
UNIT 6 THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION*

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you should

- be familiar with the main events or timeline of the English Revolution;
- be able to link its events with the general developments during the 17th century;
- be able to establish some linkages between its political, economic and social aspects;
- discern the different themes and trends that constituted the English revolution;
- have some idea of the historiography and debates about it;
- be able to explain the distinction between what has been called the English Revolution and the Glorious Revolution;
- be able to discuss the nomenclature of Civil War to describe its main conflicts, and what is meant by the term in the context of the English Revolution, and
- be able to understand the significance of the English Revolution and its place in modern European history.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The English Revolution is among the most important developments of the 17th century and had far reaching consequences. It can be understood well only in the context of the social, economic and intellectual developments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and its specific events also have their roots in the crisis of the 17th century. Here we will focus on the main events and trends of the English Revolution, including their social and economic dimensions. Economic interests and social aspirations were often linked with the political conflicts and

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arguments put forward by the main political actors in the events. The political dimension of the Revolution took primarily the form of a struggle for power between the King and the Parliament.

The English revolution could not have taken place without the decline of the feudal system, the backdrop of the explorations of the 16th century and the discovery of 'new' lands, the interactions with other societies, the questioning of the Church and the Reformation, and the contributions of geographers, and philosopher-scientists like Leonardo da Vinci, Copernicus and Galileo about the human body and the Universe, not to speak of the whole experience of the Renaissance and Humanism, and the political thought linked with it. We will, therefore, briefly consider these aspects also.

6.2 AN OVERVIEW

The period between 1642 and 1660, characterized by armed conflict and political turmoil in England, is known variously as the English Revolution or the Civil War, depending on the features that are emphasized by different historians to describe this turmoil and conflict. The events included a series of engagements between the King i.e., the Crown and Parliament, during which the high points were the trial and execution of King Charles I, the establishment of what came to be known as the Commonwealth of England for a few years (1649-1653), and the rise of Oliver Cromwell who became almost a dictator representing specific social interests. It is said to have ended with the restoration of the Monarchy, which also is variously known as Restoration or the Glorious Revolution, depending on the features emphasized by different historians.

This period was also important for the expression within the political mainstream, and outside it, of certain ideas that became the hallmark of thinking in a modern society: liberty, equality and the modernity that we encounter in the later revolutions were articulated here in England for the first time in attempts to reform the political structure in the larger context of the nation-state.

The English Revolution began as a conflict between the King and Parliament, regarding where the real political authority lay. The origins of the parliament lay in a Council created by Henry I during the 11th century, but it came to be known as parliament only in the 13th century, and was dominated by the higher nobility and high church functionaries. In 1215, the parliament won for itself a charter of demands safeguarding the interests of these classes, known as the *Magna Carta*, which set the precedent for the conflict whereby the ruling classes of England asserted their rights and privileges from the existing national monarchy. As England underwent social and economic changes, the merchants and the emerging middle classes began to lay their claims. During the Tudor regime, the merchants interested in the explorations and the consequent trade with colonies encouraged by the King, found it in their interest to support the King. By the time of the Stuarts in the 17th century, these developments contributed to land becoming integral to the exchange economy, the growth of market in land and in the products of the land. Even those not traditionally based in land wanted to buy land. The confiscation and sale of church lands had also contributed to the land market.

With land becoming an important factor in the emerging capitalism, there was a change in the composition of those aspiring to hold land and an expansion of the

land market. The ruling classes linked with land also expanded as a consequence, and began to hold broader interests than the landed classes earlier. These new landed gentry added new dimensions to the conflict between King and Parliament, which took the form of religious conflict and Civil War. Various, these dimensions involved taxation, foreign policy and wars, property rights and religious rights, and above all, a questioning of the theory of 'Divine Right of Kings'.

Religion also became a dividing factor. For reasons that we will explore, most of the Catholics, and many conservative Protestants, continued to support the Crown, while those who came to be called Puritans sided with the Parliament. Thus the political conflict assumed a religious dimension, or as some would say, the religious divide resulted in political opposition.

The stakes of the Monarchy in areas of Scotland and Ireland meant that the conflict raged not only within England proper, but also in all the areas ruled by and in which the Stuart monarchy claimed stakes, Scotland and Ireland included.

6.3 THE MAIN ISSUES OF THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

We will now go on to the main issues that emerged in this multi-dimensional conflict within English society and in British politics. How and why did these issues of conflict arise, and when they did?

