
UNIT 6 MEIJI INDUSTRIALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Structure

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to :

- know about the characteristic features of Japan's pre-modern economy and its transformation in the Meiji period,
- know about the building up of a modern industrial infrastructure,
- understand the economic policies of the Meiji period,
- familiarise yourself with the growth of labour unions and factory legislation,
- learn about developments in agriculture, and
- understand the role of the state in promoting economic growth.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The economic transformation of Meiji Japan has evoked a great deal of interest and attention because Japan represents the most successful attempt at industrialization by an Asian country. This success has led scholars to examine the policies and programmes adopted by Meiji leaders in this regard. There has been an extensive debate on whether Westernization and modernization mean the same thing and the example of Japan shows that an industrial society need not necessarily come to resemble the Western society.

The question of how far the pre-modern economy of Japan contributed to Japan's modern growth is also a complex one. Economic historians are not of one opinion on the question. But most of them recognize that extensive development of economic institutions and practices had taken place which made it possible to build a modern economic organization with remarkable speed and dispatch.

The international situation also played a role in this. Though Western imperialist pressure in a sense created a crisis, Japan was able to use the breathing space

rapidly and effectively to create a prosperous economy. Moreover, access to technology and skills was not restricted and Japan could send its leaders out to shop for appropriate skills and materials.

Finally, it must be remembered that though Japan is poor in resources, it had sufficient coal deposits and nineteenth century industrialization was based on coal.

This Unit discusses the economic condition at the time of Meiji Restoration and goes on to explain the policies of the Meiji leaders. The Unit also takes into account the agricultural reforms as well as the efforts of the state in the field of industrialization. The role of banking institutions and foreign trade has also been discussed. As a result of rapid industrialization there also emerged a labour movement under the trade unions. The Unit also deals with the governments' policies in this regard.

6.2 THE MEIJI RESTORATION AND THE ECONOMY

The new Meiji Government inherited a host of problems from the Tokugawa Bakufu and perhaps the most important one was the financial debts which had accumulated. The financial problems of the Bakufu and the growing debts of the han had played a major role in the downfall of the Tokugawa. The management of this vast debt as well as the expenses which were incurred in the restoration wars was the most pressing problem which the new leaders faced. To be sure of a stable source of revenue the government could only turn to the agricultural sector and to reduce its debts it had to cut the stipends of the samurai.

During the Tokugawa period the stipends of the samurai retainers formed nearly 30 per cent of the revenue. In the han the Daimyo spent nearly 20 per cent of their revenues in maintaining their residences in Edo which was demanded of them because of the system of alternative attendance. The government took immediate steps to reduce these stipends and reform the land tax. The stipends were commuted into government bonds or lump sum payments. The amount was effectively reduced further because of increasing inflation so that the government's fiscal burden became manageable. This provoked armed rebellions and discontent amongst the displaced traditional elite.

Agricultural reform was the next crucial area and though it began in 1873 it took six years to complete. During the Tokugawa period land tax was based on productivity and theoretically paid in rice but with the reforms the tax was payable in cash on the assessed value of the land. The national tax rate was 3 per cent of the assessed land value and the local tax one-third of the national tax. Now the tax payer became the owner of the land.

These measures had been preceded by changes such as abolishing customary restrictions on land use and land surveys. In spite of the governments care in not provoking outbursts there were protests, the largest of which was in 1876 in Wakayama Prefecture. Though the government initially adapted a rigid stance it softened as other samurai revolts erupted and in 1877 the land tax was lowered to 2.5 per cent of market value which meant a 17 per cent reduction in the yearly tax.

Politically the measure was a success for between 1874-1881 there were only ninety nine incidents of protest and of these thirty seven were really landlord tenant disputes. Tax assessments were now equalized and rational but it worked to the greater advantage of the landlords particularly as customary land rights did not ensure permanent tenancy. This also explains the increase in landlord tenant disputes. However, it has been argued by Sydney Crawcour that the new tax as a proportion of output was no higher than the old rate and in some cases actually lighter.

The main effect of the land tax was that land now became a capital asset which could be bought and sold.

