
UNIT 2 THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The French Revolution is generally considered as a major turning point in European history which marked the end of despotism and beginning of modern state. In this Unit we shall study the origins of the French Revolution and the significant features of the revolutionary period. After reading this Unit, you will be able to explain:

- how the economic crisis precipitated the revolution,
- the issues which mobilized the urban and rural force,
- the role of philosophers in providing an ideology,
- how the popular participation changed the course of revolutionary struggle,
- the democratic measures adopted by the national assembly and their implication,
- the principles of legitimation of the revolutionary government after the destruction of the old order, and
- the nature of political struggle which gave birth to political parties in France.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The French Revolution made France a trailblazer in the domain of political culture. It not only established new principles of politics and democracy which continued to influence the European mind subsequently, it provided a new vocabulary of revolutionary action. The revolutionary doctrines of liberty, equality and fraternity

continue to hold a special place even today in democratic societies the world over. In order to understand what led to the complete overthrow of the feudal structure in France along with monarchical government, it is necessary to have a brief background of the diverse social interests supporting or opposing the Revolution. Besides studying the immediate causes of the Revolution, it is necessary to know how the popular intervention of the *menu-peuple* (ordinary people) at crucial moments not only saved the Revolution but also influenced its course. The democratic action of the Third Estate laid down new principles of legitimacy. The crowd's direct action in 1792 pushed the Revolution towards a democratic Republic and revolutionary ideology and politics led to the formation of a rudimentary form of political parties.

2.2 REVOLUTIONARY OVERTHROW OF THE ANCIEN REGIME AND DEMOCRATIC ACTION

France was the most populous and powerful state of Europe in 1780s and majority of its population lived in the countryside. What happened in the late eighteenth century France that led to major political transformation in France needs to be understood first? In the subsequent sub-sections you will learn about the forces which prepared the ground for revolutionary change in France.

2.2.1 Economic Crisis and Popular Disturbances

For most of the eighteenth century the French economy was marked by moderate growth and prosperity. However, its fruits were spread unevenly. There was a distinct expansion of the oil industry, cotton manufactures, large seaports, sugar refinery and colonial commerce. From 1771-72, bad harvests led to an inevitable increase in grain and bread prices which caused disturbances at several places. The real economic crisis of the old regime began from 1775. Overproduction of wine caused falling prices and low profits. The depression of wine trade lasted seven to eight years. It was followed by a serious forage scarcity resulting in significant livestock losses affecting almost one-third of the French population. From 1787 a major cereal crisis followed catastrophic hail storms, harsh winter and drought. The prices of grains and bread climbed between 50 and 100 percent. The rural crisis also had repercussions on the industrial sector where sales began to fall, affecting production and causing unemployment. The Franco-British trade treaty of 1786 made French workers vulnerable as the import tariff of British products in France was reduced. These caused popular disturbances and bread riots in many French towns, notably in Paris. Rumours and speculation, stirred especially by lively pamphlets fuelled fear and anger. In the countryside, peasants reacted to the harsh burden of state taxation and tithe. Their anger was also against bourgeois agents who set rules against common grazing rights in forests and posed a threat to common lands. This made Georges Lefebvre to conclude that the peasant revolution was both anti-feudal (against excessive seigneurial exploitation, that is, by traditional landlords) and anti-capitalist (against the appropriation of common land by the new landlords). Thus, under the impact of economic crisis and political events, the peasant movement developed.

2.2.2 Financial Collapse of the State and Political Crisis

The existing government was unable to curtail expenses and a defective taxation structure caused financial collapse. With a deficit of 112 million livres government's ability to raise credit was exhausted, France faced national bankruptcy. Fiscal exemption granted to the nobility and clergy were causing resentment. The Controller-General of Finance, Calonne, tried to rationalize the tax structure through a new graduated land tax which would have undermined the financial privileges of the aristocracy; but he failed in this attempt. Calonne had a limited option. He could not depend on the Parlement of Paris for approval because he expected violent opposition from its members. The summoning of the national representative assembly, the Estates-General, would have implied confession of state bankruptcy and would have rendered speedy action difficult. So he recommended the calling of an Assembly of Notables.

