

The Career and Achievements of Louis XIV

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Introduction

The accession of Louis XIV on the throne of France heralded the dawn of a glorious era in the history of France. Of course Louis was just a child of five years when he was put on the throne in 1643 on the death of his father King Louis XIII. It was indeed a critical pence for France. Internally, the French economy was in a poor state; a sizeable part of France Was under the devastating spell of famine. Externally, the long-drawn Thirty Years' War was continuing, posing constant threat to France of Spanish retaliation. But in such a period of crisis the ship of the state was steered with skill and determination through the troubled waters by CARDINAL MAZARIN. He, as chief' advisor to the Queen Mother, became the virtual ruler of France, as CARDINAL RICHELIEU had been during 1624-41 with Louis XIII on the throne.



In that sense, the early part of Louis XIV's reign, from 1643 to 1661, passed off under the guidance and guardianship of Mazarin. His first achievement was the successful completion of the Thirty Years' War, which ended with 'the triumph of the Franco-Swedish forces. The peace settlement, that followed the war, was called the PEACE OF WESTPHALIA (1648). This also signified diplomatic victory, and the establishment of the supremacy of France in European politics. (More on the war to be discussed in Unit 13). Mazarins second accomplishment was securing the victory to the royal army in FRONDE, which was a fierce civil war fought between the French monarchy and the nobility from 1648 to 1653. This was an immensely significant victory as it cleared the way for royal absolutism of Louis XIV. Mazarin passed away in 1661. When Louis became a young man of 24 with tremendous dash and drive. So, in the real

sense, the rule of Louis XIV began in 1661 and it continued with increasing strength till his death in 1715.

Louis XIV had handsome appearance, bold personality and indomitable determination. He had of good education, sound temperament and strong physique. The Chief Features of life character were self-discipline, patience and tenacity of purpose. He never showed his anger in public and always tried to maintain the dignity and decorum of the highest office he *held*. He had an incredible capacity for work. He went through the rigorous daily routine, which included attending council meetings and elaborate ceremonials, looking into the activities of various departments of the administration and deciding policy matters, without showing any sign of fatigue. Besides being a good administrator and organiser, he was a war hero, a conqueror and a builder who left his permanent mark in history. It is not surprising that the French hailed him the GRAND MONARQUE (The Grand Monarch).

In keeping with the French tradition, Louis XIV was an uncompromising advocate of absolute monarchy. Firstly, he believed in the DIVINE RIGHT THEORY OF KINGSHIP, which was later popularised in Europe by England's king, James I, in the early 17th century. Besides Louis' tutor, Bishop Bossuet, instilled into his mind the divine right idea. According to it, king is the representative of God on earth, and for all his acts, good or bad, he is answerable only to God. For individuals it is a sin to question his policies, and a sacrilege to criticize them. Royal power, as Bossuet told LOUIS, carried with it divine obligations as it was sanctioned by God. Secondly, Louis made his authority unlimited by his remark, 'l'etat c'est moi' which means I am the state. If explained in modern terms, it will be a dangerous theory. By this he identified himself with France to mean that his voice was the only voice, and the opinions and views of his subjects were insignificant. It meant that he embodied the authority of the state in all aspects. Thirdly, he proclaimed himself as the 'Le-Roi Soleil', that is, the SUN KING. The sun is the source of all power and life. Similarly, Louis thought himself to be the source of all life and activity in France. Louis was so much conscious of his absolute power that the ESTATESGENERAL, the French

parliament, became almost non-existent. He virtually made the Estates General to surrender all its power to him. Thus, his sovereignty was unchallenged in contrast to that of his contemporary English counterparts the STUART kings who went along with Parliament.

His Achievements

The reign of Louis XIV did not make any original or innovative contribution in the sphere of administration. But there were some noteworthy changes. The trend was distinctly towards a highly centralised administration. He introduced Richelieu's SYSTEM OF INTENDANTS with more vigour and efficiency. He and a handful of able ministers, on whom he reposed his faith throughout their lives, decided all important matters of government. The four most important Departments were those of Finance, War, Foreign Affairs and the Interior, each kept under a highly dedicated minister. For example, COLBERT served as finance minister for 18 years, while MICHEL TELLIER was in the war department for 34 years. The king appointed the ministers, the intendants and the army commanders. The ministers organised the departments of state for the supervision of the royal finances, for the army, the navy and the foreign and diplomatic services.

For administrative convenience France was divided into 30 provinces, and each province was kept under the charge of an intendant. The intendants were the agents of the king and they maintained direct contact with the king and ministers. In fact, the ministers controlled the administration of provinces through the intendants. For securing highest standard of efficiency and keeping them away from corruption, the intendants were frequently transferred from one province to another.