6.3 THE INITIAL PHASE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The years between 1868 and 1885 mark a period when the government sought to bring order and lay the groundwork for economic development. The Meiji government inherited not only heavy debts but also some newly built factories and shipyards. The political compulsions of the Meiji leaders forced them to consider the development of defense industries even while they were establishing their political hold. In the closing years of the Tokugawa the Bakufu as well as several han had begun to tentatively establish ironworks and foundries. For example, the han of Hizen had in 1850 established a reverberatory furnace for smelting iron and subsequently it was able to cast cannon using the iron it produced.

Similarly in shipbuilding there had been certain developments. The Bakufu as well as other han had built steamships. Coal mines were being modernized and cotton spinning plants built. The Meiji government built on this small but developing foundation. The government was also faced with a decline in foreign trade earnings hence, it set about building an infrastructural base so that Japanese manufacturing would be encouraged. The leaders were wary of being swamped by foreign goods. The capital expenditure required was too heavy for entrepreneurs to attempt on their own and the government by actually importing and setting up plants hoped this would introduce new technology and organizational methods.

In 1872, for instance the Tomika silk filature plant was set up. Most of these government plants did not function well but they as well as the experimental stations and farms brought in the latest technologies and methods. Between (1868-1881) the government spent about 36.4 million yen in these enterprises. These enterprises were subsequently sold at low prices to private entrepreneurs and businessmen to lay the basis for the development of capitalism.

In the field of agriculture, which continued to provide the revenue for growth and development, there is a controversy about growth rates. Kazushi Ohkawa estimates that between 1878 and 1882 the annual value of agricultural production was 432 million yen in current prices. He later revised this figure by 50 per cent.

In 1874, according to a survey taken at that time, 60 per cent of the physical output was from agriculture and 30 per cent from industrial goods and the rest from extractive industries like mining, fishing and forestry. In agriculture rice

was the major crop. It is interesting that sake, a rice wine and processed food accounted for 42 per cent of the industrial production the rest being yarns and textiles.

This survey gives an idea of the general features of the economy at the time of the Restoration revealing that it was still undeveloped compared to the economies of the Western nations.

In 1881 Matsukata Kasayashi (1835-1924) became Finance Minister and he had to tackle the severe inflation faced by Japan. Because of the decline in earnings as well as the drain of specie, Matsukata reduced the currency in circulation by increasing the specie backing. This in effect strengthened the hands of the stronger businesses and channeled resources into the modern sector. The recession in the economy severely affected those at the margins of society and worsened the conditions of tenants and small farmers.

The commutation of stipends and the writing off the han debts (estimated to be 47 million yen) and such measures helped to transfer invertible resources into the hands of government and the rural rich. This set the framework for the growth of economy. What should be emphasised here is that there were certainly institutions in the Tokugawa economy which made it possible for the Meiji leaders to build a modern economy but as some scholars like James Nakamura point out that the growth rate at this time was not remarkably high. Such an argument suggests that the Meiji success may have more to do with the fact that they could restrict consumption and keep it at low levels till the Second World War.

6.4 BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE

A major reason for the growth of economy was the heavy expenditure undertaken by the government in building the infrastructure. In 1872, the National Banking Act, based on the U.S. model, led to the establishment of some 150 national banks. There were other private banks and the capital came initially from the commuted stipends of the samurai. According to E.H. Norman “the feudal lord ceased to be a territorial magnate drawing his income from the peasant, and became instead, by virtue of the commutation of his pension, a financial magnate investing his freshly capitalized wealth in banks, stocks, industries or landed estates, and so joined the small financial oligarchy.”

Gradually the rural rich and businessmen came to dominate this sector. By 1900 there were a variety of banks such as the Hypothec Bank, the Industrial Bank, etc.

On the advice of the Meiji Government the big financial houses had also formed Tsusho Kaisha (Commercial Companies) and Kawase Kaisha (Exchange Companies). These Kaishas were regulated by Tsushoshi (Commercial Bureau established in 1869). The banking and loan capital depended heavily upon the state for support. The Meiji Government in turn used this to develop such industries which needed huge capital investments. It is worth mentioning here that capital accumulation played a major role in industrialization. By the end of the 19th century the rate of interest on loans was between 12 to 18 per cent where as on deposits it was 7 to 8 per cent.

