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# UNIT 12 JYOTIBA PHULE (1827-1890)

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## 12.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will discuss the contribution of Jyotiba Phule to the development of political thought in modern India. After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the nature and evolution of Jyotiba Phule's thinking, and
- know the difference between Phule's response to colonialism and that of the thinkers you have studied so far.

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## 12.1 INTRODUCTION

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### 12.1.1 Life

Phule was born in a Mali (Gardner) family of Poona in 1827. The Malis belonged to Shudra Varna and were placed immediately below peasant caste of Maratha-kunbis of Maharashtra. He was educated at a Marathi school with a three year break at a mission school in Poona. In 1848 Phule began his work as a social reformer interested in education of low caste boys and girls, when he started a school for girls of low and untouchable castes. Since no female teacher was available, Phule asked his wife Savitribai to teach in the school. He opened two more schools for girls in 1851. He was honoured by the Board of Education for the work he did for girls' education in 1852. Phule established a school for untouchables and a night school in 1852. By 1858, he gradually retired from the management of these schools and entered into a broader field of social reform. He supported the movement for widow remarriage in 1860 and in 1863 established a Home for the prevention of infanticide. Phule and his wife Savitribai adopted one orphan child from the Home because they had no child of their own. In 1865 he published a book on caste system written by one of his friends Padval.

The organisation with which Phule's name is associated and for which he is remembered even today is the Satya Shodhak Samaj. It was established in 1873 by him and his colleagues to organise the lower castes against the Hindu social order based on varna and caste system. One of his colleagues started the first newspaper of the Movement, *Din Bandhu*, in 1877. The government appointed him a member of the Poona Municipality in 1876. He continued as a member till 1882 and fought for the cause of downtrodden.

### 12.1.2 Writings

Besides being a leader and organiser of the lower caste movement, Phule was also an original thinker and therefore, found it necessary not only to write polemical pamphlets but also to put forward his basic philosophical position. In *Brahmanache Kasab* (1869) Phule has exposed the exploitation of Brahmin priests. In *Gulamgiri* (1873) he has given a historical survey of the slavery of lower castes. In 1883 he published a collection of his speeches under the title *Shetkaryancha Asud* (The cultivator's whip-cord) where he has analysed how peasants were being exploited in those days. We find a text of his philosophical statement in *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak* (A book of True Religion For All) published in 1891 a year after his death. From his writings we come to know that his thinking on social and political issues was influenced by Christianity and the ideas of Thomas Paine (1737-1809). He was known for his religious radicalism in England. Phule himself has recorded that he was influenced by the ideas of Paine.

As a recognition of his great work for the lower castes, he was felicitated and a title of 'Mahatma' was conferred on him by the people in Bombay in 1888.

In this unit we are primarily interested in his social and political ideas. The scholars who have worked on nationalist movement and thought have on the whole neglected the ideas of thinkers like Phule. So far as Phule is concerned, a difficulty encountered by the scholars is that of language. He wrote mainly in Marathi and that too in a Marathi meant for the masses.

#### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) Briefly discuss some of Jyotiba Phule's writings.

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## 12.2 ATTITUDE TOWARDS COLONIAL GOVERNMENT

### 12.2.1 Welcoming the British Rule

British rule had brought to an end the tyranny and chaos of the regime of the last Peshwa in Maharashtra. The colonial rulers had not only established law and order but also the principle of equality before law. The earlier regime of Brahmin Peshwas had imposed strict limitations on education, occupation and living standards of the lower castes and women. The new rulers opened the opportunities in education and mobility in occupation for the members of all castes. Missionary schools and government colleges were ready to admit any student irrespective of caste origins. New ideas of equality and liberty could reach the moderately educated sections of the lower caste. Phule was probably the best product of this process. High caste reformers and leaders also had welcomed the colonial rule. It is not surprising that Phule who was concerned with the slavery of the lower castes also favoured the British rule. He hoped that the new government which believes in equality between man and man would emancipate lower castes, from the domination of the Brahmins.

