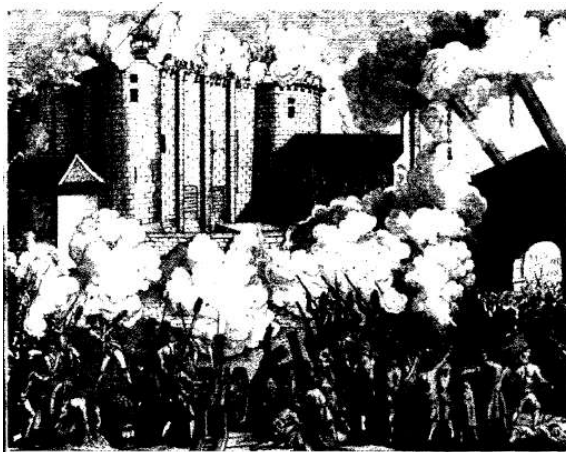


## THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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.

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 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 his outcome. How and why did this happen?

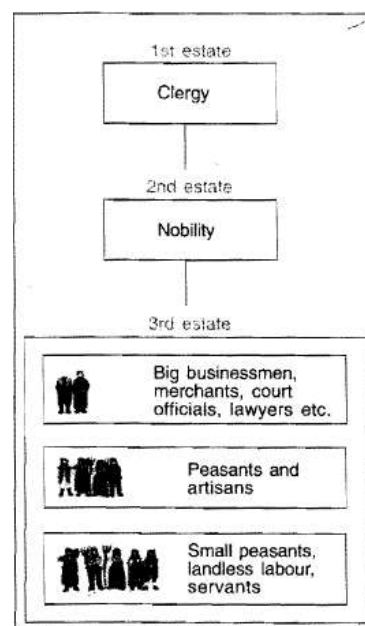


**Storming of the Bastille**

### FRENCH SOCIETY DURING THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

In 1774, Louis XVI of the Bourbon family of kings ascended the throne of France. He was 20 years old and married to the Austrian princess Marie Antoinette. Upon his accession the new king found an empty treasury. Long years of war had drained the financial resources of France. Added to this was the cost of maintaining an extravagant court at the immense palace of Versailles. Under Louis XVI, France helped the thirteen American colonies to gain their independence from the common enemy, Britain. The war added more than a billion livres to a debt that had already risen to more than 2 billion livres. To meet its regular expenses, such as the cost of maintaining an army, the court, running government offices or universities, the state was forced to increase taxes. Yet even this measure would not have sufficed. French society in the eighteenth century was divided into three estates, and only members of the third estate paid taxes.

The society of estates was part of the feudal system that dated back to the middle ages. The term Old Regime is usually used to describe the society and institutions of France before 1789.

