

Chapter 1

The French Revolution

❖ French Society during the Late Eighteenth Century

- 1774: *Louis XVI* of the Bourbon family of kings ascended the throne of France.
- Under Louis XVI, France helped America in gaining their independence from Britain.
- France was experiencing financial instability due to the long years of wars fought by her and the cost of maintaining an extravagant court at the palace of Versailles.
- Taxes were increased for meeting the expenses of maintaining an army, the court and running government offices or universities.
- The French Society was divided into three estates—
 - First Estate: **Clergy**
 - Second Estate: **Nobility**
 - Third Estate: **Big businessmen, merchants, court officials, lawyers, peasants, landless labourers and servants.**
- The first two estates enjoyed certain privileges by birth which also excluded them from paying any taxes to the French government.
- The members of the third estate had to pay taxes to the State that included a direct tax called *taille* and a number of indirect taxes levied on the articles of daily consumption.
- Peasants served in the fields and houses of the privileged classes and they also built the roads and served in the army.
- The Church collected taxes known as *tithes* from the peasants.
- The price of the food grains increased with an increase in the demand for the same.
- Fixed-waged workers could not afford the expensive food grains. Hence, the gap between the poor and the rich widened.

❖ A growing Middle Class

- 18th century: France witnessed the emergence of social groups and middle class, who earned through an expanding overseas trade and from the manufacture of goods such as woollen and silk textiles.
- Philosophers such as John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau envisaged a society based on freedom and equal laws and opportunities for all.

- Locke refuted the doctrine of the divine and absolute rights of the monarch.
- Rousseau proposed a form of government based on a social contract between people and their representatives.
- Montesquieu proposed a division of power within the government between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary.

❖ **The Outbreak of the Revolution**

- The **Estates General** was a political body which had the representatives of all three estates.
- **5th May, 1789**: Louis XVI called an assembly of the Estates General for passing proposals for new taxes.
- The first and the second estates sent 300 representatives each and the third estate had 600 members.
- The members of the third estate demanded that the voting must be conducted by the assembly as a whole, where each member would have one vote.
- **20th June, 1789**: The third estate declared them as the **National Assembly** and swore to draft a constitution for France that would limit the powers of the monarch.
- *Mirabeau* and *Abbe Sieyes* led the third estate.
- **14th July, 1789**: The fortress prison of Bastille was destroyed by the crowd, protesting against the increasing prices of essential commodities.
- Rumours spread saying that the *manor* had hired bands of brigands who would destroy their ripe crops.
- Peasants in several districts attacked *chateaux* with hoes and pitchforks.
- A large number of nobles fled from their homes and migrated to the neighbouring countries.
- Louis XVI finally recognized the National Assembly and agreed that the constitution will check his powers thereafter.
- **4th August, 1789**: The National Assembly abolished the feudal system, feudal privileges and taxes. Members of the 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**

- **1791**: Constitution drafted.
- The Constitution vested the power of making laws in the National Assembly.
- The members of the National Assembly were indirectly elected; the citizens voted for a group of electors, who in turn chose the Assembly.

- Only men above 25 years of age who paid taxes equal to at least 3 days of a labourer's wage were given the status of active citizens and were allowed to vote.
- The Constitution also began with a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens.
- Rights such as the right to live, freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, equality before law, were established as 'natural and inalienable' rights.
- Symbols to convey the content of the Declaration of rights:

Broken chain	Freedom
Bundle of rods or fasces	Strength in unity
Eye with a triangle radiating light	Knowledge
Sceptre	Royal power
Snake biting its tail to form a ring	Eternity
Red Phrygian cap	Freedom
Blue, white, red	National colours of France
Winged woman	Law
Law tablet	Equality before law

