

Causes of the French Revolution

Introductory:

French Revolution is a paradox of modern history. A number of causes can be attributed to its occurrence. But no cause can be singled out as the sole factor behind those events of 1789 which heralded the Revolution in France. Ever since then, the historians and other writers have been engaged in discussing its various causes. But no one can claim to answer categorically some very complex questions related to this great event of human history.

A number of questions can be raised which signify the paradoxical nature of the French Revolution. For example:

- Why Revolution occurred in France?
- Why this Revolution did not occur in any other part of Europe where the socio-economic conditions of the common people were almost the same and even worse than France in some cases?
- Why the Revolution started from Paris? Why not from the country side of France where the peasants' economic conditions were critical as compare to the urban middle classes particularly of Paris city?
- Was this revolution a brought about by the lower ranks of the French Society or was it a 'Middle Class Revolution'?
- How far the Social Conditions of the People of France were responsible for the Revolution? Did the over burden of taxation so much to do with the beginning of the Revolution?
- How far the role of the Enlightenment or the writings and ideas of the *Philosophes* were instrumental in bringing about the Revolution?
- Was this Revolution was a conflict of interests at the top between the Ruling hierarchy and the wealthy classes of the City of Paris?
- What was the actual role of the common people in the Revolution?

Multiple Causes:

A. Political Causes:

- The political structure of France was similar to that of other countries of Europe in the 18th Century. Absolute despotism and the position of the King and the royal Family. Only responsible to God. "Divine Right of the King"! Having the Legislative, Judicial and Executive Powers concentrated in his own Hands. He was above the Law. The *Estates General* never met for 175 years.
- **The King:** Louis XVI was inactive, incapable and lucrative. Devoid of any significant quality necessary for the Kingship. Religious minded but lethargic character. The higher nobility became powerful over him. 1774 enthronement. Lacked in his opinion and decision-making. Earlier was under the influence of his financial advisor Turgot but very soon under pressure of his Queen Marie Antoinette.

- **Queen Marie Antoinette:** Daughter of Maria Theresa of Austria. The Austrian Beauty. Became notorious for extravaganza. Did not know writing. Opportunist Nobles gathered around her and exploited to the maximum. Became a symbol of hate amongst the people at large. Scandals with nobles. Poor matrimonial relations with the King.
- **The Royal Court:** Versailles Palace some miles away from the City of Paris.
- **Poor Administrative Structure:** The King, The Five Councils to assist the King, France divided into several 22 Generalities, Districts and the lower Country Sides having divergent rules of law in every district.

B. Social Conditions/Causes:

- **Social Structure of French Society:** The society was divided into three orders: **First Estate (The Clergy), Second Estate (The Nobility), Third Estate (The Commoners/ Rest others)**
- **First Estate:** It represented the religious class.