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History

French Revolution

Question 1.

How was the French society organized? What privileges did certain sections of the society enjoy? Describe.

Or

‘Social disparity was one of the major causes of the French Revolution.’ Justify by giving examples. HOTS

Answer:

(i) Division of the society into three Estate :

The First Estate: It consisted of the clergymen and church-fathers.

The Second Estate: It consisted of landlords, men of noble birth and aristocrats.

The Third Estate: It consisted of the vast majority of the common masses, the landless peasants, servants, etc.

(ii) Heavy Burden of Taxes on the Third Estate: The members of the first two Estates were exempted from paying taxes to the state. So all the taxes were paid by the people of the Third Estate.

(iii) Wide Gap between People of Different Estates: Most of the people of the Third Estate were employed as labourers in workshops with fixed wages. The wages failed to keep pace with the rise in prices. So the gap between the poor and the rich widened.

(iv) No Political Rights: Out of the total population, the first and the second Estates had share of 2%. The remaining people belonged to the Third Estate. Although the upper two classes made up only a small fraction of the total population, yet they were the people who controlled the political and economic system of the nation. They enjoyed all the rights and privileges. The entire machinery of the government was designed to protect their interests and privileges.

(v) Unequal Distribution of Wealth : In the French society, peasants made up about 90% of the population. However, only a small number of them owned the land they cultivated. About 60% of the land was owned by nobles, the church and other richer members of the Third Estate.

Question 2.

Explain the role of thinkers and philosophers in the French Revolution.

Answer:

(i) Influence of the Philosophers and Writers: There were many French philosophers and thinkers like John Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire and Mirabeau, who exposed the evils prevailing in the system. They infused people with the idea of liberty, equality and fraternity.

(ii) Charles Montesquieu (1689-1775): A nobleman by birth, he became a lawyer and a judge. In his book, "The Spirit of Laws", he criticised autocracy and praised the democratic republic.

(iii) Francis Aronet Voltaire (1694-1778): Voltaire 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.

(iv) Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778): Rousseau is regarded as the architect of the French Revolution. He gave the slogan “Man was born free, yet he is everywhere in chains”. In the famous book, “The Social Contract”, he proved that the government was the result of a social contract between the people on the one hand, and ruler on the other. So if the ruler did not fulfil the contract, the people had the right to withdraw their loyalty to him, and bring down the tyranny of the ruler, by revolting.

(v) John Locke: He was also a great political thinker. He wrote ‘Two Treatises of Government’ in which he sought to refute the doctrine of the divine and the absolute right of the monarch.

Question 3.

Explain the events that led to the insurrection of 1792 in France.

Answer:

(i) Assembly of the Estates: On 5th May, 1789 Louis XVI called together an assembly of the Estates General to pass proposals for new taxes. Voting in the Estates General in the past had been conducted according to the principle that each estate had one vote. This time too, Louis XVI was determined to continue the same practice. But members of the Third Estate demanded that voting now should be conducted by the assembly as a whole, where each member would have one vote. When the king rejected this proposal, members of the Third Estate walked out of the assembly in protest.

(ii) National Assembly : The representatives of the Third Estate viewed themselves as spokesmen for the whole French nation. On 20th 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' Sieye's.

(iii) Turmoil in France : While the National Assembly was busy at Versailles drafting the Constitution, the rest of France seethed with turmoil. Due to bad harvest, there was shortage of food, and there was also rumour that bands of brigands were on their way to destroy the ripe crops. Caught in a frenzy of fear, peasants started attacking nobles. Under all these circumstances, Louis XVI finally accorded recognition to the National Assembly.

(iv) Storming the Bastille : On the morning of 14th July, 1789 the agitated crowd stormed and destroyed the Bastille. Under all these circumstances, Louis XVI finally according recognition to the National Assembly.

(v) France became a Republic : In 1792 the Jacobians held the king hostage and declared to form a new government. The newly elected Assembly was called the Convention. On 21st September, 1792 it abolished the monarchy and declared France as a republic.

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