UNIT 1 SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF HUMAN BEINGS

Structure

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit you should be able to explain:

why human beings are at the centre of all social processes and what is the procedure for the study of Social Sciences in the social roots of human beings and various forms of prejudices

the connection between knowledge and society.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

What do the various organised branches of knowledge, be it Sociology, Political Science, Economics or any other discipline of social sciences, have in common? It is the fact that they all have to, at some point or the other, focus on human beings as their central theme. It is precisely this centrality of human being as a subject that integrates various diverse studies of society, economy, polity or nature and environment, together. Although all these disciplines follow different approaches and methodologies, they share with each other the same concern i.e. human beings. In other words, social sciences are all about individuals in the society.

1.2 HUMAN BEING AT THE CENTRE OF SOCIAL PROCESSES

What is it that constitutes and sustains society? Who has put society on the path of development? Who produces food? Who has given birth to political institutions? Is not the answer, human bang, in each of these cases? That is the reason why the human being is more and more acknowledged as the principal subject of social and scientific investigations. No doubt there was a time when the scientists denied human beings tbeir place in social scientific endeavours. During that time the scientists did not want to look at themselves. They were more willing to judge others. Today, the increasing concern of the scientist (natural or social) is to study human beings. In spite of the increasing specialisation in both natural as well social sciences, human beings, due to the central position occupied by them, are the subjects of all studies. For example, even a zoologist who studies animals, compares their body structure etc. with that of human beings; a botanist who studies plants does so in relation to their utility for human beings.

1.2.1 Social Science as a Reflective Critique

Science is a systematic body of knowledge acquired through a set of procedures comprising observation, classification, elimination, generalization, verification and validation. Science can be considered valid if it can generalise the observations of the scientists in a manner which is in accordance with these rules. Such rules, rigid as they are, have little scope however for human values, meanings and their reflective character. That is why for the scientist, to acknowledge who/man openly as the moving subject of his/her discipline, and as a fellow being, is supposed to be fraught with dangers for the scientific mode of studying social reality.
The problem is especially acute in social sciences, even though not all the disciplines of social sciences may be equally exposed to it.

1.2.2 Human Being as a Creative Agent

Human beings are at the centre of all social processes. Since they are endowed with the ability to live with creativity, they constantly reflect and improve upon the conditions that surround them. For example, a bird makes a nest but the shape and make of the nest does not change. It has remained the same for ages. Similarly a lion has had a cave as his house for long. But human beings who started by taking shelter in trees, bushes and caves gradually moved to making huts, small houses, then to bungalows and now multi-storied towers. This has been possible due to the creative urge and capability in human beings.
Human beings are not merely the passive bearers of culture, tradition and social structure. They not only create but are also the creative agents of values, meanings, aspirations etc. It is this creativity that has led to the formation of cultures and on the other hand, it is culture which provides objective conditions to human beings for expressing their creativity. As Malinowski observed: "Man has freedom precisely because he has culture" and "culture is an initial instalment in freedom".

1.2.3 Science as Empathic and Critical Reflection

For the social scientist this poses an important challenge. How will she/he treat human being as a cultural being? Social scientists do this by self-consciously refusing to judge other cultures without first looking at themselves and their own culture. "Love others but live your own culture" is a common saying in any society.

It is necessary that the social scientists remain self-conscious in the pursuit of science, for only then, can they reflect and empathise with this subject. To empathise means to judge your subject not merely from your own standards, but also from the subject's own perception and evaluation of own self. This is not always easy; because by training and habit, social scientists suffer from many constraints. The rules of science exhort them to be objective and value neutral which is difficult to observe when the subject-matter is the living, ever-changing and not-easily predictable human being. Attachments to various social groups and limitations of time and money in the profession are some other difficulties which they have to cope with in their daily routines. In these limiting circumstances, the path that invites the least resistance would be the one which the social scientist takes recourse to easily and often uncritically as a matter of habit or tradition and not after reflection. This unfortunately is the dominant trend in the social sciences, but a genuine student must guard against these temptations arising out of an intellectual setting devoid of reflection, criticism and respect for other points of view.

1.3 SOCIAL SCIENCE PROCEDURE

There have been many contrary views on how social science ought to be conducted. Extreme positions ranging from recourse to pure intuition to observations of strict natural science rules have been articulated by several scholars. Some others have suggested a middle ground between the two positions. For a truly scientific study of human institutions, it may be necessary to combine the skills of intuition reflecting with scientific and methodological techniques, because humans have the features both of nature and culture. They are a biological entity and yet a product of culture and society.

