



The French Revolution: Causes, Course and Impact

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Abstract : The French Revolution of 1789-1799 was one of the most important events in the history of the world. The Revolution led to many changes in France, which at the time of the Revolution, was the most powerful state in Europe. The Revolution led to the development of new political forces such as democracy and nationalism. It questioned the authority of kings, priests, and nobles. The Revolution also gave new meanings and new ideas to the political ideas of the people.

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The French Revolution was spread over the ten year period between 1789 and 1799. The primary cause of the revolution was the disputes over the peoples' differing ideas of reform. Before the beginning of the Revolution, only moderate reforms were wanted by the people. An example of why they wanted this was because of king Louis XIV's actions. At the end of the seventeenth century, King Louis XIV's wars began decreasing the royal finances dramatically. This worsened during the eighteenth century. The use of the money by Louis XIV angered the people and they wanted a new system of government. The writings of the philosophes such as Voltaire and Diderot, were critical of the government.

Causes of the French Revolution:

Political:

In the 18th century, France was a feudal society under the authority of an absolute monarchy. The Bourbon monarchs lived in splendor in the royal palace of Versailles. The finances of France were in a deplorable condition.

The treasury was practically empty after the numerous wars that France was involved in. King Louis XVI was incapable of guiding France through the political and financial crises. Queen Marie Antoinette, an Austrian princess, was blamed for squandering away public money. The administration was corrupt and autocratic.

Socio-economic:



The social conditions of France were as distressing as its political organisation. French society was divided into three classes or estates. The privileged class comprising the clergy and the aristocracy formed the first estate and the second estate respectively. These two estates enjoyed many privileges under the government and did not have to bear the burden of taxation.

The nobility monopolised all important positions in the French administration and lived a life of luxury. The third estate comprised the common people. It consisted of middle class people, peasants, artisans, workers and agricultural labourers. Even the rich middle class, consisting of merchants, factory owners etc., fell in this category. The entire burden of taxation fell on the third estate. But these taxpayers had no political rights.

The condition of the artisans, peasants and workmen was miserable. The peasants had to work for long hours and pay separate taxes to the Crown, to the clergy and to the nobility. After paying all these taxes, they hardly had enough money to feed themselves. The wealthy middle class had to pay heavy taxes and resented the privileges enjoyed by the aristocrats and the higher clergy i.e. the first two estates. The workers, the peasants and the middle class who suffered under the social and economic system wanted to change it.

Influence of Philosophers:

French philosophers like Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu inspired the people with revolutionary ideas of liberty and equality. Montesquieu rejected the theory of the Divine Right of Kings and urged for separation of powers. Rousseau, in his book ‘Social Contract’, announced that sovereign power lay in popular will.

Influence of the American Revolution:

The success of the Americans in their war for independence also encouraged the French people to protest against their exploitation by the aristocracy, the clergy and the state.

Immediate Cause of the Revolution:



The immediate factor which caused the outbreak of the Revolution was the bankruptcy faced by the Government. The heavy expenditure on the army during the Seven Years' War had drained the finances of the country.

CONCLUSION

The people of France chose the darkness rather than the light. The nation was therefore to reap the results of this course. The restraint of God's Spirit was removed from a people who despised His grace. Evil was permitted to come to full maturity. And the entire world stood witness to the fruit of willful rejection of the light.

French atheism denied the claims of the living God and a spirit of unbelief and defiance took reign. The corruption as usual made itself manifest in the licentiousness that became the signature characteristic of the nation.

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