**Notes: - History, Causes & Events of French Revolution**

**Introduction**

The French Revolution of 1789 had far-reaching effects on the social and political life of people. The revolutionary principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity generated a new political force, namely, dynamic nationalism, which first swept France and was responsible for the overthrow of absolute monarchy and the privileges of the feudal lords. In its wake it brought new ideas and conceptions which made drastic changes in realm of politics, law and government. The revolution shook France between 1787 and 1799 and reached its first climax there in 1789. During this period, French citizens razed and redesigned their country’s political landscape, uprooting centuries old institutions such as absolute monarchy and feudal system. The disruption was caused by widespread discontent with the French monarchy and the poor economic policies of Louis XVI, who met his death by guillotine as did his wife Marie Antoinette.

**A Monarchy in Crisis**

When Louis XIV was on his death bed, he had recognized the inefficacy of war as a mean to realize his aims. He had, in the process of achieving his ambitions involved France in series of war, had taxed his people to their utmost capacity and drained away the wealth of nation and had brought untold misery to them. So when he was nearing his end he called his great-grandson, the future Louis XV and advised him to take a lesson from his failures and to wage any more wars and to relieve the people from the burden of taxation. But he and his successor Louis XVI unheeded the advice and gradually the political, social and economic conditions so degenerated that the situation get out of control and precipitated a great Revolution which brought untold misery to millions of people and uprooted numerous families and wars, calamitous to the monarchy which involved France in long and bloody wars. As the 18th century drew to close, France costly involvement in the American Revolution and extravagant spending by Louis XVI and his predecessor had left the country on the brink of bankruptcy. In the fall of 1786, Louis XVI controller general, Charles Alexander de Calonne, proposed a financial reform package that included a universal land tax from which the privileged classes would no longer be exempt. (Dayal, 1989)

**Causes of French Revolution**

Let us now discuss the causes of the French Revolution. For the sake of convenience we divide it into four categories.

* Social
* Political
* Intellectual
* Economical

**Social Causes**

France was divided into three Estates or Classes

* The Clergy
* The Nobles
* The Commoners

The first two classes were called the “privileged” classes and the third was the under-privileged class.

**Privileges of Clergy**

The privileges of the clergy dated back to medieval times when the Church was supposed to be the guardian of the “souls” of the people and looked after their education and tended the weak and invalid. In the lieu of spiritual service the clergymen were granted large estates and the Church owned a good deal of landed property. In the 16th 17th 18th centuries the name of the Church had suffered much on account of the corruption and vices of the clergymen and the consequent Reformation movement, yet the clergymen in the 18th century still enjoyed their old privileges and influence. To others who wished to achieve position and influence the Church was the only avenue for achieving this, and ambitious people joined the religious order. In the social and political matters the clergymen always made common cause with the noble and all attempts to impose taxes on them were resisted bitterly.

**Privileges of the Nobles**

The nobles in France formed a hereditary caste and unlike England, the sons of French nobles kept themselves aloof from the commoners and were jealous of their rights. They enjoyed a numbers of privileges which dated back to the heydays of feudalism and though Richelieu and Mazarin had deprived them much of their political power, their privileges were still intact. The nobles often monopolized trade and were extremely rich and lived in a grand style. They did not pay any direct taxes and were exempted from a number of indirect ones. The nobles could be classified into big nobles and lesser nobles.The former usually lived at court and vied with one another in leading a luxurious and licentious life and in trying to win the king’s favour. The more money they could fleece, the greater was their own share. They perpetrated all sorts of atrocities on the helpless peasants who could not even appeal to the nobles against them.

The lesser nobles mostly lived in idle, gay and purposeless life on their estates and contributed very little the economic or political progress of the country. They were satisfied with an easygoing life, enjoyed shooting and hunting. They have same privileges as big nobles and exempted from taxation and other burdens from the masses groaned.

