The bakers also hoarded supplies of breads for making greater profit.
- After spending hours in long queues at the bakery, crowds of angry women stormed into the shops.
- At the same time, the king ordered troops to move into Paris. On 14 July, the agitated crowd stormed and destroyed the Bastille.
- In the countryside rumours spread from village to village that the lords of the manor were on their way to destroy the ripe crops through their hired gangs.
- Due to fear, peasants in several districts attacked the castle of nobles, looted hoarded grain and burnt down documents containing records of manorial dues.
- Large numbers of noble fled from their homes and many migrated to neighbouring countries.
- Louis XVI finally recognised the National Assembly and accepted the constitution.
- On 4th August, 1789, France passed the law for abolishing the feudal system of obligations and taxes.
- The member of clergy were also forced to give up their privileges.
- Tithes were abolished and lands owned by the Church were confiscated.

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 – the legislature, executive and judiciary which made France a constitutional monarchy.
- The Constitution of 1791 gave the power of making laws in the hands of National Assembly, which was indirectly elected.
- The National Assembly was elected by a group of electors, which were chosen by active citizens.
- 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.
- The remaining men and all women were classed as passive citizens who had no voting rights.

France Constitution at that time

- The Constitution began with a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.
- Rights such as the right to life, freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, equality before law, were given to each human being by birth and could not be taken away.
- It was the duty of the state to protect each citizen's natural rights.
- Various Political Symbols:
 - The broken chain: stands for the act of becoming free.
 - The bundle of rods or fasces: Show strength lies in unity.
 - The eye within a triangle radiating light: The all-seeing eye stands for knowledge.
 - Sceptre: Symbol of royal power.
 - Snake biting its tail to form a ring: Symbol of Eternity.
 - Red Phrygian cap: Cap worn by a slave upon becoming free.
 - Blue-white-red: The national colours 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.

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 1792 to declare war against Prussia and Austria.
- Thousands of volunteers joined the army from the provinces to join the army.
- People saw this war as a war of the people against kings and aristocracies all over Europe.
- The patriotic song Marseillaise, composed by the poet Roget de L'Isle was sung for the first time by volunteers from Marseilles as they marched into Paris which is now the national anthem of France.
- The revolutionary wars brought losses and economic difficulties to the people.
- The Constitution of 1791 gave political rights only to the richer sections of society.
- Political clubs were established by the people who wished to discuss government policies and plan their own forms of action.
- The most successful of these clubs was that of the Jacobins.
- The members of the Jacobin club belonged mainly to the less prosperous sections of society such as small shopkeepers, artisans as well as servants and daily-wage workers. Their leader was Maximilian Robespierre.
- Jacobins start wearing long striped trousers and came to be known as the sans-culottes, literally meaning those without knee breeches.
- In the summer of 1792 the Jacobins planned a revolt of a large number of the people of Paris who were angered by the short supplies and high prices of food.
- On August 10, they stormed the Palace of the Tuileries, massacred the king's guards and held the king himself as hostage for several hours.
- Later the Assembly voted to imprison the royal family. Elections were held.
- From now on all men of 21 years and above, regardless of wealth, got the right to vote.
- The newly elected assembly was called the Convention.
- On 21st September 1792, it abolished the monarchy and declared France a republic.
- Louis XVI was sentenced to death by a court on the charge of treason.
- The queen Marie Antoinette met with the same fate shortly after.

The Reign of Terror

- The period from 1793 to 1794 is referred to as the Reign of Terror as Robespierre followed a policy of severe control and punishment.
- All his enemies, Ex-nobles, clergy, members of other political parties, even members of his own party who did not agree with his methods were arrested, imprisoned and guillotined.
- Robespierre's government issued laws placing a maximum ceiling on wages and prices.

