

Subject :- Social Science

Class - IX

The French Revolution

Q1 : Describe the circumstances leading to the outbreak of revolutionary protest in France.

Answer :Circumstances leading to the outbreak of revolutionary protest in France:

A society of estates, and the plight of the third estate

French society was divided into three distinct estates: the first estate comprising the clergy, the second estate composed of the nobility, and the third estate made up of tradesmen, merchants, court officials, lawyers, peasants, artisans, landless labour and servants. It was only the third estate that was made to pay taxes. The clergy and the nobility were exempt from this rule. In addition to the taxes that were to be paid to the state, peasants had to pay taxes to the Church and feudal dues to the noble lords. It was an unfair situation which led to the growth of a feeling of discontent among the members of the third estate.

Subsistence crisis

At this time, there was a greater demand for foodgrains. Due to greater demand than supply, the price of bread (the staple diet of the majority) rose. Due to rising prices and inadequate wages, most of the population could not even afford the basic means of livelihood. This led to a crisis of subsistence, and an increase in the gap between the rich and the poor.

A stronger middle class, and popularisation of democratic and social ideals

The middle class emerged educated and wealthy during the eighteenth century. The system of privileges as promoted by the feudal society was against their interests. Being educated, the members of this class had access to the various ideas of equality and freedom proposed by the French and English political and social philosophers. These ideas got popularised amongst the masses as a result of intensive discussions and debates in salons and coffee-houses, and through books and newspapers.

The assembly of the Estates General, and the proposal to increase taxes

In order to pass proposals for increasing taxes, the French monarch Louis XVI called together an assembly of the Estates General on 5 May, 1789. Each estate was allowed one vote in this assembly. The third estate protested against the unfairness of the proposal. They proposed, instead, that each member should have one vote. The king rejected this appeal, and the representative members of the third estate walked out of the assembly in protest.

The National Assembly, and the revolting subjects

These representative members, led by Mirabeau and Abbe Sieyes, declared themselves a National Assembly, and took an oath to not disperse until they had drafted a constitution for France that would limit the powers of the monarch and do away with the unjust feudal system of privileges. While this organisation was busy drafting a democratic constitution, there were numerous localised rebellions that sought to displace the feudal lords. Meanwhile, the food crisis worsened and the anger of the masses spilled onto the streets. On 14 July, the King ordered troops to move into Paris. In response, several hundreds of agitated men and women formed their own armed groups. One such people's militia stormed and destroyed the Bastille fortress-prison (representative of the king's despotic power). This is how the French Revolution came about.

Q2 : Which groups of French society benefited from the revolution? Which groups were forced to relinquish power? Which sections of society would have been disappointed with the outcome of the revolution?

Answer : The richer members of the third estate (the middle class) benefitted the most from the French Revolution. The clergy and the nobility were forced to relinquish power. The poorer sections of society and women would have been disappointed with the outcome of the revolution as the promise of equality was not fulfilled in full measure at the end of the revolution.

Q3 : Describe the legacy of the French Revolution for the peoples of the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Answer : The French Revolution bore a rich legacy for the peoples of the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because it was the first national movement that adopted the ideals of "liberty, equality and fraternity". These ideas became the basic tenets of democracy for every nation in the 19th and the 20th century. The Revolution espoused the cause of the masses, sought to abolish the idea of divine right, feudal privileges, slavery and censorship, and upheld merit as the basis for social upgradation. These tenets are important even in the contemporary world for their emphasis on equality and a world free from prejudice. Feudal systems and later, colonisation were abolished by re-working the French Revolution ideals of freedom and equality. Indian leaders such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy were deeply influenced by the ideas that the French Revolution propagated against the monarchy and its absolutism.

Q4 : Draw up a list of democratic rights we enjoy today whose origins could be traced to the French Revolution.

Answer : Democratic rights that we enjoy today whose origins can be traced to the French Revolution are: freedom of expression, right to equality, right to freedom, right to assemble and form unions (as long as they are not a threat to national security and peace).

Q5 : Would you agree with the view that the message of universal rights was beset with contradictions? Explain

Answer : The message of universal rights was beset with contradictions. Many ideals in the "Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen" were replete with dubious meanings. For example, "the law has the right to forbid only actions injurious to society" had nothing to say about criminal offences against other individuals. Also, the declaration stated that "law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to participate in its formation... All citizens are equal before it", but when France became a constitutional monarchy, almost 3 million citizens including men under the age of 25 and women were not allowed to vote at all. This was in striking contrast to the ideals that the revolution espoused. When the Jacobins came to power, they were welcomed, but their policies were too harsh and this gave way yet again to the rise of the wealthier middle classes. The political instability of these regimes finally led to the rise of Napoleon. However, throughout these coups, ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity remained paramount in the French political movement.

Q6 : How would you explain the rise of Napoleon?

Answer : The rise of Napoleon came right after the fall of the Directory in 1796. The Directors often clashed with the legislative councils, who then made attempts to dismiss them. The Directory was highly politically unstable; hence, Napoleon rose to power as a military dictator. Earlier, the Jacobins had overthrown King Louis XVI and established governance on their own module; but Robespierre's administration was too harsh and relentless. Napoleon crowned himself the Emperor in 1804 and abolished dynasties. He viewed himself as a "moderniser of Europe" and was rightly seen as a liberator who introduced a uniform system of weights and measures, introduced laws to protect private property, etc. However, his quest for power led to his ultimate downfall with his defeat at Waterloo in 1815.