The Tudor monarchy had achieved a kind of equilibrium of social forces that also became represented in the political system. Therefore, the birth of the nation-state in England was synonymous with the rise of absolutism that had a degree of consent or sanction by the major sections of the nobility who constituted the ruling classes. The nation state was only just beginning to acquire a centralized standing army and bureaucracy and the powers of the feudal nobility had been curbed. On the social and economic front, the decline of the feudal nobility resulted in the growth and expansion of a new class of landed gentry that had a stake in both land ownership and market in agricultural production, the two being part of the same process that stood between decline of feudal economy and the emergence of capitalism. A monarchy that supported the voyages of discovery and long distance commerce had the support of both the merchants and the new landed gentry because it undermined the power of the old feudal nobility. Merchants too began to invest in land. These classes needed the new monarchy as much as the monarchy needed their support. In subduing the feudal potentates the Monarchy made the social terrain safe for commercial interests and landed property against brigandage and the arbitrariness of feudal law that privileged hierarchy at every level of society.

This changed by the beginning of the seventeenth century as these new social and economic forces became wealthier, stronger and more independent and now wanted more autonomy and say in political matters. The acquisition of private property through sale required laws that cemented the right to private property, which could not be encroached upon by feudal privilege or by the Crown. They wanted more changes in their favour than the successive kings were prepared to concede: the monarchy now seemed an obstacle rather than a promoter of their further advancement. This conflict was inherent in the very logic of development

of social and economic forces in the seventeenth century, though it may not have been quite apparent to them as they fought the power of the king on various issues that seemed to confront them.

Confronting these issues resulted, ultimately, in what can be called the reform or new adjustments or creation of a constitutional monarchy – a system unique to England, and different from the Continent, in the working of its political institutions, if not in the content of the social classes it empowered and represented.

In France, the real challenge to the feudal landed aristocracy came only with the French Revolution in the eighteenth century, as an absolutist monarchy presiding over trade and commerce, the growth of middle classes, the first enclosures of land and emergence of capitalistic features, continued to hold power and protect the interests of the feudal landed aristocracy.

So, while the kings in England might have wanted to enjoy the power of their counterparts on the Continent, the development of English society and economy favoured changes that enabled a curbing of their powers: you would learn later that the first industrial revolution occurred in Britain rather than on the Continent, and is not unrelated to these developments that allowed a growth of what are now called the “pre-requisites of the industrial revolution”.

The Parliament became the vehicle or instrument of these changes in the realm of politics, while the Monarchy now relied on those entrenched within the political system in the sixteenth century, the feudal barons that it had brought under control, who had lost their economic dominance and were now dependent on Court positions and therefore willing to safeguard their pre-eminence in the political system by supporting the Monarchy. They were opposed to the erosion of the entire complex of power that formed this pact. On the other hand, the commercial interests now required the whole national market, the destruction of guilds that restricted non agricultural activity within specific towns, as did the landed gentry that had built its stakes in woolen textile production and pastoral farming, for which there was a growing market. The clash of interests with the yeomen and tenantry on land was still in the future, as was the contradiction between those involved in non agricultural production, the nascent capitalists and the nascent workmen who already depended on work on the orders from those in touch with the market and could provide them the raw materials. The separation between town and country had emerged, as had the division of labour, but not sufficient for the down trodden to challenge the new emerging dominant classes.

The English Revolution, therefore, occurred during the rule of the Stuarts in the mid seventeenth century, and was a product of the transformation in the structure of English rural society: the pacts and contradictions specific to this fluid but critical juncture in English social and political development.

The Revolution also presented itself as a Civil War and has been referred to as such by some contemporaries and later historians: this is due to the bitterness of the struggle obviously and because it seemed to tear the existing social fabric apart. It was the first major churning that challenged the existing political and social order throughout the nation-state. Because, unlike Europe, England never again experienced a revolution, say a 1789, 1830 or 1848, later historians have stressed on the continuities, the capacity for absorption of dissent, the willingness of accommodation within its institutions and the initiative for reforms that made

it unique and somewhat immune to the revolutionary tendencies of the 19th and 20th century Europe. Some historians have, in fact, questioned whether even the English was a revolution at all.

