**THE FRENCH REVOLUTION**

**Introduction:**

At the end of the 18th century, the most glorious kingdom in Europe would face its most mighty and least expected rival, the wrath and power of its own people. One man rose to inspire an entire nation, and the common French man took up arms against the monarchy. With pain, chaos, revolt and blood storming France, the prison of Bastille was the first to fall. The dawn of 14th July 1789, marked the beginning of an era which had blood spilled all over it. It made a permanent mark in history by the name of French Revolution. This era paved way for the well-known refrain ‘Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite’ which translates to Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

**Causes of the French Revolution:**

1. **Social Causes**

* The 18th century French society was divided into three estates.
* The first estate consisted of the clergy.
* The second estate comprised the nobility and the clergy who did not have to pay any taxes.
* The third estate, which formed about 97% of the population, consisted of the merchants, officials, peasants, artisans and servants. It was only the third estate that paid taxes.
* While the middle class which was a part of the third estate consisted of educated people such as teachers, lawyers, artisans and merchants.  They started questioning the privileges being enjoyed by the nobility.

1. **Economic Causes**

* France had already gone through long years of war, which had drained the country’s financial resources. When the reigning king, King Louis XVI, helped thirteen American colonies to gain independence from Britain, the war added more than a billion livres to a debt that had already risen to more than 2 billion livres.
* Palace of Versailles had a luxurious court and the sheer maintenance of the mansion involved a great deal of expenses.
* Lenders increased the rate of interest on debts to 10%.  So, the French government was obliged to spend an increasing percentage of its budget on interest payments alone.
* Thus, to ensure that the regular expenses, such as the cost of maintaining an army, the court, running government offices or universities, were taken care of, the King increased the taxes that were already borne by the poorer strata of the French society.
* The population of France rose from about 23 million in 1715 to 28 million in 1789. This led to a rapid increase in the demand for foodgrains.
* Production of grains could not keep pace with the demand. So the price of bread which was the staple diet of the majority rose rapidly.
* Things became worse whenever drought or hail reduced the harvest. This led to a subsistence crisis.

**Role of the Middle Class:**

* The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of social groups, termed the middle class.
* They earned their wealth through an expanding overseas trade and from the manufacture of goods such as woollen and silk textiles that were either exported or bought by the richer members of society.
* The third estate also included lawyers or administrative officials. All of these were educated and believed that no group in society should be privileged by birth.
* These ideas envisaging a society based on freedom and equal laws and opportunities for all, were put forward by philosophers.
* In his Two Treatises of Government, John Locke sought to refute the doctrine of the divine and absolute right of the monarch.
* Jean Jacques Rousseau carried the idea forward, proposing a form of government based on a social contract between people and their representatives.
* In The Spirit of the Laws, Montesquieu proposed a division of power within the government between the legislative, the executive and the judiciary.
* The ideas of these philosophers were discussed intensively in salons and coffee-houses and spread among people through books and newspapers. These were frequently read aloud in groups for the benefit of those who could not read and write.

**The Outbreak of the Revolution:**

* The financial condition in France was in a pitiable state. Louis had almost bankrupted France with a 3 million livre debt. In order to increase the taxes to offset this permission was needed from all three estates.
* The Estates General was convened on 5th May 1789 at Versailles comprising representatives from all three estates.
* The members of the third estate gathered on 20th June, 1789 in Versailles and declared themselves as the National Assembly and decided to draft a constitution that would limit the powers of the King.
* Their key leaders were Mirabeau and Abbe Sieyes.
* On August 4th 1789, King Louis recognized the National Assembly and agreed to abide by their framework.
* The National Assembly abolished the feudal system of taxes, tithes and the special privileges enjoyed by the clergy and nobles by birth.

**France becomes a Constitutional Monarchy:**

* The recognition of the National Assembly by King Louis and him agreeing to their demands was a victory for the entire Third Estate.
* In 1791, the National Assembly completed the draft of the constitution. As per the new constitution, France became a constitutional monarchy with the King, or the Executive, having to share power with the legislature and the Judiciary.
* Only men who were older than 25 years and who paid taxes were allowed to vote.
* The constitution commenced with the Declaration of the Rights of Man. It stated that the right to life, to freedom of speech, to freedom of opinion and to equality before the law were intrinsic to all human beings.
* Visual symbols were used to share the message to the uneducated and illiterate people:
* The broken chains stood for freedom
* The blue white and red symbolized the national colours of France
* The Red Phrygian cap was a sign of freedom and was worn by slaves when they became free
* The all seeing eye stood for knowledge
* The snake indicated eternity
* The bundle of rods of fasces indicated strength in unity
* The winged woman stood for the law
* The sceptre was a symbol of royal power
* The tablet also known as the law tablet signified equality
* All women and children, and men who did not fall into the category of active citizens, were termed passive citizens, and were denied the right to vote.
* The preamble to the constitution of 1791 consisted of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.
* These rights included the rights to life, the freedom of speech, the freedom of opinion and equality before the law.