**The Miseries of Masses**

The masses comprised as the third estate, were composed of peasants and the new middle class “bourgeoisie” both belonged to the under-privileged classes

1. **The Peasants**

The peasants were subjected to “triple taxation” they paid taxes to the king, to the nobles and to clergy. The king claimed both direct and indirect taxes. The direct taxes comprised the “taille” or the land tax, a poll tax per head and income tax which amounted to one-twentieth of the peasant’s income. The indirect taxes comprised salt tax, customs and excise duties and forced labor on the roads.

1. **The rise of the Bourgeoisie**

A new middle class had steadily emerged through the last two or three centuries. It consisted of the bourgeoisie or towns- people who controlled commerce and industries and worked for a living in some profession or the other. They mostly controlled all industry through guilds. They had become fairly rich on account of overseas trade in tobacco, wine, spices, tea, coffee and cotton with the colonies and quite a few of them could compete very favorably in wealth with the nobles. But they belonged to the underprivileged class and were subjected to taxation. They were inspired by the French philosophers and the successful revolt of the American colonies against Great Britain and by their “Declaration of Independence”. They attacked the privileges of nobles and were in sympathy with the peasants. (Dayal, 1989)

**Economic Causes**

Though there had been considerable economic and agricultural development in the 17th century under Richelieu and Colbert, agriculture was still backward and quite often they were famines and food riots. King Louis XVI had just spent millions of francs helping the American colonies fight against the England. Because of this and others debts, just the interest payments on loans took up over half of the France’s economy. Then in 1788 France was hit by a terrible drought that nearly destroyed the entire year’s harvest and the jobless, starving people began to riot. (Knowles, 1919)

**Political Causes**

**Degeneration of Monarchy**

Political condition after Louis XIV was far from happy. The monarchy though still absolute had degenerated in many respects. Louis XV was an easy-going man, pleasure-loving monarch whose court was steeped in immorality and licentiousness. He was deeply under the influence of mistress like Madame de Pompadour who was responsible for the Austrian alliance in 1756 and all its evil results in terms of loss of colonies and foreign commerce and prestige.

Louis XVI who succeeded him in 1774 was weak-willed through religious, pious, kind and moral. He lacked all those qualities of leadership and kingship which were required at this crucial time in history of France, when the king was faced with a grave financial and political crisis. He was too much under the influence of his young and beautiful queen, the Austrian princess, Marie Antoinette, who was intensely hated by the French people because she was foreigner. She had no love for the French people and was extravagant and unsympathetic. While France was passing through a serious financial crisis and was faced with the problem of food, she was lavishly spending money on her pleasures and was absolutely unconcerned about the miseries of people. The monarchy was, in short, incompetent and utterly unable to solve the question of the nobles’ privileges and the problem of food and thus allowed the condition to drift and deteriorate.

**Centralized Government**

The administration had been highly centralized in the 17th century and continued to be so in the 18th. Everything in the state was decides by the council at Versailles which hardly any time to devote to the affairs of the state. Too much centralization had deprived local officials of all initiative and unnecessary delay was caused by references to the central government even over trivial matters.

**Influence of American Revolution**

The revolt of the American colonies against Great Britain had a tremendous impact on the minds of the Frenchman. France had joined the colonies against England in the war of American Independence and the French soldiers under Lafayette had fought in America and defeated the English. The success of revolt of the colonies and their Declaration of the Independence and a subsequent adoption of a new constitution based on the principles of equality and liberty and on the principles of the separation of powers as enunciated by Montesquieu deeply influenced the French soldiers returning home after the war and the French people through them.

**Intellectual Causes**

The writings of philosophers had a tremendous impact on the minds of people and created a revolutionary awakening in their minds and formed intellectual creed of the French Revolution. The common man was now convinced that the Church and State had made an unholy alliance to exploit him and so both of them should be revolutionized. In creating intellectual awakening in France the following philosophers played a notable part.