- Meat and bread were rationed.
- Peasants were forced to transport their grain to the cities and sell it at prices fixed by the government.
- The use of more expensive white flour was forbidden and all citizens were required to eat the equality bread, a loaf made of whole wheat.
- Instead of the traditional Monsieur (Sir) and Madame (Madam) all French men and women were addressed as Citoyen and Citoyenne (Citizen).
- Churches were shut down and their buildings converted into barracks or offices.
- Robespierre pursued his policies so harshly that even his supporters began to demand moderation.
- Finally, he was convicted by a court in July 1794, arrested and on the next day sent to the guillotine.
(The guillotine is a device consisting of two poles and a blade with which a person is beheaded. It was named after Dr. Guillotin who invented it.)

A Directory Rules France

- A new constitution was introduced which denied the vote to non-propertied sections of society.
- It provided for two elected legislative councils which then appointed a Directory, an executive made up of five members.
- The Directors often clashed with the legislative councils, who then sought to dismiss them.
- The political instability of the Directory paved the way for the rise of a military dictator, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Women Revolution

- From the very beginning women were active participants in revolution.
- They hoped that their involvement would pressurise the revolutionary government to introduce measures to improve their lives.
- Most women of the third estate had to work for a living as laundresses, sellers, domestic servants in the houses of prosperous people.
- Most women did not have access to education or job training.
- To discuss and voice their interests women started their own political clubs and newspapers.
- The Society of Revolutionary and Republican Women was the most famous of them.
- Women were disappointed that the Constitution of 1791 reduced them to passive citizens.
- They demanded the right to vote, to be elected to the Assembly and to hold political office.
- The revolutionary government did introduce laws that helped improve the lives of women.
- By creation of state schools, schooling was made compulsory for all girls.
- Their fathers could no longer force them into marriage against their will.
- Marriage was made into a contract entered into freely and registered under civil law.
- Divorce was made legal, and could be applied for by both women and men.
- Women could now train for jobs, could become artists or run small businesses.
- During the Reign of Terror, the new government issued laws ordering closure of women's clubs and banning their political activities.
- Many prominent women were arrested and a number of them executed.

- It was finally in 1946 that women in France won the right to vote.

The Abolition of Slavery

- The unwillingness of Europeans to go and work in the colonies in the Caribbean which were important suppliers of commodities such as tobacco, indigo, sugar and coffee created a shortage of labour on the plantations. Thus, the slave trade began in the seventeenth century.
 - French merchants sailed from their ports to the African coast, where they bought slaves from local chieftains.
 - Branded and shackled, the slaves were packed tightly into ships for the three-month long voyage across the Atlantic to the Caribbean.
- There they were sold to plantation owners. The exploitation of slave labour made it possible to meet the growing demand in European markets for sugar, coffee, and indigo.
- Port cities like Bordeaux and Nantes owed their economic prosperity to the flourishing slave trade.
- The National Assembly held long debates for about whether the rights of man should be extended to all French subjects including those in the colonies.
- But it did not pass any laws, fearing opposition from businessmen whose incomes depended on the slave trade.
- Jacobin regime in 1794, abolished slavery in the French colonies.
- However, ten years later, Napoleon reintroduced slavery.
- Slavery was finally abolished in French colonies in 1848.

The Revolution and Everyday Life

- After the storming of the Bastille in the summer of 1789 was the abolition of censorship.
- The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen proclaimed freedom of speech and expression to be a natural right.
- Newspapers, pamphlets, books and printed pictures flooded the towns of France from where they travelled rapidly into the countryside and described and discussed the events and changes taking place in France.
- Plays, songs and festive processions attracted large numbers of people which was one way they could grasp and identify with ideas such as liberty or justice.

Rise of Napoleon Bonaparte

- After the end of reign of terror, directory created political instability.
- In 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself Emperor of France.
- He conquered many neighbouring countries and placed members of his family on the crown
- Napoleon saw his role as a moderniser of Europe.
- He introduced many laws such as the protection of private property and a uniform system of weights and measures provided by the decimal system.
- Initially, many welcomed Napoleon as a liberator who would bring freedom for the people. But soon the Napoleonic armies came to be viewed everywhere as an invading force.
- He was finally defeated at Waterloo in 1815.

Legacy of the French Revolution

- 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.
- Later, these ideas were adopted by Indian revolutionary strugglers, Tipu Sultan and Rammohan Roy also.