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## UNIT 18 MEIJI JAPAN-I

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### 18.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this Unit we discuss the problems in foreign relations faced by the Meiji Government from 1868-1893. After reading this Unit you will be able to know about the:

- territorial issues related to Kurile Islands, Ryukyu Islands, and Bonin Islands,
- attempts made by Japan to remove Chinese dominance over Korea, and
- the revision of Unequal Treaties.

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### 18.1 INTRODUCTION

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The Meiji Government inherited the legacy of a country opened to the West on the basis of such treaties which had granted extra-territorial rights to the Western nationals in Japan and had also deprived Japan of tariff autonomy. These humiliating provisions which made inroads into Japanese sovereignty had to be rescinded in order to win for Japan a position of equality with the Western nations. This not only required a programme of internal reconstruction, but Japan also had to become adept in negotiations at the bilateral and multilateral levels. The northern frontiers of Japan with Russia had to be reviewed and delineated to the advantage of Japan. Japan sought to establish her sovereignty over Ryukyu Islands and have it accepted. Redress had to be sought for the Korean "audacity" to thwart Japan's efforts to open Korea. Japan, which had concluded a treaty of Amity with China in 1871 to face the Western threat, found a conflict of interests with China over the issue of the Ryukyu Islands as well as Korea. While the initial expedition to Korea proposed by Saigo Takamori was not undertaken in 1873, Japan interfered in the internal affairs of Korea to establish her own rights. Both these issues created distrust and hostility between China and Japan which only increased over the years. USA indirectly helped Japan to establish her rights vis-a-vis China as well as her territorial expansion in general. These are the various aspects dealt with in this Unit.

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### 18.2 TERRITORIAL ISSUES

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We shall now discuss in detail the territorial issues faced by Japan which include the Kurile islands, Ryukyu islands and Bonin islands.

#### 18.2.1 Kurile Islands

The Treaty of Shimoda, concluded with Russia in February 1855, went beyond the

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Treaty concluded with USA, in that it contained certain territorial clauses. These conceded all of the Kurile islands south of Uruppu to Japan and islands north of it to Russia. Sakhalin was to remain unpartitioned. However, this treaty did not settle the boundary question. In 1859 a demand was made by Count Muravieff, who sailed with a fleet to Shinagawa, that La Perouse strait should be made the boundary between Japan and Russia. In 1861, the strategic island of Tsushima was seized by Russia. But Britain made Russia renounce all her claims to the island. Hence a proper delineation of frontiers with Russia became one of the main foreign policy problems of the new Meiji Government.

In the years after the Restoration opinion was divided among the leaders about the northern boundary:

- i) One group felt that Japan should stake her claim on all the Northern islands including the whole of Kuriles and Sakhalin. The US Secretary of State, William H. Seward, who visited Tokyo in 1870 suggested that Japan could offer to purchase the northern half of Sakhalin. He urged Japan to follow a policy of expansion. This advice was given on the basis of his own negotiations with Russia and the purchase of Alaska in 1867.
- ii) Another group headed by Kuroda Kiyotaka, the Head of the Hokkaido Colonisation Office realised that while Japan's hold over Hokkaido had still not been strengthened, it would not be prudent to antagonise Russia by making big claims. The militia in Hokkaido could not defend the island from an attack from the north. The first priority should be the consolidation of Japan's position in Hokkaido rather than expansion. He advocated Japan's abandonment of any claim on Sakhalin. Ultimately it was Kuroda's views that prevailed.

Admiral Enomoto Takeaki was sent to St. Petersburg in 1874 with instructions to negotiate and settle the Russo-Japanese boundary questions amicably. After lengthy negotiations, the treaty of Petersburg was signed in 1875. Russia ceded the Kurile chain of islands to Japan. In return Japan gave up all her claims to Sakhalin. **This was the first international treaty concluded on the basis of equality of Japan.** Kuriles were important to Japan strategically because of their geographical position and economically because of the abundant fish in the waters around the islands.