**Voltaire**

He was a great philosopher, historian, poet, dramatist and satirist of his age and was a very widely known. He ridiculed Church by means of his sarcasm and satire, and completely shook people’s faith in it. He indirectly undermined their faith in the theory of the Divine Right of Kings. His writings had a tremendous effect on millions of people not only in France but in whole Europe

**Montesquieu**

He was more of a political philosopher then a Deist. He was deeply influenced by the English culture and political institutions. He attributed the comparative happiness and prosperity of the English people to their liberal constitution and advocated the adoption of the similar institution in France. He ardently supported the principle of the Separation of Powers, the independence of the three organs of State, the Executive, the Legislature and Judiciary from one another

**Financial Causes**

Unfortunately both the King and the nobles failed to appreciate the gravity of the financial crisis and did not realize that if the Ship of State foundered on the rock of financial bankruptcy, the nobles would also sink along with the monarch. The noble remains adamant, and the King continued to vacillate. Minister after minister was appointed to improve the financial condition but without the cooperation of monarch and the nobles the crisis continued to deepen.

**Turgot as Finance Minister**

Louis XVI appointed Turgot as Finance Minister. Hopes rose high, as he was a friend of Voltaire who wielded considerable emotional influence on the people. He abolish the guilds and to introduce free corn trade but he was strongly opposed by the nobles and the clergy so was dismissed in 1776.

**Jacques Necker**

He was great banker and financier and enjoyed the confidence of the moneyed class of France. But as he was a Protestant he was hated by the nobles. Yet he succeeded in raising loan to enable France to fight against England in war of American Independence. He issued a pamphlet entitled “Accounts rendered of the Financial Condition”. It mentioned the sources of income but at the same time it drew the attention of masses to the colossal expenditure at court. There was a hue ad cry by the masses against this so the King dismissed him.

**The States-General 1789**

The king decided to summon this medieval institution which had not been met since 1614. The State-General was an assembly of the three Estates, the nobles, the clergy and the masses. Whenever it was summoned, the three Estates met, deliberated and voted separately and the votes of any two Estates could outweigh the vote of third, irrespective of the strength of each estate..As always the clergy and nobles voted together against the masses. But the Third Estate was adamant and on 10 June 1789 it proclaimed itself a “National Assembly” and invited the other two Estates to join it. The King was opposed this move and shut the doors of hall where the meeting of the Third Estate to be held.

The King was frightened into submission and ordered that the three Estates could sit together and vote “by head”. Behind his outward submission, he was scheming to crush the Assembly and mob violence by force and under pressure of his courtiers, he dismissed Necker. Necker was popular in people and they hoped that he will be able to solve the financial as well as food problem. The Paris mob was infuriated and on the 14th of July stormed the “Bastille”, the symbol of “Bourbon Despotism”. This was hailed as the end of Absolutism and marked the beginning of the great French Revolution.

**Reign of Terror**

In June 1793, the Jacobins seized control of the National Convention from the moderate Girondins and instituted a series of radical measures, including establishment of a new calendar and the eradication of Christianity. They also unleashed the bloody Reign of Terror, a 10 month period in which suspected enemies of the revolution were guillotined by the thousands. Many of the killings were carried out under orders of Robespierre, who dominated the draconian Committee of Public Safety until his own execution on July 28, 1794. His death marked the beginning of the Thermidorian Reaction, a moderate phase in which the French people revolted against the Reign of Terror excesses.

**French Revolution Ends: Napoleon’s Rise**

On August 22, 1795, the National Convention, composed largely of Girondins who had survived the Reign of Terror, approved a new constitution that created a bicameral legislature for first time in France.

Executive power would lie in the hands of a five member Directory appointed by the parliament, Royalists and Jacobins protested the new regime but were swiftly silenced by the army, now led by a young and successful general named Napoleon Bonaparte.

On November 9, 1799, as frustration with the leadership reached a fever pitch, Bonaparte appointed himself as France’s first consul for the first time and the for the consul for life. The event marked the end of French Revolution and the beginning of Napoleonic era.

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