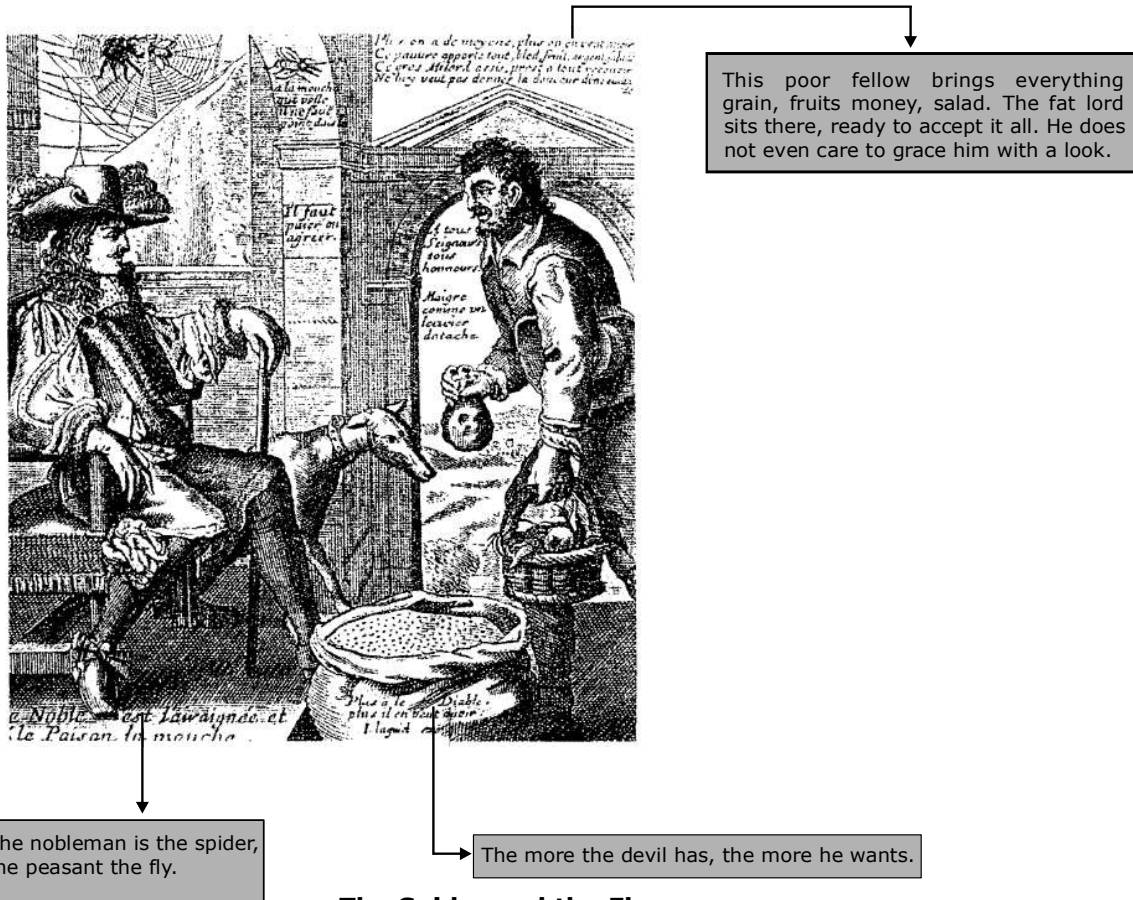


**A Society of Estates**

## THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Figure shows how the system of estates in French society was organised. Peasants made up about 90 per cent of the population. However, only a small number of them owned the land they cultivated. About 60 per cent of the land was owned by nobles, the Church and other richer members of the third estate. The members of the first two estates that is, the clergy and the nobility, enjoyed certain privileges by birth. Peasants were obliged to render services to the lord-to work in his house and fields-to serve in the army or to participate in building roads.

The Church too extracted its share of taxes called tithes from the peasants, and finally, all members of the third estate had to pay taxes to the state. These included a direct tax, called *taille*, and a number of indirect taxes which were levied on articles of everyday consumption like salt or tobacco. The burden of financing activities of the state through taxes was borne by the third estate alone.



**The Spider and the Fly**

1. **The Struggle to Survive:** 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. So the gap between the poor and the rich widened. Things became worse whenever drought or hail reduced the harvest. This led to a subsistence crisis, something that occurred frequently in France during the Old Regime.
2. **A Growing Middle Class Envisages an End to Privileges:**
  - (i) The French Revolution drew its strength from the ideas of philosophers and thinkers of the time, groups of intellectuals classified by scholars according to their thinking.
  - (ii) Physiocrats, Philosophers and some others were grouped as liberals depending on their ideologies.
  - (iii) Greatest thinkers were Francois Marie, Arouet de Voltaire, Jean jacques Rousseau, Charles Louis Montesquieu, John Locke and Denis Diderot to name a few.
  - (iv) Through their teachings and writings they stirred the people to action, revolutionized the minds of the people and prepared then for them great changes ahead.

## THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

### Contributions of the thinkers:

- (i) Charles Montesquieu - A nobleman by birth, he became a lawyer and a judge. He preferred constitutional monarchy in France, he popularized the theory of separation of powers within the government between the legislative, the executive and the judiciary in his book "The Spirit of the Laws".
- (ii) Francis Aronet Voltaire - He was another outstanding philosopher of the revolution. He wanted the people to think about their material life on earth and forget about heaven. He condemned the Church which supported the privileged class and ignored the poor.
- (iii) Jean Jacques Rousseau - He is regarded as the architect of the French Revolution. In the famous book "The Social Contract", he proved that the government was the result of a social contract between the people on one hand and ruler on the other. So if the ruler didn't fulfill the contract, that people had the right to withdraw their loyalty to him and bring down the tyranny of the ruler by revolting against him.
- (iv) John Locke - He was a great political thinker. He wrote "Two Treatises of Government" in which he sought to refute the doctrine of the divine and absolute right of monarch.



