

The Significance of the American Revolution in World History

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Introduction

The American Revolution was an event of momentous significance in world history. By the term 'revolution' we mean a fundamental change in the political and socio-economic system. It signifies a total transformation. The American Revolution effected fundamental changes in the political and socio-economic spheres of the 13 American Colonies. It turned into an independent nation from a combination of colonial dependencies under British rule. This was indeed a fundamental change. Again, the socio-economic scenario of the colonies also reflected a fundamental change. The exploitative colonial economy was done away with and a free capitalist economy run by the colonies themselves came into existence.



Effects and Significance

The most outstanding achievement of the American Revolution was that the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA came into existence in place of the old colonies. It was also responsible indirectly for the birth of CANADA and AUSTRALIA. But to arrive at a suitable conclusion of the above mentioned question, changes brought about in political, social and economic spheres have to be considered

An outstanding achievement of the American Revolution lies in the fact that it was the first successful struggle for freedom in modern history. More significantly, it became a role model for all subsequent freedom movements in various parts of the world in the 19th and

20th centuries. Interestingly enough the Indian freedom movement derived a lot of inspiration from the personalities and events of the American war of Independence. The sacrifices of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson very much inspired the Indian nationalist leaders

The American War of Independence can be regarded as the first successful democratic movement in modern history. The victory of the American colonies not only meant the birth of a new nation but it also implied the victory of the system of democracy. The popular will in making a government was firmly established. The inhabitants of the American colonies struggled hard for the success of democratic process. No other nation so early glorified the great principles of democracy by putting them into practice as the Americans have done.

The American Revolution marked an outstanding triumph of the forces of anti-colonialism. The British colonialism In the 13 American Colonies reflected an exploitative character. The colonies were meant to serve the needs of the mother-country. They were considered as sources of raw materials and markets for British goods. The colonies did not enjoy the right to sell their products. All the products of the American colonies had to be sent to London from where they were distributed to various parts of the world. In other words the British colonial interests guided the destiny of the trade and commerce of American colonies. We must mention that the imperial hold was not always very rigid due to the distance of the colonies from the mother-country thereby creating problems of transport and communication. Yet the psychology of the mother-country very much reflected the view that colonies were meant to be exploited and exacted as much as possible. As we have seen, the Imperial parliament passed all legislations concerning .colonies and this very much hurt the sentiments and feelings of the colonial people. For that reason the American war of Independence assume the nature of an anti-colonial uprising. The American succeeded in crushing British colonialism In the colonies. It Is a fitting tribute to the American Revolution that all the anti-colonial movements In the 19th and 20th centuries regarded the revolution as the most esteemed example of anti-colonialism.



Another highly precious legacy of the American Revolution was that it brought forth a written constitution - the first of its kind in modern history. This would be the source of all powers, position and functions of the various branches of the American government. The constitution also became the custodian of Individual liberty, civil rights and the independence of the Judiciary. One may say that the Englishmen also possessed a constitution but we must point out that it was not a written constitution. It can only be regarded as a combination of acts and statutes passed by Parliament from the 13th century to the present one. But the importance of the American constitution lies in the fact that everything has been very elaborately and comprehensively written. For this reason the constitution became the sources of all laws of the land. Significantly enough it tremendously influenced the making of constitution in various parts of the world till the present time. In the making of the Indian constitution some of the remarkable features of the American constitution have been inserted. The American leader's clearly stated that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty and the constitution is the best custodian of the nation's as well as Individual's liberty.

A significant result that followed from the above-mentioned fact was the formation of a national government based on a written constitution. The success of the Revolution had provided the people of the colonies the opportunity to give legal form and expression to their political ideals as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Thus came the state constitutions, JAMES MADISON, the fourth U. S. President, once said, "Nothing has exerted more admiration than the manner in which free government have been established in America". He was hinting at the written constitution, developed in America which was among the earliest in history. JOHN ADAMS, the second U.S. President, wrote aptly, "in all free states, the constitution is final." Americans everywhere demanded "a standing law to live by." Within a year after the Declaration of Independence, ten of 13 Colonies had drawn up a new constitution. After the recognition of their independence, the 13 colonies decided to frame a constitution which would bind them with a strong union. Their representatives met at Philadelphia in May, 1787. It was an assemblage of experience, wisdom and dedication. According to Prof. Beard, "never in the history of assemblies has there been a convention of men richer in experience and in practical knowledge or endowed with profounder insight into springs of human action and the intimate essence of government. George Washington, who was a revered hero after his triumphant conduct of the American army in the war presided over this FEDERAL CONVENTION. The Ideas of John Lock and MONTESQUIEU very much

influenced the delegates in the framing of the constitution for the national government. The new constitution was finally adopted on 21 June 1788. Washington, in accordance with the constitution, was chosen President and assumed office on 30th April, 1789.