The English revolution was, on the other hand, followed by a Restoration, also called the Glorious Revolution, which has rendered the question of this nomenclature complex for England, particularly as both King and Parliament continued to play a significant role in British history right into and through the twentieth century, and the struggle/conflict between the Monarchy and the Parliament continued in various forms, representing adjustments within ruling classes and involving shifts of balance of power within institutions, as well as preservation of power of the ruling classes.

6.4 CONFLICT BETWEEN KING AND PARLIAMENT, TILL 1649

The English Revolution is said to have been provoked by Charles I when, in August 1642, he decided to raise an army for dealing with rebellion in Scotland, without putting this measure through the Parliament. Many members of the Parliament saw this as usurping the prerogatives hard won by “British society” in their struggle against absolutist rule of the King.

The seeds of the conflict between the Monarchy and the Parliament had, however, been sown earlier during the reign of James I (1603-1625), as the co-operation that the Tudors had managed to obtain from the Parliament began to be systematically eroded. To begin with, he was a strong advocate of the Divine Right of kings, and sought to rule accordingly, besides being of Scottish origin. Differences on the major issues of rights of Parliament, of different religious groups, and over matters of taxation and foreign policy had already emerged strong during his reign, and resulted in a considerable debt for the monarchy and a growing political crisis within the English political system. The monarchy felt constrained to order taxes in order to meet the growing costs of administration, army and needs of foreign policy, without obtaining sanction of Parliament, which was adamant in not giving these sanctions. The conflict came to a head over this.

During his reign Charles I (1625-1649), who succeeded James I, called the session of Parliament three times in four years, but dissolved it each time when matters came to a head over matter of finances. In 1628, he was forced to accept the *Petition of Right*, whereby he had to agree that in future he would not impose “loans” or taxes without parliamentary consent, and would not attempt to punish anyone who refused such loans. There was also condemnation of arbitrary arrest, martial law and other such aggressive measures by the King. Charles responded by dismissing the Parliament in 1629. For eleven years he ruled thereafter in a high-handed fashion, without calling the Parliament, until the fateful year 1640, when he was compelled to do so in order to pay for the war necessary to defeat the Scots. The Parliament hardly managed to complete two months and ended in deadlock once again.

This was also the turning point in his reign and in the constitutional history of England, for the Parliament demanded substantial concessions in terms of regulating the prerogatives of the Crown and the powers of the Parliament: it was now a tussle over how England was to be governed. Henceforth the Parliament

insisted on the reversal to the rights granted to the Council under the *Magna Carta* in 1415, that had been extracted by the barons who constituted the highest nobility and exercised great power. It insisted on final authority in all matters of finances, taxation and foreign policy decisions. They asked for religious reform. The tussle spilled over into matters of governance, with the Parliament calling for greater say and authority of local structures and officials at county level against the royal courts established by the Crown and dominated by the nobility representing royal interests and loyal to the King. The king was forced to call the Parliament again in 1640, known in history as the Long Parliament. Its members insisted on a redefinition of the powers of King and Parliament, with Parliament as supreme authority. It decided to abolish all the Courts and institutions that ensured royal authority: the Court of Star Chamber, the Court of High Commission, Council of the North and the Council of Wales. It decided to punish with imprisonment the significant officials responsible for asserting the power of the Crown and seen as undermining the legitimate rights of Parliament, among them William Laud and Wentworth. William Laud had been made the Primate of England in 1633 and was seen as exercising undue power on behalf of the King. It abolished knighthood and payment of what was known as ship money, and decreed the approval of Parliament necessary for all other taxes. By the *Triennial Act*, it sought to ensure that Parliament would have to be called at least once every three years.

In the meantime, the Irish revolt broken out in 1641, with the Irish rebels being seen as forces on the side of the King. Soon this had repercussions in the Parliament and resulted in the formation of a King's Party in Parliament. On its part, the Parliament produced a document called *The Grand Remonstrance* authored by Pym, leader of Parliament that tilted the balance of power firmly on the side of the Parliament, which was not acceptable to Charles I. It could be passed only by a majority of eleven votes, testifying to the deep cleavage in English society and politics.

At this critical juncture, on January 4, 1642, the King decided to respond with an attack on Parliament with his own armed force of 400 soldiers, hoping to arrest the main leaders of the opposition in Parliament. Now started the armed conflicts that have given to the English Revolution the nomenclature also of Civil War which ended in 1649, with the execution of Charles I and formation of a Republic headed by Oliver Cromwell. It meant victory for the Parliament.