The king maintained his hold over the towns by nominating mayors. The problem with France was that at the middle and lower levels there were numerous officers who owed allegiance to nobles rather than the king. This was particularly evident in the matter of tax-collection. Some French provinces, notably in the south, still had

assemblies of provincial estates which controlled much of taxation and supervised local administration. Even in towns, mayors and councils of the towns had extensive rights. Many of these offices and positions were purchased by men of localities to make money by corrupt practices and bribes or to increase their influence in their respective areas. Louis XIV must be given the credit for bringing changes by which these local administrators gradually came under the control of the central administration. Louis XIV's ministers had to fight constant battles to bring these local administrators under control. The intendants were given extra powers to supervise the activities of local administrators' and to take stern action against corrupt officials. For this reason, there was a definite improvement in law and order situation as well as in the matter of tax collection.

One of the most urgent objectives of Louis XIV was to turn France into the strongest military power in Europe. For this reason he concentrated on strengthening the army. A strong and efficient army would prove helpful internally in maintaining law and order, and keeping the nobles subdued and externally it would fulfil the expansionist imperialist policy of the Grand Monarch. Indeed the rise of the French army during his reign was amazing. Louis and his trusted man in the War Department. Teller, almost revolutionised the character of France's fighting forces. From a small force of 20,000 in 1661 it reached to an incredibly mighty force of 400,000 in 1700, an increase by 20 times, a phenomenon unheard of in Europe. Drastic changes were made both in army and navy to turn the French militia into a formidable 'War Machine', as one contemporary commander remarked. Ability and competence became the criteria for recruiting higher officers in the army and navy.

In the army, regiments were organised into brigades, each kept under a general, to bring them under closer control. Two new ranks of officers, Major and Lieutenant Colonel, were created to provide incentive to talented young men to serve the nation better. Recruitment to these two commissions was to be made only on merit, not on purchase. Supplies, provisions and salaries became regular; the lazy and inefficient men were dismissed through regular screening.

The army showed equal strength in infantry, artillery, engineering and siege techniques, all very important for those days when the soldiers had to fight in water-logged Low Countries. The Inspector-General of Infantry, MARTINET, was so rigorous in drilling that his name had become synonymous with discipline. Another general, MARSHALL VAUHAN, was known for his never-say-die spirit, and it was said of him that "a town he besieged was indefensible and a town he defended was impregnable."

France never before saw such a glorious period in European politics as during the reign of Louis XIV, and as regards the French rulers who followed him, only Napoleon could equal (or perhaps surpass) his achievements in this domain. Of course, we must note that full credit for accomplishments in the sphere of European politics and diplomacy in the early years (1643 – 1661) of Louis's reign must be given to Cardinal Mazarin, who was then the de facto ruler of France. It was to Mazarin's credit that France had made tremendous gains and emerged as the supreme power in European politics by the peace settlement of Westphalia in 1648. Mazarin added another feather to France's cap when it gained additional territories from Spain by the Peace of Pyrenees in 1659. But with his death in 1661, it was the turn of Louis to leave his indelible mark in the annals of European politics.

The objectives of his foreign policy were:

- (i) to consolidate the gains made at Westphalia and Pyrenees, which meant not only sustaining, but further strengthening the supremacy of France in European politics,
- (ii) to secure France's 'national frontiers' along the Rhine and the Alps,
- (iii) to turn France into a commercial power by waging a mercantilist war against her major economic competitors, Holland and England, and
- (iv) to be a great empire-builder.

He dreamt of building up a 'multinational empire' that Charlemagne had done 900 years ago. His romantic feeling was under the spell of cultural imperialism too, by which he meant to spread the French culture, language and tastes to a major portion of

Europe. The main thrust of his effort was north-east, toward the Low Countries and Germany. He also intended to secure Spain as a French vassal with a French ruler. As a part of the competition against the English and Dutch rivals, he also desired to establish a big French empire outside Europe, keeping the French commitments in North America and India.

In the first year of his reign, he was able to defeat Spain and it ended quickly with the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1668, which proved to be favourable to France. Then came to confrontation with Holland. Louis disliked the growing Dutch prominence in trade and commerce, their attachment to Calvinism and their republicanism. He was particularly angry that Holland had entered into an alliance with England and Sweden against France. He planned to retaliate by invading Holland. He managed to keep England and Sweden neutral, and in 1672 the French forces invaded Holland. The gallant feat of the Dutch monarch, William III of Orange, was able to resist the French. However, it must be said that the formidable French advance could be halted by the extreme measure of opening the dikes.

His great achievement in foreign affairs was invalidating in 1679 an alliance against France, which consisted of Spain, the Holy Roman Empire and Prussia. By removing tariff on the Dutch goods he succeeded to keep Holland neutral. Spain too ceded the country of Burgundy plus some towns in Belgium to France by a treaty. Prussia did not have much to do. The alliance died before it could be able to stand. The power and glory of France were now at their peak, but after this thundering successes Louis began to, stretch himself too far. He thought of destroying the independence of Holland and to bring the Iberian Peninsula under the French rule. In order to settle the northern and eastern frontiers of France he cast his greedy eyes on several territories. He grabbed the free city of Strasbourg, the chief town of Alsace.