2.2.3 Revolt of the Notables and Parlements

The Assembly of Notables met at Versailles, the royal palace near Paris, on 22 February 1787. Members made bitter and unrestrained attacks on Calonne's fiscal proposals, and the reforms were brusquely rejected. The Assembly of Notables marked the beginning of the Revolution. The aristocracy was bitterly hostile to the growing power of the royal government. The Notables declared that it was beyond their power to consent to the levying of new taxes. A leading notable, Lafayette, argued that only a truly national assembly could assent to the drastic tax reforms and that such an assembly was the Estates-General which had not met since 1614.

Brienne, the successor of Calonne, tried to push through a moderate programme of reforms through the Paris Parlement in September 1787, but failed. The delay in presenting the fiscal edicts by the government enabled the opposition groups in the Parlement of Paris to organize their forces. The proposals of stamp duty and land tax were rejected. Numerous tracts and pamphlets were circulated to seek popular support by propagating that Parlements were defending popular rights against the despotism of the central government. This resulted in some anti-government riots in Paris, against intendants (royal civilservants) in Brittany and against the royal troops in Dauphine. Necker, who was again made the Controller-General, had no option but to call the meeting of Estates-General to get the reforms approved.

2.2.4 Calling of the Estates General and the Coming of Revolution

The clash between the aristocracy and centralized absolutism soon turned into a clash between the privileged and unprivileged orders when the government summoned the meeting of the Estates-General. In 1788, the French government had a debt of 4.5 billion livres and the king, Louis XVI, was compelled to seek additional funds from the Estates-General which traditionally had the power to grant new taxes to the crown. The Estates-General consisted of three groups representing the three parts of French society. Each part was called an estate. The First Estate, consisted of the Roman Catholic clergy, the Second Estate of the nobility, while the Third Estate comprised commoners representing the bulk of French population who were unprivileged and shouldered the entire tax burden.

Within the Third Estate however, vast differences existed in matters of occupation, education and wealth. Separate elections were held for each estate and the voters drew up their list of grievances for their representatives. These were called cahiers de doléances. Whereas the cahiers of the nobility stressed the recognition of their traditional liberties, implying feudal rights and privileges, the cahiers of the Third Estate were mostly written by members of the liberal professions demanding individual liberty and a written constitution. They also wished to see equality before law and the sharing of taxes by all the classes.

It was not simply the economic crisis or political issues which brought the people together. The main problem was the growing contradictions in French society. A small percentage of total population enjoyed all the privileges while the bulk of the people shouldered the entire fiscal or tax burden of the state and faced social discrimination. However, the steady growth of middle classes (called the bourgeoisie) both in terms of wealth and social status began to challenge the traditional order. The leadership came from this segment of society while the masses were stirred to action by the prospects of radical reform. Together they formed the Third Estate.

The Estates-General met on 5 May 1789 and matters came to head immediately in the absence of any firm lead from the government. The government had doubled the seats of the Third Estate because it represented the most populous segment of society. The Third Estate suggested that instead of voting separately, the three estates should vote together in a single body on the basis of one person one vote. Though several members of clergy were prepared to come to some understanding with the commoners, the nobility rejected these ideas and adopted an uncompromising position. Consequently the commoners walked out and voted itself a 'National Assembly' on 17 June 1789, calling themselves the true representatives of the people. They decided to draw up a constitution for France and bring about legal equality. In this way they reflected the Enlightenment ideas of popular sovereignty in place of a despotic government as suggested by Abbe Sieyes in his famous pamphlet, 'What is the Third Estate?' The Revolution was not yet led by any well-formed party or movement but by a general consensus of ideas among a fairly coherent social group which imparted effective unity to the revolutionary struggle. This group was the liberal bourgeoisie of professional men like lawyers, doctors, writers, notaries and office holders, familiar with the ideas of classical liberalism and Enlightenment, as formulated by philosophers and economists.