Those who supported and fought on the side of the King, the Royalists, came to be called Cavaliers as they represented the old tradition of feudal fighting forces. Those on the side of the Parliament were called Roundheads because of the kind of caps they wore. The Cavaliers claimed to be fighting for not just King but God and against the disturbers of social harmony, the ones who sought to make "subjects princes and princes slaves". The allegiances were, however, complex: what was involved was not just issues of class, although they were paramount. As pointed out earlier, religion and foreign policy and the nature of rebellions, which brought Scotland and Ireland into the picture, also determined these allegiances. And life was disrupted in much larger areas than the sites of armed combat, because of requisitions, plunder and hardship due to strife.

Within the Parliamentary opposition forces too there were groupings and distinctions regarding methods of opposition to King and how far they may go in initiating change. Mainly there were two, the Presbyterians and Independents,

both Puritans in religious affiliation, the former among them more moderate and the latter insisting on more radical outcomes. Oliver Cromwell, an Independent, formed a Model Army to fight the battle against the Crown, in the process also changing the character of the militia by purging it of the moderate elements. This new Model Army was the force that finally defeated the King's forces in June 1645 when the Scots, on whom Charles was hoping to rely, left him to his devices to face this army owing allegiance to the Parliament. 1644-45 were the years of the biggest battles of the Civil War.

At this stage a "Rump Parliament" of members loyal to Cromwell was convened and decided on the King's execution and a Republic to replace the Monarchy, but not before many of the Independents themselves, considered too radical, were disbanded by a majority in the Parliament. The radical influence was that of the Levellers and Diggers, whom we will talk about subsequently, after we have outlined those who led the Republic. The "Rump Parliament" was so called because it was a continuation of the Long Parliament that had been in session before the Civil war and was never officially disbanded by the Parliament, which had assumed the right of dissolving the parliament, as opposed to its being the King's prerogative. Now, with the differences mentioned above within the Parliament, only 150 members called for the session passed the fateful decision of execution and Republic. The execution took place on January 30, 1649.

Throughout this period the English Parliament continued to consist of two houses, the House of Lords and House of Commons, both dominated by the representatives of the landed gentry, although the Upper House was predominantly of titled nobility and the Commons had members of those who had expanded the ranks of the gentry due to acquisition of land during the late 16th and early 17th century, and merchants with high stake in both commerce and land. These were the ones demanding restrictions on Absolutism and prerogatives of the Monarchy. They had support of those called the "middle sort of people" and yeoman and artisans, some of whom exhibited radical tendencies. It was also a period of intense activity and experimentation, including attempts at constitutionalism.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss the nature of conflict between different social groups during the English Revolution.

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- 2) Briefly describe the nature of conflict between the King and the Parliament in England till 1649.

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6.5 OLIVER CROMWELL AND THE REPUBLIC, 1649-53

For all practical purposes, the Civil War did not end with the formation of the Commonwealth. Cromwell had to deal with all the continuing issues that preceded him, and although the King had been removed, it cannot be said that the Royalist challenge was over, as events were to show. His personality, of course towered over the period, as much as did that of the King in the earlier phase. Of commoner, yeoman origins, his sympathies did lie with the goals that the Parliament had set for itself. The compromises he made were those dictated by the balance of forces, rather than his own predilections. In that sense, he was not an advocate of absolute power for himself, as the kings before him had been. Even though he ruled like a dictator, he refrained from using divine sanction for his rule, or the rituals and titles that went with it.

Oliver Cromwell ruled without care for parliamentary sanction, but he reversed many of the policies of the Monarchy and considered the interests of the new gentry and the middle classes. In 1649 he put down the Irish rebellion and conquered Scotland in 1650-51, thus defeating forces considered supportive of the Monarchy, followed by wars with the Dutch Republic and with Spain.

Cromwell dissolved the Rump Parliament in 1653, over differences on religious policy and finances during rebellions. He created a new Parliament with 140 people of his own choice, soon dissolved that too and took for himself the title of “Lord Protector”, to distinguish from the title of King. The Protectorate had a constitution called the Instrument of Government, and power was shared by the Lord Protector and the Council of State. The Parliament created by it included representatives from Scotland and Ireland besides England. They were elected, but of course on a very restricted franchise, based on private property, that for its time meant essentially that the representatives would be the landed aristocracy, including new gentry. The Parliament could now constitutionally make laws and impose taxes. It produced what is regarded as the first written constitution in England. There was a lot of sale of land, particularly of the Church and Royalists and the Crown officials, furthering the consolidation of the new gentry and the privilege of private property. Navigation Acts of 1651 helped promote commercial capital and colonial interests.