Kuriles were incorporated into Hokkaido and administered as part of Hokkaido prefecture. The conclusion of this treaty proved beneficial to Japan as it settled the vexed boundary issue amicably. Moreover, it was also a valuable experience for the Japanese leaders in international negotiations. However, Japan's amity with Russia was soon broken over the issue of Korea and the Russian ambitions to get an ice free port in the east.

### 18.2.2 Ryukyu Islands

The Ryukyu islands extend for 570 miles in southerly direction below Kyushu. The language and customs of the Ryukyus shared similarities both with the Chinese and Japanese but were closer to the Japanese. Till the seventeenth century, these islands were predominantly under Chinese influence. But after the seventeenth century, they were conquered by the Kaimyo of Satsuma **han**. This only led to the King of Ryukyus paying tributes and carrying on an active trade with both China and Japan. Yet the King considered himself independent and signed treaties on his own behalf with the Western powers. Once the **han** in Japan had been abolished (by 1872) the position of Ryukyus had to be made clear. The Japanese took steps to see that the Chinese claims on Ryukyus were not accepted. The King was forcibly taken to Tokyo and in 1872, the USA was officially informed that Ryukyus had been incorporated into Japan but the treaties signed by the King would be honoured by Japan.

In 1873, the Japanese Government reaffirmed the position of Ryukyus as Japanese subjects by getting the acceptance of China that Japan had a right to redress for the killing of some Ryukyus by an aboriginal tribe in South Formosa (Taiwan). This was also taken by Japan as China's renunciation of her claims on Ryukyus. De Long, the American Minister in Tokyo, also accepted this interpretation. Hence when Japan sent an expedition to Formosa it was not challenged militarily by China. In fact in October

..., with the mediation of British Minister Thomas Wade in Peking, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs signed a convention at Peking which admitted the rightful purpose of the expedition thus recognizing the Ryukyans as Japanese subjects. Further China also promised to pay an indemnity of 50,000 taels, one fifth of which was paid immediately for the families of ship-wrecked Japanese (i.e. Ryukyans) who were killed. The British Minister, Thomas Wade counter-signed the agreement guaranteeing the payment of the money by China. There was no reference in the agreement to Ryukyans but only as "people from Japan". China, in signing the agreement did not realise that she was accepting the sovereignty of Japan over these islands. In 1879, China protested against the incorporation of these islands into Okinawa prefecture but her position was weak under the international law. China sought US mediation in the problem. President Grant suggested direct negotiations between China and Japan on this issue and to accept a compromise solution. Japan offered that the southern most group of Ryukyus, i.e. the Sakishima group, be ceded to China. In return, Japan asked for a revision of the treaty of 1871 to include the most favoured nation clause which would give Japan the same privileges as granted to Western powers in China. The Chinese vacillated, accepting Japan's offer at one time and rejecting it later or stating that the whole matter had been transferred from the Foreign Ministry to the Northern and Southern Superintendents of Trade. It was apparent that the Chinese did not want to sign an agreement which would sign off the sovereignty over those islands to Japan. In 1881, the US Minister in Peking was informed that at most they would sign a treaty where both China and Japan guaranteed the independence of Ryukyus. However, by keeping the issue in abeyance, China could not prevent the actual control of these islands by Japan who now refused to reopen negotiations. Japan acquired the islands without open hostilities but earned China's animosity in the bargain. China was also resentful of the arrogance of the Japanese officials and their insistence on following Western procedures in international law. China was now also getting apprehensive of the Japanese military machine.

### 18.2.3 The Bonin Islands (Ogasawara)

These islands situated 500 miles to the southeast from Tokyo had been a part of Japan but were mainly used for exiled political criminals. The islands were claimed by the British in 1827 and the United States in 1853. However, neither of them pressed the claim and Japan went ahead in settling Japanese in these islands. In 1873 the US Secretary of State Hamilton Fish ruled that the islands had never been recognized as US territory and also persuaded other Western powers to recognize them as Japanese territory. The Bonins were incorporated into Tokyo prefecture in 1880.