The Tennis Court Oath

The National Assembly, considering that it has been summoned to establish the constitution of the kingdom, to effect the regeneration of public order, and to maintain the true principles of monarchy; that nothing can prevent it from continuing its deliberations in whatever place it may be forced to establish itself; and finally, that wheresoever its members are assembled, there is the National Assembly:

Decrees that all members of this Assembly shall immediately take a solemn oath not to separate, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the kingdom is established and consolidated upon firm foundations.

Source: '*A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution*', ed. by John Hall Stewart (Macmillan, New York, 1951, p.88).

2.2.5 Role of Philosophers

The presence of philosophers with their ideas and new vocabulary probably made the difference between a mere replacement of one regime and the inauguration of a new order. Historians have debated the role of ‘philosophers’ (or philosophes in French) in precipitating the French Revolution. An important strand of thought and action in the years between 1789 and 1848 was set by Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1762) in which he wrote, ‘Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains’. Rousseau in particular and eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy in general, questioned the traditional base of political, social and economic authority. The Enlightenment taught that there would be human progress if those customary arrangements were challenged which benefited a few at the expense of the many. Enlightened thinkers regarded progress as the growth of individual self-expression and the elimination of authority based on birth, feudal privileges and guild regulations. Though the philosophers did not advocate revolution, they furnished the rising bourgeoisie and the entire nation with efficacious weapons in the revolutionary struggle with a potentially revolutionary vocabulary words like citizen, loi, patrie, etc. Rousseau’s concept of ‘sovereignty’ of the people and ‘general will’ made the leaders feel that society as a whole should decide its own interests. These ideas were disseminated through political discussions, clubs, masonic lodges and academic societies forming links with the popular movements.

The spread of ideas of the Enlightenment to the literate elites was an important step but equally significant was the role of salons and clubs. Salons were the elegant drawing rooms of the wealthy urban elite where philosophers and guests gathered and often engaged in academic and intellectual conversations centering on new ideas. At the onset of revolution, salons and clubs became the rallying point of reform-minded deputies like Mirabeau, Barnave, Robespierre, Petion, Duport and Sieyès.

2.2.6 Popular Participation in Overthrowing the Ancien Regime

Ever since the members of the Third Estate had assembled at an indoor tennis court (the most convenient hall they could find) on 20 June and the National Assembly, later joined by a majority of the clergy and some members of the nobility, matters had gone out of hand for the king. He reacted by dismissing his most popular minister Necker and summoned approximately 20,000 soldiers to garrison the Paris-Versailles region. Mirabeau’s speech diverted the attention of the people and the popular reaction turned to violence. The elections to the Estates-General had already charged the political atmosphere through pamphlets and posters. The menu-peuple of Paris (consisting of workers, journeymen, shop assistants, artisans and even small shopkeepers and rentiers of Faubourg Saint Antoine, a poor locality of Paris) responded by attacking the Bastille, a major prison fortress and royal armoury in the heart of Paris on July 14, 1789. The fall of the Bastille is traditionally celebrated as the beginning of the French Revolution. The political consequences were remarkable. The National Assembly was not only saved, it received royal recognition. In Paris power passed to the committee of Electors which set up a city council (the Paris commune). The king was forced to appoint Lafayette as commander of a citizen’s militia called the National Guard. In rural areas, impact of Parisian events and harsh economic conditions caused troubles. What turned peasant unrest into a major upheaval was a combination of provincial town risings and a wave of mass panic spreading across vast stretches