It was the DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE (4th July, 1776) that proclaimed the birth of a new nation. It did more than that. It brought forth a philosophy of human freedom which would become in subsequent period a dynamic force in the western world. Not only in the west, but in the rest of the world it would be the Inspiring force and the guiding spirit of many freedom struggles. It was a memorable document on individual liberty and equality, and a charter on human rights. It said:



'All men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'

The document adds that the government was set up to secure these rights and that whenever government becomes destructive of these ends, the people have right to change or abolish it, and to institute a new government. It is clear that the source of inspiration for Thomas Jefferson and his contemporaries had been the writings of English political philosophers, particularly JAMES HARRINGTON'S OCEANIA and John Lock's classic work SECOND TREATISE ON GOVERNMENT. The whig spirit of England after the Glorious Revolution (1688 – 89) had an impact on the American leaders. The noteworthy point was the awakening consciousness of men that government should exist for the people, not the people for the government. The

Declaration was much more than a public notice of separation. It instilled among the common-folks a sense of their own importance, inspiring them to struggle for personal freedom, self-government and a dignified place in society. The ideas of the Declaration brought the Revolution within the range of the popular inspiration and strengthened it with the force of popular emotion.

The Political changes did not affect a vast section of the population. The loyalists of the British crown had to leave the colonies and were forced to go and, settle in Canada and the governors had now no place left for them in the colonies. These people accounted for a maximum of 20% of the population. For the rest of the population, i.e., 80% of the masses, the, political changes had not much effect. They continued as before. The political system also did not show a radical departure from the previous existing system. The percentage of the voters increased as against the select few who had the right to vote in the colonial system, but even after the revolution, many people, especially the women did not enjoy the right to vote. Therefore, a movement which fails to bring the entire population or people into focus can hardly claim its right to a revolution.

Not much changes were to be seen in the social sphere, too. The American Revolution did not bring about the end of class distinction as had been in the case of French and Russian Revolutions. This' is evidenced by the fact that even after the revolution, only a small group, though an increased number and voting rights and other privileges. The structure of the society more or less remained unchanged save a small section such as loyalists and the governors, who had to leave the colonies and more to other places. As per the right of equality emphasised in the constitution, the institution of slavery was abolished in theory but not in, practice. It was a development that paved the way for the future American Civil War. The Position of women too remained unchanged and as before, they hadn't voting rights.

Before the revolution, the colonists had the feeling that the British Crown was trying to Impose Anglicanism of the Church of England on them. After the revolution they took steps to check this and worked towards Deanglicisation. Save this, not much is to be noticed of the impact of the revolution in the social sphere.

The American Revolution also did not have a great impact in the financial sphere. The Revolution marked the end of the colonial system of exploitation according to which the

colonies existed for the mother country. The American colonies could now manufacture items as they liked and enter into free competition. But it must be borne in mind that a certain degree of freedom was enjoyed by the colonists even before the revolution. The trade and navigation acts passed by the British, governments were never enforced strictly. Moreover, the increased' freedom of trade benefitted only a small section which went on becoming richer, while the, middle class remained unaffected by it. This led to the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor.

No doubt, the lands of the British Crown and the loyalists were seized and redistributed among the landless people, but these lands were not distributed uniformly among all the people and as such only a small section could reap the harvest. Clearly, the principle of equality was no en creed in the economic set up after the revolution.

Thus, it is seen that the American Revolution could not bring about drastic changes as was the case with the French and Russian Revolutions. It was a revolution in a limited sense. It accentuated the pace of changes and reforms that were taking place. The colonists were the inheritors of the British tradition of freedom, The Institutions in the colonies were based on the model of England. As such, it were mainly the American settlers who brought about the revolution. It was not a mass movement. Moreover there was no general discontent among the colonists which is the characteristic of any revolution. The changes brought about cannot be ascribed to this period alone and it continued even after the revolution.

Above all, the changes, brought about by the revolution were bound to take place, had the revolution taken place or not, John Adams, the second President of U.S.A., in a reminiscent Jetter written in his later years, Viewed that the history of American Revolution began as early as 1629. He asserted that the revolution had affected much before the war commenced. He added:

"The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people The principles and feelings which led the Americans to rebel ought to be traced back for two hundred years; and sought in the history of the country from the first plantation in America."

Indeed, the American Revolution not only gave birth to a new nation, but it also brought

forth a new society that was different in nature from the continental society, The 13 American colonies combined to build up a society that possessed a forward looking attitude, an Innovative mind and creative temperament. It was free from the shackles of tradition and conservatism. It was liberal and progressive. This was the reason that the American society moved forward rapidly. The social impediments like rigid class distinction and subjection to social conservatism never bothered it. Social mobility was evident in this new society right from the beginning. The value of a man in the society was determined not by his birth or class but by his ability and achievements. People belonging to ordinary families had a wide array of opportunities open to them. For this reason the American Society provided the largest number of 'rags to riches' success stories.