Transport and communication were also given great importance. The first railway line was built from Tokyo to Yokohama and by 1881 there were just two hundred miles of rail lines. In this field the government encouraged private investors by guaranteeing their investments. For example, by 1903 there were 4,500 miles of operating track and 70 per cent of this was built by private companies. In 1906 the Railway Nationalization Bill led to the acquisition of seventeen companies and the Imperial Japanese Railways had more paid up capital than all industrial companies combined.

In shipbuilding also the government followed a policy of selective subsidies to encourage the growth of indigenous business enterprises. Initially Iwaki Yataro's (1835-1885) Mitsubishi Company was given massive subsidies and it was able to effectively counter foreign competition. But soon there were changes and the 'NYK (Nippon Yusen Kaisha), formed in 1885, became the major company. Between 1883 and 1913 the government gave subsidies so that the company could expand its fleet and they were able to raise their share of tonnage carried into Japanese ports to 50 per cent. As a side benefit the development of shipbuilding industries led to development of engineering and other related skills.

There were similar developments in the generation of electric power which was increased by technological developments in hydroelectric generation and high tension transmission. Cheaper labour and capital costs allowed small companies to buy cheaper motors which in turn enabled them to increase their productivity.

The economic landscape of Japan began to be transformed. Nakamura Takafusa, an economic historian describing the initial period opined that modern industry was like sparsely scattered islands in a sea of traditional industry. But the introduction of these new developments led to a gradual change. Between 1883-1913 the labour force increased from 22 to 26 million. Employment was still mostly in the traditional sector which accounted for nearly 60 per cent of the employment. In output agriculture accounted for 20 per cent and other traditional sectors for another 40 per cent.

The point to notice is that the modern sector was still increasing at a modest pace and that the traditional sector played an important role in the economic development of the Japanese economy. Similarly in agriculture there was little change in the size of farms. The average size was just under one hectare and this remained true for much of the period. However, concentration of land did increase. From 1885 to 1914 tenancy rose from 35 to 45 per cent. The growth in numbers and power of the landlords is clearly reflected in their increasing role in business and politics.

Agricultural growth again is a controversial topic but there is an indication that gross farm value of production grew at an average annual rate of 1.7 per cent in constant 1934-36 prices. The growth was caused by the increase in fertilizers, machinery and labour as well as technological changes. Moreover the growth of village co-operatives also contributed to the spread of new ideas as well as an improved marketing. However, it has to be noted that Japanese agriculture benefited not from trying to import European techniques which were tried but proved unsuccessful but by using traditional small-scale farming and improving it.

Whatever the rate of growth and whether it was as high as once thought the important point to be noticed is that food production kept up with demand and there was no lag. In 1880 the agricultural labour force was 17 million and it fed a population of 36 million but by 1920 while the agricultural population had declined to 14 million the total population had increased to 55 million, Food imports from the colonies were not that substantial. Unlike other developing countries food habits hardly changed with the income increases. Income inequalities also contributed to raising savings among the rich and reduced consumption among the poor.

Foreign trade also played a crucial role in the initial years when it was 6 per cent of the total but by 1905 it was 28 per cent. Moreover, silk had initially formed the major export item but gradually the quantity of agricultural products was reduced though they still contributed one-fourth of total commodity exports.

Traditional industry supplied goods as well as contributed to capital formation and exports and while the Meiji Government initially attempted to organize trade associations it later concentrated on promoting industries using new technologies. But from 1879 when the Osaka Chamber of Commerce organized traditional trades, various laws to organize this sector were enacted. The fact is that this sector supplied a range of demand and gained from the cheaper electricity and transport as well as the cheaper and superior materials produced in the modern sector. Finally the traditionally produced products were able to compete in the export market. That is why Sydney Crawcour has argued that industrial growth in Japan before World War I was really the growth of the traditional sector.