The British rule opened up new employment opportunities in the administration. The political power at local level was also being given to the Indians. Phule who had worked as a member of the Poona Municipality could visualise how lower castes would be able to acquire power at local level during the period of British rule and also enter the colonial bureaucracy. He believed in

the benevolent attitude of the British rulers towards the lower castes and therefore asked for a number of things from them. He was not sure how long the British rule would continue. Therefore, he wanted lower castes to exploit the opportunity and get rid of the tyranny of Brahmins. Brahmin rulers used to collect huge wealth out of taxes levied on poor lower castes population, but never used to spend even a paisa for their welfare. On the contrary, the new regime was showing the signs of doing good things for the deprived people. Phule assured the colonial rulers that if the Shudras were made happy and contented, they need not worry about the loyalty of the subjects. He wanted the British government to abolish Brahmin Kulkarni's position, and a post of village headman (Patil) filled on the basis of merit. In fact, Phule would have liked the British government to put an end to the balutadary system which was connected with caste specific occupations in the villages. He asked the government to make laws prohibiting customs and practices which gave subordinate status to women and untouchables. Phule wanted Brahmin bureaucracy to be replaced by non-Brahmin bureaucracy. But if the non-Brahmins were not available, the government should appoint, he thought, the British men to these posts. He believed that the British officers would take impartial view and were likely to side with lower castes.

Phule knew that education had not yet percolated to the lower castes. The masses had not yet become politically conscious. The high caste elites were claiming that they were the true representatives of the people and therefore were demanding political rights. This process, Phule thought, would reestablish the political supremacy of the high castes. Phule advised his followers from the lower castes not to participate the movement for political rights. He argued that the Indian National Congress or other political associations were not national in the true sense of the term because they represented only high castes. Phule warned his followers against the selfish and cunning motives of the Brahmins in forming these associations and advised them to keep themselves away from such associations. In his Satya Shodhak Samaj, he had made it a rule not to discuss politics. In fact, we find that he had expressed more than once a complete and total loyalty towards the new government. He firmly believed that the almighty God had dethroned the tyrannical rulers and had established in their place a just, enlightened and peaceful British rule for the welfare of the masses. It does not mean that Phule did not understand the significance of politics. Infact, he has said at one place that the conditions of lower castes had deteriorated because they were deprived of political power. His efforts to organise lower castes under the banner of Satya Shodhak Samaj should be seen as a political activity. It is true that he gave preference to social reform rather than political reform in the 19th century. But that does not suggest that he would have continued to hold the same views in the changed circumstances. He knew that if the lower castes were educated, they would become conscious of their political rights vis-a-vis Brahmins and not only demand a share in political power, but would dethrone the Brahmins and establish their own supremacy. His writings were directed towards that.

### 12.2.2 Criticism of the British Rule

Though Phule preferred British rule to the regime of the Brahmins, he was aware of the shortcomings of the former and he never hesitated to point them out openly. Since his mission was to bring about an egalitarian society where all men and women would enjoy liberty, Phule criticised the contemporary rulers if he felt that their policies went against this idea. He was mainly interested in destroying forever the supremacy of Brahmins in social, economic and political fields. Therefore, he used to attack the British government whenever its policies favoured the Brahmins even indirectly.

It was the educational policy of the British government which came under severe attack from Phule. He complained that the government was providing more funds and greater facilities to higher education and neglecting that of the masses. He brought it to the notice of the government that the greater portion of the revenue of the Government was derived from the labour of masses. The higher and rich classes contribute very little to State's exchequer. The government, therefore, should spend a large portion of its income on the education of the masses and not of the higher classes.

Due to the educational policy favouring the upper classes, the higher offices were virtually monopolised by them. If the government wished the welfare of the lower castes, it was its duty to reduce the proportion of high castes in the administration and increase that of the lower castes. Phule's object in writing a book on slavery was to open the eyes of the government to the pernicious system of high class education. This system, Phule said, was keeping the masses in ignorance and poverty. The government used to collect a special cess for educational purposes but the funds so derived were not spent for education of the masses. He criticised the primary schools run by the government by saying that the education imparted in these schools was not satisfactory. It did not prove practical or useful in the future career of the students. He also criticised on similar lines the higher secondary schools, colleges and system of scholarships. The scholarship system, he observed was unduly favourable to literary castes while there was a need to encourage the lower castes children.

Moderate nationalists had always held high the liberal principles on which the British government was founded and criticised the colonial bureaucracy for departure from them. Phule agreed with them on this point. However, he made a distinction between British officers and the Brahmin officers and preferred the former. But he observed that the British officers were concerned about their own comfort and salaries. They did not find sufficient time to know about the real conditions of the peasants. They did not understand the language of the peasants. The Brahmin officers thereby used to get an opportunity to mislead the British officers and exploit the poor and illiterate peasants. Phule probably did not realise that the colonial rule depended upon the elites of the colony to maintain its dominance and therefore recruited them to the bureaucracy.

His biographers tell us that when he was a member of the Poona Municipality he showed rare courage in opposing a move to spend one thousand rupees on Viceroy's visit. In 1888 a dinner was organised in honour of the Duke of Connaught at Poona. Phule went there in the typical dress of a poor peasant and delivered a moving speech after the dinner. He told the audience that the people of the country were to be found in the villages. He had intentionally come in that dress so that the British guests would come to know how a common peasant lived. He also told them that it was the duty of the government to formulate policies for the welfare of these peasants. In his writings also we come across a criticism of government's policies which went against the peasants. We will take note of it while discussing his views on economic issues.

**Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) Why did Phule initially welcome the British rule? What was his later criticism?

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**12.3 CRITIQUE OF THE INDIAN SOCIAL ORDER**

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**12.3.1 Philosophical Foundations of the Critique of Social Order**

Phule's criticism of the British government emanated out of his concern for the welfare and the status of the lower castes in contemporary society. According to

Phule, the Indian society was based on inequality between man and man and exploitation of ignorant masses by the cunning Brahmins. Phule believed that God who is the creator of the Universe has created all men and women free and capable of enjoying their rights. The creator has created all men and women as the custodians of all human rights so that a man or a group of men should not suppress an individual. The Maker has bestowed upon all men and women religious and political liberty. Therefore, no one should look down upon anyone's religious faith or political opinion. Every individual has a right to property. The Maker, Phule thought, has given all human beings the liberty of thought and expression. But the thought or opinion one is expressing should not be harmful to anybody. The creator has made all men and women capable of claiming a position in civil service or municipal administration according to their ability. No one should encroach upon the equal liberty of other human beings. Phule believed that all men and women are entitled to enjoy all the things the Maker has created. All men and women are equal before law. Phule held that the magistrates and judges of the court of law should be impartial in their judgements. Phule developed a critique of Indian society in the light of these fundamental principles.

### 12.3.2 Attack on Varna and Caste System

Indian society was founded on the Varna system. Phule challenged the view that it was god-ordained. He held that this claim was made to deceive the lower Varnas. Since this claim was made by the religious texts of the Hindus, he decided to expose the falsehood of these texts.

Phule depended upon the contemporary theories and his own creativity to interpret these texts. Accordingly, he believed that Brahmins who were known as Aryans descended upon the plains of North India few thousand years back, possibly from Iran. They came as conquerors and defeated the original inhabitants of this land. Under the direction of the leaders such as Brahma and Parshuram, Brahmins fought protracted wars against the original inhabitants. They initially settled on the banks of the Ganges and later on spread-out over the other parts of the country. In order to keep a better hold over the masses, they devised the mythology, the Varna and caste system and also the code of cruel and inhuman laws. They founded a system of priestcraft which gave the Brahmin a prominence in all rituals. The caste system was a creation of cunning Brahmins. The highest rights and privileges were given to the Brahmins whereas Shudras and Atishudras (untouchables) were regarded with hatred and contempt. Even the commonest rights of humanity were denied to them. Their touch or even their shadow was considered as pollution. Phule reinterpreted the religious text of the Hindus to show how Aryans had conquered the original inhabitants. The nine avatars of Vishnu were seen by him as various stages of Aryan conquest. From those days, the Brahmins have enslaved the Shudras and Atishudras. For generations they have carried the chains of slavery of bondage. A number of Brahmin writers like Manu have added from time to time to the existing legends which enslave the minds of the masses. Phule compared the system of slavery fabricated by the Brahmins with slavery in America and pointed out that Shudras had to suffer greater hardships and oppression than the blacks. He thought that this system of selfish superstition and bigotry was responsible for the stagnation and all the evils from which India was suffering for centuries.

After narrating the story of Brahmin domination in the past, Phule tells us how in his times things had not changed much except for advent of the enlightened rule of Britain. The Brahmin continued to exploit the Shudra from his birth to death. Under the guise of religion, the Brahmin intervened and meddled in each and everything the Shudra did. A Brahmin tried to exploit him not only in his capacity as a priest, but did so in a number of other ways also. Due to his higher education, he had monopolised all the positions in the administration, judiciary, social, religious and political organisations. In a town or village, the Brahmin was all in all. He was the master and the ruler. The Patel of the village had become a nonentity. Instead the Brahmin village accountant known as Kulkarni had acquired power in the village. He was the temporal and spiritual adviser of the people, a money-lender and a general referee in all matters. Same was the

case at tehsil level where a tehsildar used to harass to illiterate masses. Phule tells us that the story holds good at all levels of administration and in judiciary, as well as various departments of the government. The Brahmin bureaucrats used to exploit the poor and ignorant masses in each and every case by misguiding the British superiors.

It is essential at this stage to note that Phule who belonged to the gardner caste — Shudra caste — was concerned about not only Shudras but also Atishudras, i.e. the untouchables also. He advocated that these lower castes and untouchables should organise against the dominance of the Brahmins and strive for an egalitarian society. It is not, therefore, surprising that Dr. Ambedkar whose ideas you are going to study of later regarded Phule as his Guru.

