

French Revolution

[UPSC Notes]

What is French Revolution?

French Revolution was a period of social and political upheaval in France against the unbiased rule of the kings, clergies and nobles by the third estate (lower class). This revolution had put forth the ideas of fraternity, equality, and liberty. The French Revolution shook the world and marked social, political, fundamental, and economic changes.

French Revolution Summary

The basic overview of the French Revolution is as follows-

Highlights	Details
French Revolution was started in	5 May, 1789
French Revolution Duration	10 years, 6 months and 4 days
French Revolution Location	Kingdom of France
French Revolution ended on	9 November, 1799

Causes of French Revolution

The French Revolution resulted from the inherent contradiction within the French society because of political, social, religious, intellectual, and economic reasons. The leading causes of the French revolution are as follows-

- **Social-**

Social factors like the inequalities among individuals led to the idea of revolt which turned into French Revolution. There was a reservation of the higher posts for the Feudals in civil and military. There was a reservation of 60% land for them (their population was less than 1%), and the poor were compelled to work as the bounded labourers on the lands owned by the Feudals. Because religion impacted people and the King, the next privileged class was the Clergy, who owned $\frac{1}{5}$ of the land in France. Their land was exempted from all taxes. At last, there were the ordinary people who were at the bottom rung of the social ladder. They were bounded to pay $\frac{4}{5}$ taxes. Not only this but they were bonded labourers.

- **Intellectual-**

Various intellectual people created influence among people in the 18th century Montesquieu's book Spirit of law criticized the Monarchy. So, it has become popular among the masses. Not only did it criticize the Monarchy, but it also supported parliamentary democracy. Free, another economic reformist, supported the reform by advocating trade, agricultural, and business reforms.

But the French Revolution turned towards the clergy section of the society after Voltaire, an atheist, began questioning the Monarchy and religious corruption in the society. He spread the

thinking that there must be limited Monarchy and that the Burbo must be overthrown. And people were blown by his thoughts. His thoughts were celebrated and implemented throughout. Another political philosopher, Rousseau, criticized the hypocrisy of the clergies and the corruption among them. He also propounded the concept of liberty, people's sovereignty, the right to pass the law, social contract, creative change, etc.

- **Religious-**

There was already a hatred for the Clergies and the upper class. They didn't pay any tax and were out of restrictions. Clergies had control over common people's life. This utter dominance of the upper class over the common people became an outrageous reason for the French Revolution. Even there was a revolt against the Roman Catholics and their monopoly.

- **Economic-**

The state's farming was not going well, and the government didn't make any effort. Instead, the farmers were exploited, making them go against the feudal. Along with this, the unsatisfied merchants were fed up with the practice of paying uncertain taxes. Because of the burden of taxes, the people were becoming bankrupt. It resulted in moral, societal, and economical stagnation the society.

- **Political-**

It is one major cause for igniting the fire of revolt in France. The nation was under the rule of the Bourbon dynasty. It alienated all the sections of the society against the centralized power. Along with this legal jeopardy, defective judiciary, Imperial conquest, and economic burden boosted the aggressiveness that became the reason for the revolt.

Also, in 1774, the nation was under the rule of Louis XVI, but under his rule, the financial situation worsened. As a result, troops were sent to assist the Americans in the war against Britain.

Timeline of French Revolution

The French Revolution was a series of events divided into 5 essential stages. These include the meeting of the Estate Generals, the revolution, the Declaration of Rights of the man, the Reign of terror, and the end of the French Revolution. These are described as under-

1789: The meeting of the Estate Generals

In 1789, the Nobility clergy and the middle class of the French were represented by the Estates-General Assembly. Louis XVI called its representatives to discuss the new tax measures in May 1789. During this time, the ordinary people of France had already gathered the support to be one among the decision-making bodies. They were in demand to get voting rights. Middle-class people supported this decision. They were in favour of judicial and political reforms. Perhaps the nobles condemned this demand as they did not want to give up on their luxurious privileges.

As a result, the third estate (the ordinary people of the society) formed the National Assembly. The members of the Assembly took the Tennis Court oath in June 1789. They vowed to remain undispersed in all the reforms initiated. As a result of the circumstances developed, all the three assemblies were absorbed into the new order.

1789-92: The revolution

After the assemblies were merged into one, the National Assemblies continued to work as such in Versailles. However, the nation was gripped by fear and violence during this time. As a result of this, there was an insurgency in France that took Bastille fortress on July 14, 1789. After this, the French Revolution marked its beginning.

The revolt took a wave of revolutionary fervour throughout the countryside. The ordinary people burnt and saw the homes of the aristocrats, and the tax collectors compelled the nobles to leave the place in masses. In the history of the French revolution, this period was called the Great Fear. At last, on August 4, 1789, the National Assembly was finally blown to feudalism.

