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The course of the French Revolution 1787 to 1799

Question

Examine/discuss the significance of following events in the course of the French Revolution 1789-1799

- (i) The Estate General Meeting May 5, 1789
- (ii) The storming of Bastilles, July 14, 1789
- (iii) The civil Constitution of the Clergy, July 1790
- (iv) The declaration of the rights of man and citizens, August 27, 1789
- (v) The marching of Women October 5, 1789

The French Revolution, which took place from 1787 to 1799, was a period of radical social and political upheaval in France. Here's a brief overview of its course:

1. **Estates-General meeting, May 5, 1789:** The revolution began with the calling of the Estates-General in May 1789 to address France's financial crisis. Instead, the Third Estate, representing the common people, declared itself the National Assembly, demanding a constitution and more representation.

The significance/implication of the Estate-General meeting May 5, 1789 in the course of the revolution

- (i) **The meeting** marked a significant step toward revolution in France because it provided a legitimate forum for critics of the Ancient Regime.
- (ii) The meeting fostered unity among the third estate demanding for more political power, fair representation in the government and fairer taxation.
- (iii) **Formation of the National Assembly (June 17, 1789):** Frustrated by the lack of progress and the refusal of the First and Second Estates to share power, the Third Estate declared itself the National Assembly. This bold move marked the beginning of the revolution, as the Third Estate aimed to create a new constitution and represent the people of France.

- (iv) The meeting exposed the disunity and weakness of the First and Second Estates when part of second Estate joined the National Assembly which further weakened the monarchy.
- (v) The meeting exposed the weakness of King Louis XVI when he failed manage situation after the disagreements giving the third estate power demand for their rights and a chance to form a National Assembly.
- (vi) A collection of a big number disgruntled people in one place created a mob justice mood for the peasants to fight for their right and thus sparking onset of the revoution

2. The Tennis court Oath, June 20, 1789

The Tennis court Oath, June 20, 1789, was dramatic act of defiance by representatives of the non-privileged classes of the French nation (the third Estate)) during the meeting of the Estates-General (traditional assembly) at the beginning of the French revolution.

Finding themselves locked out of the special royal session that was taking place in meeting hall at Versailles on June 20 and thinking that the king was planning to disband them, the delegates of the Third Estate moved to a nearby indoor tennis court; and took an oath never to separate until a written constitution had been established for France. The solidarity of the Third Estate, forced King Louis XVI to relent and on June 27 ordered the clergy and the nobility to join with the Third Estate in the National Assembly.

3. The royal session, June 23, 1789

The king Louis made a failed attempt to assert his authority and control over the revolutionary process. His agreements to some of the Third Estate's demands, such as fiscal equality and regular meetings of the Estates-General, were rejected as insufficient and the Third Estate continued to push for more radical changes.

The Royal Session became a rallying point for those who opposed the revolution and sought to preserve the traditional social and political order. It marked the last voluntary decision by the king and set the stage for the subsequent revolutionary events.

4. Storming of the Bastille (July 14, 1789):

On July 14, 1789, fears that King Louis XVI was about to arrest France's newly constituted National Assembly led a crowd of Parisians to successfully besiege and broke into the Bastilles, an old fortress that had been used since 1659 as a state prison. The released all the prisoners and this victory inspired the mob into further revolutionary struggle.



Storming of the Bastille (July 14, 1789)

Significance / Implication of the Storming of Bastilles in the course of 1789 French Revolution

- (i) The storming of Bastille symbolized the collapse of dictatorship and other forms of torture in the French society. The infamous law of the “Lettre de cathet” ended there and then. Since then it was declare a National Liberation Day.
 - (ii) For fear of arrest of the perpetrators, the mob became more determined to push on the revolution for their survival.
 - (iii) The angry released prisoners killing the noble and clergy sparking the revolution and the down fall of the monarchy.
 - (iv) The storming of the Bastille forged unity among the crowd of Parisians to struggle for more fundamental reforms.
 - (v) The noble and clergy for fear of the lives formed resistance groups which fueled the revolution into a reign of terror.
 - (vi) Storming of the Bastille prompted the revolutionists to form a new government based at Paris replacing the Royal attendants whose leadership was appointed by the King. This of course suppressed the King’s power.
5. **Abolition of Feudal Privileges (August 4, 1789):** The National Assembly abolished feudal privileges, including the exemption of the nobility and clergy from taxes.
 6. **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (August 26, 1789):** This document laid out the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, becoming a cornerstone of modern human rights.