### 12.3.3 Equality between Man and Woman

Another oppressed group in the Indian society was that of women. Phule always mentions women alongwith men. He did not assume that when men are mentioned, women are automatically included into that category. He makes a special reference to women when he discusses human rights. Just as Shudras were deprived of rights by the Brahmins by keeping them ignorant, Phule thought that selfish men had prohibited women from taking to education in order to continue male domination. The Hindu religious texts had given a number of concessions to men but had imposed severe restrictions on women. Phule was mainly concerned about the marriage system of those days. He attacked the customs and practices such as child marriage, marriage between young girl and old man, polygamy, objection to remarriage of women, prostitution, harassment of widows, etc. He advised Shudra peasants not to have more than one wife and not to marry their young children. He had given serious thought to the institution of marriage and had devised a simple and modern contract type ritual for the marriage ceremony of the members of Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth Seeking Society). It is interesting to note that Phule did not stop at visualising equal status to women in marriage, family education and religion but claimed that woman was superior to man in many respects.

#### Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) Briefly discuss Phule's critique of the Varna and caste system.

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## 12.4 INDIAN ECONOMIC PROBLEM

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### 12.4.1 Crisis in Agriculture

In caste and social terms, Phule was concerned about the status of Shudras, untouchables and women in Indian society, while in economic terms he was interested in peasantry and its problems. The high caste nationalists viewed industrialisation as the only solution to the economic problem of India. Phule on the other hand talked from the point of view of improving agriculture since he

perceived Indian economy primarily as the agricultural economy. He observed that Indian agriculture was going through a crisis situation and identified the following factors as causes for the crisis.

The size of the population dependent on agriculture had increased. Earlier at least one person from a farmer's family was employed in the army or administration of the Indian states.

Farmers who owned a small piece of land used to make their living on fruits, flowers, fodder, grass and wood from nearby forest. The new government had started the department of forests which covered all hills, valleys, waste lands and grazing grounds thereby making the life of the farmers who used to depend upon them difficult.

British officers had increased the rate of land tax even though the income of the farmer had declined.

Farmers were being exploited by the money-lenders and Brahmin officers of the revenue and irrigation departments and from the judiciary.

Due to severe poverty and declining conditions of the lands, farmers could not come out of the problem of indebtedness. In these cases the lands were transferred to the money-lenders.

Another problem faced by the rural economy was that of the unfair competition by the British goods. Because of the inflow of these cheap and superior goods in large quantity, the indigenous craftsmen of the villages and towns suffered great losses and in many cases they had to close down their hereditary business. Those who worked in cottage workshops lost their jobs, thereby increasing the proportion of unemployment in the rural areas.

#### 12.4.2 Solution of the Agrarian Problem

On the basis of his in-depth knowledge of the rural economy and the agriculture sector, Phule suggested certain solutions to these problems. The first and the most important solution to the problem of the poverty of the farmers which Phule suggested was construction of bunds, tanks and dams so that sufficient water was made available to the farm. He wanted the government to take up schemes such as soil conservation, animal breeding and teaching of modern techniques of farming, holding exhibitions of agriculture annually etc. He pointed out that unless agriculture was made profitable, the agricultural banks which were talked about in those days would not succeed. He asked the government to reduce the burden of taxes on farmers in order to make agriculture profitable. After paying land cess and local funds, each person in a farmer's family was left with less than three rupees for a month, when an ordinary Brahmin or British officer used to get fifteen rupees in a month for his miscellaneous expenses.

Thus, Phule had shown a rare understanding of the economic problems of the Indian Society. Though he had welcomed, as seen earlier, British rule he had realised how Indian economy, especially its rural sector, was being ruined by the colonial connection. The high caste elite nationalists had shown how wealth was being drained to England from India. Phule who was looking from the view point of farmers and lower castes could see another type of drain of wealth i.e. from rural sector to urban sector, from peasant economy to the Brahmin domain. It should be pointed out that Phule did not made any class differentiation within the peasantry.

#### Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What were Jyotiba Phule's solutions to India's economic problems?

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## 12.5 UNIVERSAL RELIGION

The idea of the emancipation of the lower castes and the untouchables required a critique not only of the Indian social order or that of the colonial economic policy but also of Hinduism and an attempt to visualise some kind of emancipatory religion. Phule influenced by radical religious ideas of Thomas Paine could succeed in doing this kind of a theoretical exercise.