In certain regards Japan's experience has been different from the Western countries. The normal pattern of industrialization as in the Western countries has been a progress from light industry, like textiles to mining and metallurgical or chemicals to mass produced goods. In Japan railways developed even before the iron and steel industry as the materials and components were imported. The textile industry was established almost simultaneously with iron and steel, shipbuilding, etc. In other words these industries could be established because the state was willing to bear the burden through subsidies and protection. The criteria used was the national interest rather than the economic viability of the project.

The Shipbuilding Encouragement Act of 1896 is a good example of the way in which domestic construction was promoted. The Act provided that steel steamships built in wholly owned shipyards would get a subsidy of 12 yen per ton for ships of 700-1000 tonnes and 20 yen per tonne for 1,000 or more tonne ships. If the engines were Japanese made than 75 yen per horsepower would be given addition. Even this was not enough to compete with foreign made ships and it was only in 1899 when the Navigation Subsidy Act was amended and subsidies for foreign-built ships cut to half of that for domestically built vessels that domestic production picked up.

What becomes evident in looking at the growth of the modern sector is the close links it had with military demands. When military expenditure increases then the modern sector grew as it did during the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. Scholars like W.W. Lockwood see military expenditure as a drain but others like Kozo Yamamura argue that it helped to disseminate Western technology and skills.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss the impact of Land Tax on Japanese economy.

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- 2) Discuss the efforts made by the Government to industrialize Japan in the key sectors.

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- 3) Was the Japanese experience of industrialization similar to that of the Western countries?

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6.5 THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE UNIONS

The first Japanese workers union was formed in San Francisco around 1890 by Takano Fusataro and when he returned to Japan he formed one in 1897. Takano was influenced by the ideas of Samuel Gompers. He rejected all demands for radical action and was opposed to socialism. Takano felt that inequality of wealth was inevitable and that it was only possible to carry-out moderate and gradual reform.

The other pioneer in the trade union and socialist movement was Katayama Sen. Katayama Sen started as a Christian socialist and he worked among the poor and it was this experience which led him to organize workers in Tokyo. In 1897 he established the Society for the Promotion of Trade Unions.

Oi Kentaro (1843-1922), a radical thinker was active in the Osaka region. He set up vocational training centres, night schools and even special banks. There was a growing realization that concrete steps must be taken to better the lot of the working men and this required not only organizing them but creating facilities for their education and material well-being.

The early trade union thinkers were in general moderate in their programmes stressing the need to work in harmony and co-operation. But Katayama was insistent that the feudal relations which continued to govern the relations between workers and capitalists must be ended. In spite of their moderateness the government suppressed them within three years and this led the organizers to think of ways to act politically.

The socialist movement had been gaining strength and influence among the intelligentsia. In 1901 a Socialist Party was formed and this too was banned almost immediately. As mentioned earlier the governments repressive legislation like the Peace Preservation Law of 1900 as well as other administrative and civil codes were used to suppress the growth of workers' organizations. The government's policy reduced the growth of trade unions for a while but it also increased their radicalism and many began to advocate class war.

The Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5 is an important divide in the economic history of Japan. From this period onwards iron and steel, coal, metal mining, etc. began to develop and Japan also began to pursue her policies of foreign expansion with greater vigour. The economic growth also generated increasing disputes in industry as well as tenant uprisings in the rural areas.

The initial years of the century from 1900 to 1910 saw the labour movement even more suppressed because of the various prohibitory laws and this suppression led to increased violence which reached its peak in the Ashio copper mine case in 1909. The mines were located near the resort of Nikko at the headwaters of the Watarase river. Copper was an important raw material and the mines were extensively developed without thought to the environmental pollution that they were causing. In 1896 because of the deforestation of the watershed area floods had devastated thousands of houses downstream leading to protests and the mines came to symbolize the distorted development of Meiji industrial development. In February 1909 the Ashio mine workers, some 1,200 went on strike for better working conditions and higher wages.

The Meiji Government followed a policy of ruthless suppression but on the other hand of trying to improve working conditions so that social discord would be reduced. The government was quick to ban socialist societies. Here it is interesting to note that it even banned a society to study insects, the Insect Society, because it contained the dreaded word society (shakai) which suggested socialism.