of the country described as the Great Fear of late July and early August 1789. It was rumoured that the nobility were plotting to overthrow the Third Estate and seize power in alliance with grain speculators and hoarders by starving the people into submission. As a consequence, the people began to arm themselves by forming local militia or 'peasant guards.' Peasants began to attack their lords, burn and destroy chateaux (country mansions of the nobility), destroy feudal documents, and refuse to pay taxes and *tithe*. To pacify the peasants and restore order, the National Assembly declared the abolition of the feudal regime along with seigneurial privileges and the old socio-political structure. The second major work was the Declaration of the Rights of Man (proclamation of liberty, equality and fraternity) which became a manifesto of freedom. It turned the royal subjects into citizens of France and was provided legal equality. Thus politics was made as much by pressures from outside the Assembly as by politicians within.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man August 27, 1789

- 1) Men are born and remain free and equal in rights; social distinctions may be based only upon general usefulness.
- 2) The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and inalienable rights of man; these rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
- 3) The source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation; no group, no individual may exercise authority not emanating expressly there from.
- 4) Law is the expression of the general will; all citizens have the rights to concur personally or through their representatives in its formation; it must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal before it, are equally admissible to all public offices, positions, and employments according to their capacity, and without other distinction than that of virtues and talents.
- 5) No one is to be disquieted because of his opinions; even religious, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law.
- 6) Free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Consequently every citizen may speak, write, and print freely, subject to responsibility for the abuse of such liberty in the cases determined by law....

Source: *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution*, ed. by John Hall Stewart (Macmillan, New York, 1951, p.114).

Louis XVI remained inactive all this time in Versailles. He refused to promulgate the decrees on the abolition of feudalism and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The Revolution was still not secure and the gains had to be fought for again in October 1789. An acute shortage of bread, the arrival of the Flanders regiment to protect Louis and his indifferent attitude towards the National Assembly led to an active involvement of women in the revolution who set off for Versailles in thousands. As an eye witness described, "detachments of women coming up from every direction, armed with broomsticks, lances, pitchforks, swords, pistols and muskets were followed by huge crowds and reinforced by 20,000 Paris guards under Lafayette. They forced the king and his family to

leave for the Tuileries in Paris. As the king promised to rush food supplies to Paris and accept the decisions of the Assembly, he was escorted by the jubilant crowd with a cry ‘the baker, the baker’s wife and the baker’s boy’” (meaning of course the king, the queen and the heir to the throne, known as the Dauphin in France).

From October 1789 until 1795 women participated in the Revolution in a variety of ways. Olympe de Gouges became the principal spokesperson for the cause of political rights for women. They demanded equality with men. They demonstrated for bread and price controls and joined in the defence of their ‘Fatherland’. Women led soap riots caused by the rising price of soap which affected thousands of laundry women. The Society for Revolutionary Republican Women composed of working class women, remained extremely active during the early part of the Revolution until it was suppressed. During the Terror, women opposed the Revolution owing to the harm it caused to family life, the Church, and the supply of consumer goods. But in a period of male domination women’s demands were not taken up very seriously.

In the early phase of the Revolution, the National Assembly continued its attempts to reform the political structure into a constitutional monarchy but two events brought about a radical shift in the progress of revolution after 1791. The first was the religious issue. The Church was seen as a privileged order and supporter of the feudal regime. The abolition of tithe was followed by the nationalization of all Church property and land which was put for sale. By the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (12 July 1790), bishops and priests were to be elected by popular vote and the clergy were turned into salaried state officials who had to take the oath of allegiance to the constitution. Only 54 percent of the parish priests took the oath while the majority of the bishops refused it. This meant an end to the period of national unity. It created conditions for the civil war as the anti-clerical issue split the nation along new lines. It brought about a realignment of counter-revolutionary forces of staunch Catholics, royalists, emigres, etc. The second event was the flight of the king to join hands with the emigres who tried to defeat the revolutionaries by seeking the help of foreign powers. This completely destroyed the cause of monarchy: France was declared a Republic in 1792 and Louis XVI was tried and executed in January 1793.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Explain the major economic grievances of the peasants? Answer in 100 words.

