

**P.R. GOVERNMENT COLLEGE (A), KAKINADA**  
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**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY**

**Study Material for students**



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**TOPIC: FRENCH REVOLUTION**

## FRENCH REVOLUTION

### (French Revolution: Causes- Courses - Results)

#### A. CAUSES OF FRENCH REVOLUTION

The most important event that had lasting effect on subsequent history of mankind was the French Revolution. It occurred in 1789. Ever since ideals professed by that upsurge have such an impact on every field of human activity that they are reverberating in every unrest on earth. The main causes of the French Revolution were broadly divided under four headings.

- 1) Political Causes
- 2) Social Causes factors.
- 3) Economical Causes and
- 4) Intellectual

#### 1. POLITICAL CAUSES

**a) Irresponsible and extravagant monarchs:** France was unfortunate in having very irresponsible, extravagant monarchs in succession. They were bent more upon dazzling the world with the splendour of the French Court than upon exerting to ameliorate the lot of poor people for fancy's sake they involved the French men and money in many wasteful continental wars. A Substantial part of the French revenue was diverted towards the maintenance of these splendours and wars 4 Though Louis XIV warned against imitating his fondness for building and for war his feeble successor, Louis XV plunged France into chaos by his sloven character) In the words of Swain, "Women were the constant source of his enjoyment". His notorious mistresses Madame da Pompadour and Madame Dubarry scandalised the French court and directed the affairs of the state according to their whims. Louis XVI, who succeeded Louis XV, lacked in firmness, will and determination to execute whatever reforms he might have contemplated. His beautiful and Capricious Austrian wife, Marie Antoinette guided him even in political matters, leading the monarchy ultimately to be submerged in deluge,

**b) Corrupt court:-**on the eve of the France Revolution The court of Louis XVI was full of corruption and immorality) from the highest nobles down to the petty courtiers everyone

displayed unabashed greed and self indulgence. The common folk were naturally vexed with the corrupt court.

**c) Confusion in Administration:** There was no well defined administrative system in France) Overlapping jurisdictions of various officials resulted in legal confusion consequently; abuses of power, unnecessary delay and arbitrariness were brought into existence, thereby exasperating the common man. (Nepotism and favouritism were rampant in day-to-day administration In addition to these irregularities; there was no fixed fiscal Policy which could have regulated the systems of budget and audit.

**d) Despotism of the Government: The French Government**

Was of such a despotic nature that anyone could be detained without trial or without sufficient causes. A royal order called, "letter de cachet" was quite sufficient to detain a person. The nobility and the clergy took undue advantage of this to wreak vengeance upon their opponents.

**e) Impact of the American Revolution:** The French volunteers who had participated in the War of American Independence imbibed the cherished ideals of liberty, equality and democracy. On their return to the native soil, they imbued the French nation with those lofty ideals, instigating them to revolt against monarchical oppression)

**2) SOCIAL CAUSES:-**

**a) Division in Society on privileges:** The French Society was broadly divided into three Estates, namely the Church (Clergy), the Nobles and the Common people. Among these three, the first two Estates were privileged sections whereas the third Estate, which was by far the largest section, was unprivileged one. The marked inequality between the two sections was to a large extent responsible for the discontent.

**B.The First Estate (The Clergy):** One fifth of the cultivated land was in the hands of the Church in France. The Church collected a tax called "**Tithe**" from the people for providing community services. Most of the educational institutions were under its control. The higher Clergy, which was exempt from taxation, naturally supported monarchy. The lower clergy which was subjected to drudgery, generally favoured revolution.

**c) The Second Estate (The Nobles):** The Nobles, constituting the Second Estate, enjoyed social privileges like preference in army and society. They monopolised all positions of rank influence and money. They also were exempt from many taxes. Being absentee landlords, they tended to become menacing parasites on toiling peasants. They led a life of ease and pleasure. But some nobles, stricken by poverty and deprived of social status, reacted favourably to the revolution.

**d) The Third Estate (the common people):** Peasants workers and artisans came under the third Estate. In direct contrast to the Church and the Nobility, these people had no privileges at all. They had to lead a very miserable life. They were exploited on a large scale. The crops of the poor peasants were used to be badly damaged by the hunting nobles or their pet animals. Rendered helpless under these oppressive conditions, the Third Estate stood in the forefront of the revolution.