#### Check Your Progress 1

1) How did Japan extend its suzerainty over the Ryukyu islands? Answer in ten lines.

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2) When were the Bonin islands incorporated into Japan? Explain in five lines how this was made possible.

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3) Explain the importance of the Treaty of Shimoda. Answer in five lines.

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### 18.3 THE KOREAN QUESTION

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Korea's geographical position makes it a land bridge between Japan and the Asiatic mainland. In the nineteenth century, Korea was an independent country with her own King and separate government. Her payment of tribute to both China and Japan, however, made both these nations claim a special interest in Korea to the exclusion of the other. But for many centuries Korea had maintained closer relations with China than with Japan. In early 1872, Japan tried to put her relations with Korea on par with that of China but was rebuffed. Subsequently several Japanese subjects in Korea were assaulted. Saigo Takamori wanted to send an expedition to Korea to uphold Japan's honour and pride and also to make Korea pay for her insulting conduct towards Japanese envoys. Saigo was confident that the newly recruited army would be successful in the expedition. Saigo also looked upon the expedition as an opportunity for Japan to extend its frontiers. The dispossessed **samurai** class could also be given new territories for exploration. Saigo was fully aware that an expedition might result in hostilities with Russia but he was prepared to take the risk. Though Saigo was able to get approval for the expedition under his leadership, the expedition was not sent. The Iwakura Mission, which had gone to Europe and America, was able to get the decision reversed. This was because the members of the Mission were convinced on the basis of what they saw abroad that priority should be given to internal reconstruction and no foreign adventures should be taken up at that time. They also realised that Japan would not be able to bear the financial burden of the war. Moreover, they felt that Japan's Korean adventure would invite the intervention of Western powers which would be to the disadvantage of Japan. The reversal of the decision led to the resignation of Saigo and other leaders. This also led to other repercussions.



Iwakura himself was attacked and wounded as he left the Imperial palace grounds. The attackers were identified as those who were dissatisfied with the government decision against sending an expedition to Korea. There was an open insurrection in Saga under the leadership of Eto Shimpei who had left the government. Though the rebellion was suppressed quickly the spectre of **samurai** discontent alarmed the government. In fact it was to partially satisfy the disgruntled **samurai** that the chastisement expedition was sent to establish Japanese dominance in Formosa. It was Saigo Takamori's younger brother Saigo Tsugumichi who organized and commanded the Formosa expeditionary force. The successful results of the Formosan expedition revealed to the leaders that a "well-timed, carefully calculated and judiciously limited foreign adventure, which is capable of justification in Western international formula is not unduly risky and can render domestic affairs more manageable". But it was still too early and risky to attempt an adventure in Korea.

In 1875, Japan followed the same procedure with Korea as the Western Powers had done with her, viz. demand a treaty by the show of naval force along the Korean coast

and also through diplomatic negotiations. The mission however failed that year. The next year, China, which had agreed to concessions in Ryukyus as a result of Japan's show of military force, advised Korea to negotiate diplomatically with Japan. The Treaty of Kanghai of 1876 concluded between Japan and Korea opened two ports to Japan and granted her partial extra territorial rights. In return, Japan recognized Korea as an independent sovereign state having the same rights as Japan. However, China did not interpret the treaty as making Korea independent of Chinese sovereignty. Neither did Korea herself accept that she could carry an independent foreign policy. This was revealed when USA tried to open relations with Korea. The Shufeldt Treaty signed in 1882 by Korea with USA carried in every aspect terms of equality but the letter which accompanied the treaty clearly characterised Korea as a dependency of China. Hence the issue of Korea's status in relation to China was different from that with Japan. This was not the intention of Japan while concluding the Treaty of Kanghai.

Domestic intrigues in Korea further complicated Korea's relations with China and Japan. There were two contending factions:

- The one headed by Taewonkun, the father and Regent of the young king, who was conservative, anti-foreign and supported China.
- After 1873 when the King came of age, he was controlled by the Queen and the Ming family. The position of this group was progressive, pro-foreign and pro-Japanese.