The **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen**, adopted on August 26, 1789, was a foundational document of the French Revolution and had several significant implications:

- (i) **Establishment of Fundamental Rights:** The declaration outlined the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of man, including liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression. It emphasized that all men are born free and equal in rights.
- (ii) **Principles of Equality and Justice:** It declared that all citizens are equal before the law and have the right to participate in the formation of laws. This principle of equality was a radical departure from the hierarchical structure of the Ancient Regime.
- (iii) **Source of Sovereignty:** The declaration stated that the nation is the source of all sovereignty, and that political power should be derived from the people. This idea challenged the divine right of kings and laid the groundwork for a more democratic system.
- (iv) **Inspiration for Future Documents:** The declaration influenced other revolutionary documents and constitutions, including the French Constitution of 1791 and later constitutions. It also inspired similar declarations and human rights documents around the world.
- (v) **Symbol of Revolutionary Ideals:** The declaration became a symbol of the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. It served as a rallying point for the revolutionaries and a reminder of the goals they sought to achieve.

7. The marching of women, October 5, 1789

The march was triggered by economic hardships and lavish lifestyle of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette at Versailles.

On 5 October 1789, the Paris Commune organized a crowd of thousands of Parisian market women and their allies to move to Versailles. The initial riot against high prices of bread became intertwined with the activities of revolutionaries seeking liberal political reforms and a constitution monarchy for France. They also forced the King Louis and His wife return with them to Paris where the king's family was kept as prisoners .



The marching of women, October 5, 1789 from Paris to Versailles

Significance of the marching of women, October 5, 1789 in the course of French revolution

The **Women's March on Versailles** on October 5, 1789, was a significant event in the French Revolution for several reasons:

- (i) **Demand for Bread:** The march began as a response to the severe bread shortage and high prices in Paris. Women, who were responsible for feeding their families, were particularly affected and took to the streets to demand action.
- (ii) **Forcing the Royal Family to Paris:** The marchers, who numbered in the thousands, besieged the Palace of Versailles and demanded that King Louis XVI and his family return to Paris. The next day, the royal family was forced to move to Paris, effectively ending the king's independence and bringing him under the control of the revolutionaries.
- (iii) **Symbol of Popular Power:** The march demonstrated the power of popular movements and the ability of ordinary citizens to influence political events. It showed that the monarchy could no longer ignore the demands of the people.
- (iv) **Shift in Power Dynamics:** By bringing the king to Paris, the march shifted the centre of political power from the royal court in Versailles to the revolutionary capital, Paris. This move was a major step towards the establishment of a more democratic and accountable government.
- (v) **Mobilization of the People:** The march mobilized a large number of people and set a precedent for future popular uprisings. It highlighted the role of women in the revolution and their willingness to take direct action to address their grievances.
- (vi) **King Louis XVI was compelled to accept and sign the declaration of the rights of man and citizens.** This diminished the power of the monarchy.

8. The civil constitution of the clergy, July 1790

The ***Civil Constitution of the Clergy*** was a law passed in July 1790 during the French Revolution (1789-1799), which caused the immediate subordination of the Catholic Church in France to the French government. An attempt to modernize the Church and realign it with revolutionary values, the law proved highly divisive, turning many Catholics and clerics against the Revolution.

Significance of The civil constitution of the clergy, July 1790 to the course of the French Revolution

The **Civil Constitution of the Clergy**, passed on July 12, 1790, was a significant and controversial law during the French Revolution. Here are some key points about its significance:

- (i) **State Control Over the Church:** The law aimed to bring the Catholic Church in France under state control. It required clergy to take an oath of loyalty to the state rather than to the Pope, effectively making bishops and priests state employees.
- (ii) **Reduction of Church Power:** By restructuring the Church, the law sought to reduce its political and economic influence. It abolished monastic vows, confiscated church lands, and reorganized dioceses to align with new administrative districts.
- (iii) **Division within the Church:** The Civil Constitution caused a schism within the French Church. Many clergy members refused to take the oath, leading to a split between the "constitutional clergy" (those who accepted the law) and the "non-juring" or "refractory clergy" (those who remained loyal to the Pope).
- (iv) **Papal Opposition:** Pope Pius VI condemned the Civil Constitution, further deepening the divide. This opposition led to ongoing conflicts between revolutionary governments and the Church.
- (v) **Impact on Revolutionary Goals:** The law embodied the revolutionary goals of secularization and reducing the power of traditional institutions. However, it also alienated many devout Catholics and contributed to internal conflicts.
- (vi) **The unpopular church tithe or tax was abolished in France.** This liberated the peasant from this exploitative obligation.
- (vii) **The Civil Constitution of the Clergy** ushered freedom of worship in France
- (viii) **The catholic institution became democratic.**
- (ix) The national Assembly through the sale of church property, managed to raise funds to support their administration.

