

Magadh Mahila College

Patna University, Patna

HISTORY

B.A. – I

PAPER – II

RISE OF MODERN WEST

Unit – 6

Age Of Enlightenment

Topic: - Salient Features of Enlightenment

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Introduction

The AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT or the period from 1700 to 1789, or the eighteenth century prior to the FRENCH REVOLUTION of 1789, as generally called, added a glorious chapter to the history of Europe. In this period the people, particularly of France, were made to believe that their's was a superior age, that they have qualities and attainments enough to be fittingly called 'enlightened', and that they have emerged from a long twilight, from a time of barbarism and ignorance to a period of sparkling rays of wisdom and progress. The belief in Enlightenment was so widespread that the educated classes, the writers and thinkers called PHILOSOPHES, and the kings and emperors known as ENLIGHTENED DESPOTS all adhered to it.



Salient Features of Enlightenment

Based on the 17th Century Age of Science and Reason

The most salient feature of the Enlightenment was the its spirit was based on the scientific and intellectual revolution of the 17th century. Indeed ISSAC NEWTON'S LAWS OF MOTION, F. BACON'S idea of SCIENTIFIC METHOD, RENE DESCARTES concept of reason, LOCKE'S principle of NATURAL RIGHT and NATURAL LAW. SPINOZA'S POLITICAL CONCEPTS, plus the SCIENTIFIC THEORIES of W. HARVEY and HALLEY, all combined to lay the foundation of the 18th century Enlightenment. History hardly knows of a period so skeptical towards tradition, so faithful to the power of reason and science and so convinced of the harmony of nature and inevitability of progress.

Rejection of Superstition, Magic, Miracle and Witchcraft

Another noteworthy feature of the Enlightenment was the disbelief in and discouragement to superstition, miracles, witchcraft and magic. This was obviously the result of materialist and scientific thinking. The people in the Age of Enlightenment, not only ceased to fear the devil but also the God. God was taken more as the creator of the Universe than as the Father and Divine Providence. God was compared to a watchmaker and the universe as a watch. The Universe is as complex and intricate as a watch, as a watch cannot exist without a watchmaker, so the universe can't do without god. The Newtonian concept of mathematical law and accuracy was predominant in the minds of Enlightenment scholars.

Spirit of Secularism

A very important feature as well as the accomplishment of the Enlightenment was the spirit of SECULARISM. Religious orthodoxy began to decline as a result of newly emerging rationalism. Churches and churchmen gradually lost out in prestige and leadership. Politics, economy and trade were no longer subjected to religious ends. The religious bondage was thrown off.

Concept of Mechanistic Universe

The Philosophus school of thinkers view that the entire universe is like a machine. A machine contains numerous parts and accessories and all these work in co-ordination based on scientific principles. Similarly, the universe, which contains a large number of galaxies and planets including our own earth, also operate according to definite rules of science. The birth, movement and destruction of planets are according to the laws of science. In other words, the universe is mechanistic in nature. The Enlightenment scholars, being admirers of science and reason, rightly clung to these view. It may appear that they did not believe in God, but the fact is they did not outright God. But they gave a secondary role to God. As already noted, He is just a watch-mechanic rectifying that fault in nature as the mechanic does In the case of a defective watch.

17.2.5 Principle of Empirical Knowledge

The philosophus intellectuals highly respected the principle of empirical knowledge. This is a very profound concept and its relevance is increasing with every passing century. It means that the truth has to be sought after thorough exploration and research. First of all information has to be searched from all possible sources. This is the stage known for exhaustive collection of facts and figures. In the second stage the collected information has to be Classified and analysed. In the final stage the truth has to be brought forth in the light of the analysis and assessment of collected materials. The final stage is the most important because the researcher has to arrive at truth without any bias or prejudice. This concept of arriving at truth is more rigid In case of science. The truth has to be reached after thorough experimentation and research. a partial experiment will not lead to universal truth. This concept has been a precious and lasting legacy of the Age of Enlightenment.

Idea of Progress

Another remarkable feature of the Enlightenment was the abiding faith in the idea of progress. It is often said that the idea of progress was the dominating idea of the European civilization from 17th century to early 20th century. It received a rude shock during World War I and was shattered to pieces by the World War II. The idea implies that human society with the accumulations of more and more knowledge about itself and the universe will improve and ennoble itself. Man's advancement and improvement would follow a linear course. Each generation with the acquisition of great knowledge and experience would be better, nobler, wiser and more prosperous than it's preceding generation. In the 17th century, in England and France, the dispute between the ANCIENTS and MODERNISTS had already reflected the coming of the idea of progress. The Ancients believed that the classical literature was the source of knowledge and wisdom and that there was nothing more to know than what the ancient Greeks and Romans had said. The Modernists, on the other hand, refer to the vast repository of knowledge, contributed by science and technology, by art and literature. They believed that the modern men not only know the best of the past, but also know much by unravelling the mystery of nature through experiments and observations.

Conclusion

The period from 1700 to 1789 is generally known as the Age of Enlightenment in European history. It was marked by a resurgence in confidence based on the achievements scored through science. Europeans of this era supposed themselves superior to the people of preceding ages, Intellectuals, philosophers, writer and even a number of rulers accepted and propagated the idea of Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment had certain salient features associated with it. The developments in science and reason during the 17th century was the main basis of the idea of Enlightenment. It had promoted confidence in the creativity of man.

Secondly, the Enlightenment rejected the medieval practices such as, superstition, magic, miracle and witchcraft.

Thirdly, and quite logically, it boosted the spirit of secularism. The church lost its predominant position in intellectual activities and in guiding the European socio-economic life.

Fourthly, the thinker of that age gave the concept of mechanistic universe, according to which the universe was compared to a machine containing several parts and run by certain principles of science.

Fifthly, it emphasised the principle of empirical knowledge. Accordingly, the truth can be known only after going through an exhaustive process of experimentation, analysis and biasless conclusion.

Lastly, Enlightenment had a firm faith in the idea of progress on a linear path.

Several thinkers, philosophers and groups were involved in spreading the concepts of Enlightenment. Their writings did a commendable job in this regard. Among individuals, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Kant were the outstanding exponents of the Age of Enlightenments. The Encyclopaedists and Physiocrats were

two leading groups who promoted the cause of Enlightenment. Diderot was the famous Intellectual Involved In preparing the historic Encyclopaedia Quesnay led the physiocrats who advocated the theory of laissez fair in economic activities.

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