Opportunity for education was provided to all the individuals irrespective of their class or family status. This was a period, we mean the late 18th and early 19th century, when the impact of the Industrial Revolution in Western Europe was slowly entering into the newly built American society. This provided a grand opportunity for the economic progress of the American society. 'Career open to talent' became the ideal mantra of the American people. The work culture which made its appearance slowly became a strong socio-economic force. Construction of roads, bridges and canals in right earnest. On the one hand they attempted to unify the new nation and on the other they brought economic prosperity to it. Mills and factories began to be built up and at the same time agriculture too received a great boost. As the colonies possessed immensely vast natural resources the path of economic progress was not very difficult to seek, thanks to the hard work, dedication and struggle of the Americans.

Effects on Britain

The American War of Independence had tremendous impact on Britain. Firstly, it marked the end of the First British Empire and the birth of the Second British Empire. Leaving the American colonies had been a sad experience for the British people as the separation of the colonies from the mother-country was unbelievable to an Englishman. But it could not be checked due to the wrong policies pursued by the Imperial government.

In one way the loss of American colonies proved to be a blessing in disguise for Britain. It was a great lesson for the British authorities. Negligence, sense of superiority and dominating attitude proved to be a curse for the British people and politicians. They now worked hard to mend their ways. They launched upon the idea of building up the second British Empire, colonisation became one of the means to attain it. Attention was focused on Canada, New Zealand and Australian territories. An attitude of care and attention was brought forth towards these territories and dependencies. Attention was also paid to consolidate the gains in India and to further expand them. All these helped to lay a strong foundation of the Second British Empire.

Secondly, the Colonial Office was set up and a cabinet minister in charge of colonies was appointed. The establishment of the Colonial office and the appointment of the Secretary of State for Colonies had been an extremely significant development. It showed the sense of responsibility and attention of the imperial authorities on the colonies. The Second British Empire signaled the advent of the British Empire which by the end of the 19th century would be so large as not to see the setting of the sun.

Thirdly, a very significant effect of the British failure in the American war was the fall of the personal rule of George III. The English king set aside the cabinet system and established his authoritarian regime. For some time it appeared that Parliament and cabinet ministers were run on his dictation. All sorts of manipulations, were resorted to by the monarch to establish his personal rule in 1762 and it lasted somewhat till 1782. But the popular discontent reflected in John Dunning's (an independent member) motion in the House of Commons that 'the power of the king has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished' was passed by the House. This dealt a severe blow to the Georgian personal rule.

Lastly, an outstanding achievement that followed the fall of George's personal system was the restoration of the cabinet system and the principle of ministerial responsibility. The lion's share of the credit must be given to William Pitt, the younger. King George III appointed him as Prime Minister in order to perpetuate his personal rule. But Pitt, the younger proved to be a highly competent Prime Minister, a great administrator and the most venerable Tory leader. After three months in office as Premier, he called a General Election and received an overwhelming mass mandate as the Prime Minister. The unprecedented victory absolutely shattered the personal regime of George III.

Effects on France

The American War of Independence also very much influenced the course of French history. Firstly, the French could take pride in the fact that they settled the score with their arch-rival English by helping the Americans to defeat the British forces. The French took revenge of the humiliating defeat and loss of Canada at the hands of the British in the Seven Years' War (1756-63). This was indeed a positive aspect.

Secondly, the spirit and determination of the people of the American colonies proved very inspiring to the French people. La Fayette the great French General, who commanded the French troops in the colonies and trained the colonial troops spoke highly of the struggle of the American people. He wrote several articles in the French news media that proved inspiring to the French. They too determined to struggle against the authoritarian Old Regime and to fight for parliamentary democratic system in France. Thus the American freedom struggle somewhat prepared the ground of the French Revolution.

Thirdly, another positive impact was evident in the fact that on the model of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the French Revolutionaries too brought out a same declaration during the course of the Revolution. The similar French Declaration clearly reflected the impact of the American Declaration and it also enshrined the great ideals of individual liberty, parliamentary system, civil rights and social justice.

Lastly, the impact carried a negative aspect too. The financial and military assistance by the French to the Americans was provided out of spirit of revenge on the British. The help proved to be extremely costly to the French. It put unbearable pressure on the already

strained French treasury. The national debt of France enhanced greatly. The French government never recovered from this bankruptcy that augmented with every passing year eventually leading to the financial crisis of 1788-89 that drove France towards the Revolution.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that the American Revolution, which reached its culmination through the American War of Independence was an event of immense significance not only in the history of American but in the world history. It created a free nation, brought forth a written constitution, ended colonialism so far as the American colonies are concerned, built up a democratic system and laid the foundation of a socio-economic system that would eventually give rise to the most advanced and prosperous nation in the world. The impact was felt in other countries also. The freedom struggle and the written constitution of the Americans inspired subsequently people all over the world including India. The American Revolution also left its impact on Britain and France.

Suggested Readings:-

1. Meenakshi Phukan : Rise of Modern West
2. G. Clark : Early Modern Europe
3. Raghubir Dayal : A Textbook of 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
