



Wine and the French Revolution

Description

Alcohol has been an integral part of the social, economic, cultural and political fabric of nations throughout history. Often all these have converged and led to landmark events in history of nations where alcohol played an important catalyst. French Revolution is one such striking example.

The French Revolution

The French Revolution was a period of intense social and political turmoil in France from 1789 until 1799. It witnessed the masses revolting against the autocratic rule and led to abolition of the French monarchy aimed at establishing a secular and democratic republic based on liberalism and equality.

It began on July 14, 1789 when revolutionaries stormed Bastille â?? a fortress in Paris, which played an important role in the internal conflicts of France and for most of its history was used as a state prison by the kings of France. It was stormed by a crowd of revolutionaries on July 14, 1789 in the French Revolution, becoming an important symbol for the French Republican movement.



14 July 1789 â?? Storming of Bastille Fort

Wine and the Revolution

So what has wine to do with the revolution, one may ask. Well, in ways more than one, wine was interlinked with the events in the revolution. To get a clearer picture of the role played by wine and its relevance to the revolution, it becomes imperative to understand the socio-economic and cultural scenario prevailing in France during the pre-revolution period.

Wine was a central element of the society with the masses consuming the ordinary wine or the vin de rouge and the superior class preferring the expensive wines of likes of Champagne, Burgundy and Bordeaux.



Wine was an integral part of french culture in late 18th century

However, the excessive prevalence of wine in day to day life was also a major source of revenue for the authorities by means of taxes. More revenue came from taxes on alcoholic beverages entering Paris than from all other commodities combined.

The tax rate on wine especially coming into Paris was very high. So much so that the price of a barrel of wine used to get tripled as it traveled from the toll barriers to the city center. And the brunt of these taxes were suffered upfront largely by the 3rd Estate or the common people. The taxes and the customs barriers of Paris became the focus of revolt in July 1789.

Perhaps the scenario existing during that period and the relevance of wine in day to day life of the society is best illustrated in *“A Tale of Two Cities”* the famous book by Charles Dickinson written in the backdrop of the French revolution. In the chapter titled *The Broken Wine Cask*, the author depicts a broken wine cask



outside a wine shop and portrays the



act of passing peasants scrambling to lap up the spilling wine as a symbol for the desperate quality of the people's hunger. In another instance, the narrative directly associates the wine with blood, with the author noting that some of the peasants have acquired "a tigerish smear about the mouth" and portraying a drunken figure scrawling the word "blood" on the wall with a wine-dipped finger. And quite prophetically, the blood of aristocrats later spills at the hands of a mob in these same streets. These two pictures perfectly capture and portray the sentiment existing in the society during the period.

Coming back to the narrative, in days leading to 14th July, the desperate local masses frustrated by the wine taxes, got together and attacked the toll gates at the entry of Paris. Chasing away the toll officers, they then brought loads of wine into the city. Devoid of taxes the wine was made available at nominal prices and this was rejoiced by the crowds. The consumption of wine can also be said to have released constraints and inhibitions of people and emboldened them to transgress authority.



Crowds celebrating wine made available at nominal taxes

Opposition to the taxes grew and after a sustained protest, taxes were finally abolished on 1st May 1791. Paris and other large cities witnessed prolonged and exuberant celebrations. Again wine was at the center of these festivities as drinking was a social act that commemorated newly found freedoms.

Wine was thus a lubricant and a catalyst to the unrest. It played a subtle yet a decisive a role in the events related to the French revolution.