Civil War had not ended during the Commonwealth. The New Model Army and its domination, despite its purges and changes in composition, made it an important player during the Commonwealth. It had helped put down rebellions of the Irish and the Scots, and it had fought the Royalist forces on the side of Parliament. In terms of religion, Cromwell had favoured the Puritans, as opposed to Catholics, seen as identified with Charles I and James I, or the Anglican Church, supportive of the social and religious compact arrived at by the Tudors in their consolidation of the monarchical nation state in the 16th century, with landholdings and important positions in the Court well into the 17th century.

Cromwell himself died, succeeded by his son Richard, but lack of control on his part facilitated an invitation to the son of former king Charles, who made conciliatory overtures and came back to the throne as Charles II. Thus ended the experiment of Commonwealth, with a Restoration.

6.6 RESTORATION (1660) AND GLORIOUS REVOLUTION (1688)

If the Commonwealth had failed in creating stability and co-operation with the Parliament, so did the Restoration of the monarchy that followed it, despite an official end of the Civil War. The contradiction within the polity was inherent in the fact that a Monarchy had now been restored by a victorious Parliament. The House of Lords was also restored, where the nominated members of the king held sway but House of Commons in which the elected component was significant, also became important.

The result of this was that both those who favoured Monarchy and those who favoured Parliament as the supreme authority had to carry their fight *into* the Parliament, rather than resolve the matter through armed battles of militias on this side or that. Those who favoured “Court”, (those dependent on Court appointments and positions and belonging to the titled nobility, sympathetic to the prerogatives of divine right of kings) came to be known as Tories. Those who were critical (and had their social base in the gentry, the new landed aristocracy, and favoured decentralization of authority) were called Whigs. They had their base in the “country”, where ownership of land by them made them powerful and prosperous, and among those who gained new wealth from commercial capitalism following the Navigation Acts and expansion of legitimate trade and commerce through monopolies in trade.

These social and political conflicts also impinged on religious differences. The preferences of Charles II, and James II after him, for Catholicism were dubbed unpatriotic and identified with Spain, apart from infringing upon opportunities for other religious sects within the administrative set up. Although the Court of Star Chamber and other such courts dissolved during the Commonwealth were not restored along with the Monarchy, nevertheless the preferences for Catholics and their appointments tended to put power in the hands of those who favoured monarchy, and therefore central control in administration.

By the 1670s, Tories and Whigs were well defined political groups within the Parliament, and in 1679 the Whigs pushed through the *Habeas Corpus Act* that institutionalized the protection and rights of private property, guard against arbitrary power of the king through set procedures for trial and punishment and legal rights of those accused. In this context, when the powers of king and parliament was a strongly contested constitutional issue and James II stubbornly exercised his prerogatives, the parliament majority favouring Whigs, invited William and Mary of Orange, in Holland, to accept the throne and restore Protestantism. The Settlement hence arrived at came to be known as the “Glorious Revolution”. It came to be termed as “Glorious Revolution” by historians linked with the Whigs, because it put the rights of Parliament on a sound foundation, making Parliament a structural component of the English polity. The *Bill of Rights* passed in 1689 institutionalised this structure, by restating the rights of Parliament. It marked the origin of the constitutional parliamentary representative system with two Houses of Parliament that has become the blue print for many states in the modern world.

In class terms it established the social and political domination of the landed gentry that was to last through the eighteenth century: the elections to the

Parliament, we must remember, were based on property qualifications, which restricted franchise. These elections not only ensured the pervasive influence of gentry in parliamentary legislation, but also guaranteed that the social composition of the Parliament was such that most members belonged to this class. Anglicanism continued to be State religion, and Puritanism that enjoyed adherence among middle classes remained without clout in political affairs. Given the nature of economic development here, the gentry was far more open to entry of newcomers into their class, and far more accommodative of the commercial, and later industrial, interests, which gave to the English polity a reformist constitutionalism, as compared with Europe, where the eighteenth century saw a contestation between absolutism and titled nobility on one side, and opposing forces that took on a revolutionary form.

6.7 RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AND POLITICS

Religious conflicts were intertwined with the politics of the time not only because religious beliefs were all pervasive, but because the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw intense religious wars. The Tudor kings and the Stuart rulers had their own personal predilections as well as bases of support for the Monarchy as an institution, while those opposed to Absolutism did not necessarily subscribe to the same religion.