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- 2) Why did the economic reform proposals fail? Answer in 60 words.

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- 3) Discuss the various divisions within the French society and the problems of the Third Estate. Answer in 100 words.

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- 4) Examine the role of philosophers in the French Revolution. Answer in 100 words.

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2.3 PRINCIPLES OF LEGITIMATION

Recent writings on the French Revolution suggest that the Revolution was rooted in the political culture that took shape in the last years of the old regime, as an implicit contradiction, between absolutism and the politics of Enlightenment, resulting in crisis. How the absolute monarchy saw itself, its relation to the society within which it functioned seemed to be in glaring contradiction to the progressive principles of the new political culture. This new culture furnished the basis of a revolutionary discourse and raised the issue of legitimacy.

A number of historians (e.g. Denis Richet, Gueniffy, etc.) point out that the resolution voted on 17 June 1789 by the Third Estate to constitute itself into the National Assembly was the first and the most profound revolutionary act. It implied a fresh set of principles of legitimacy for the revolutionary government. It was Sieyes who had stressed the importance of the Third Estate. Sieyes proposed two revolutionary theses: the identification of the nation exclusively with the Third Estate and the claim that the nation alone had the power to give France a constitution. Between May and August 1789, the entire ancien regime was destroyed. The French had rejected their national past and opted for the principles of the Revolution. When the National Assembly, after destroying feudal privileges, set about framing the future constitution of France, it became the Constituent Assembly. The decrees of 4th and 11th August abolished all personal privileges, serfdom and tithe and created free and equal justice and freedom of employment for all. Thus a new legal society had been established in France.

Two debates of the Constituent Assembly were crucial from the point of view of the principles of legitimacy. Those were, (a) the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and (b) the subject of sovereignty. By destroying the feudal regime, the Constituent Assembly had redefined the French people as individuals who were free and equal. Liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression were made

some of the basic rights. In short, the subjects of the French ruler were made citizens of the nation. The Declaration of the Rights of Man brought about a radical conception of society, and organized the new public authorities to protect these rights by way of a written constitution based on revolutionary doctrines.

The second debate beginning in September concerned the question of the nature and attribution of sovereignty. The issue of 'sovereign' proved to be extraordinarily difficult. The destruction of the society based on orders and privileges raised the new issue of representation. The leaders realized that it was nearly impossible to reconcile the sovereignty of the nation with the direct exercise of its rights by all the members of the nation. It was Sieyes who tried to provide a reasonable solution to the problem of the exercise of sovereignty between the need for new institutions and the claims of democracy. The unicameral Assembly became the only place where the general will of the citizens could appear. It is argued by some writers that such definitions led to a new kind of absolutism of the National Assembly in place of the monarchy. In the following years, a fundamental conflict developed between the popular and parliamentary concept of democracy, each claiming indivisible sovereignty.

2.3.1 The Jacobin Republic and Terror (1792-94)

Louis XVI lost all authority and legitimacy to rule France as a constitutional monarch when he tried to escape from Paris in June 1791. The radicals used the threat of aristocratic reaction to ensure the success of revolution and declared war on Austria in April 1792 because the Austrian Emperor Leopold II's Declaration of Pillnitz threatened to restore the full authority of the French crown by force with the support of European powers. The radicals drew support from the Parisian mob as well as from extremist political action groups like the Cordeliers and Jacobin clubs. They deposed the king and formed a National Convention to draft a new republican constitution in August-September 1792. It was chosen on the basis of universal male suffrage.

