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Impact of intellectuals and philosophers in French revolution 1789

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Abstract

In the 18th century French people gave up conventional thoughts and began adopting the enlightened views and outlook. The ideas of the Enlightenment played a major role in inspiring the French revolution, which began in 1789 and emphasized the rights of common men as opposed to the exclusive rights of the elites. As such, they laid the foundation for modern, rational, democratic societies. The rationalism and the spirit of free enquiry reinforced by Renaissance reached its apex in the 18th century. This article focuses on the Prominent French intellectuals carried the cause of enlightenment forward like Montesquieu; Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Quesnay, Tourge and D'Alembert. These philosophers infused independent thinking among the people. The French philosophers took a leading part in the exposition of the rationalist spirit of the age. They directed their free enquiry upon the existing institutions of France. Reason was the medium of their test. The philosophers exposed the defects of all institutions and customs found in their writing. The intellectual movement of that time applied scientific outlook on life. The main aspect of their thought was the establishment of a liberal, progressive and ideal society. They supported the cause of laissez-faire, elimination of prevalent disparity in taxation and the rights of autonomy in administration. They laid bare inequality, exploitation, cruelty, religious intolerance, corrupt and absolute monarchy, financial restrictions etc. They revealed the hollowness of the French institutions through satire and humor, criticism and scientific explanation.

Keywords: Ancient regime, blood-thirsty, conservatism, enlightenment, ideal society, laissez-faire, rationalism, religious intolerance, etc.

1. Introduction

The French revolution of 1789 is a great changeable event in the history of world. The unlimited monarchy in France, despotic rule of Bourbon dynasty, anarchy in administration, inefficiency of Louis 16th, arrogant queen Marie Antoinette such bad political condition and in addition to its climax of inequality was in France. France in 18th century had many revolutionary thinkers. The philosophers played an important role in the French revolution. They inspired the common mass of France with their revolutionary ideas and prepared them to fight against injustices. Among them were Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu and Diderot. Their revolutionary ideas encouraged people to fight for their rights. They exposed the inefficiency of the monarch and his government and aroused the people to challenge authority. Many events happened in the course of revolution. It began with very important role of National Assembly from 1789 to 1791. Fall of fort of Bastille, declaration of human rights including liberty, equality and fraternity, the great principles. Imprisonment of king and queen then their assassination, end of Reign of Terror with Robespierre etc. were main events in course of revolution.

- They did not believe in the doctrine of the divine and the absolute right of the monarch. In his two treaties of government John Locke refuted this doctrine strongly.
- 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, executive and the judiciary.
- The ideas of these philosophers were discussed in saloons and coffee houses and spread among people through books and newspapers.
- These were frequently read clearly in groups for the benefit of those who were illiterate. Thus the philosophers contributed a lot in bringing of the French revolution.

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The debate as to which factors, roughly classified as economic or intellectual, played more important part in bringing about the French revolution goes back the revolution itself when two points of view were started by Mallet du Pan and Mournei, writers of catholic reaction like de Mainstre and Bonald are in agreement with Babbit in the USA today that Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu were responsible for the evil destruction France as healthy before drinking the cup of Philosophic Poison.

2. Importance of the Theme

The word revolution carries a meaning of far-reaching change in the polity through radical transformation of society. It is mostly an epoch-making upheaval in human affairs. The revolution is an outcome of a contest between the old order which is dying and the new order which is rising. Russian political thinkers Trotsky define revolution as the movement when the masses, that is to say, the millions of ordinary men and women, begin to participate in politics, to take their lives and destinies into their own hands. The role of women in French revolution is a graphic illustration of this fact. Among the most decisive moments in the revolution was the fifth of October 1789, when six or seven thousand women of Paris marched in the pouring rain to Versailles to demand bread and to force the King to move to Paris. From his mid nineteenth century perspective, Carlyle viewed the crowd as an uncontrolled mob, blood-thirsty and wild-eyed. The 1789 revolution weakened the feudal order and ultimately defeated it, the Church lost its power and position forever, the republic replaced the dynastic regime and bourgeoisie emerged as new dominant class.