**France becomes a Republic:**

* Although Louis XVI had signed the Constitution, he entered into secret negotiations with the King of Prussia. This worried the rulers of other neighbouring countries who made plans to send troops to put down the events.
* Before that, the National Assembly voted in April 1792 to declare war against Prussia and Austria.
* Thousands of volunteers saw this as a war of the people against kings and aristocracies all over Europe.
* Among the patriotic songs they sang was the Marseillaise, composed by the poet Roget de L’Isle which is now the national anthem of France.
* While the men were away fighting at the front, women were left to cope with the tasks of earning a living and looking after their families.
* Large sections of the population were convinced that the revolution had to be carried further, as the Constitution of 1791 gave political rights only to the richer sections of society.
* Political clubs became an important rallying point for people who wished to discuss government policies and plan their own forms of action. The most successful of these clubs was that of the Jacobins, who had been active throughout this period, formed their own clubs. Led by Maximilian Robespierre, the members of the Jacobin club belonged mainly to the less prosperous sections of society.
* A large group among the Jacobins decided to start wearing long striped trousers similar to those worn by dock workers. It was a way of proclaiming the end of the power wielded by the wearers of knee breeches.
* In the summer of 1792 the Jacobins planned an insurrection of a large number of Parisians who were angered by the short supplies and high prices of food.
* On the morning of August 10 they stormed the Palace of the Tuileries, massacred the king’s guards and held the king himself as hostage for several hours. Later the Assembly voted to imprison the royal family. From now on all men of 21 years and above, regardless of wealth, got the right to vote.
* The newly elected assembly was called the Convention. On 21 September 1792 it abolished the monarchy and declared France a republic.
* Louis XVI was sentenced to death by a court on the charge of treason. On 21 January 1793 he was executed publicly at the Place de la Concorde. The queen Marie Antoinette met with the same fate shortly after.

**The Reign of Terror:**

* To avoid monarchy from coming to existence again, the people of the republic undertook severe measures. The period from 1793 to 1794 was referred to as the Reign of Terror.
* Robespierre followed a policy of severe control and punishment.
* All those whom he saw as being ‘enemies’ of the republic – ex-nobles and clergy, members of other political parties, even members of his own party who did not agree with his methods – were arrested, imprisoned and then tried by a revolutionary tribunal. If the court found them ‘guilty’ they were guillotined.
* Robespierre’s government issued laws placing a maximum ceiling on wages and prices. Meat and bread were rationed. Peasants were forced to transport their grain to the cities and sell it at prices fixed by the government. The use of more expensive white flour was forbidden to ensure equality. Equality was also sought to be practised through forms of speech and address. Churches were shut down and their buildings converted into barracks or offices.
* Robespierre pursued his policies so relentlessly that even his supporters began to demand moderation. Finally, he was convicted by a court in July 1794, arrested and on the next day sent to the guillotine.

**A Directory Rules France:**

* A new constitution was introduced which denied the vote to non-propertied sections of society.
* It provided for two elected legislative councils which then appointed a Directory, an executive made up of five members.
* This was meant as a safeguard against the concentration of power in a one-man executive as under the Jacobins.
* The political instability of the Directory paved the way for the rise of a military dictator, Napoleon Bonaparte.

**Women and revolution:**

* From the very beginning women hoped that their involvement would pressurise the revolutionary government to introduce measures to improve their lives.
* Most women of the third estate had to work for a living. They also had to care for their families. Their wages were lower than those of men.
* Most women did not have access to education or job training. Only daughters of nobles or wealthier members of the third estate could study at a convent, after which their families arranged a marriage for them.
* In order to discuss and voice their interests women started their own political clubs and newspapers.
* About sixty women’s clubs like ‘The Society of Revolutionary’ and ‘Republican Women’ came up in different French cities.
* One of their main demands was that women enjoy the same political rights as men.
* They demanded the right to vote, to be elected to the Assembly and to hold political office.
* In the early years, with the creation of state schools, schooling was made compulsory for all girls. Marriage was made into a contract entered into freely and registered under civil law. Divorce was made legal, and could be applied for by both women and men. Women could now train for jobs, could become artists or run small businesses.
* During the Reign of Terror, the new government issued laws ordering closure of women’s clubs and banning their political activities. Many prominent women were arrested and a number of them executed.
* Women’s movements for voting rights and equal wages continued through the next two hundred years in many countries of the world. The fight for the vote was carried out through an international suffrage movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was finally in 1946 that women in France won the right to vote.

**The Abolition of Slavery:**

* Before the French Revolution in 1789, France had three colonies of the Caribbean - Martinique, Guadeloupe and San Domingo under its control. These places were major suppliers of sugar, coffee, indigo and tobacco.
* The triangular slave trade between Europe, Africa and America began in the 17th century.
* Merchants sailed from the French ports to the African coast where they bought Negroes, who are natives of Africa, from the local chieftains.
* Port cities like Bordeaux and Nantes were flourishing economically because of the slave trade.
* The National Convention voted to abolish slavery in all the French colonies on February 4, 1794.
* Slavery was reintroduced in the French colonies by Napoleon Bonaparte. Slavery was finally abolished in 1848 by the French Second Republic.

**The Rise of Napoleon Bonaparte:**

* Napoleon Bonaparte quickly rose to power within the military. Moreover, he led many successful campaigns during the French Revolution and fought on the side of the people.
* In 1804 when he made himself the emperor of France.
* On attaining power, he conquered all neighbouring European countries, dispossessed dynasties and created kingdoms for the members of his family.
* He introduced many laws such as the protection of private property and a uniform system of weights and measures provided by the decimal system.
* But soon the Napoleonic armies came to be viewed everywhere as an invading force. He was finally defeated at Waterloo in 1815.
* Many of his measures that carried the revolutionary ideas of liberty and modern laws to other parts of Europe had an impact on people long after Napoleon had left.
* Colonised people reworked the idea of freedom from bondage into their movements to create a sovereign nation state.