9. The king's Flight to Varennes, June 22 1791

On June 22, 1791 King Louis XVI and his family made unsuccessful attempt to escape to Austria for greater freedom of action and personal security than was possible in Paris. Unfortunately he was intercepted by peasants at Varennes. Humiliated he was returned to Paris.

The **Flight to Varennes**, which took place on the night of June 20-21, 1791, was a significant event in the French Revolution. Here are some key points about its significance:

- (i) **Loss of Trust:** The failed escape attempt severely undermined King Louis XVI's credibility as a constitutional monarch. It demonstrated that he was willing to abandon his responsibilities and flee the country, which led to increased public distrust and hostility towards the monarchy.
- (ii) **Increased Radicalization:** The flight heightened revolutionary fervour and radicalized public opinion. It convinced many that the monarchy could not be trusted and that more radical measures were necessary to secure the revolution's goals.
- (iii) **Treason Charges:** The attempt to escape was seen as an act of treason, which ultimately led to the king's trial and execution in 1793. The charges of treason were a direct result of his attempt to flee the revolution.
- (iv) **End of Monarchical Rule:** The flight marked a turning point in the revolution, as it became clear that the monarchy could not be reconciled with the revolutionary changes. This event paved the way for the establishment of the First French Republic in 1792.
- (v) **Impact on Foreign Relations:** The flight also raised fears of foreign intervention, as it appeared that the king was seeking help from foreign powers. This contributed to the outbreak of the French Revolutionary Wars in 1793.
- (vi) **Humiliation:** King Louis XVI was greatly humiliated among the French masses and the royal family was kept in the Trileries Palace as prisoner under tight security.
- (vii) **The staunch aristocrats were compelled to carry out revolts against the French revolutionaries.** This was due to humiliation of the king.
- (viii) **The noble and clergy that feared arrest and death went to exile.**

10. The enactment or adaption of the new constitution of France in September 1791

Constitution of 1791, French constitution created by the National Assembly during the French Revolution. It retained the monarchy, but sovereignty effectively resided in the Legislative Assembly, which was elected by a system of indirect voting.

The implications of the constitution of France in September 1791

The **French Constitution of 1791** was a ground breaking document that had several significant implications for the course of the French Revolution and beyond:

- (i) **Establishment of a Constitutional Monarchy:** The constitution transformed France from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, where the king's powers were limited by law. This marked a significant shift in the balance of power.
 - (ii) **Sovereignty of the Nation:** The constitution declared that sovereignty resided in the nation, not in the king. This principle laid the foundation for modern democratic governance.
 - (iii) **Legislative Assembly:** The constitution established a unicameral Legislative Assembly, which was responsible for making laws. Members of this assembly were elected by active citizens who paid a certain amount in taxes.
 - (iv) **Civil Rights:** The constitution included the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen as its preamble, affirming the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.
 - (v) **Abolition of Feudal Privileges:** The constitution abolished feudal privileges and declared that all men were equal before the law.
 - (vi) **Impact on Future Constitutions:** The French Constitution of 1791 set a precedent for constitutional governance and influenced future democratic movements and constitutions around the world.
11. **Reign of Terror (1793-1794):** This period was marked by extreme violence and political purges, with thousands executed by the guillotine, including King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette.
12. **Thermidorian Reaction (1794):** The radical phase of the revolution ended with the fall of Robespierre, leading to a more conservative government.
13. **Directory (1795-1799):** A five-member committee governed France, but it was marked by corruption and inefficiency.
14. **Rise of Napoleon Bonaparte (1799):** The revolution concluded with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who eventually became Emperor of France, ending the revolutionary period and establishing the French Consulate.

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