An alliance between the Jacobins and the popular movement (particularly the sans-culottes of the Paris communes) provided an essential foundation for the revolutionary dictatorship under the leadership of Robespierre against the enemies of 'liberty'. The popular Parisian militants put into place a coherent set of ideas and practices after 1792 leading to a direct government and installation of a popular democracy as different from collective dictatorship of an assembly as suggested by Sieyes or Marat's notion of centralized dictatorship. Taking popular sovereignty as a given absolute, the Parisians deduced the principles of autonomy, the right to approve laws and to control and recall elected officials. Thus, representative democracy, the base of Jacobin dictatorship, was replaced by direct democracy. Appointment replaced election. The evolution of revolutionary committees is significant here — the most powerful was the Committee of Public Safety. It concentrated all powers and portrayed itself as the representative of the 'general will' and became the powerful executive of the convention. It carried out the law of the General Maximum (establishing price controls of goods ranging from food and drink to fuel and clothing) as demanded by the radical working class of Paris. The war hysteria against the enemies of liberty and the Republic made the leaders engage in a Reign of Terror (January to July 1794) which witnessed over 40,000 men and women (the king, queen, secret royalist sympathizers, arch-Catholics, grain speculators and many others) beheaded by

the guillotine. Robespierre is regarded as both a tyrant and dictator, and a saint of democracy who pointed the way to socialism. The Revolutionary government soon lost touch with the masses and became dictatorial in character and Robespierre lost his grip over the government.

2.3.2 The Thermidorian Republic (1795-99)

After the fall of Robespierre all fundamental problems re-surfaced and there was a fresh discussion in the convention on the Declaration of Rights, the sovereignty of the people and on the principle of representation. The new declaration contained the supremacy of law as an expression of general will but the rights of resisting oppression (1789) or of insurrection (1793) disappeared. The Right to Equality was accompanied by the declaration of 'Duties' aimed at avoiding the tension between the unlimited nature of rights and the necessity for social order based on law. The past experience of boundless power concealed within the democratic idea of sovereignty led to a rethinking on the subject. Here began a long tradition of discourse on the concept of sovereignty to be found in Benjamin Constant, Madame de Stael, Royer-Collard and Guizot. Sieyes suggested checks on sovereignty by creating a *jurie constitutionnaire* - a special body which would have the task of exercising control over the constitutionality of laws and administrative regulations. This was the first appearance of the notion of a jurisdiction superior to the legislative power in French history. The new constitution created a bi-cameral legislature representing the general will to be exercised with restraint based on high property qualifications. A Directorate was proposed with 5 Directors as the Executive. In practice the Directorial regime achieved the thorough depoliticizing of France, and in particular of Paris. The bulk of the petty bourgeoisie was barred from all offices, voting existed only in name and politics was dominated by the oligarchs and professional administrators. The force of this regime resided not in legitimation by elections but in police, army and bureaucracy. Directory inaugurated social and political reign of notables - a class which dominated in the nineteenth century.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What were the new principles of legitimation after the abolition of the *ancien regime*? Answer in 100 words.

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- 2) Discuss the nature of power exercised by the Thermidorian Republic. Answer in 60 words.

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2.4 IDEOLOGICAL DIVISIONS AND CONTOURS OF PARTY POLITICS

The period of the Revolution was to see the emergence of numerous political societies which carried their own internal battles for power. The most notable of these was the Cordeliers Club (called after the abandoned Cordelier monastery across the Seine where it held its meetings). It kept close contact with the activities of the *sans-culottes* (small property owners including artisans, shopkeepers, journeyman with militant ideas and a belief in direct Republican democracy) and succeeded in enlisting and training the Paris mob into a highly effective political force. Similarly, the Jacobin Club originated at the very beginning of the revolution. At first it was moderate and offered a meeting place for the constitutional and educated elements. However, with the progress of Revolution it became increasingly radical and started creating branches all over France with a strong network. These clubs became a hotbed of republicanism.