The French revolution has been battleground both for materialists and idealists to prove their respective positions. Marx discussed in his philosophy of dialectical materialism, himself admits that „Subjective Forces“ or Ideas play an important role in history that role is conditional on the objective reality. He explains the important of individual role in his work Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the Living” (Marx, 1937: 11). Hegel, one of the greatest philosophers of all times, too was profoundly influenced by this great revolution and he contextualized it in the light of his conception of history. Hegel argues that history is not meaningless chance, but a rational process the realization of the principle of freedom immanent in human consciousness (Hegel, 1956: 446).

3. Objectives of the Study

The present research paper has been thought to be undertaken with the following objectives in view: to

1. Analysis the historical development of ideas for human rights in France.
2. Study the intellectual’s debate on new form of liberal government in
3. Europe.
4. Highlight the impact of philosopher on society of France and western world.
5. Identify the core ideas that drove the age of enlightenment in France.

4. Methodology

The research is based on Secondary source of information. Data collected from various historian opinion and writings of French revolution. The French revolution was a momentous historical event that set enduring patterns for modern revolutionary movements and for much of modern politics in general. Contemporary reactions to it fed into the development of many ideologies, from conservatism to communism. Scholarly controversies about the significance and interpretation of the French revolution have been animated in particular by Marx and Engels’ use of it as the prime example of a „Bourgeois Revolution“ that prepared the way for the triumph of capitalism. Although the controversies over the Marxist Interpretation continue, recent scholars have turned in new directions: gender relation; the notion of citizenship and its connection to religion, ethnicity and race and the revolution’s impact on the colonies.

5. Enlightenment and French Revolution

The great French revolution which took place at the end of 18th century was preached by the ideological revolution known as the enlightenment. The materialists of the enlightenment were the most consistent fighters against feudal ideology. French philosophers of the 18th century, the forerunners of the revolution, regarded the reason as the sole judge of all that is. A rational government, a rational society was to be founded and everything against reasons was to be remorselessly set aside (Engels, 1999: 61).

The enlightenment was an intellectual movement of second half of the 18th century which owed its origin to classical times and the renaissance when humanism and rationalism were struggling to take the place of the dogma of the church. French philosopher Descartes with his „Rationalistic Approach and habit of Systematic Doubt“, John Locke’s empirically based political theory and Issac Newton’s use of observation and experiment with his law of motion and gravitation paved the way for the Enlightenment in the 18th century when these ideas were further developed by in France and publicized all over Europe in French, the international language of the time, in such work as Montesquieu „The Spirit of Laws (1748)“, Condillac’s Origin the Consciousness of Humanism (1746), the Encyclopedia of Diderot (1751), D’Alembert (1751 onwards), Voltaire’s Dictionary of Philosophy (1746) and Rousseau’s Social Contract and Emile (1762). All these philosophers or intellectuals did not from a school of thought, they subscribed together to a number of board propositions (Williams, 1982: 132- 133).

Under the influence of ideals of Renaissance, the Reformation, Scientific Revolution in Physical Sciences, these writers and philosophers established knowledge and discoveries on the basis of reason and observation without relying on authorities in Spirit of detachment from medieval dogma. The thinkers of the enlightenment also believed that human behavior also followed laws which could be discovered by reason and observation and which could be applied to morality, government, the economy and the social order. The popular coffee house of Paris were the centers of intellectuals activities and people from all walks of life met there to exchange views about new philosophies. There were five basic ideas of the enlightenment: Reason, Nature, Happiness, Progress and Liberty. The doctrine of liberty and equality were the most talked about subjects of discussions

in the time of privileged nobility and clergy when the privileged classes placed restriction on the freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of trade at the time when the French intellectual was expanding and seeking to experience fresh breeze of liberty and equality.

5.1 Baron De Montesquieu (1689 to 1755):

He was born in noble family. Advocate Montesquieu was judge also. He studied history, political science and law. The true intellectual revolution in France started with Montesquieu who exposed the privileges enjoyed by the French aristocracy and the corruption rampant in the royal court. In his book *Spirit of Laws* he openly attacked the absolute monarchy of France and pointed out that the shortcomings of political institutions and mental outlook of the people governed. He advocated constitutional monarchy that would serve the interests of the French people. He also preached that liberty of individuals could never be safe guarded without separation of powers of the government into three independent organs – legislature, judicial and executive. Montesquieu exercised a profound influence on the people. His criticism of the existing laws and institutions destroyed the prestige in which these institutions.