**e) Absence of legal security:** Equality before law was unknown in France. The French society was not based upon law. Privilege, concession and exemption reigned supreme.

### 3. ECONOMIC CAUSES:

**a) Oppressive Taxation:** Unjust, uncertain and burdensome crushed the peasantry. The "Tallie" a tax on lands and houses, the taxation 'gebelle', the salt monopoly payment, and the feudal dues for pressing the grapes or crushing the corn were imposed on the peasantry alone. Moreover 'Correa' or labour on roads was an obligation of the peasants. As the privileged classes were exempt from most of these taxes, the unprivileged had to bear the brunt of oppressive taxation. This sort of inequality went a long way to incite the peasantry to rise in revolt.

**b) The Financial Crisis:** "The Revolution or some revolution would probably have come in France in any case; but it is through the financial needs of the state that it did actually arrive. The French Government was bankrupt due to its participation in costly wars such as the seven years' war and the American War of Independence The extravagance of the royal household was not curbed. The financial crisis reached threatening proportions the payment of salaries to the armed forces fell into arrears Owing to severe food shortage, there raged a terrible famine in France.

**c) Negated attempts of ministers:** Since the public debt had already mounted to astronomical figures, the public was willing to lend no more to the state. The king sought the assistance of able ministers to set right the financial position The Ministers in succession, like Turgot. Neckar tried to enforce efficiency, and honesty in administration and to introduce juster and progressive methods of taxation. But the king, being influenced by the Queen and the Nobility, did not accept the financial reforms suggested by these able ministers Finally the Government was faced with a grave financial crisis in 1789. He was obliged to summon the Estates-General (the French Parliament) to find a solution to the crisis.

#### 4. INTELLECTUAL FACTORS:

a) Intellectual awakening there was an intellectual movement in 18th Century pervading all European nations. But it found full expression in the writings of the French Philosophers like Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau. Critical ideas of these thinkers had a tremendous impact on the enlightened mind of the French middle class and contributed to the outbreak of the French Revolution.

**B. COURSE OF FRENCH REVOLUTION:** The various phases in the course of the French Revolution may be conveniently divided under the names given from time to time to the French legislative body which led the Revolution.

##### 1. THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY:

**a) Estates general (1789):** In a desperate attempt to surmount the financial crisis, the King summoned the Estates-General on May 5, 1789. It had met for the last time in 1604, in the past, each Estate sat separately and its decision was considered as one joint vote. Thus though the third Estate was numerically and functionally a large and important segment, its decision was used to be outvoted by the first two Estates. So, as soon as the Estates-General met, the Third Estate grew apprehensive of the king and the nobles. It demanded that all the three Estates sit together as "National Assembly" and that each deputy's vote be counted and every issue be settled by majority of such votes. But this demand was rejected by the king and the first two Estates.

**b) The oath of the Tennis Court:** The Third Estate chose to be adamant regarding this demand. Meanwhile some members of the second Estate joined them. On June 23, 1789 the deputies of the Third Estate were refused entry into the chamber. Nothing daunted, they assembled in Tennis Court nearby and took in oath "never to separate until the constitution of the kingdom shall be established."

**c) National Assembly:** ultimately the indecisive king gave way. Yielding to the demands of the Third Estate, he ordered on July 27, 1789 the three Estates to sit together and vote "by head" as members of a "National Assembly". Henceforth, the National Assembly guided the destiny of the French Nations. It proceeded with the work of drawing a constitution for France. But the destitute conditions prevalent in the country and some stirring events at Versailles led to wide-spread violence.

**d) Fall of the Bastille:** The king was under the influence of the Queen and the privileged classes. Royal troops were interpreted concentrated on Versailles. This measure was being an unholy attempt to over-whelm the National Assembly. The Parisian mob to and intimidate was excited and given to wild disorder, Violent demonstrations followed. On the Third day- July14, 1789-a mob attacked the royal prison fortress of the Bastille, a symbol of

Bourbon despotism. The walls of the fortress were sacked and the prisoners were set free. The Fall of Bastille heralded the French Revolution. July 14 is now celebrated in France as the day of liberation.