His craving for more German territories started the WAR OF THE LEAGUE OF AUGSBURG, 1688-97. The League was led by his old enemy, William III of Holland, whose power and prestige further increased because now (after the Glorious Revolution of 1688) he was also the King of England being the husband of Queen Mary. So,

England too was a member of the League. Spain the Holy Roman Empire, and Savoy were their other members. England won a great naval victory at Cape La Hogue in 1692, but William III lost some battles on land in the Low Countries. The war ended by the Treaty of Ryswick with no side gaining victory.

In 1701 began his last and most crucial conflict, the WAR OF THE SPANISH SUCCESSION, which lasted till 1714. The problem of succession to the Spanish throne began when Charles II, the Hapsburg king of Spain and Louis's brother-in-law, had died in 1700 without leaving a direct heir. The diplomats had been trying for years to solve the succession issue without putting on the throne either a French Bourbon or an Austrian Hapsburg. Charles II left his lands intact to Philip of Anjou, the grandson of Louis XIV. Louis accepted it on behalf of Philip. This very much worried England. Holland. Savoy, the Holy Roman Empire and many German states, who formed a GRAND ALLIANCE to preserve a separate Spain.

In the fierce and grueling war that followed, the French gradually got exhausted and lost much of their possessions. In North America they lost Nova Scotia to the English, while in Europe they were defeated by the Alliance forces in four major battles, the noteworthy victories were gained in Blenheim (1704) and Malplaquet (1709). Two great generals of history. Duke of Marlborough of England and Prince Eugene of Savoy left the indelible mark of their military genius in this war. But the French, though lost some possessions, were not defeated. Moreover, the allies suffered as many casualties as the French. Again, the Grand alliance itself was weakening. England was fed up with fighting in a war that was proving damaging to her trade and commerce. She decided to try for peace when the pro-peace party won majority in parliamentary election of 1710. Soon negotiations for peace began culminating in the TREATY OF UTRECHT in 1713.

The Utrecht settlement brought peace and maintained balance of power in Europe. It was a triumph for Louis XIV, though he had to accept some losses in the process. His main objective, putting his grandson. Philip of Anjou on the Spanish throne, was very

well attained. Philip was recognised as King Philip V of Spain and secured the Spanish lands overseas. Of course, the French and Spanish crowns were forbidden ever to be held by the same person and so the allies too won their point. France suffered losses in Canada. She lost Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and the Hudson Bay territories to England, Minorca and Gibraltar in the Mediterranean to England. The English also gained Asiento, the right to supply slaves to the Spanish colonies. Belgium was ceded to Austria. Yet, the gain of the Spanish throne overshadowed all losses, and the Utrecht settlement was considered as a diplomatic triumph of Louis XIV, at least the French thought so.

The period saw outstanding achievements' in the realms of economy and finance. France was fortunate to get a financial genius like JEAN BAPTISTE COLBERT. He held the office of the comptroller-General of Finances, which made him virtually the Finance Minister of France. A man with an innovative mind, scientific spirit and constructive zeal, he enjoyed the fullest support of Louis XIV. He was closely associated with the Academic Royale des Sciences, established in 1666. His role was visible everywhere: in invention, in technological education, in designing and building ships, and in attracting foreign experts to settle in France. The father of modern free trade economics, Adam Smith, described Colbert as "a man of great industry and knowledge of detail, and of unparalleled abilities".

He was a staunch advocate of mercantilism and secured financial stability and economic prosperity of his country through mercantilist policy. He imposed tariffs of foreign imports to promote the growth of domestic industries. He set up national tariffs in 1664 and 1667. The first was directed against the Dutch trade and the second against the English trade. Colbert convinced Louis that the total volume of trade and the markets for this trade were stable but inflexible. The government, therefore, constantly strive to expand trade and find new markets. It must secure colonies to get new markets and sources for raw materials. He even viewed that France's conflict with the Dutch and the English was inevitable to grab this limited trade prospect. In the absence of technological improvements to attain mass production of goods and their speedy

transportation all over the world, Colbert's view was generally accepted at that time. Louis's unsuccessful invasion of Holland in 1672 was to a large extent influenced by Colbert's views.

Colbert was a great builder. Emphasising government role in boosting up trade and commerce, he built up four new naval ports and the great French canal, CANAL DES DEUX MERS (1661-81), which gave France a navigable waterway between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. It reduced transport charges by half, and was described as the greatest engineering feat since the Roman days. He also built up many roads and bridges. All these gave remarkable impetus to the French commercial activities during the reign of Louis XIV.