1789: The Declaration of Rights of the Man

After feudalism, the Assembly adopted the Rights of Man and that of the citizen. The democratic principles were the basis for the charter of the Assembly. Apart from this, it draws its basis from the political and philosophical ideas of the enlightenment thinkers like Jena-Jacques Rosseau. Later in September 1791, the French Constitution was adopted, limiting the King's power. But it was not enough for the more radical assembly members.

1793-95: The Reign of Terror

Louis XVI was arrested by a group of insurgents who attacked the royal residence in Paris on August 10, 1792. Also, a lot of people were massacred in Paris. After this event, National Convention replaced the Legislative Assembly that proclaimed the abolition of the Monarchy and the establishment of the Republic of France.

But one major event during this period was the death of King Louis XVI on January 21, 1793. However, it didn't end up here. Instead, Marie Antoinette, the wife of King Louis XVI, was executed after nine months. This marked the beginning of the Reign of Terror. It became one of the most violent and turbulent phases of the French Revolution. Robespierre controlled the National Convention and was executed for counter-revolutionary activities and suspected treason. This phase ended after Robespierre's execution on July 28, 1794.

1795: Directory and the Rise of Napoleon

In 1795, The National Convention approved creating the new Constitution. This Constitution was the basis for creating France's bicameral legislature. The parliament formed a five-member group called the Directory. Also, an army was groomed under General Napoleon Bonaparte. The army has a lot of powers than the Directory. Napoleon appointed himself as the "first consul". After this, the French Revolution was over, resulting in the Napoleonic era's beginning.

Role of women in the French Revolution

The condition of women in France was not different from the rest of the world. They were not allowed to get an education or practical training. However, the daughters of the rich people or the nobleman of the society can have the privilege of getting an education. The lower-class women had to work for a living, but their daily wages were low compared to the men. Also, at that time, the women were responsible for doing all the household and caring for children. But, the women of the society turned the tables during the war and became active participants. They started the Society of Revolutionary and Republican Women, which became one of the most famous political clubs. Later, in 1791, in the French Constitution, women were designated as passive citizens. But, they fought for their rights and demanded the right to vote. They successfully transformed their status in society at the end of the revolution. The government made laws for women. Special schools were established, and education was made compulsory for all girls. Also, the women were not forced into marriage, and they legalized divorce. Not only this, women got the right to run a small business and were allowed to be artisans.

Significance of French Revolution In France

The French Revolution changed France's social, political, fundamental, and economic sections. Below are a few of the significant impacts of the French Revolution on France-

- **End of the social divide-** Before the French Revolution, society was divided based on class. Still, the French Revolution destroyed social discrimination and declared equality for all. The end of the social division led to the rise of the middle class, which was responsible for shaping society.
- **Political Parties-** Because of the involvement of many countries with different political thinking in the French Revolution, France became a multiparty state. It leads to the freedom of association, giving rise to political clubs like Cordeliers, Jacobins, etc. There

is a competition for power among these parties. They keep a check on the government and critique a bad policies.

- **Declaration of rights of man-** The political liberty like the freedom of speech, association, press, ownership of property, and worship was granted by the documents passed by the Constitutional Assembly.
- **End of Monarchy-** For more than 400 years, France was under the Bourbon Monarchy rule. But after the French revolution, the Monarchy's rule ended in 1792. The Republican form of government replaced it. However, the rule was restored after the failure of Napoleon's power. Perhaps it lasted till 1830 because of the weakening of the Monarchy by the French Revolution.
- **Birth of Revolutionary ideas-** The French Revolution resulted at the beginning of revolutionary ideas of fraternity, equality and liberty in France. Thus, France became the democratic birthplace. Later, the wave of revolutionary ideas hit other countries like Germany and Italy, and they began to promote freedom, equality, democracy, and good governance.
- **Constitution and Rule of Law-** Before French Revolution took place, there was no constitution to secure people's freedom and rights. But, with the end of the French Revolution, the rule of law in the Constitution was introduced in France. After the introduction of the Constitution, there was a separation of the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary.
- **Parliamentary Democracy-** After the French Revolution, the parliament was revived. France's parliament was abandoned for more than 175 years, but the revolution resulted in the functioning of the parliamentary system whose members are elected democratically.
- **Land ownership-** Before the French Revolution, the nobles and the Clergy took the domination of the land. But after the revolution ended, there were a lot of changes related to land ownership in France. Along with this, it brought new reforms to French society. Because of this, the working classes get the right to possess the land.
- **National Guard-** The royal guard was responsible for the protection of the Bourbon monarchy. After the revolution, it got replaced by the revolutionary army called as National Guard. It was responsible for protecting the achievements of the French Revolution.

Impact of the French Revolution on the world

French Revolution not only impacted France but had a significant influence on the world. Many countries got inspired and gave birth to new ideologies. Because of the French Revolution, the ruling Monarchy was opposed worldwide. Also, it spread the wave of liberalism and equality. Also, the French Revolution radically changed the social and political system of the 18th century.

Along with this, the revolution ended feudalism and introduced democratic principles, individual freedom, and equality of life.