**e) The King brought to Paris:** Another violent demonstration brought the royal family to Paris: On 5th October, a Parisian mob, headed by Lafayette, forced its way from Paris to Versailles shouting "we want bread". On reaching Versailles, they killed the royal bodyguards and caught hold of the king, the Queen and other members of royal family. With all indignity worthy of an unruly mob, they brought the royal family to Paris. The National Assembly followed the king to Paris.

**f) The Achievements of the National Assembly:** In every sense the achievements of the National assembly were revolutionary. First of all, it abolished feudalism and serfdom once for all, next it nationalised the church and confiscated the church property. It issued a Declaration of the Rights of man and the citizen. This Declaration was acclaimed as a victory for democracy. Finally It provided for the constituent Assembly to frame the new constitution.

## 2. THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

The constitution of 1791 sought to clearly define the functions of the three organs of the Government namely legislature, executive and Judiciary. It provided for a limited and constitutional monarchy. There was provision for a single chamber only called the legislative Assembly. It proclaimed equal citizen-ship of all. The Constituent Assembly took some radical measures like the Nationalisation of the Church, the issue of paper Currency called the Assignats and the existence of the State authority over the Clergy. Further, for the sake of convenient and efficient administration, France was divided into 83 departments.

## 3. THE NATIONAL CONVENTION

**a) King's Unsuccessful flight:** Smarting under loss of power, the king deemed it advisable to escape from France. Disguised as common people, the royal family escaped in an ordinary coach on July 30, 1791. But unfortunately, they were recognised at frontier town and were forced to return to Paris. With this attempt at flight, the king forfeited whatever trust the people deposited in him. Henceforth the Radicals in the National Assembly secured upper hand over the Moderates.

**b) Start of Revolutionary War:** Meanwhile, the "Émigré" nobles who fled the country, gathered over the Northern and Eastern frontiers along with Austro-Prussian armies with the avowed intention of re-establishing old regime. France declared war against Austria and Prussia. French Patriots were stirred up with the new national anthem "the Marseillaise".

For all their enthusiasm, the French troops met with setback in the initial stages. But, on September 20, 1792, the French army scored significant success on the battlefield of Valmy.

**c) Revolutionary Republic:** Day by day, the Parisian mob became the most powerful instrument of the Revolution. The initiative did no longer vest with the moderates like Mirabeau, Sieyes and Lafayette. The extreme Radicals like Danton, Marat and Robespierre took the lead in bringing out rapid changes. They belonged to the Jacobean club which dominated the Paris commune under the direction of the Jacobins, the Parisian mob invaded the royal place, massacred the Swiss Guards. On August 10, 1792, the terror-stricken deputies of the National Assembly voted to suspend the king from the Office They authorised the immediate election of a National Convention to draw up a Republic Constitution. Thus, the National Assembly dissolved itself to give place to a National convention which came into existence on 1st September, 1792. The National Convention abolished monarchy and declared France a Republic on September 22, 1792.

**d) Execution of Louis XVI:** The Jacobins dominated the National Convention. The king was accused of high treason and brought before trial. He was sentenced to death. On January 21, 1793 Louis XVI was guillotined. Guillotine was a murderous machine invented by Dr. Guillot ne. The execution of the king roused the enemies of France. Fearing that their countries would be infested with regicide ideals of French Revolutionaries, European Powers such as Britain, Prussia, Austria, and Holland, Spain formed a coalition to Surround France. The French Republic answered by ordering conscription and instituting the "Committee of Public Safety" to withstand the foreign aggression and suppress the internal disorder.

**e) Reign of Terror:** Vested with executive powers, the committee of safety extraordinary was expected to restore order in France. Instead, it proceeded to weed out the dissident elements in and out of the National Convention. Under the Law of Suspects, the Revolutionary Tribunal constituted a Reign of Terror to deal with the counter revolutionaries. Originally intended against royalists and aristocrats, the terrorism was very soon extended to **Girondists** known for their moderation and finally even to the Jacobins. Note worthy among the victims of this Reign of Terror were Marie Antoinette, Mme. Roland, St. Just and Danton. This repressive policy reached its climax under Robespierre but with his execution the Reign of Terror came to an end. Approximately 1000 people were said to have perished during this terrible period. Eventually, the National convention, vexed with the existing order, dissolved itself in 1795 providing for a new constitution under Directory.