The bureaucracy had begun to examine working conditions as early as 1882 when there were only fifty factories. The reports and studies of the minimum standards necessary in the factories were however, not translated into law. The first factory law was passed in 1911 in spite of the objections of business houses but this law was considerably watered down and gave ample time to industry before its implementation was made necessary.

6.6 THE RURAL AREAS

Greater interest was shown in the transformation taking place in the rural areas. The Meiji land settlement had removed the traditional practices and customs which at times protected tenants and now they were more vulnerable to landlord pressure. Tenancy rights could be cancelled at any time and there was no restriction on their property rights. This is the reason that in the early years there was an

increase in tenancy disputes. Even though the land tax was reduced from 3 per cent to 2.5 per cent the tenants were unsuccessful in reducing their financial burdens.

In the period from 1870-1880 many tenancy disputes also arose because of ignorance as there was a bewildering variety of tenancies at the time of the restoration and they gradually fell into disuse. Most tenants rented lands from a number of landlords partly to spread their risks and partly because landholdings were fragmented. Many landlords took to rural industries such as silk reeling; they were also money-lenders. The landlords were, as Ann Waswo argues the dominant elite in rural society and till 1900 or so they played a considerable role in society.

The government actively encouraged the landlords to consolidate their holdings so that it could provide better facilities like irrigation and drainage. The tenants were on the one hand lured by a more profitable life in the cities where wages were higher. This created a labour shortage in agriculture which led to an increase in wages but it was still profitable for landlords to lease land rather than cultivate it. Moreover, the increasing expenditure of the government led it to make local governments responsible for public works and education. This added tax burden was another source for tension in the rural areas.

To diffuse the problems of the rural areas the government bureaucracy 'initiated a Rural Improvement movement. This was a continuation of what had been done in the 1870s by the Hotokusha or Repaying Virtue Society. These societies formed under the leadership of landlords were based on the teachings of Ninomiya Sontoku (1787-1856) an agricultural reformer active in the late Tokugawa period. They sought to develop both the correct virtues as well as practical improvements in agriculture. Such attitudes in the bureaucracy were responsible for the passage of laws such as the Industrial Co-operatives Law 1899 which encouraged the setting up of credit, consumer marketing and producers' co-operatives. The government was motivated by a desire to stabilize conditions in the rural areas because it felt that this was vital for both the economic growth of the country as well as its social stability. They were seeking for ways to encourage national loyalty and patriotism.

In 1908 the Imperial Rescript (Boshin shosho) urged the Japanese to work hard and co-operate so that by their efforts "the growing prosperity of our empire is assured." The government also used youth organizations and military associations to spread these ideas of collective effort. This collective effort, it was stressed, would "protect the security of society".

6.7 ASSESSMENT

The Meiji government played a decisive role in not only providing the resources to build the industrial infrastructure but also in carrying out effective growth-oriented economic policies. The government transformed the fiscal system and it had at its disposal an average of 14 per cent of Japan's gross national product. This source of funds allowed it to pursue its developmental functions. The government's policy on taxation was to limit consumption and encourage savings.

A large proportion of the government's expenditure went to the building up of the military machine. In the 1880s these expenditures were in the region of 18

per cent, 1890-1900 they increased to 34 per cent and 1901-1910 they went as high as 41 per cent. This benefited the growth of the modern sector. Other policies created income inequalities which allowed increased savings among the richer classes and therefore encouraged growth.

Japanese government also followed an interventionist policy and it had not only the political will but also the financial resources to carry this out. The Meiji policy was to influence the direction of investment by favouring certain areas through special guarantees of loans and dividends. The ethical dimension of economic activity was also equally important. In Japan profit by itself could not be a goal. The businessmen, because of the influence of Confucian thought, saw service to the state as a valid and important goal. This enabled the government to work closely with business leaders for commonly acceptable goals.

