

CHAPTER - I



THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

(1789-1799)

WHAT WAS THE FRENCH REVOLUTION?



On the morning of 14 July 1789, the city of Paris was in a state of alarm. The king had commanded troops to move into the city. Rumours spread that he would soon order the army to open fire upon the citizens. Some 7,000 men and women gathered in front of the town hall and decided to form a peoples' militia. They broke into a number of government buildings in search of arms.

Finally, a group of several hundred people marched towards the eastern part of the city and stormed the fortress-prison, the Bastille, where they hoped to find hoarded ammunition. In the armed fight that followed, the commander of the Bastille was killed and the prisoners released – though there were only seven of them. Yet the Bastille was hated by all, because it stood for the despotic power of the king. The fortress was demolished and its stone fragments were sold in the markets to all those who wished to keep a souvenir of its destruction.



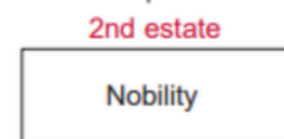
The days that followed saw more rioting both in Paris and the countryside. Most people were protesting against the high price of bread. Much later, when historians looked back upon this time, they saw it as the beginning of a chain of events that ultimately led to the execution of the king in France, though most people at the time did not anticipate this outcome

FRENCH SOCIETY BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

In 1774, Louis XVI of the Bourbon dynasty became king of France at the age of 20, married to Austrian princess Marie Antoinette. He inherited an empty treasury, drained by wars and the extravagant court at Versailles. France's support for the American colonies added over a billion livres to an already massive debt, forcing the government to raise taxes. However, only the Third Estate paid them.

French society was divided into three estates: clergy, nobility, and the Third Estate. The first two enjoyed privileges, including exemption from taxes, while peasants—about 90% of the population—carried the burden. Most land was owned by nobles and the Church, and peasants had to pay feudal dues, church tithes, and state taxes such as the *taille*, along with indirect taxes on everyday goods. Thus, the financial weight of the Old Regime fell entirely on the Third Estate.

A SOCIETY OF ESTATES



3rd estate



Big businessmen, merchants, court officials, lawyers etc.



Peasants and artisans



Small peasants, landless labour, servants

CAUSES



Economic Crisis

- France was facing a serious financial crisis
- Continuous wars and support to the American War increased debt
- The royal family spent heavily on luxury (especially the palace of Versailles)
- Government was nearly bankrupt
- To solve this, taxes were increased
- But the burden again fell on the Third Estate



High Taxes

- The taxation system in France was highly unfair
- The First Estate (Clergy) and Second Estate (Nobility) paid little or no taxes
- The entire tax burden fell on the Third Estate (common people)
- Peasants had to pay multiple taxes like:
- In addition, they had to provide forced labor (corvée) for public works
- There was no equal representation, so people had no say in taxation



Enlightenment Ideas

- Philosophers like Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu spread new ideas
- They believed in:
 - freedom
 - equality
 - rights of citizens
- They opposed absolute monarchy
- Their ideas inspired people to question authority
- People wanted a fair and just system



Food Crisis

- France faced repeated bad harvests due to harsh weather conditions
- This led to a shortage of food grains
- The price of bread, the main food of the poor, increased rapidly
- Workers spent up to 80–90% of their income on bread
- At the same time, wages did not increase accordingly
- This created a huge gap between income and living costs
- Hunger and starvation became common among the lower classes

KEY EVENTS

Estates-General Meeting (1789)

- King Louis XVI called a meeting to solve financial crisis
- Representatives from all three estates attended
- Third Estate demanded equal voting rights
- Their demands were rejected by the king

IMPORTANT:
Start of political conflict

Tennis Court Oath

- Third Estate broke away and formed National Assembly
- They gathered in an indoor court
- Took an oath to write a new constitution
- Promised not to disperse until their demands were met

IMPORTANT:
Beginning of a new government

Storming of the Bastille (14 July 1789)

- People in Paris were angry and feared army attack
- They attacked the Bastille prison
- Prison was seen as a symbol of royal power
- Weapons and ammunition were seized

IMPORTANT:
This event marks the start of the Revolution

Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789)

- National Assembly adopted a new document
- Declared:
 - equality before law
 - freedom of speech
 - rights of citizens
- Ended privileges of the upper classes

IMPORTANT:
Foundation of modern democracy

France Becomes a Republic (1792)

- Monarchy was abolished
- France became a republic
- King Louis XVI was executed

IMPORTANT:
End of monarchy

END OF MONARCHY (1792)

The political situation in France became increasingly unstable after the beginning of the revolution. People had lost trust in the king, especially after Louis XVI attempted to escape from the country. This event made it clear that the king was not loyal to the nation and was secretly against the revolution.

In 1792, the monarchy was officially abolished and France was declared a republic. Power was no longer held by a king, but by elected representatives. This marked a major turning point in French history, as the old system of absolute monarchy came to an end.

Soon after, Louis XVI was put on trial and found guilty of treason. In 1793, he was executed, symbolizing the complete collapse of royal authority and the rise of a new political system based on the will of the people.



RESULTS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The French Revolution brought major political and social changes in France. The system of absolute monarchy was abolished, and power was transferred to the people through a republic. The old feudal system, which gave privileges to the clergy and nobility, was also ended. The revolution introduced new ideas such as liberty, equality, and fraternity. All citizens were considered equal before the law, and many rights were guaranteed.

These ideas later influenced other countries and inspired future revolutions across the world.

The revolution also changed everyday life. New laws were introduced, censorship was reduced, and people gained more freedom to express their opinions. However, the period was not completely stable, as France continued to face political struggles even after the monarchy ended.



KEY FACTS

- End of monarchy and feudal system
- Rise of republic and democracy
- Equality before law
- Spread of revolutionary ideas worldwide

QUICK REVISION

TIMELINE

- **1789** → Revolution begins
- **14 July 1789** → Storming of Bastille
- **1792** → Monarchy abolished
- **1793** → King executed
- **1793–1794** → Reign of Terror

KEY POINTS

- Society divided into 3 Estates
- Third Estate paid all taxes
- Causes → inequality, taxes, food crisis
- Revolution ended monarchy
- France became a republic

KEY WORDS

- Liberty
- Equality
- Fraternity

IMPORTANT FIGURES

- Louis XVI
- Maximilien Robespierre