1.3.1 Understanding Human Beings in their Social Setting

Social Sciences should aim first at understanding the manifold aspects of human beings in their social setting. To arrive at the level of a meaningful Social Science, the social scientist should look at the subjects, with a sense of empathy. This is the true meaning of reflection. It contributes to the social scientist's ability to observe and understand the pressures and constraints, the freedom and choices that human beings are faced within society. It provides him/her the perspective through which he can see an observed behaviour as an aspect of other possible behaviours.

For instance, it is a widely accepted view that rural people are fatalistic by nature. Through scientific techniques one can possibly substantiate this belief it is quite likely if a question such as: "why have your crops been poor this year?" is put to a villager, he might say: "It is all fate." But if the scientist understands that the villager has the same rationality, humility and reflective ability as he himself possesses, he will be careful in interpreting this reply. He will explore the context in which the statement has been made. He will match it against the villager's other sets of beliefs and action in other spheres of life. For example, his ready acceptance of modem technology in agriculture, modern systems of health care etc. He may then come to realise that the research conclusions are still far from definitive.

It is customary among people not to judge others in terms of what the latter say about themselves. Normally, they evaluate before reaching a conclusion (regarding others opinions/views about themselves). Take another case from Survey Methodology widely used in social sciences. More often than not, queries concerning family income are not correctly answered for obvious reasons. A surveyor normally checks this bias through cross questioning the same respondent.

1.3.2 Science as Critique of Human Conditions

The arguments above in no way undermine science. What they tend to highlight is the lack of emphasis, generally, in social sciences on the need for them to be a reflective critique of the human-conditions. It is not

enough as social anthropologists do, to gain rapport and establish communication by learning the language of the people one studies or living in their huts, and dancing with them, unless the social scientist is willing also to share his humanity with those she/he studied. This is also how a true research problem can be located and studied. It is easier to blame people for being fatalistic, superstitious, traditional or even coldly rational or inhumanly calculative, on the basis of one's own value judgements. Application of scientific methods with the power of empathy in social scientists will offer a comprehensive and valid insight into the social problems she/he studies. Only such an approach ensures that social sciences can offer a critique of human conditions. The social problems that have greater significance as objects of research are also those where critical, reflective and humanitarian goals of social sciences are fulfilled to the largest extent.

Check Your Progress I

Note: (i) Use the space given below for your answer.
(ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) Which of the Following statements are correct7 Tick (✓) or (x).
i) The focus of study in Social Sciences is the human being
ii) Human beings are merely the passive bearers of culture.
iii) An interaction between the features of nature and culture is necessary to have a scientific study of human being.

2) Write about 50 words on the creative ability of human beings.

1.4 RACIAL DIFFERENTIATION AND THE UNITY OF HUMAN BEINGS

Social anthropologists often face a paradoxical situation in their study and analysis of human reality. While they are willing, (and indeed know that they must share the belief in the unity of human beings), their own investigations show them that the subjects of their study (other human beings) are not always willing to do the same.

Such a differentiation is made on the basis of caste, race, clan or kinship ties. Often this differentiation turns into a bias and this becomes a guiding factor of social behaviour. Regional bias also sometimes gives added support to such social behaviour. For example, in the region of Kachin, people believe that the surrounding folks, be they Shans, Burmese, Thais or Ahoms-are not fully human. For a long time, the Europeans regarded themselves superior to people from all other regions and they believed that it was the 'White Man's Burden' to civilize other races and societies. This fallacy was used to justify imperialism and colonialism. Gradually, the scientists (natural as well as social) of the "other regions", through their labour and research proved the White Man's burden theory to be false and demonstrated that the other societies were in no way culturally inferior to the European societies.
We would like to familiarise you with the basis of racial division, misconceptions related to it, and how they were disapproved.

i) Division on the basis of Race

This refers merely to clusters of genetic distribution among human beings related to features such as colour of skin, eyes, form of nose, lips, hair and other physical attributes.