Montesquieu, himself an aristocrat, suggested that „Liberal Constitutional Monarchy“ was best system of government for the people of France who were aspiring to see themselves equal before law and prize freedom. He criticised monarchy, accepted democracy. In his opinion parliamentary democracy was ideal. He said three types of government 1) Monarchy, 2) Dictatorship, 3) Republic, are there.

1. In ideal monarchy, though power gets centralised, nobles and council of experienced people should be there to help and discuss with king. It should be bold and independent in thinking. It can prevent king to be a dictator.
2. In dictatorship all power gets centralised with king; lack of any factor to control his power. The Dictator creates his terror and makes people slaves. Terror is the base of his existence.
3. In democracy government takes care of people. Ordinary man also gets chance to be a leader. For success of republic people must be aware of it, economic equality is important. For the welfare of people power should be separate.

5.2 Voltaire (1694-1778)

The foremost figure in the 18th century intellectual world was Voltaire. His imprisonment by the government converted him into a social thinker and critic. He examined the condition of contemporary society and highlighted the tyranny, cruelty and absurdities prevailing in France. He wrote a famous critical history named „*The Age of Louis XIV*“ and also wrote numerous essays, tales and satires. The other famous work was the „*Philosophical Dictionary*“. He attacked the decadent customs and notions prevalent in the society. But his main target was the Catholic Church. He criticized the French Church as privileged nuisance, monument of bigotry and den of superstitions. He said that the church held human thoughts in perpetual bondage. He gave a battle cry to destroy it and criticized the government and society. His powerful writings attacked the citadel of tradition. He demolished its holiness and prestige.

Voltaire’s idea of tolerance is tersely put in his famous dictum: “I don’t agree with a word you say but I shall defend to death your right to say it” (Durant, 1961: 247). Durant Explains why revolution in France was violent in contrast to the revolutions which happened in other European countries give philosophical appraisal of influence of thought of Voltaire: “The most profound and lasting influence of Voltaire has been on religious belief. Through him and his associate France bypassed the Reformation and went directly from the Renaissance to Enlightenment. Perhaps that is one reason why change so violent; there was no pause at Protestantism” (Durant, 1961: 880).

5.3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau- (1712 – 1778)

The French rationalist philosophy swung to a radical channel with the advent of Jean Jacques Rousseau. He scorned the dry rationalism of the philosophers and pointed that right feelings are important along with right thinking. In his writings he poured his contempt on selfishness and cunning way of the rich and the educated. In his essay- what is the origin of inequality among men, Rousseau showed how vanity and greed had corrupted men. Rousseau had an intense faith in the dignity and goodness of man. In his book- *Social Contract*, he investigated the origin of state and government. He adopted Lock’s main proposition of state of nature, the idea of contract and the sovereignty of the people. He declared that Government, Law and State were the outcome of a contract with people. The collective will of the people called the general will was the sovereign power. The king remained on the throne under the obligation to obey the contract. If the king failed in his duty, the contract was broken and the general could depose him will. The people had a right to revolt against a bad government.

According to Mmmme De Stael (1766-1817), a famous female French writer and intellectual, Napoleon ascribed the French Revolution more to Rousseau than to any to other writer (Durant, 1961: 890). The influence of Rousseau is easily visible from the beginning of the Revolution even when the idea of constitutional monarchy was being implemented. Rousseau’s famous dictum that “Man was born free but everywhere is in chains” finds its echo in the Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizens adopted by the National Assembly of France on August 26th, 1789 (Rousseau, 1982: 49). The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of Man. These rights are liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression. The Principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. Nobody nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.