State intervention when it was through direct management of industries did not prove to be successful but working through the business houses or zaibatsu was responsible for development. In the traditional areas as these were not crucial to national security the government did not intervene directly. It acted to prevent social tensions and to preserve social harmony. Thus in agriculture it encouraged co-operatives and credit unions. It also worked to improve production and quality by setting up inspection facilities and research stations. Sydney Crawcour argues that while government policy was not always successful and though it created problems on the whole through co-operation between business and government a greater developmental potential was realized from the economy than would otherwise have been possible.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Which of the following statements are right or wrong? Mark (✓) or (×).
 - i) The first Workers Union of Japan was formed at Tokyo.
 - ii) The Socialist Party was encouraged by the government.
 - iii) The government encouraged the landlords to consolidate their holdings.
 - iv) The government was opposed to any kind of shakai and banned the Insect Society.

- 2) Discuss the growth and suppression of labour movement in Japan.

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- 3) Assess the industrial policy of the Meiji Government.

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6.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have seen the major features of Meiji economic development. The Meiji leaders inherited from the Tokugawa Bakufu a complex economic system and a bureaucratic structure which regulated and governed this economy through direct intervention in certain key areas. The Meiji leaders also inherited the vast financial problems which had helped to dismantle the Bakufu's political power. Finally, the samurai ruling class had been removed from direct control over the land and many became a part of the bureaucracy. This meant that their interests were not tied to any particular type of landholding system and so they were able to adjust with less resistance to the changes initiated by the Meiji Government.

The Meiji Government channelled its newly created resources into building the transport, communication, energy sectors and building a strong military machine. These policies reflected their understanding that for Japan to survive it must pursue the goal of *fukoku kyohei* (rich country, strong army). The building of the infrastructural facilities was accompanied by directly importing new industries and selling them to businessmen at low prices as well as vigorous economic policies: These -policies -selectively guaranteed investments, gave subsidies and channelled resources into developing indigenous industry.

The economic policies were based on a common understanding between the government and business leaders and were part and parcel of the centralization which had taken place in the political sphere. Here, in the economic sphere key houses were encouraged. This created what became a dual sector, that is a modern sector and a traditional sector. These two sectors differed in size, productivity and wages. However, as we have seen the traditional sector played a key role in the growth and development of the economy.

Foreign loans were kept to a minimum as the Meiji leaders were worried about Japan losing its sovereignty. They used these loans at a few occasions but growth was financed by exports and by keeping internal consumption at low levels. This was possible because of the political control the Meiji Government exercised. The oligarchy was able to create a suppressive system which ruthlessly crushed dissent but on the other hand it also carried out policies which built connections of loyalty between the people and the government. This ideological linking of the people to the state through the ideas of loyalty to the Emperor was a crucial factor in the economic development of Japan as it encouraged self-sacrifice for the nation.

The development policies exacted a toll both from the people who had to bear the burden of sacrifice as well as from Japan's neighbours who had to suffer the consequences of her expansionist policies. These issues are dealt with in later Units but here it needs to be pointed out that militarism and expansionism were intimately connected to the successful economic growth of Japan. Moreover, the role of the state was also of crucial significance.

The Meiji state protected the economy from foreign competition and actively aided and developed indigenous industry. It created strong links between the business and government so that policies which were in line with the political objectives of the state could be carried out. The costs to both the people and the environment were high and they were borne because of political control.

6.9 KEY WORDS

Modern Sector: Term used for those economic activities where modern scientific technology has been, applied. The terms 'traditional' and 'modern' vary with time and space i.e. what might have been modern fifty years ago may not be considered modern today.

Specie : Bullion.

Traditional Sector: Term used for those economic activities which are based on obsolete technology and traditional methods of production.

Zaibatsu: Monopoly houses which controlled diverse businesses. The Major houses were Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo and Yasuda. The word literally means financial cliques.

6.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should include the aspects of agrarian reforms discussed in Sec. 6.2.
- 2) Base your answer on Secs. 6.3 and 6.4 by taking into account the governments' policy in supporting iron industry, shipbuilding, Railways, electricity, etc.
- 3) See the second last paragraph of Sec. 6.4

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) i) × ii) × iii) ✓ v) ✓
- 2) You should mention the emergence of trade unions, views of trade union leaders; attempts by the government to suppress it; the prohibitory laws etc. See Sec. 6.5.
- 3) Base your answer on Sec. 6. 7.