What is called 'race' is a statistical property such as distribution and concentration of a pattern of genes in a certain population. All humans in all societies share gene properties from a common pool in varying degrees and there is no group of human kind which can qualify as a pure race. Biologically, therefore, racial distinction is a matter of degree rather than of kind. Secondly, studies have proved amply that social and cultural attributes such as linguistic ability, intelligence, power of abstraction and logic and all other attributes of civilization are equally present in all human group. In this respect, human kind shares common cultural, intellectual and human properties. The major racial types such as the Australoids (blacks), the Caucasoids (whites) and Monogoloids (yellow) share this human and cultural potential in common.

ii) Race and Racism

The internal genetic divisions of races are often given erroneous meanings. A popular erroneous example is : "whites are more intelligent than blacks". Such racial prejudices as were found in South Africa were used by the apartheid regime to exploit the blacks as a majority. The world opinion therefore condemned the apartheid government there as racist.

iii) Misconceptions about Racism

For many years, the misconception of racism was strengthened by attempting to define cultural abilities of beings by correlating them with physical features and I Q (Intelligence Quotient) tests. Such social scientists who adopted these methods had their own racial bias. Further, it were also the Limitations in their methods of measurement of l.Q. which led them to conclude that the Blacks are inferior to Whites. It was overlooked that the methods of l.Q. tests were culturally loaded in favour of those racial groups which defined themselves as superior such as the Whites.

Another example of such misconception about racism: "sunnier the climate, weaker the intellect." Still another example: industry, commerce, science etc., are all supposed to be the products of the superior white mind. But do you believe this? How does, then, one account for the recent prosperity Japan, China and other East Asian Tigers are enjoying, of late? Such misconceptions about racism should be abandoned with a clear and scientific thinking that they have been artificially created to suit some narrow ends. Around the 1930s, physical anthropologists and archaeologists began a series of excavations in Africa and came to very interesting conclusions. They found concrete evidence that over three thousand years ago Africa cradled a substantial part of human civilisation. Its art and culture spoke of a level of intellectual attainment which was approximated much later by the northern people.

The remains of this early African civilization have been found at several sites and also quite unexpectedly, in the Sahara desert. Who would have imagined this? For that matter who would have imagined that conditions can deteriorate, for climatic, social or other reasons, to the extent they have in Africa. From a continent studded with glittering seats of culture where musicians, artists, and thinkers flourished, Africa became a continent ravaged by wars, slave trade, poverty and disease.

Or let us consider Greece. The accomplishments of the Greek civilisation were not carried forward in an uninterrupted manner. It was enriched enrobe by the non-Greeks, even by the non-Europeans viz., the Arabs. Where would Hipocratic medicine have been if the Arabs had not translated and integrated Hipocratic knowledge with their own and thus, enriched medical science. The Romans took it up from the Arabs but only after ancient medicine had already been significantly improved upon. It was systematic historical research which demonstrated that racist bigotry is built on shallow foundations.

v) Pseudo-science and Race

But what about the supposed methods of science (or Pseudo-science) that reinforced racial prejudices? The l.Q. tests? The cranial or physical measurements? Have not the racists found confirmation for their views from such supposedly 'scientific' methods? It was again the social scientists with their reflective approach who first questioned the scientific validity of these tests which were culturally biased and suffered from poor logic.

In spite of overwhelming agreement among social scientists about the invalidity of racism, the deep irony is that racial divisions and racial beliefs are still popularly upheld. The root of these prejudices perhaps lies deeper in social, cultural and political divisions among human groups. Its bases are social, political and economic rather than biological.

1.5 SOCIAL ROOTS AND FORMS OF PREJUDICE

Racism is the most acute form of social prejudice. We hesitate to use the term racism when we encounter other kinds of prejudices. But perhaps a larger lesson can be learnt if we examine the basis of social prejudices where natural differences are imputed, though not observable, to justify social distance. After all, there are no observable racial differences between various castes, and yet each caste or jan pretends to be naturally different, if not also superior, from other jahs. Purificatory rites, food taboos, and caste rituals find their ultimate sanction in the belief that jatis are naturally different as their status is ascribed by birth. Here too, the social scientist's job is not only to explain the existing social reality, but to account for its historical background and the various stages before the present one. The social scientist will also probe why and how this happened.

The theory of jati differentiation does not unfortunately exhaust the unfounded prejudices that abound in India. Have we not heard the complaint from rich circles about how stupid and ignorant the poor people are? Have we not heard time and again that the poor irrationally and ceaselessly multiply? Or, have we not heard that the villager is naturally inclined towards irrational and superstitious medical practices? For example let us take up the social prejudice against the poor. A poor person is unable to lead a life of comfort and ease but this does not mean that he is stupid or ignorant. His children may not go to school due to economic hardships, but this does not mean that they don't have the intellect to study. In such exercises where generalizations are made overlooking the social realities, we only tend to reveal the magnitude of prejudice which clouds our understanding of the problem.