In July, 1882 an anti-Japanese riot was instigated by Taewonkun. In the disturbances, the King and Queen escaped assassination. But the Japanese Minister had to flee to Japan with the help of the British. Japan sent reinforcements to guard the legation. China also did the same. Taewonkun was captured by the Chinese and taken away on the ground that he had revolted against the Chinese Emperor. When order was restored and the King could regain temporary control, he apologised to Japan for the revolt, gave an indemnity for the losses incurred by Japan and permitted the increase of guards in the legation. However, two years later, Japan cancelled the remaining indemnity payments.

The situation in Korea had only exacerbated, as both Chinese and Japanese forces were in position, with the possibility of a conflict over the control of the King. China was still not willing to accept the concept of Korea being an independent and sovereign state. Intrigues within the court continued as one group continued to co-operate with China.

The Japanese liberals continued to involve themselves in the Korean problem. This was partly out of sympathy for the budding progressive movement in Korea and its Korean leaders and partly in the hope that by contributing to it, they would contribute to the achievement of liberal goals in Japan.

There was no clear cleavage between the liberals and the Japanese government on the Korean issue. The latter was also urging the Korean Government to initiate reforms and to assert her independence. Yet, the Japanese government was not interested in these as an extension into practice of liberal principles. It only saw them as an antidote to backward, unsettled, unfriendly and unpredictable conditions in Korea, which might pose a danger to the security of Japan.

From about 1881 Fukuzawa Yukichi and other Japanese liberals were in close touch with Korean reformers. Their activities were on the increase until they reached a sort of crescendo with the Seoul uprising. In 1884 the leaders of the Independence Party in Korea, Kim-ok-kiun and Pak Young-hyo, who had been supported by the Liberals in Japan as well as the Japanese Legation in Seoul staged a **coup d'état**. Several of the King's ministers were killed. In retaliation the attempts by Koreans to capture the Japanese Legation made the Minister and civilian Japanese flee from Seoul to Inchon. The Korean King took refuge in the Chinese camp and the revolutionary leaders escaped to Japan. Once again, Japan demanded an apology and an indemnity by separate negotiations with Korea and refused to release the revolutionary leaders. At this time Yuan Shi Kai, who was appointed the Chinese resident in Korea, befriended the King and helped the Koreans to oppose Japan. The deteriorating situation could only be settled by negotiations between Japan and China or through a war. Both opted for negotiations. Ito Hirobumi went to China and had talks with the Viceroy, Li Hung Chang. The result was the Li-Ito Convention signed at Tientsin in March 1885. The main points of agreement were as follows:



Fukuzawa Yukichi



Ito Hiro

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- 1) Both China and Japan would withdraw troops from Korea within four months.
- 2) If disturbances in Korea demanded despatch of troops by any country, it would be done only after giving notice of doing so to the other.
- 3) Neither Chinese nor Japanese would be employed in the organization or training of Korean army.

The implementation of this agreement by the withdrawal of Japanese troops defused the tensions between China and Japan over Korea. The question whether China or Japan would dominate Korea was not settled but had only been temporarily shelved. However, Russia which was interested in the future of Korea, was watching the situation closely and waiting for an opportunity to establish her own influence. The Russian move to offer Russian officers to train the Koreans and in return receive the use of a warm water port in Wonsong, was stopped by protests from both China and Japan. The British occupied certain South Korean islets in retaliation to Russian intentions, but withdrew in 1887. Japan was therefore, on the one hand successful in neutralising the Chinese influence in Korea, and on the other in preventing the Russian intrusion into Korea. But at the same time Japan failed to achieve the recognition of Korea as an independent nation by China. A crisis was, however, averted till 1893.

