SOCLAL, 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 ambitions. 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 ant physician, widely regarded as one of the
most influential 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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