1.5.1 Prejudice in Science

Even sciences are not entirely free from prejudice. Ordinarily, this takes from of generalising on the basis of whatever is observable to the naked eye (obviously, and not going behind the phenomena.) As the great thinker Karl Marx put it "had all appearances coincided with reality, there would have been no need for science". Can we generalise, for example, for an ice-burg when actually we are in a position to see only one tenth of its size (that is, its up)? These illustrations apply to most of the generalizations made in social sciences where they are often made without regard to the total context and implicit human values. That is to say, without exercising the power of reflexivity' which, a genuine social scientist must do, especially, while conducting an enquiry. Failure to do so would only encourage unscientific usages of stereo-types to cover deficiencies in enquiry. Often they are done also for political purposes. Take for example, the colonial description of martial races. It is anybody's guess that the Punjabis or the Jats are not born to be soldiers only, as if, the Oriyas and the Bengalis cannot fit that role. But the colonial masters had a design in coining this racial myth.

1.5.2 Regional Prejudice

There exist in a country or a society certain regional prejudices. What do they indicate? They demonstrate the narrow thinking of the people belonging to a particular region regarding their own superiority or inferiority. Very often this gets reflected in the works of the social scientist. For example, the high rate of food production in Punjab, Haryana and Western U.P. in comparison to the lower productivity in eastern U.P. and Bihar was explained in terms of the lethargic nature of the peasants in the latter regions and hardworking peasants in the former. But is this really true? No. In fact, the lower and higher levels of food productivity are related to agrarian structures, irrigation facilities, fertility of the soil, variety of seeds and implements used etc. This again was proved by the efforts of social as well as natural scientists. The sociologists demonstrated after studying the habits, customs and culture of the people in the Eastern regions that there was no question of lethargy involved. Thus, the regional prejudice which differentiated human beings on the basis of lethargy was proved a misconception due to the efforts of scientists (natural and social).

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) What do you understand by racism and racial discrimination? Answer in about 50 words.

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2) How have the regional prejudices in relation to food production in India found to be baseless? Write in five lines.

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3) Which of the following statements are correct? Tick (✓) or (x).
   i) The Government of South Africa follows a racist policy
   ii) The notion of 'Whiteman's Burden' is a misconception.
   iii) The roots of racial prejudices lie in biological factors.
   iv) For a true study of society, social realities have to be ignored.

1.6 KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIETY

Let us now apply what we have studied so far to analyse the relationship between knowledge and society. Some social scientists have suggested that human beings from the earliest times have used nature and natural model to understand and classify their social world. Unlike the social world, there is a certain stability about nature. Trees have branches, crows are black, cows give milk, the beetle behaves like a beetle, the vultures

scavenge like a vulture, a stone is generally unmoved, and so on. But when the social world is observed there is so much fluidity and transition that it is difficult to be certain about anything at all. The social world has to be put into order, and what better way is there to do this than by borrowing the stability of the natural world to act as a model for the social universe. Hence, the tendency to impute natural differences where actually there exist only social and cultural ones. This is a common prejudice and not a scientific practice.

This can be coupled with another important tendency in viewing of the world. According to this view, human beings can never leave the world untheorised. Before Copernicus for example, it was commonly believed that the sun moved around the each Even today, there may be some people who believe that the each is delicately balanced on the horns of a mighty bull, and every time the bull hiccups, we have earthquakes. There is no natural phenomenon, no universal mystery, whose theorising or solution has not been offered simply because sufficient, authentic, or "scientific" evidences are not available. Little wonder then that humankind should be classified and re-classified, and the universe should be theorised repeatedly.

If we proceed from this understanding then, we cannot escape the realisation that some of the categories of social science regarding other human beings have their basis in a crude natural model, and that some of our contemporary scientific theories may well seem bizarre or even funny to future scientists. That is why whenever a social scientist sits on judgement on the knowledge systems, (whether they are beliefs, values, theories, actions or prescriptions), it is always necessary to know the totality of the human context within which knowledge is produced. Because, it is this context which eventually ensures the acceptance or rejection of certain kinds of knowledge. What guarantee is there that our current notions of science will not appear childish in our children's life time?