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## **18.4 REVISION OF UNEQUAL TREATIES**

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The treaties which granted the rights of commercial relations to the Western powers had also granted extraterritorial rights, i.e. the rights to the foreign nationals to be tried by their own courts and according to their own laws for crimes committed by them on Japanese soil which might involve Japanese lives and property. Japan's freedom to determine her own tariffs on imports and exports had also been curbed by a uniform duty of 5 per cent. Debates concerning treaty revision started in official and private circles soon after the Meiji Restoration.

The Iwakura Mission had however realised that civil and criminal codes had to be revised before the Western Powers could be persuaded to abolish extra-territoriality. There was, however, continuous clamour by the public asking for its abolition as it went against the prestige of Japan. As early as 1873, Okuma Shigenobu, who was then the Finance Minister, realised that the Government should have the independent right to fix the import and export duties.

In fact while opposing the Korean Expedition plan in 1873, Okuma Toshimichi clearly stated: "The first thing is to revise the treaties, the Korean business after that." If they are not revised, he felt that England and France will send armies on the pretext of an internally insecure situation. The Japanese tried intermittently for several years, to get the treaties revised through negotiations but failed. However, they gained experience in the techniques of negotiations with foreign powers. In 1880, Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru proposed the partial amendment of extraterritorial rights as well as tariffs and presented it to the foreign countries. There was no favourable response but the Dutch Minister in Tokyo leaked this secret proposal to the newspaper **Japan Herald** and it evoked a widespread anti-government reaction from the public. The British Foreign Minister called the Japanese Minister Mori Arinori in London, and refused to accept the revised proposals as the basis for negotiations. In fact Britain adopted the most rigid attitude among the foreign countries. In 1884, the British Government clearly stated that revision of the treaties was contingent upon the adoption of Western legal codes. Already Japan had made efforts to speed up the process of revision. The assistance of a French adviser Gustave Boissonade was taken to revise the penal code and the code of criminal procedure. A commercial code was designed with the aid of the German legal expert Herman Roesler. The United States was impressed with these efforts and was favourable towards the revision of unequal treaties but other governments claimed that the efforts were still insufficient.

Formal negotiations for abolition of unequal treaties were started with the Western powers on 1 May 1886. The general outline of the conclusion reached was as follows:

- 1) Japan would set up organs to enforce judicial power. It would also establish a criminal code, a criminal procedure code, a civil code, a commercial code and a commercial procedure code in accordance with European principles.
- 2) In civil cases in which foreigners were involved, the majority of judges would be foreigners.
- 3) Preliminary investigation in criminal cases would be handled by foreign judges.
- 4) A foreigner sentenced to death by a Japanese court should be surrendered to his nation and should be tried in accordance with the laws of that nation.

In effect these essentially meant the continuation of extra-territoriality. Once the contents of the treaty revision leaked out to the public, there was opposition to it both from within the government as well as from among the general public. The concept of mixed courts with foreign and Japanese judges was not at all acceptable. The extension of land ownership and mining rights to foreigners, it was felt, would bring Japan's natural resources under the control of foreigners. Unrestricted residence of foreigners in any part of Japan and freedom to travel all over Japan was also opposed. Within the government itself, there was a view that it was better to postpone treaty revision until after the establishment of the National Diet in 1890. Others thought the treaty revision bill should be cancelled rather than suspended. Even the French Adviser Biossonade strongly opposed the Bill. He said that it would be better to maintain the earlier treaties rather than to revise them in such a form. He felt that since foreigners received far better protection than Japanese, popular dissatisfaction of the people might erupt into serious disturbances if the bill was enforced.

The opposition within the government and the public was so strong that the government on 20 July 1887 finally informed the ministers of foreign countries to postpone indefinitely the conference on treaty revision. Another outcome of this issue was that Foreign Minister Inoue had to resign.