The French romantic thinker of the enlightenment Jean Jacques Rousseau was the main precursor of this great revolution. He was also called as Messiah of the Revolutionary crisis. His writing were widely read in the French educated class and quoted as gospel almost by all leaders of the revolution. Rousseau’s doctrines were contained in an early essay on civilization, *A dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the inequality of Mankind*, 1754, in his *Emile, A Treaties on Education and Social Contract*, which is his chief influence on the Revolution. Rousseau was considered threat to the ancient regime and he was exiled many a time and his books like *Emile* were still banned and burned, but their ashes helped to disseminate their ideals. Rousseau rejected the validity of all established

morality, religion, customs and institutions. Nothing external to the individual could claim any authority. His personal conscience was the supreme judge of morality. Only that to which the individual gave and unguided by anything except his own deeply felt conception of virtue of the common good was the formation of law and political association. Rousseau's ideas of the Republic influenced the Robespierre and Jacobins' rule of popular sovereignty known in history as the Reign of terror.

5.4 Denis Diderot – (1713 to 1784)

Denis Diderot was a writer and philosopher whose corpus of work contributed to the ideas of the French Revolution. He was editor of encyclopedia's art and science sections. He was an original "Scientific Theorist" of the Enlightenment, who connected the newest scientific trends to radical philosophical ideas such as materialism. He was especially interested in the life science and their impact on our traditional ideas of what a person or humanity are. Through writings he brought real condition of nation before society. He was critical on inequality, economic exploitation, anarchy in religion. Reforms are necessary for the development of nation. Injustice with people will be certainly problematic to government. By his thoughts middle class people were very much influenced. French government imposed restrictions on encyclopedia.

Facino Cane: He was French economist. He said the economic progress depends upon freedom of agriculture, business and trade, emancipation of farmers from government and upper class is important. His theory was total freedom in economic field is the real progress of nation.

5.5 Frene (1694-1774):

He was medical practitioner. He studied economic condition of nation in detail. To develop nation economically, it is necessary to concentrate and reform in agriculture, trade and business. These sectors should free. During course of revolution his thoughts were accepted and implemented.

5.6 La Mettrie (1709-51)

An intellectual army physician wrote a book Natural History of the Soul which earned him exile in Germany. He took refuge at the court of Frederick. He blasted the dogma of the Church in this book. His inquiries into reason for man's intelligence holding that why animals have intelligence compared with plants are because they have to move to satisfy their wants. Man is the most intelligence of all species as he has the greatest wants and widest mobility (Durant, 1961: 231).

5.7 Claude-Arien Helvetius (1715-71)

He wrote in his book on man attacked the belief that conscience was given by the grace of God. He said that conscience was not the voice of God, but the fears of the police. It is the deposit left in us from the stream of prohibitions poured over the growing soul by parents and teachers and press. Morality must be founded on sociology rather than theology. The source of all action is egoism and pleasure. Diderot questioned the foundations of beliefs: "Belief in God is bound up with submission to autocracy; the two rises and fall together and man will never be free till the last king is strangled with entrails of the last priest (Cobban. 1965: 150)

6. Impact of Intellectuals on France

French Philosophers Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu inspired the people with revolutionary ideas of liberty and equality. Montesquieu rejected the theory of the "Divine Rights of the King" and urged for separation of powers. Rousseau, in his book Social Contract, announced that sovereign power lay in popular will. Their revolutionary ideas helped the people to fight their rights. They exposed the inefficiency of the monarch and his government. The French Revolution had a great and far-reaching impact that probably transformed the world more than any other revolution. Its repercussions include lessening the importance of religion; rise of Modern Nationalism; spread of Liberalism and igniting the Age of Revolutions.

7. Concluding Remarks

To sum up, the French revolution is unique in many ways. The French people struggled to materialize the thoughts and ideals they animated by and inspired with. The revolution passed through many phases, each of which represented the endeavor on the part of the French people to experiment on their vision of liberty, equality and fraternity. As the revolutionaries replaced one set of ideas with another, they also went from one philosopher to another whose ideas represented the needs of consciousness and conditions in which the revolutionaries found them. American Declaration of Independence was also one of the influential factors in the French revolutionary Politics. Rousseau was the French as the intellectual father of their 1789 revolution. The French revolution, being itself inspired with ideas gave birth to ideas which led beyond the ideas of the entire old world order.

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