Phule believed in one God. He regarded God as a creator of this world and all men and women his children. Phule discarded idolatry, ritualism, asceticism, fatalism and the idea of incarnation. No intermediary between God and devotee was considered essential by him. Phule never believed that any book was God ordained. Apparently, it might appear that Phule's approach was similar to that of M.G. Ranade and his Prarthana Samaj. He differed from Ranade and his Prarthana Samaj. He differed from Ranade significantly and on very important issues. Ranade wanted to work within the structure of Hinduism. He was proud of the Hindu tradition and never thought of breaking from it. He looked to reformist activities as continuation of Protestantism of saints and similar efforts in the history. On the contrary, Phule visualised Sarvajanic Satya Dharma (Public True Religion) to take place of Hinduism. His true religion broke from Hindu tradition altogether. Moreover, he differed from reformers like Ranade when he severely criticised the mythology and sacred books like Ranade when he severely criticised the mythology and sacred books like Smritis and Vedas of Hindus. He tried to prove that the history of Hinduism was in fact, the history of Brahmin domination and slavery of Shudras. He found cunningness, selfishness and hypocrisy in sacred scriptures than a discussion of true religion. The elite reformers criticised the contemporary, degenerated form of Hinduism, while Phule attacked it from its very inception and showed that Brahmins had deceived lower castes throughout history. Phule interpreted Hinduism as a relation based on Varna and caste system devised by the cunning Brahmins to deceive the lower castes.

In fact, Phule accused the Prarthana Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj for their cunning motives. These Samajas, according to him, were established by the Brahmins who were educated from the revenue collected from lower castes. The activities of these associations were intended to conceal the superstructure built by their politically motivated ancestors in the name of religion. They were formed by the Brahmins for their own defence and deception of Shudras and untouchables.

But though he dismissed Hinduism altogether, he did not reject the very idea of religion or dharma. He tried to put in its place universal religion based on principles of liberty and equality. His Sarvajanic Satya Dharma put emphasis on truth seeking without the aid of any Guru or text. His religious ideas were definitely influenced by Christianity but he never advocated conversion because he was also influenced by the radical religious argument of Paine, who had shown a number of defects in Christianity.

His universal religion was liberal and in many respects very different from traditional religions. His religion was mainly and primarily concerned about secular matters. Phule had visualised a family where each member of that family might follow his own religion. In this ideal family a wife might embrace Buddhism while her husband might be a Christian and children might follow other religions because Phule believed that there might be some truth in all the

religious texts and scriptures and therefore one of them could not claim the ultimate truth. He thought that the government should not close its eyes to inhuman religious customs or unjust traditions and practices of Hinduism. At one place he criticised the colonial government for its policy of continuing the practice of giving grants to temples, since he claimed that the money had been collected from lower castes in the form of tax. Thus there was no place for any communalism or unwarranted neutralism in matters of religion so far as Phule's religious ideas were concerned.

### Check Your Progress 5

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) How did Phule differ from Ranade and other reformers as regards his views on religion?

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## 12.6 LET US SUM UP

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Jyotiba Phule, a lower caste social reformer of the 19th century Maharashtra, developed a critique of Indian social order and Hinduism. He pointed out that when Brahmins migrated to this land of the Shudras and Atishudras (untouchables) they systematically devised an exploitative caste system. They fabricated a totally false mythology and scriptures to support that system. The enlightened British rule provided an opportunity for the masses to get themselves liberated from this slavery of the Brahmins. But at the same time, he criticised the British bureaucracy for its policy of supporting higher education and for its tendency to rely upon Brahmin subordinates. He also criticised the economic policy of the alien rule since in many respects it was unfavourable to the poor peasants. He suggested a number of solutions to improve the conditions of the agriculture sector.

In place of exploitative Indian social order, Phule wanted to establish a society founded on principles of individual liberty and equality and in place of Hinduism he would have liked to put universal religion.

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## 12.7 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

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Keer, Dhananjay : *Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule : Father of Social Revolution*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay.

O'Hanlon, Rosalind: *Caste, Conflict and Ideology : Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*, Orient Longman, Bombay.

Pathan, Y. M. '*Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule and Satya Shodhak Samaj*' in *Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilization*, edited by S.C. Malik, IIAS, Shimla, 1977.

Omvedt, Gail, '*Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India in Economic and Political Weekly*, 6(37), September 1977.

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## 12.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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**Check Your Progress 1**

See Section 12.1.2

**Check Your Progress 2**

See Section 12.2 and Sub-sections 12.2.1 and 12.2.2

**Check Your Progress 3**

See Section 12.3 and Sub-section 12.3.2

**Check Your Progress 4**

See Section 12.4 and Sub-sections 12.4.1 and 12.4.2

**Check Your Progress 5**

See Section 12.5