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Causes of French Revolution

Date

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Introduction:

"The French Revolution was sprang from a combination of intellectual ferment and material grievance and it was the intellectual ferment which made the material grievance more fiercely resented." - Chateau Briand

The French Revolution of 1789 was the most important event of human history. It was an important event because it overthrew the old-established monarchy and introduced new methods and principles of government which shaped the world political thinking since. The France by the 1789 had become infected with various pathogenic elements such as economic miseries, political frustration, religious corruption, and moral deterioration. Hence, French Revolution was economic, political, social and religious which swept away the existing political institutions and aimed at establishing an egalitarian political and economic society.

Ideas of Enlightenment

M.D Ketelbey rightly observed, "writers of all kind prepared French Revolution". This statement reflects how the ideas of enlightenment was one of the most significant causes of French Revolution.

Revolutionary ideas challenged the existing authority and promoted reason, individual rights, and equality. Moreover, ideas of enlightenment awakened political consciousness of French people,

who started demanding more equitable and just political structure. Enlightenment's, one of the major concern was to promote rational thoughts in every aspect of human existence; not just science, but also philosophy, morality and society. On the other hand, influential philosophers and thinkers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and J.J. Rousseau challenged the divine right of king and the church and advocated for freedom of speech, separation of power, and equality. The famous saying of Rousseau, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" captured the frustration of citizens especially middle class who was being suppressed at the hands of upper classes. Ultimately, ideas of enlightenment provided an ideological framework which inspired people to rise against tyranny and seek a more equitable and just political and social order.

Social Causes

Before the Revolution of 1789, the society of France was divided into three distinct classes known as the estate; namely, clergy, nobility and commons.

Clergy:-

The first estate, called clergy, was comprising of priest. These clergies were controlling the Catholic church and some aspect of government. In addition to keeping registers of birth, deaths,

and marriages, the clergy also had the power to levy a 10% tax known as tithes. They formed 1% of the total population and owning 10% of land. Furthermore, clergy was enjoying great privileges and tax exemptions.

The Nobility:

The second Estate consisted of nobility of France, including members of the royal family. Like the clergy, the Nobility also had great privileges and tax exemptions. The Nobility was around 2% of the population and owned more than 10% of land. They had easy access to the royal court and had ~~the~~ been exercising power and influence.

The Commoners:

The third estate was made up of everyone else other than clergy and Nobility, from peasants, farmers to Bourgeoisies - the wealthy business class. While the second estate was only 2% of the total population, the third estate was approximately 97% of the population and had none of the privileges and rights of the other two states. They bore a burden of heavy taxation, sometimes double or triple taxation.

Discrimination towards the third Estate:

"The French Revolution of 1789 was much less a rebellion against a despotism than a rebellion against inequality." The third estate was facing severe discrimination at the hands of upper two classes. Despite comprising an approximately 97% of the total population, they denied the rights and privileges enjoyed by the upper two classes. They had burdened with taxation, sometimes double or triple amount of taxes as that of the clergy and nobility. Although, they were enlightened, educated, and significant contributor to the economy of France, they had ~~no rights and~~ ~~privileges~~ power and influence. They had not access to the royal court; only those of the noble birth could meet the King. All high-ministers, administrative officials, and office holder were nobles. Hence, historians argue that the French Revolution was largely fueled by the growing resentment of the third estate who wanted equitable rights and justice system.

Economic Causes

Royal pusillanimity and lavish life

The French king, Louis XVI, who took the throne in 1774, inherited massive debt problems but was unable to fix them. Despite facing fragile situation and financial crisis, king was unable to implement taxation on the clergy and the nobility. Instead, he dismissed the financial minister who advised the king to implement tax on both

The upper two estate. On the other hand, court expenditure did not reduce. Because Queen Antoinette, the royal spouse of Louis XVI. was awfully pretty and luxury loving. She did not restrain herself from squandering money even after visualising the economic decline of France. The famous historian Robertson writes about her: Marie Antoinette was that ignorant, frivolous, and prodigal daughter of the Habsburg to whom France seemed only a bottomless purse to be drained for her pleasure."

Unfair taxation system:

By the 1789, there was certainly unfair taxation system in France. The third estate, commoners, were burdened with heavy taxation. They were paying triple taxation to the state, including taxes to the King, the clergy, and to the Nobility as well. On the other hand, the clergy and the Nobility were set free from taxation and refused to contribute any tax revenue to the French government. This blatantly unfair taxation arrangement did little to endear the aristocracy to the common people.

Disordered Finance

Necker

"France had no financial policy", - Paul Kennedy. This statement depicts that the financial situation of France was drastically declining. The French treasury was bankrupt, as there was a deficit

of 126 million livres. Out of all income, half of the French expenditures went for debt services which was approximately 60%. The main reason for disordered finance was exemption of taxes to the clergy and the nobility, who were owning one third of the land. Additionally, 60% of the taxes paid by commoners did not reach the government because of corruption.

Impact of costly wars:

The most decisive cause of economic decline of France was the disastrous wars into which France was plunged during the eighteenth century. The first of the wars which prepared the ground for the French Revolution was the 'Seven years' war' (1756-1763), fought during the reign of Louis XV. France's prolonged involvement in the Seven years war drained the treasury, as did the country's participation in the American Revolution of 1775-1783. French had long been recognized as a prosperous country, and were it not for its involvement in costly wars and its aristocracy's extravagant spending, it might have remained one.

Political Causes

Administrative malaise:

France was divided into many administrative areas. No universal law in France at the time. Rules of measurement always kept changing.

Confusion reigned in nearly every department. By the time of Revolution in 1789, French system of government had become messy, rotten and disorganized. They lacked the art, capacity, and ability to rule the people. There was no provision of any sort for election in the country. The laws of the land were also freakish, and they differed from place to place. The eminent historian Hazen writes in the following words: "what was lawful in one town might be illegal in a place not five miles distant. Almost four hundred bodies of law were in force in different parts of France."

Absence of strong national representative institution

There was no significant national representative institution in France other than Estates-General. Estates-General was a dysfunctional institute. Its meeting was called on May 5, 1789, since 1614. This institution also did not have any fair representation of the public. Because there were 3 houses in Estates general; 1 of clergy, 1 of Nobility and 1 of commoners. which means 90% of the population had only 1 vote, while 10% had 2 votes. Resultantly, First and second Estates could operate as a bloc to stop the third estate from having its way.

Influence of American Revolution

During the war between England and her colonies, Louis XVI's government had made an alliance with the colonists, and French forces served in America. After the war, many French forces and soldiers returned with democratic ideas of justice from the famous Declaration of Independence 1776. They returned to a country where the people had no control whatever over taxation, had no representative parliament. "The war of American Independence became an eye opener to the nations of Europe and in particular gave leaders to the French Revolution."

Conclusion:

Intellectual causes

In conclusion, the French Revolution was a watershed moment in world history that fundamentally altered the political, social, and economic landscape of France and inspired movements across the globe. Rooted in Enlightenment ideals, economic hardships, and the inefficiencies of the ancien regime, it marked the end of absolute monarchy and the rise of democratic principles. Despite its periods of violence and instability, the Revolution laid the foundation for modern nation-states and the universal values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Its legacy continues to influence political thought and struggles for justice to this day.