The success of the English and Dutch chartered trading companies inspired him to found the French East India Company in 1664. In the following years some more companies came into being to boost up the French trading activities in the Baltic, the Levant and in Africa. This helped the spread of France's commercial activities all over the world. Some of these Companies failed, but those which remained continued to do the good work.

The collection of taxes improved considerably. The Intendants and local administrators were appointed from the common people and they did the work of tax collection efficiently. But the French tradition of exempting the nobility from taxation continued. This definitely deprived the French treasure of considerable revenue as the nobility possessed as well as earned a lot of wealth every year. Both' the nobility of the sword and the nobility of the robe were exempted from

Louis XIV always strove to prove to Europe that France was the most powerful nation in the continent, and this must be reflected in the majesty and grandeur of its royal court. The French court was known for its beauty, decorations and manners. One of the grandest achievement of the Grand Monarch was the construction of PALACE DE VERSAILLES (the Versailles Palace). He first shifted the capital from Paris to Versailles, a small township situated 12 miles away. The construction of the palace

began there in 1668 and continued till 1711. The palace' an example of exquisite beauty, was spread over a large area, and also contained a sprawling garden. The garden contained 1400 fountains spreading water that had to be brought from the River Seine at huge expense. The palace along with the garden became a place of attraction for the royalties and dignitaries of the entire continent. Versailles also housed 10,000 administrative staff, for whom quarters were built up at a huge cost.

There is no doubt that Louis XIV was indeed the Grand Monarch. He raised the French monarchy to the zenith of glory, dignity and power. He made France the most powerful and prosperous nation in Europe. A Frenchmen could look around Europe and could feel that he held his head high with pride and honor. Louis was a ruler, administrator and builder without a parallel in Europe. The administrative and financial reforms which he introduced proved immensely beneficiary to France. He was a war-hero who hardly lost a battle and always won over a combined opposition. Some of the legacies he bequeathed proved not only glorious but lasting too.

But at the same time he left a trail of problems behind him which bothered France for a long time to come. No doubt the treasury could boast of sound revenue, resulting from the sound management of finance by that great financial genius, Colbert. But if the latter brought extra revenue for him every year, Louis was quick to spend them in his ever increasing activities and engagements. He spent lavishly to maintain the majesty and dignity of his court, and this involved heavy spending on dinner and cocktail parties in honor of the foreign dignitaries and royal guests. But the expenses on building the Versailles Palace and its maintenance, and on the continuous wars, particularly the long-drawn War of Spanish Succession proved to be tremendously heavy. All these large-scale expenditures put unbearable strain on the treasury. When he passed away, he left a huge burden of national debt on France. With every passing decade the burden of national debt went on increasing leading eventually to the unprecedented bankruptcy that became one of the potential causes of the French Revolution of 1789.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that the reign of Louis XIV was a period of great achievements in the spheres of administration army reforms, foreign affairs, economy and construction. He was man with strong will and determination, capacity for hard work, and ability for organization and leadership.

The period witnessed reforms in the realm of administration. He succeeded in bringing the entire France under a centralised and efficient administration. The tradition of monopolising the high offices through purchase by the noble families received a jolt during this period. More and more men from non-noble families were recruited on the basis of their talent and ability. They held the positions of ministers, intendants and judges. The noble were not completely neglected. They too shared administrative responsibilities. But the Nobility of Sword was undermined, while the nobility of robe was given more prominence.

Louis XIV turned France into a militarily powerful nation. Both army and naval forces were strengthened many time. France's military prowess became a thing that amazed as well as frightened the Europeans. He turned the French militia into a formidable 'war machine', and with it he was able to bring for France the most honoured status in European diplomacy and politics. His reign saw the establishment of French supremacy in European affairs. France fought several wars during his reign; she won most of them, some remained indecisive and she lost none.

The reign also saw the emergence of France as a great economic power in the heydays of mercantilism. Through mercantilist policy, Colbert infused a new lease of life into the French economy. France's trade, commerce and industry recorded tremendous advancement. The revenue increased as a result of better financial management and efficient tax collection. The increased revenue enabled Louis to spend lavishly in construction activities, strengthening the army, and fighting 'continuous chain of battles, all of which brought glory and honour to France, but proved damaging in the long run. Yet all said and done, it is clear that Louis's reign and been immensely productive and valuable period for France.

Suggested Readings:-

1. Meenakshi Phukan : Rise of Modern West
2. G. Clark : Early Modern Europe
3. Raghubir Dayal : Modern European History
4. Jain and Mathur : World History (1500 – 1950)
5. G.M. Trevelyan : Social History of England
6. Parthsarathi Gupta (ed.) : आधुनिक पश्चिम का उदय
7. लाल बहादुर वर्मा : आधुनिक यूरोप का इतिहास