### THE OUTBREAK OF THE REVOLUTION

The Estates General was a political body to which the three estates sent their representatives. However, the monarch alone could decide when to call a meeting of this body. The last time it was done was in 1614.

On 5 May 1789, Louis XVI called together an assembly of the Estates General to pass proposals for new taxes. A resplendent hall in Versailles was prepared to host the delegates. The first and second estates sent 300 representatives each, who were seated in rows facing each other on two sides, while the 600 members of the third estate had to stand at the back. The third estate was represented by its more prosperous and educated members. Peasants, artisans and women were denied entry to the assembly. However, their grievances and demands were listed in some 40,000 letters which the representatives had brought with them.

## THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

This was one of the democratic principles put forward by philosophers like Rousseau in his book *The Social Contract*. When the king rejected this proposal, members of the third estate walked out of the assembly in protest.

The representatives of the third estate viewed themselves as spokesmen for the whole French nation. On 20 June they assembled in the hall of an indoor tennis court in the grounds of Versailles. They declared themselves a National Assembly and swore not to disperse till they had drafted a constitution for France that would limit the powers of the monarch. They were led by Mirabeau and Abbe Sieyes. Mirabeau was born in a noble family but was convinced of the need to do away with a society of feudal privilege. He brought out a journal and delivered powerful speeches to the crowds assembled at Versailles.



**The Tennis Court Oath**

Abbe Sieyes, originally a priest, wrote an influential pamphlet called *What is the Third Estate?*

While the National Assembly was busy at Versailles drafting a constitution, the rest of France seethed with turmoil. A severe winter had meant a bad harvest; the price of bread rose, often bakers exploited the situation and hoarded supplies. After spending hours in long queues at the bakery, crowds of angry women stormed into the shops. At the same time, the king ordered troops to move into Paris. On 14 July, the agitated crowd stormed and destroyed the Bastille.

In the countryside rumours spread from village to village that the lords of the manor had hired bands of brigands who were on their way to destroy the ripe crops. Caught in a frenzy of fear, peasants in several districts seized hoes and pitchforks and attacked chateaux. They looted hoarded grain and burnt down documents containing records of manorial dues. A large number of nobles fled from their homes, many of them migrating to neighbouring countries.

Faced with the power of his revolting subjects, Louis XVI finally accorded recognition to the National Assembly and accepted the principle that his powers would from now on be checked by a constitution. On the night of 4 August 1789, the Assembly passed a decree abolishing the feudal system of obligations and taxes. Members of the clergy too were forced to give up their privileges. Tithes were abolished and lands owned by the Church were confiscated. As a result, the government acquired assets worth at least 2 billion livres.



### **France Becomes a Constitutional Monarchy:**

- (i) The National Assembly completed the drafting of the constitution in 1791, Power was now separated and assigned to different institutions the legislature, executive and judiciary making France a constitutionally monarchy.
- (ii) The Constitution of 1791 vested the power to make laws in the National Assembly, which was indirectly elected.
- (iii) The Constitution began with a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Rights such as the Right of life, freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, equality before law were established as 'natural and inalienable' rights.

### FRANCE ABOLISHES MONARCHY AND BECOMES A REPUBLIC

Among the patriotic songs they sang was the Marseillaise, composed by the poet Roget de L'Isle. It was sung for the first time by volunteers from Marseilles as they marched into Paris.

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, which got its name from the former convent of St Jacob in Paris. Women too, who had been active throughout this period, formed their own clubs.

The members of the Jacobin club belonged mainly to the less prosperous sections of society. They included small shopkeepers, artisans such as shoemakers, pastry cooks, watch-makers, printers, as well as servants and daily wage workers. Their leader was Maximilian Robespierre.

These Jacobins came to be known as the sans-culottes, literally meaning those without knee breeches'. Sans-culottes men wore in addition the red cap that symbolised liberty. Women however were not allowed to do so.

On the morning of August 10 they stormed the Place 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. Elections were held. 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.

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.

1. **The Reign of Terror:** The period from 1793 to 1794 is 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.

He was convicted by a court in July 1794, arrested and on the next day sent to the guillotine.

2. **A Directory Rules France:** The fall of the Jacobin government allowed the wealthier middle classes to seize power. A new constitution was introduced which denied the vote to non-propertied sections of society. It provided for two elected legislative councils. These 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. However, the Directors often clashed with the legislative councils, who then sought to dismiss them. The political instability of the Directory paved the way for the rise of a military dictator, Napoleon Bonaparte.