The Government continued to deliberate on the proposals and also took strong measures against those who embarrassed the Government in the treaty negotiations by creating trouble. However, in 1889, a bomb was thrown at Okuma Shigenobu, who was the then Foreign Minister, when he was returning from one of the meetings and he lost one leg. This contributed to postponing the settlement of the problem for a few more years. However, the Government was criticised very severely in the Diet for the inability to find a solution to this problem. Prime Minister Ito Hirobumi used this attitude of the Diet as an excuse for the dissolution of the Diet. The Government took stern measures against those who disturbed law and order. However, public opinion made the Government realise that it had to aim at total abolition and not a phased abolition of the unequal treaties. Finally, in 1893 negotiations with Britain on the issue started making some progress. In 1894, Foreign Minister Aoki Shuzo went to London and signed a treaty on 16 July 1894. This treaty abolished extra-territoriality, subject to the implementation of the new codes. Thus, the special rights to foreign settlements came to an end. The changes were to take effect from 1899. The control over tariffs was however, to continue for a further twelve years thereafter meaning that Japan regained full tariff autonomy only in 1911. Similar treaties with other powers also followed. This process helped Japan move one step forward towards her goal of achieving an equality with the Western powers.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What led to the signing of the Treaty of Kanghwa? What were its implications?  
Answer in 15 lines.

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2) What was the Li-Ito Convention? Answer in 10 lines.

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3) Which of the following statements are right or wrong? Mark (✓) or (×).

- i) The Treaty of Kanghwa opened two ports of Japan.
- ii) For many centuries Korea had maintained closer relations with China rather than with Japan.
- iii) In 1882, an anti-Chinese riot was instigated by Taewonkun.

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### 18.5 LET US SUM UP

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The main achievement of Japan in the realm of foreign policy in this period was the abrogation of the extraterritorial rights. The restrictions on Japanese sovereignty were partially removed though she regained her tariff autonomy only in 1911. This issue reveals that relations with foreign nations gave an impetus and urgency to modernise Japan on the model of Western institutions. The open exhibition of the resentment of the people against the special rights granted to foreigners strengthened the hand of the government in the negotiations, in their demand for total abolition, but the people in return were subjected to strong Government measures. The Government leaders gained experience in the processes of bilateral and multilateral negotiations with the foreign powers.

Japan also achieved success in the delineation of frontiers with Russia as well as the international acceptance of Japan's rights over Ryukyus and Bonin islands. The advice and assistance of USA in promoting Japan's claims in this regard has to be noted. However the Ryukyu island's question sowed seeds of distrust between Japan and China. China lost out because of Japan's ability to use her newly gained military might to exercise actual control over the islands as well as Japan taking recourse to Western international law to support her claims. China, however, would not so easily relinquish her rights over Korea. Japan's efforts to declare Korea as an independent sovereign nation, so that dominance by China was removed, were not successful. The conflict between China and Japan over Korea was settled without going to war through the



Li-Ito Agreement of 1885. However, both the nations had only temporarily forsaken their claim for exclusive control over Korea. As discussed in Unit 19, Japan and China actually waged a war on this issue. This issue also could not be confined to a bilateral level but invited interference from Western powers, who became apprehensive of the growing claims of Japan in the region with the help of her military strength. Japan learnt very early to regulate her foreign policy in the light of real politics. This comes out clearly not only in her Korean policy but generally also. The most careful consideration of domestic economy, the internal political considerations as well as the international power relations preceded their every move.

By 1880s Japan had become convinced that her goal of getting recognition from the Western powers as a sovereign nation equal in status could not be achieved in concert with China. Rather her close association with China might make the Western powers relegate her to the same category as other Asian nations who were backward and would not take positive steps to modernise themselves. Hence, she had to "disassociate" herself from Asia so that her efforts at modernisation gained recognition.

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## 18.6 KEY WORDS

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**Amity:** Friendly relationship.

**Coup d'etat:** Violent change in government.

**Diet:** Japan's Parliament. This constitutes both the House of Councillors and House of Representatives.

**Exacerbated:** Aggravated

**Tael:** Chinese currency

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## 18.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Base your answer on Sub-sec. 18.2.2
- 2) See Sub-sec. 18.2.3
- 3) Refer Sub-sec. 18.2.1

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Refer Sec. 18.4
- 2) Refer Sec. 18.4
- 3) 1) ✓    ii) ✓    iii) X