❖ France Abolishes Monarchy and Becomes a Republic

- **1792:** The National Assembly voted for declaration of war against Prussia and Austria.
- Revolutionary wars brought losses and economic difficulties to the people.
- Large sections of people continued with the revolution and formed numerous political clubs such as the **Jacobins**.
 - The Jacobin club belonged mainly to the less prosperous sections of the society.
 - **Maximilian Robespierre** was the leader of the Jacobin club.
 - Jacobins wore long striped trousers as opposed to the nobles who wore knee breeches. They also wore a red cap to symbolize liberty.
- **10th August, 1792:** The Jacobins entered the Palace of the Tuileries, massacred the king's guards and held the king as hostage for several hours.
- The Assembly voted for imprisonment of the royal family.
- Elections were held and all men of 21 years and above, regardless of wealth got the right to vote.
- The newly elected assembly was called the **Convention**.
- **21st September, 1792:** The Convention abolished the monarchy and declared France a republic.
- **21st January, 1793:** Louis XVI was executed publicly at the Place de la Concorde. Queen Marie Antoinette met with the same fate shortly after.

❖ The Reign of Terror

- **1793-1794:** Known as the Reign of Terror.
- Jacobins under Robespierre practiced a policy of severe control and repression.
- Those suspected as the 'enemies' of the republic were arrested, imprisoned and then tried by a revolutionary tribunal. These included ex-nobles, clergymen, members of other political parties and those who criticized the Jacobin's rule.
- They were guillotined if the court found them guilty.
- Robespierre's government imposed a maximum ceiling on wages and prices.
- Meat and bread were rationed.
- Peasants were forced to sell their grain at the prices fixed by the government.
- All citizens were required to eat the *pain d'egalite* (equality bread) and discard the use of expensive white flour.
- All French men and women were henceforth called *Citoyen* and *Citoyenne* not anymore, *Monsieur* and *Madame*.
- Churches were shut down and their buildings converted into barracks or offices.
- **July, 1794:** Robespierre was arrested and guillotined the next day.

❖ **A Directory Rules France**

- The fall of the Jacobin government allowed the wealthier middle classes to seize power.
- A new constitution was introduced.
- Voting right to the non-propertied sections of the society was denied.
- The new constitution provided for two elected legislative councils.
- These councils appointed an executive consisting of five members, called the **Directory**.
- The Directory was formed for avoiding the concentration of power.
- Differences arose between the Directory and the legislative councils which paved the way for the rise of a military dictator, Napoleon Bonaparte.

❖ **Role of Women**

- Women had to work for a living and also had to take care of their families.
- Women were paid lower wages as compared to men.
- Women started their own political clubs and newspapers such as 'The Society of Revolutionary and Republican Women'.
- They demanded for equal political rights.
- The revolutionary government introduced state schools. Schooling was made compulsory for all girls, marriage could not be forced upon and divorce was made legal.

- During the Reign of Terror, laws were issued for closing women's clubs and banning their political activities.
- **1946:** Women in France won the right to vote.

❖ **The Abolition of Slavery**

- A triangular slave trade took place between Europe, Africa and America.
- Slaves were bought from the local chieftains of Africa and were sold to the plantation owners in the Caribbean.
- 1794: The Convention legislated to free all slaves in the French overseas possessions. However, Napoleon reintroduced slave trade after some years.
- **1848:** Slavery was abolished in the French colonies.

❖ **The Revolution and Everyday Life**

- Censorship was abolished in France. Books, newspapers and plays could now be read and performed without the approval of the censors of the king.
- The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizens proclaimed freedom of speech and expression to be a natural right.
- Newspapers, pamphlets, books and printed pictures flooded both French towns and countryside.

❖ **Rule of Napoleon**

- **1804:** Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself Emperor of France.
- Napoleon saw himself as a moderniser of Europe. He introduced laws such as the protection of property and a uniform system of weights and measures provided by the decimal system.
- Napoleonic army was initially viewed to be a liberating force but soon it was seen as an invading force.
- **1815:** Napoleon was defeated in the **Battle of Waterloo**.
- The French ideas of liberty and democratic rights spread to the rest of Europe and inspired many individuals and societies.

Contribute to this Revision Note:

If you find anything of importance missing from this note, email it to us at revision-notes@meritnation.com, and we'll add it to this note under your name!