### **DID WOMEN HAVE A REVOLUTION?**

From the very beginning women were active participants in the events which brought about so many important changes in French society. They 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 worked as seamstresses or laundresses, sold flowers, fruits and vegetables at the market, or were employed as domestic servants in the houses of prosperous people. 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. Working women had also to care for their families, that is, cook, fetch water, queue up for bread and look after the children. Their wages were lower than those of men.

In order to discuss and voice their interests women started their own political clubs and newspapers. About sixty women's clubs came up in different French cities. The Society of Revolutionary and republican Women was the most famous of them. One of their main demands was that women enjoy the same political rights as men. Women were disappointed that the Constitution of 1791 reduced them to passive citizens. They demanded the right to vote, to be elected to the Assembly and to hold political office. Only then, they felt, would their interests be represented in the new government.

In the early years, the revolutionary government did introduce laws that helped improve the lives of women. Together with the creation of state schools, schooling was made compulsory for all girls. Their father could no longer force them into marriage against their will. 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 business.

### **THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY**

One of the most revolutionary social reforms of the Jacobin regime was the abolition of slavery in the French colonies. The colonies in the Caribbean-Martinique, Guadeloupe and San Domingo-were important suppliers of commodities such as tobacco, indigo, sugar and coffee. But the reluctance of Europeans to go and work in distant and unfamiliar lands meant a shortage of labour on the plantations. So this was met by a triangular slave trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas. The slave trade began in the seventeenth century. French merchants sailed from the ports of Bordeaux or Nantes to the African coast, where they bought slaves from local chieftians. Branded and shackled, the slaves were packed tightly into ships for the three-month long voyage across the Atlantic to the Caribbean. There they were sold to plantation owners. The exploitation of slave labour made it possible to meet the growing demand in European markets for sugar, coffee, and indigo. Port cities like Bordeaux and Nantes owed their economic prosperity to the flourishing slave trade.

Throughout the eighteenth century there was little criticism of slavery in France. The National Assembly held long debates about whether the rights of man should be extended to all French subjects including those in the colonies. But it did not pass any laws, fearing opposition from businessmen whose incomes depended on the slave trade. It was finally the Convention which in 1794 legislated to free all slaves in the French overseas possessions. This, however, turned out to be a short-term measure: ten years later, Napoleon reintroduced slavery. Plantation owners understood their freedom as including the right to enslave African Negroes in pursuit of their economic interests. Slavery was finally abolished in French colonies in 1848.

### THE REVOLUTION AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Can politics change the clothes people wear, the language they speak or the books they read? The years following 1789 in France saw many such changes in the lives of men, women and children. The revolutionary governments took it upon themselves to pass laws that would translate the ideals of liberty and equality into everyday practice. One important law that came into effect soon after the storming of the Bastille in the summer of 1789 was the abolition of censorship. In the Old Regime all written material and cultural activities -books, newspapers, plays -could be published or performed only after they had been approved by the censors of the king. Now the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen proclaimed freedom of speech and expression to be a natural right. Newspapers, pamphlets, books and printed pictures flooded the towns of France from where they travelled rapidly into the countryside. They all described and discussed the events and changes taking place in France. Freedom of the press also meant that opposing views of events could be expressed. Each side sought to convince the others of its position through the medium of print. Plays, songs and festive processions attracted large numbers of people. This was one way they could grasp and identify with ideas such as liberty or justice that political philosophers wrote about at length in texts which only a handful of educated people could read.

**Conclusion:** In 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself Emperor of France. He set out to conquer neighbouring European countries, dispossessing dynasties and creating kingdoms where he placed members of his family. Napoleon saw his role as a moderniser of Europe. He introduced many laws such as the protection of private property and a uniform system of weights and measures provided by the decimal system. Initially, many saw Napoleon as a liberator who would bring freedom for the people. 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 that carried the revolutionary ideas of liberty and modern laws other parts of Europe had an impact on people long after Napoleon had left.

The ideas of liberty and democratic rights were the most important legacy of the French Revolution. These spread from France to the rest of Europe during the nineteenth century, where feudal systems were abolished. Colonised peoples reworked the idea of freedom from bondage into their movements to create a sovereign nation state. Tipu Sultan and Rammohan Roy are two examples of individuals who responded to the ideas coming from revolutionary France.