When the Legislative Assembly met in October 1791 in accordance with the provisions of the new constitution consisting of 745 members, there were no sharp divisions among the members who passed back and forth from one group to another. Party formations were slow and close party organization hardly existed. However, many members of the assembly began to develop extreme views of republicanism - ideas spread and nurtured by the Jacobin and Cordelier Clubs. Most vocal groups were for the removal of the king and planned a demonstration. The events at Champs de Mars in July 1791, where the demonstration was organized and the firing ordered by Lafayette, led to a split when Lafayette and the royalist faction left the Jacobins and formed the Feuillant Group. It was a moderate breakaway element which favoured constitutional monarchy.

2.4.1 Constitutionalists vs Republicans

The events at Champ de Mars brought about a swift division within the Third Estate. There was a clear line of demarcation between those who sought compromise with the king and those who did not. Many men who had been patriots in 1789 felt threatened by the growing popular pressure from below and fearing loss of property and political leadership, moved towards the supporters of monarchy and Feuillants. Led by Barnave, Duport and Eameth, these moderates attempted to make the constitution more favourable to the monarchy. Their number in the assembly was about 260. Keen to bring the revolution to an end before the middle classes were threatened by the *menu-peuple*, the Feuillants wished to reconcile monarchy with the nation. In the Assembly their conservative campaign for the revision of the constitution had a limited success.

Less numerous but far more active were the Left Wing deputies of the Jacobin Club. Their strength was about 140. Like the Feuillants the Jacobins had their supporters in the electoral assembly and reflected two distinct political tendencies. The extreme radicals formed the nucleus of the future republican party. They were more powerful in the clubs than in the assembly. Their main leaders were Merlin de Thionville, Chabot, Couthon. The dominating group of the left-wing deputies consisted of the followers of Brissot. Known as Brissotins in the Legislative Assembly, they came to be known as Girondins under the National Convention - because several of their best known representatives like Vergniaud, Grangeneuve, Ducos, came from the department of Gironde. The Girondins were

staunch advocates of war against Austria and the allies from where the threat of counter-revolution came. They believed that the war would forge national unity. However, the flight of Louis XVI and his family from Paris to join the counter-revolutionaries destroyed the cause of constitutional monarchy. With it the Feuillants lost ground in French politics.

The coming of war in 1792 deepened the gulf between the moderates and the extremists. It intensified fears and panics due to grain shortages, speculation and black marketing and external threats of counter-revolutionaries. The war pushed the lower section of Parisian society into prominence as voluntary armies (Revolutionary army) were created from the urban working population. Hence, the war and economic difficulties swung the revolution to the left. The sans-culottes in Paris combined into a powerful force and attacked the Tuileries, (the royal palace) on 10 August 1792. This brought about the downfall of the monarchy and France was made a Republic. The National Convention was called on 20 September 1792 to frame a Republican constitution.

2.4.2 Political Struggle between the Girondins and the Montagnards

In the National Convention there were three main political groups but the grouping was quite fluid. The majority, but not very stable, was generally formed by a great mass of independent deputies. They had no permanent commitments to any particular programme or faction and were known as 'Marais' or 'Plain' and constituted the centre party. The Girondins (former Brissotins) were led by Vergniaud, Brissot and Guadet. Though they were not in majority, they often controlled the balance of voting and supplied most of the ministers. The third important group or party was the Jacobins or Montagnard (Mountain), so-called from the upper tiers of seats they occupied in the assembly. It was led by very important personalities like Robespierre, Marat and Danton.

The political struggle between the Girondins and Montagnards tore apart the Convention and lasted till the former were expelled by the invasion of the Parisian crowd. There is a difference of opinion on the nature of this struggle - whether it was based on personal rivalries and lust for power or a reflection of social and economic class struggle. Some writers regard Girondins a coherent party while others see the idea of Girondin party a result of Montagnard propaganda. Even Montagnards were also well organized whose tactics had often been concerted in the Jacobin clubs, of which they gained complete control. The Girondins is seen as a party of wealth representing the upper bourgeoisie while the Montagnards had a social base in the lower middle class and the menu-people. The Montagnards adopted policies geared to the needs of the masses and did not hesitate in seeking popular support and adopt policies satisfying popular demands. The misconduct of foreign war and the daunting economic troubles within France such as the falling value of the *assignat* (revolutionary paper money) and the insoluble food problem was weakening the position of Girondins. Instead, they concentrated on the counter-revolution and laws against the emigres. The decisive blow to the Girondins came from the radically inclined militant groups from Paris (sans-culottes) who invaded the Convention and brought Montagnards to power on 2 June 1793. So, it was the combined force of Montagnards (numerically small) and sans-culottes which brought about the coup.