In the sixteenth century, on the question of religious affiliation, the Parliament had supported the Tudors against the Catholic Church and its international jurisdiction. England became gradually independent of the declining Holy Roman Empire, challenged the Catholic Spanish Empire in the seas and had its own navigation plans and voyages. The Reformation and the confiscation of monastic lands and their sale (1536-40) created a land market and made land a commodity to be bought and sold in the market, which means it could be bought by non-noble classes or those from the nobility who had not “held” land as feudal tenure and been part of the vassalage system. Thus the conflict between Church and State was intrinsic to the rise of new economy and the social classes that benefited from it, and it was natural that the Parliament, by now dominated by these interests, should support the New Monarchy in this religious conflict.

In the seventeenth century, religion continued to regulate and influence social life. It was present at all stages of a person’s life from baptism to burial, was the main agency of education and socialization at the level of the village and the parish and in the towns. It defended the existing social and political order, just as it had defended feudalism in the Middle Ages. Social conflicts therefore, even in the seventeenth century, inevitably assumed a religious form and conflictual ideas were invariably couched in religious terms. Religious pamphlets thus proliferated and dominated much of the debate during the years of the English Revolution, on both sides. The defense of Monarchy and the espousal of republicanism were expressed through strong religious arguments by their proponents.

When James ascended the throne, the Calvinist and the Catholic clergy organized to pull him in different directions and the Puritan clergy expected him to address matters of Church abuses. Charles II favoured Catholics, as did James II after him, which to many Parliamentarians seemed unpatriotic because Catholicism was identified with Spain or the Dutch state, or plain and simple attack on religious tolerance and a conspiracy to restore Catholicism in England, including reversal

of the Church lands. William Laud, the main Minister of Charles was Arminian and it was thought that all the gains of Reformation and of parliamentary prerogatives would get completely eroded under Charles. Cromwell and the Republic in which the Puritans held sway was a backlash to these apprehensions. With these opposing perspectives, the issues of religion also became intertwined with conflicts over centralization and decentralization of governance and administration.

Most often the immediate cause of conflicts between the Crown and the Parliament arose over the needs to finance the curbing of rebellions: during the Stuart regime the Scots and the Irish rebelled often enough for the Crown to demand taxes in order to finance his standing armies, and this tax tended to fall primarily on the gentry who had gained from the commercialization of agriculture or on the merchants who gained from monopolies in trade, rather than the titled nobility who enjoyed certain privileges regarding taxation in return for support to the Monarchy. Religious conflict became inevitable in these rebellions, because the Scots and Irish also saw these as attempts to impose the Anglican Church of England, and in the case of Irish to impose Protestant landlords on a majority Catholic peasantry. With the Dutch and the French too the trade rivalries were compounded by the differing state religions, the Monarchy and the Parliament having opposing perspectives not only on the issue of patriotism but also religion, with the Parliament finally inviting William and Mary of Orange to take over the throne affecting the Glorious Revolution, discussed above.

6.8 INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS

The intellectual traditions associated with the English Revolution are rich and varied, ranging from the royalist-conservative to the incipient utopian-socialist. The ideas that sprang forth from the Renaissance, Reformation, Counter Reformation, the new inventions and scientific discoveries regarding universe and place of earth in it brought forth a rich legacy that came to be represented in some form or the other by different groups during the English Revolution. In political actions, they were represented by the Royalists, the Fifth Monarchy men, the Puritans, the Levellers and the Diggers, the Quakers, and others who questioned baptism and marriage rituals, and yet others who questioned the idea of heaven and hell. Puritanism contributed a significant ideology in the socio-political environment of the years, and brought about a split not just in the religious lives, but also the political affiliations, best seen in the conflict between King and Parliament and in the civil war, with a strong social basis across English society. It provided political weight to the Parliament. The Levellers was a radical political movement centred mainly around London who represented small proprietors, were opposed to enclosures of land by the rich gentry which rendered the smaller peasantry landless. They were called Levellers because they also opposed the taking over of common lands over which all had rights of use. Their important leaders were John Lilbourne and John Wildman, who formulated their democratic programme that included enhanced suffrage (although not every adult male and certainly not women) and other political reforms that may curb the power of the rich landed gentry. They were also opposed to trade monopolies and corporate privileges, and sought new laws to protect the “small” people.

