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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Study Material for students



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TOPIC: AMERICAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

AMERICAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

A. THE AGE OF REVOLUTIONS

Due to several reasons, Europe and America were seething with discontent from 1750 to 1850. This general discontent found expressions in a series of revolutions one after the other. People rebelled against the evils of colonialism and monarchical oppression. The upsurge of nationalism also contributed much for the outbreak of revolutions. The most noteworthy among the revolutions were the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. The last mentioned revolution might not be against any oppression, but it contained potent seeds of future revolutions such as communist revolution.

B. DEVELOPMENT OF 13 ENGLISH COLONIES:

American war of Independence was the first blow dealt to colonialism. Before recounting the causes and effects of the American Revolution, the growth of 13 English colonies in North America must be traced back. The British colonies sprang up on eastern sea-coast of the present U.S.A. These British settlements were promoted by chartered companies and were approved by the British crown. James Town in Virginia became the first English settlement in 1607. The main reasons for the English people to emigrate were trade and religion. Eventually there sprang up thirteen colonies namely New England, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Islands, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina, South-Carolina and Georgia.

As long as the threat of French expansion and the Red Indian Menace existed, the colonies needed the protection of British Government. But after the conclusion of Seven years' war in which the French were utterly defeated and eliminated, the colonies could no longer brook the unjust dominance of the British.

C. CAUSES OF AMERICAN REVOLUTION:

The causes of American Revolution can be enumerated

Under two headings namely

- 1) Fundamental causes
- 2) Immediate causes

1) Fundamental Causes:

a) American Nationalism: Notwithstanding that the English constituted the major ingredient in the settlers, the emigrants from all European countries intermingled with them. As a result of this amalgamation American nationalism emerged and naturally the Americans began to crave for Independence.

b) Attitude of British Government: The policy of British Government was based on the conviction that the colonies existed to support the mother country. This attitude caused widespread discontent in Americans.

c) English Mercantilism: The British merchants were interested in deriving benefits by adopting mercantilist policy in American colonies. This policy restricted the scope of colonial exports and imports. The colonies should serve as sources of raw materials and markets for manufactured goods. To put this theory into practice, the English passed a series of acts known as Navigation acts. According to one of these Acts, goods, coming to and leaving the colonies must be carried by the British ships only. The colonies could not tolerate these unjust Acts.

d) Molasses Act: In 1763, English passed the Molasses Act which placed high duties on molasses imported into New England from the West Indies which did not belong to England.

e) Weakness of the English: Though the English government was strong and effective at home, it was certainly weak and ineffective abroad. It could not enforce its laws in America. This evident weakness on its part encouraged the Americans to strike a blow for their independence.

2) IMMEDIATE CAUSES: There occurred some events which aggravated the ill will between the British Government and the Americans and ultimately caused War of Independence.

a) New colonial policy of England after the French and Indian wars Britain followed a new colonial policy and changed its attitude towards American colonies. She was saddled with a tremendous National Debt. In order to reimburse the empty treasury the British Government enforced the Navigation Acts very strictly on the Americans. Arbitrary taxes were imposed on them. Colonial officials were empowered to arrest any person.

b) The Sugar Act (1764): This replaced the old Molasses Act; The Sugar Act imposed duties on sugar, coffee and certain other commodities. Naturally, colonists resented the Sugar Act.

c) The Stamp Act (1765): To enhance revenue, the parliament the Stamp Act which made passed imperative that revenue it stamps were to be affixed to newspapers, pamphlets, legal documents, and business papers. The revenue thus realised was to be used for the defence of the colonies. A Americans expressed their opposition to this Act in many ways. They resorted to violent methods to face the British oppression. Delegates from nine colonies assembled in New York, and this is known as the Stamp Act Congress. It condemned the levy of taxes without representation in the British parliament.

d) Declaratory Act (1766): Not only in America but also in Britain, the Stamp Act evoked severe criticism. In the face of mounting opposition in Parliament and violence in colonies the Stamp Act was repealed in 1766. But it passed a Declaratory Act which duly asserted the principle of the sovereign right of parliament to tax the colonies.

e) Townshend's Bill for duties on tea etc the Finance minister of England introduced a fresh bill to raise duties on tea, glass, paper etc., imported into the colonies. At: Townshend. Same time, he ordered the suspension of the New York Assembly for not enforcing the Mutiny act of 1765. Immediately. A storm of protest rose in the colonies. The merchants of Boston. Philadelphia and New York boycotted British goods. Led by Samuel Adams, the Boston mob occasioned Boston Massacre.

e) Boston Tea party (Dec, 16, 1773): In face of terrible operations, Townshend Acts were also repealed. But the tax on tea was retained in order to assert its right to tax the colonies. To give vent to their antagonism to the imposition of that tax, the Americans in Boston threw all the chests of tea into the sea. This was popularly called the Boston Tea Party Enraged by this unruly act the British Government put Boston harbour under quarantine and coercive acts.

g) The personality of George III: At the bottom of these troubles was the king's attempt to direct the national policy. He made up his mind that he should be king in fact as well as in name. The violation of the Navigation Acts by the colonists enraged him. He determined to strictly enforce these laws. Thence, the colonists grew conscious of their fundamental right to complete independence.