The Jacobins created a provisional revolutionary government in October 1793 leading to a virtual dictatorship and Terror. This government reflects an inextricable binding up of democratic and tyrannical trends. The various excesses of the Terror caused a reaction against the Jacobin Republic. On 27 July 1794 Montagnards led by Robespierre were eliminated by the conservatives who made use of the excesses of the radical revolution.

The centre stage from 1795 came to be occupied by the Marais, the independents of the earlier period or the centre party. It included revived Girondins, repentant Montagnards, passionate republicans and even devoted Catholics. The members were mostly upper elements of bourgeoisie and ex-nobles more interested in expanding their own property than in any ideology. Sans-culottes were disarmed and the left groups were demolished. The last major episode of the French Revolution was the Babeuf Plot in 1796 to implement the radical leftist ideas of property distribution and an early form of communist idealism. Babeuf and his associates were captured and mercilessly executed. The party movement remained virtually suspended until the restoration of constitutional monarchy in 1815 when the three major party divisions resurfaced.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Discuss the role of political clubs and societies in propagating the ideas of Republicanism. Answer in 100 words.

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- 2) What were the main ideas of the Feaillant party? Answer in 50 words.

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- 3) Point out the chief elements of the rivalry between the Girondins and the Montagnards. Answer in 50 words.

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2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have studied the impact of economic crisis on the common people in the villages and towns. It is evident that the financial difficulties of the state created social and political crisis leading to the French Revolution. You must have also noticed the role of philosophers in providing revolutionary language and ideology. We have examined how the Third-Estate became the National Assembly representing the citizens of France and not the subjects of the king. This established new principles of legitimacy to replace the feudal structure of the absolute state. We have also analyzed how the principles of legitimacy continued to change with the shift in the nature of revolution. You would have noticed how revolutionary politics gave birth to the political parties and political ideologies.

2.6 KEY WORDS

Ancien Regime :	A term invented in the 1790s for the way of life and government in France which was destroyed by the Revolution in 1789.
Cahiers :	Lists of grievances drawn up by each of the three estates or orders at the time of elections for the Estates-General in 1789.
Emigres :	Those who had emigrated from France and were trying to influence the foreign powers to suppress the revolution.
Estates :	One of the three social orders into which France was Divided; these were the clergy, the nobility, and the common people.
Guillotine :	A heavy slanting blade, mechanically raised to a great height between two tall wooden supports, and then dropped onto the neck of the prisoner. Owing to its weight and the height from which it was dropped, it sliced through the neck efficiently and also reduced the labour of the executioner. It was invented by one Dr Guillotine.
Menu-peuple :	The common people.
Parlement :	Sovereign law court created in selected towns to administer regional justice.
Tithe :	A tax collected by the church which was levied on the major crops like wheat, rye, barley and oats.

2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sub-sec. 2.2.1.
- 2) Failure to cut governmental expenditure, defective taxation system, fiscal exemptions of the nobility, etc. See Sub-sec. 2.2.2.

- 3) See Sub-sec. 2.2.4.
- 4) See Sub-sec. 2.2.5.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Abolition of feudal privileges, establishment of equality and justice, declaration of the rights of man, etc. See Sec. 2.3.
- 2) See Sub-sec. 2.3.2.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) See Sec. 2.4.
- 2) See Sub-sec. 2.4.1.
- 3) See Sub-sec. 2.4.2.