The most radical were the Diggers, who called themselves the “True Levellers”, as they actually dug out a landlord’s field and asserted right of all to the produce,

and opposed the very idea of private property and class distinctions altogether. Given the upper class composition of the Parliament, they questioned the Parliament authority to speak for all the people. They were inspired by thoughts of egalitarianism and justice and freedom, although they had no concrete programmes and later historians termed their vision as utopian and far ahead of its times. Their main leader was Winstanley and they tried to set up a model community, but were unsuccessful. The levellers and the Diggers were not unacceptable even to the Republic.

6.9 QUESTIONS OF REVOLUTION AND CIVIL WAR

There is a debate among historians on whether the period in question should be termed as Revolution or Civil War, with those inclined towards class analysis or social analysis of the events terming it as Revolution. England during this period, both because of the social and economic changes noted above and for the evolution towards a constitutional system, saw fundamental changes that are intrinsic to a modern capitalist society. In that sense it has been termed a Revolution, despite its not having many of the characteristics of the later revolutions in the modern world, which brought about new political regimes and a qualitative change in balance of class forces. This is the consensus, even though new studies of the cataclysmic revolutions now tend towards studying the hitherto neglected continuities.

On the other hand, other historians have tended to interpret these changes as not so fundamental, especially since the short interval of the Commonwealth was followed by Restoration of the Monarchy, which has continued to have a significant presence, if not power in the English structure. The constitutional monarchy is seen as absence of revolution, and simply as a struggle between two political institutions that took on the character of essentially a Civil War, and hence this nomenclature.

From our survey of events and the nature of conflict during these years we have seen that armed conflicts occurred almost through this entire period, from the succession of the Stuarts to the throne till the Restoration, finally coming to an end only with the Settlement of 1688. However, we can say that far from simply a Civil War, the larger epithet of Revolution, in the sense of attempts at social and political advance (if not transformation), is more pertinent. These publications also point towards issues that were to continue to concern modern society henceforth: liberty, representation and sovereignty, individual religious freedom, freedom of speech and association; and above all, the right to private property, which is the hallmark of a bourgeois capitalist society. In a way, then, this struggle between King and Parliament did signify a thrust towards the elimination of the legacies of feudalism and a preparation for doing away with the obstacles to free development of productive forces and production relations, including the religious and intellectual fetters that impeded change.

On the other hand, it was obvious that kings could no longer continue in the old ways, with aspirations akin to the absolutist monarchs of the Continent. There was nothing to prevent individual kings from harbouring aspirations of power and preference for particular religious sects or social groupings. In this lay the seeds of future conflict that characterized the period of the Restoration,

transcended the settlement of the Glorious Revolution, and continued well into the eighteenth century with its formations of political parties, in which the King was a crucial factor.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Describe the role of Oliver Cromwell in the Commonwealth.

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- 2) Discuss the major intellectual trends during the English Revolution.

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6.10 LET US SUM UP

From our survey and analysis of the events and developments that constituted the English Revolution, and the ensuing Restoration and ‘Glorious Revolution’, you would have gained an idea that this was a very significant period in English history. It created the basis for the future British political system characterized as constitutional monarchy. It also laid the seeds for the similarities and differences between Britain and the European Continent, which persist to this day.

We have tried to interpret the English Revolution in the light of the broader context of 17th century Europe. The social, economic and intellectual developments of this period formed the basis for the political conflicts, particularly the contest for power between the King and the Parliament, and subsequently for power within the Parliament as it became an important institution in the English political system. There were the seeds of the future accommodations and class alliances between the upper classes that continued to characterize British history.

Although this period also involved armed conflicts between the opposing forces, the fundamental issues of the English Revolution centred around the creation of conditions, social and political, that would allow the growth of capitalism and of modernity after the decline of feudal society. The form this took, that of a Revolution, so different and constrained as compared to the later revolutions on the Continent, was partly due to the specific call configuration of English society and the social base of the Monarchy in England, and partly due to the fact that feudalism declined and there was a long period between the decline of feudalism and the development of capitalism, much longer than on the Continent which allowed for political developments to be in the long-term more continuously

reformatory rather than cataclysmic. The English Revolution was the first evidence of this, and Restoration was as much a part of the English Revolution as the Republic was.

6.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 6.3
- 2) See Section 6.4

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 6.5
- 2) See Section 6.8

