

1 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*. Lenders who gave the state credit, now began to charge 10 per cent interest on loans. So the French government was obliged to spend an increasing percentage of its budget on interest payments alone. 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.

Fig. 2 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. The most important of these was exemption from paying taxes to the state. The nobles further enjoyed feudal privileges. These included feudal dues, which they extracted from the peasants. 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.

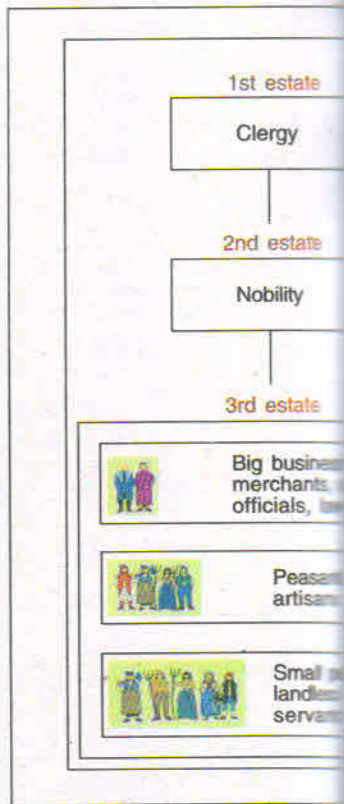


Fig. 2 – A Society of Estates.
Note that within the Third Estate, there were both rich and others poor.

New words

Livre – Unit of currency, discontinued in 1794

Clergy – Group of persons performing special functions in the church

Tithe – A tax levied by the church, one-tenth of the agricultural produce

Taille – Tax to be paid on land



This poor fellow brings everything, grain, fruits, money, salad. The fat lord sits there, ready to accept it all. He does not even care to grace him with a look.

Activity

Explain why the artist has portrayed the nobleman as the spider and the peasant as the fly.

The nobleman is the spider, because he fly

The more the devil has, the more he wants.

Fig. 21 - The Spider and the Fly, anonymous etching.

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 provisions. 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. Most workers were employed as labourers in workshops and their wages were fixed. But wages did not keep pace with the rise in prices. So the gap between the poor and the rich widened. The situation became worse whenever drought or hail reduced the harvest. This led to a subsistence crisis, something that occurred frequently during the Old Regime.

New words

Subsistence crisis – An extreme situation where the basic means of livelihood are endangered
Anonymous – One whose name remains unknown

1.2 How a Subsistence Crisis Happens

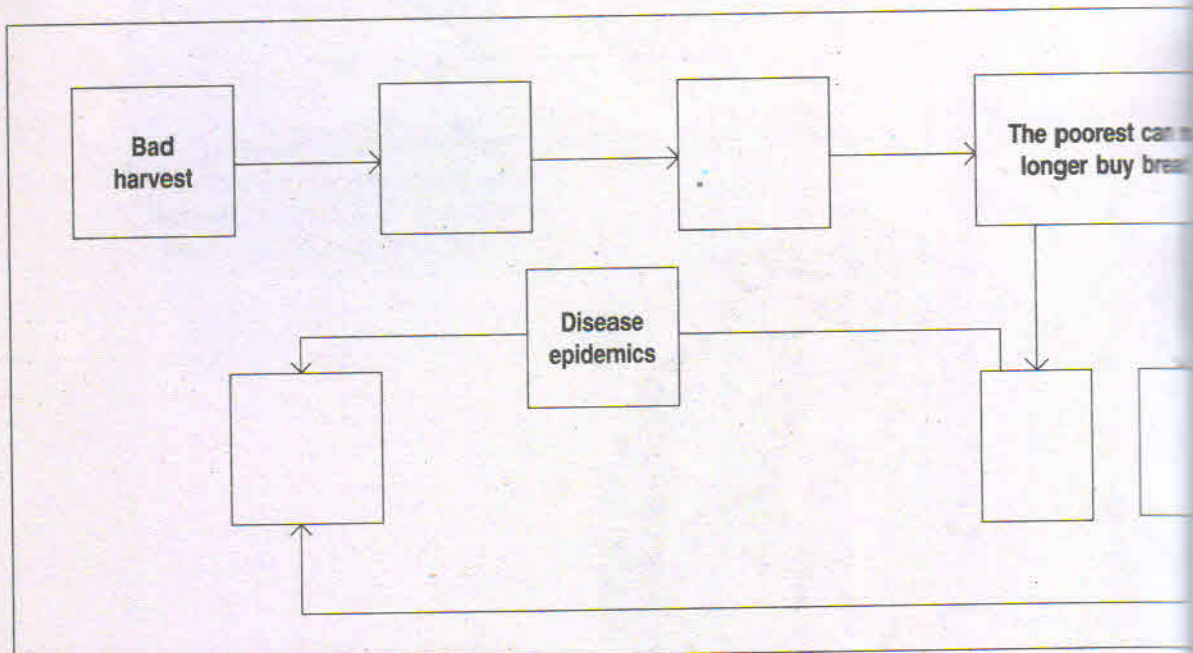


Fig.4 – The course of a subsistence crisis.

