

# SOCIAL, ECONOMICAL, POLITICAL & LITERARY FACETS OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY FRANCE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

To understand the nature of a society, we first study the economic, social and cultural life of that society. The contemporary society is nothing but a by Product of the continuous evolution of the economic, social and cultural life of the precedents. Although, the era that we are going to study is only a hundred and fifty years old but the fact is that the France of today has little left of the France of Louis XVI. In the succeeding years the regime was overthrown and the French revolution transformed all the political economical and social structures. The revolution overturned all the old legal institutions. Eighteenth century of France was marked with the dominance of the clergy and nobility. They exercised an unquestioned supremacy over the downtrodden. The taxes and the fees that they imposed upon the peasants was the chief source of revenues. They themselves got freed from any financial burdens. The clergy and the nobility were the holders of the power and privileges. This extreme one sidedness later led to the demand of the third state in 1789 i.e. the inclusion of all classes in all duties and functions. Though church was accessible to all but the dignities were reserved to the nobility only. This wedge got wider and wider as we neared the end of the Eighteenth Century.

Eighteenth century marked the changes that went a long way to change the aspect of the entire social world. Capitalism exercised a great influence upon industry itself. Expansion of industry characterized the century. New salaried class came into existence. Rural and Urban trades succeeded in getting workmen in their ambits. The old labor organizations no longer answered the new needs. The use of machines also started in the new era. But this was only a beginning, old economic system was still in use .The means of transportation had been changed. Commerce underwent a change. Though the changes were not very drastic but they paved the way for the transformation that came in the nineteenth century.

One more striking feature of the economic and social history of France was the strengthening of peasant ownership. The ownership was slowly and steadily grew during the middle ages. The Peasants were freed from any servitude and became the owners of the land they cultivated. Though the lands they owned were burdened with dues but the continuation of Manorial system further consolidated the peasant ownership after revolution whereas in England the manorial system got eliminated and the landed aristocracy took its place by the end of the middle Ages. This was the

reason of the slow progress of agriculture in France. The nobility did not get involved in the land cultivation. The peasants did not have enough resources at their disposal. The agriculture was still based on old methods. The agriculture sector could not see any comprehensive progress. It remained so till the half of nineteenth century.

The economic life of the eighteenth century underwent a change only after the French Revolution. This Revolution brought about a change in the powers and privileges of the clergy and the nobility. A new division of the social classes based on their economic role evolved. The application of science to industry, the new means of transportation, the introduction of steam followed by the electricity transformed the material life drastically. Everything that culminates today had its roots in its past. Though Eighteenth Century France today seems so remote yet it is very near. The social, economical, cultural and political scenario that we have today is the outcome of a long fought struggle.

The way France witnessed drastic changes in its social, political and Economical structures, Literature too underwent many changes that went a long way to bring recognition to the literary genres. Eighteenth century marks as the period of enlightenment in the history of French literature. The literary figure like Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot paved the way for the prominent figure of French literature like Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. The Enlightenment in France started with publication of works that criticized Roman Catholic Church. These works formed the basis for the Enlightenment attempts. John Locke was an English philosopher and physician, widely regarded as one of the most inferential widely regarded as one of the most influential Enlightenment thinker. In France too voices against the traditional Christianity started raising and challenged the wisdom of past ages. The most prominent figure among them was Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle and Pierre Bayle. They were the forerunners and the precursors of Montesquieu and Voltaire. Their ideas became popular and widely spread in year around too and gained momentum after Louis XIV death in 1715. Fontenelle wrote laboriously about scientific experiments. His book A Plurality of Worlds (1688) was based on the notion of Sun centered Universe which was propagated by Copernicus in early 1543. Though much of it was wrong yet he wrote vigorously and convincingly. His writhing propelled the general readers of France. Pierre Bayle was yet another known writer who was amongst the precursors of Enlightenment. He was a protestant. He was forced to emigrate from France because of his vigorous attacks on church. But he continued writing

from exile as well. He kept attacking the Catholic Church. His works kept getting popular in France. He raised the bar of toleration. He attacked the fanaticism of traditional Catholic Church. But he was at the same time critical of the developing rationalistic strains of thought found in European thinkers. His work 'Historical and Critical Dictionary' was his finest work because it celebrated toleration and a society of pluralistic views.

Baron de Montesquieu was the first great thinker the French Enlightenment produced. His first great work 'The Persian Letters' mocked French civilization and customs. The work attacked the absolutist system set up by Louis XIV, the Catholic Church and all the social classes. Soon after his success, he left his home in Bordeaux and made his way to Paris. He came in contact with many English aristocrats. From them he got to know the English political system and came to admire its flexibility and greater freedom. He got inspired to travel to England to get first-hand information of the England's Political system. On returning from England he began writing his great classic 'The Spirit of the Laws' in which he propagated the notion of the governments should be divided for the purposes of examination into aristocracies, monarchies and democracies. His political theory anticipated the political innovations of the U.S. Constitution and the French revolution.

Another author of the French enlightenment was Voltaire. In the beginning of his career, he was a secretary but soon he turned to writing. He was being considered the great successor of seventeenth century's Classicism. He had difficult times with the members of this court and as a result he was exiled. In the coming years he lived in London and closely observed the greater liberty of English life. When he returned to France he wrote 'The Philosophical Letters' a work about the difference between French and English societies. He openly criticized the French life, manners and region, Voltaire greatest literary achievement was his short fictional satire 'Candide'. Denis Diderot though was not as influential figure among France's Enlightenment philosophies and authors but he left a significant influence over literary and artistic tastes in the second half of eighteenth century. His work 'Encyclopedia' went on to become a major organ for promoting the ideals of enlightenment.

### CONCLUSION

In short it is suffice to say that Eighteenth Century France witnessed drastic changes in the social, economic, political and literary front. On one side, this century marked the dominance of clergy but on the other side this extreme one sidedness led to the demand of third state. Before the unparalleled Revolution, the economic resources were at the disposal of nobility only. But the Great revolution brought about drastic changes in the powers and privileges of nobility. The Political scenario too underwent changes after the Great revolution. Eighteenth century France was extremely productive in terms of the literary growth. Literary

figures like Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Fontenelle, Pierre Bayle became the torch bearers of Enlightenment. These writers sailed against the winds faces hardships but remained steadfast to the cause of Enlightenment. They condemned radicalism and promoted the ideas of liberalism. So in totality this century paved the way for the Nineteenth century France.

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