**f) The Work of National Convention:** Notwithstanding the abominable Reign of Terror, Reign of Terror, the National Convention was credited with certain accomplishments. The first act of the Convention was the abolition of monarchy. Next it set up a Republican Government. It bestowed a new constitution to France. It promised to support any struggle against monarchy anywhere in the world. The convention formulated effective-policies to

counter internal disruption. It devised a plan for national education, abolished slavery in slavery in the colonies, protected women's rights, and established the simple and convenient con metric system of weights and measures.

#### **4. THE DIRECTORY (1795-1799):**

**a) Constitution of the year III:** After the termination of the Reign of Terror, the National Convention set it to draft a new constitution the new constitution was called the constitution of the Year III because it was adopted in the year 1795, the third year of the Republic

**b) Ineffective and corrupt Directory:** The Republican Directory could not long survive due to a combination of factors. It was harried by pressures from radicals on one side and conservatives on the other. The Directors, being men of mediocre talents and corrupt disposition, were not able to exert hard and honest labour to consolidate the country after six years of revolutionary upheaval. Internal plots and intrigues, financial difficulties and the danger of foreign aggression paralysed the ineffective efforts of the Directory.

**c) Advent of Napoleon:** The rise of an adventurous soldier, Napoleon Bonaparte sealed the fate of the Directory. The times were propitious for his ascendance. He first attracted the attention of the convention by suppressing an insurrection in Paris by "Whiff of grape-shot". Under the Directory, he became the foremost general of French army by virtue of his astounding successes in the warfare. Finally he overthrew the Directory in 1799 and devised a new Government for France, establishing the Consulate with himself as First Consul. Though a semblance of democracy was retained for the time being, the fall of Directory marked the end of the Revolution.

#### **C RESULTS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION:**

Though the French Revolution seemed to have ultimately lost ground, the ideals professed by the revolutionaries exercised profound influence on the subsequent historic events in Europe and world at large.

**1) End of Old regime:** The old regime and the abusive institutions attendant on it such as feudalism, serfdom was dispensed with for good. Special privileges enjoyed by the Clergy and the Nobility were abolished.

**2) The Declaration of the Rights of Man:** The Revolution ensured intellectual and political freedom by including the famous Declaration of the Rights of Man in the new Constitution. The declaration is said to be "the most remarkable event in the history of the growth of

democratic and republican ideas". It is the gospel of modern times. It guaranteed the free communication of thought and opinion.

**3) Noblest Ideals:** The watchwords of the French Revolution such as Liberty, Equality and Fraternity reflected the coming of a new democratic and social order in Europe. Thus it made a permanent contribution to human ideology.

**4) Nationalism:** The French Revolution roused National feelings, not only in the French people, but also in many other regions in Europe. Thus, it paved way for the unification of Germany and Italy. The intense nationalism of the French people fostered unity among them. They were prepared to die for the sake of protecting the gains of the revolution.

**5) Democracy:** From the very beginning, the French Revolution evinced its zeal in upholding democratic principles. In every sense of the term the true democracy was put to test in France. The bitter lessons learnt from it proved to be of great benefit to the budding democracies of a later date.

**6) Administrative and Economic Reforms:** - Administration of law, and justice became more uniform and systematic. A sound economic system based upon social and economic justice was established by a series of radical measures such as confiscation of church property, abolition of indirect state and church taxes. New laws of inheritance were passed. Slavery was abolished.

**7) Socialism:** The French Revolution indirectly upheld the ideal of Socialism by fostering social equality. Later, it found clear expression in the movement led by Louis Blanc and in the writings of Karl Marx.

**8) Impact on Europe:** The French ting effect on the people of Europe in revolutions occurred in 1830 and 1848; Revolution had a las-19th Century. In the the ideals of the French Revolution reached all over Europe. They aimed at overthrowing oppressive governments.