1.3 A Growing Middle Class Envisages an End to Privileges

In the past, peasants and workers had participated in revolts against increasing taxes and food scarcity. But they lacked the means and programmes to carry out full-scale measures that would bring about a change in the social and economic order. This was left to those groups within the third estate who had become prosperous and had access to education and new ideas.

The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of social groups, termed the middle class, who earned their wealth through an expanding overseas trade and from the manufacture of goods such as woollen and silk textiles that were either exported or bought by the richer members of society. In addition to merchants and manufacturers, the third estate included professions such as lawyers or administrative officials. All of these were educated and believed that no group in society should be privileged by birth. Rather, a person's social position must depend on his merit. These ideas envisaging a society based on freedom and equal laws and opportunities for all, were put forward by philosophers such as John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau. In his *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke sought to refute the doctrine of the divine and absolute right

Activity

Fill in the blank boxes in Fig. 4 with appropriate terms from any of the following.

Food riots, scarcity of grain, increasing number of deaths, rising prices, weaker bodies.

of the monarch. Rousseau carried the idea forward, proposing a form of government based on a social contract between people and their representatives. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu proposed a division of power within the government between the legislative, the executive and the judiciary. This model of government was put into force in the USA, after the thirteen colonies declared their independence from Britain. The American constitution and its guarantee of individual rights was an important example for political thinkers in France.

The ideas of these philosophers were discussed intensively in salons and coffee-houses and spread among people through books and newspapers. These were frequently read aloud in groups for the benefit of those who could not read and write. The news that Louis XVI planned to impose further taxes to be able to meet the expenses of the state generated anger and protest against the system of privileges.

Source A

Accounts of lived experiences in the Old Regime

1. Georges Danton, who later became active in revolutionary politics, wrote to a friend in 1793, looking back upon the time when he had just completed his studies:

I was educated in the residential college of Plessis. There I was in the company of important men ... Once my studies ended, I was left with nothing. I started looking for a post. It was impossible to find one at the law courts in Paris. The choice of a career in the army was not open to me as I was not a noble by birth, nor did I have a patron. The church too could not offer me a refuge. I could not buy an office as I did not possess a sou. My old friends turned their backs to me ... the system had provided us with an education without however offering a field where our talents could be utilised.'

2. An Englishman, Arthur Young, travelled through France during the years from 1787 to 1789 and wrote detailed descriptions of his journeys. He often commented on what he saw.

'He who decides to be served and waited upon by slaves, ill-treated slaves at that, must be fully aware that by doing so he is placing his property and his life in a situation which is very different from that he would be in, had he chosen the services of free and well-treated men. And he who chooses to dine to the accompaniment of his victims' groans, should not complain if during a riot his daughter gets kidnapped or his son's throat is slit.'

Source

Activity

What message is Young trying to convey here? Whom does he mean when he speaks of 'slaves'? Who is he criticising? What dangers does he sense in the situation of 1787?

Activity 2
History (The French Revolution)
Grade IX

I. Multiple choice questions. (MCQs)

1. What was the Marseillaise?
a. A slogan b. A patriotic song c. A romantic song
2. When was France declared a republic?
a. On 21 September 1792 b. On 21 may 1792 c. 21 September 1793
3. Who is the author of two treatises of government?
a. John Locke b. Mirabeau c. Montesquien

II. Fill in the blanks with suitable words.

1. The society of estates was part of the _____ system that dated back to the middle age.
2. The church too extracted its share of taxes called _____ from the peasants.
3. _____ government was obliged to spend an increasing percentage of its budget on interest payments alone.
4. _____ helped the thirteen American colonies to gain their independence from the common enemy Britain.

III. Very short answer.

1. What was tithe?
2. Who wrote the spirit of the laws?
3. What is a guillotine?
4. Who wrote the book, The social contract?
5. Who crowned himself as Emperor of France in 1804?
6. Which book has proposed a division of power within government?
7. Name the political body to which the three estates of the French society sent their representations.
8. In which year was slavery finally abolished in France?
9. Name the tax which was paid directly to the state of France.
10. What was the main object of National Assembly in France while drafting the constitution in 1791?