

French Society During 19th Century

In 1774 Louis XVI became the ruler of France. He married princess Marie Antoinette. When he became the ruler, he found an empty treasury as long years of France had drained the financial resources of France. Click here to know more about Louis XVI.

Moreover, Louis XVI helped the thirteen colonies of America independence from their common enemy Britain. This added to the depth that became more than 2 billion **Livres**(Unit of currency of France). Lenders started to charge 10 percent interest on loans. To meet its regular expences, the state was forced to increase the taxes.

Structure of French Society in 18th Century-

Society was divided into three estates-

1st state was Clergy

2nd estate was Nobility

3rd estate was Masses which consisted of rest of people.

Only member of third estate paid the taxes. This included direct tax *taille* and indirect tax called *tithes* levied by the Church.

Struggle to survive

The population of France increased rapidly. Grain production was low which resulted in high prices of Bread. People cannot afford to buy them. This led to Subsistence Crisis. Subsistence crisis can be defined as an extreme situation when basic means of livelihood are endangered.

Emergence of middle class

Middle Class people became rich through overseas trade. They believed that a position of a person must depend on his ability to do work.

- John Locke wrote the book "Two treaties of Government" in which he criticised doctrine of divine and absolute right of Monarch.
- Rousseau wrote the book "The Social contract" proposing a form of government based on a social contract between people and their representatives.
- Montesquieu wrote "The Spirit of Laws" which wanted that power should be separated between the legislature, executive, and judiciary.

Outbreak of Revolution

In the old Regime the monarch had no power to increase the taxes off hison wish and he had to call meeting of the state general to pass the proposal. The estate general was a political body to which the three states sent their representatives.

The first and second estate sent 300 representatives each who were seated in rows facing each other on two sides, 600 members of the third estate had to stand at the back. This time the member of the third estate demanded that voting should be conducted by the Assembly as a whole, where each person would have one vote.

This idea was given my philosopher like Rousseau in his book the social contract. When his proposal was rejected by the king the members of the third estate walked out of assembly in protest.

Then the representative of the third estate assembled in the Hall of an indoor tennis court in the ground of Versailles on 20 June and declared himself a national assembly swearing not to disperse Till they had drafted a constitution for France that would limit the power of the monarch.

The representatives of the third estate were led by Mirabeau and he was born in a noble family but discarded is feudal privileges. Abbe Sieye as originally impressed Road an influential pamphlet called "What is the third estate". While national assembly was busy drafting a constitution, on 14th July angry crowd stormed and destroyed the Bastille. The Bastille was hated by all French people as it represented the despotic power of the King.



Storming of Bastille

In the countryside rumors spread from village to village that the Lords of the Manor and hired bands of brigands who were on their way to destroy the rice crops. Caught in fear, they attacked Chateaux (Castle or stately resident belonging to a king or Nobleman).

End of special privileges

Faced with the power of this revolution finally Louis XVI recognized the national assembly and accepted that is power for now on be checked by a constitution.

Tithes were abolished and lands owned by church confiscated, resulting in the government acquiring assets worth at least 2 billion livres.

France became a constitutional monarchy

National assembly completed the draft of the constitution in 1791. It divided power among the legislative, executive and Judiciary.

Highlight of the changed system

- Men who were above 25 years of age and who paid taxes equal to at least 3 days wage of laborer's wage were given the status of active citizen(people with the right to vote), remaining were classified as passive citizens.
- To qualify as an elector and then as a member of the assembly, a man had to belong to the highest taxpayers.
- Declaration of rights of man and citizen stated the right to life, freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, and equality which were established as natural rights and it was the duty of the state to protect these.