D. DECLARATION AND WAR OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

1. Declaration of American Independence

a) The First continental congress (1774): The retaliatory measures of the coercive Acts were vehemently opposed and a committee of correspondence went on to build up agitation in all the colonies. Some kind of Assembly was needed to unify and direct colonial efforts. Accordingly, the first Continental congress met in September in Philadelphia. Selected delegates from all the colonies attended the Congress. After much discussion, the Congress adopted a "Declaration of Rights and grievances". The resolutions pleaded for 1) Taxation by local assemblies. 2) Repeal of the intolerable Acts. The congress assemblies. Undertook to boycott English goods and to stop all exports to England and to the West Indies. But the British Government adamantly increased restrictions on trade and more troops to the colonies.

b) Skirmishes at Lexington and Concord: The colonists took steps to prepare for war. Especially, the people arms and ammunition and trained of Massachusetts gathered minutemen to fight. In Boston, British (general sent troops arrived at Lexington, conflict ensued resulting in the death of minutemen, British troops advanced towards Concord and destroyed the ammunition dump. On its way back, the British troops suffered 250 casualties as they were fired upon by the colonists. These two skirmishes were regarded as the starting points of War of Independence.

d) Declaration of Independence (4 July, 1776): Thomas Jefferson, the Virginian delegate under instructions from the Congress, drafted a document that was to be known as the Declaration of Independence. The Congress unanimously accepted it. The Declaration of Independence, issued on 4 July 1776. The Declaration (totally dissolved the political allegiance between the thirteen colonies and the British crown. It was made clear that nothing short of a complete Independence would satisfy the colonists.

2. War of Independence:

a) Battle of Bunker Hill: The first battle in which the Americans exerted themselves heroically was the Battle of Bunker Hill. The British being

encouraged by the landing of a fresh division under General Howe attacked the patriot troops stationed at Bunker Hill near Boston. The Patriots, as the patriots were named by the British, took a stand and fought valiantly. This bloody encounter resulted in the death of more than a thousand of British soldiers. The loss of the patriots amounted to five hundred only. Bunker Hill was occupied by the British troops, the Battle of Bunker Hill exhibited the fighting qualities of the American Militia.

b) George Washington: The Americans found an able general in George Washington. Washington was a reputed General since 1775. In spite of many odds, he was able to recruit 25,000 soldiers. He was well known for his integrity, drive, determination and perseverance. His sterling qualities contributed to the success of the Americans.

c) French Aid to the Americans Deputed by the Congress, Benjamin Franklin contrived to induce some foreign countries like France, Spain and Holland to assist the American Revolution. Especially France played a decisive role by sending aid in the form of money, men and munitions. Further, the League of Armed Neutrals consisting of Russia, Denmark and Sweden assumed hostile attitude towards Britain.

d) The War: The war of American Independence dragged up to 1778. During this long period of desultory warfare, the Americans were subjected to untold misery. The British also were not free from anxiety. Since many people in England refused to be enlisted in the army, the British government was constrained to recruit mercenaries from South German states. Notwithstanding initial set-backs; Washington inflicted crushing defeat on the British at Trenton and Princeton. The British General, Burgoyne was defeated at the Battle of Saratoga. This defeat of the British brought a decisive in the American War-front in favour of the colonists. The surrender of Cornwallis, the British General at York town on October 19, 1781 practically ended the main aspect of the war. At last, Britain came to terms and signed the Treaty of Paris (1783) by which she recognised the independence of the 13 colonies,

c) Causes of British failure: Many causes can be cited to account for the failure of the British in the American War of independence. 1) The follies of King George III made the war unpopular even in England. To hire German troops was considered a tactical blunder on the part of the British. 2) The

vast distance between England and America put the British at a disadvantage 3) the foreign aid extended to the Americans worked against Britain. 4) The leadership of George Washington, in contrast with the British generals, led to the ultimate victory of the Americans.

E. RESULTS OF AMERICAN REVOLUTION

1) Birth of a new nation: The direct result from the American Revolution was the birth of a new nation in American Continent. Steeped in democratic principles, it is destined to become one of the super powers in world. It professes to uphold the lofty ideal of Liberty everywhere.

2) Delimitation of Territory: The Treaty of Paris, Defined the boundaries of the new nation which extended from the Atlantic to the Mississippi and from the Great Lakes to Florida. In course of time, it began westward expansion and touched the Pacific.

3) Impact French Revolution: The American Revolution provided inspiration to the French to revolt against the oppression of monarchical rule. The French volunteers, who, while assisting the Americans, had been imbued with the revolutionary ideals on returning to France, sowed the seeds of revolution on their native soil. Thus the war of American Independence can be said to have paved the way for the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.

4) Emergence of Federal Constitution: After achieving Independence, many wise Americans realised the necessity of a strong government which could permanently bind all the thirteen states together. Prolonged deliberations resulted in the acceptance of a Federal constitution. The new Federal Constitution came into being on 4th March, 1789. George Washington became the first President of United States of America.

5) Change in Britain's policies: Thereafter the policies of George III were discredited and royal interference in administration came to be resented. The much hated mercantilist theory was modified. The British politicians came to realise that "colonies are like fruits, and when they are ripe, they will fall off" This realisation exercised great influence on the subsequent policy of Britain towards its other colonies.