While accepting this, one should not, however, conclude that knowledge progresses without active human intervention. The intervention of the microscope, the discovery that blood circulates, the early toying with antiseptics, all of these, and many other discoveries gave humankind greater potential to cope with problems. Society imposes a certain limit on the range of options that human beings can exercise, but they cannot foreclose many others available but which may not be directly sensed. As a matter of fact, the only reason why it is possible for one to be different from his brother and yet be member of the same family is because of this duality. We are constrained and yet are significantly free. This is also how received knowledge undergoes scrutiny from time to time. That human beings can produce knowledge is determined by two premises:

i) To make knowledge is to disturb previous knowledge, and

ii) It is impossible to make knowledge if woman does not have the capacity for freedom of thought.

Religious theocracies and dictatorships have tried unsuccessfully to muzzle this freedom in the mistaken belief that humankind had arrived at its final destination. It is the ceaseless restlessness of human beings that causes empires to fall, regimes to crumble, and grand theories to be replaced. So, nothing is absolute in this universe.

1.6.1 Information Society

It may not be out of place to discuss briefly though, about the information society which we are living today.

'Knowledge is power' Francis Bacon had prophetically said about five hundred years ago. That was the time industrial revolution was beginning to appear. Today's society is widely characterized as a 'post-industrial' society because there is a shift in focus of activities from commodity production to an information

dominated service economy. Information results out of knowledge quantified, processed and packaged for marketing. Today, information is a strategic resource. Masuda, one of the most visionary writers on the subject, wrote in 1990:

"The information epoch to be brought about by computer-communication technology will not simply have a big socio-economic impact upon contemporary industrial society; it will demonstrate a force of societal change powerful enough to bring about a transformation into a completely new type of human society which is the information society."

Most of these changes fast overtaking the industrial society have come about under the impact of information Technology which, in turn is the outcome of a convergence of (i) the computer systems (ii) telecommunications and (iii) information. Land and satellite-based global information networks are daily sending all kinds of data to users across the world in seconds. The control of these networks by a few multinationals is, therefore, becoming crucial in this knowledge enterprise which engages in its various "information occupations"; more than 50% of the total employed workforce in the industrial countries of the West. Some of the essential features of this emergent information society are:

a) Knowledge is a crucial resource and it is to provide the key to future innovations and policies.

b) A technocracy will emerge to rule.

c) This type of political-economic climate will witness a change in the societal values which will shift in favour of the individual, the customer and the consumer.

d) Emphasis, henceforth, will be on leisure and culture and not on work as it used to be in the industrial society.

e) Economic basis of the society will therefore be services and not manufacturing.

Where does India stand in this change sweeping over the globe? With about one percent of GDP allocated for Research and Development, India no doubt will lag behind again (like during the days of industrial development) unless (i) more investments are found for this vital area and (ii) strategic entries are made into new areas like biotechnology which are open alike to all the countries, probably with more advantages to India which enjoys a rich natural heritage.

1.7 UNIVERSALITIES AND SPECIFICITIES OF CULTURE

An old anthropological maxim, which has done good service for several decades, tells us to search for universals and absolutes. To believe, for instance, that a family should only mean a nuclear family, or that legal systems must have specialised practitioners' courts, and written laws, or that all other religions but our own are a lot of mumbo jumbo, expresses the lust for absolutes. To say the same thing in other words, my beliefs and actions constitute the absolute standards which others must follow. This is something which we may not be explicitly saying, but quite often implicitly conveying. Such an approach, to speak the least, is not humanitarian; it is prejudicial and therefore, not scientific also. The reader/student may apply this simple norm to what she/he says or does in day to day living situations to understand the importance of knowledge in the building of society. Knowledge, in this case, refers to a conscious respect to be given to the diverse groups in the society who are living as validly as we do with our of system beliefs and action.

We also know how, thanks to the tireless work of anthropologists, that every society has a set of strict rules and prohibitions regarding moral conduct and sexual behaviour. There are no absolute rules and no natural reasons why any one set of rules and prohibitions should be absolute. Matrilineal families, for instance, are quite different from patrilineal families and yet in both cases, authority and affection are equally evident though the forms may be different. It is not the father but the mother's brother who is the source of authority in matrilineal societies. The father, in these societies, is very often an intimate and comfortable figure with whom his son takes many liberties. But what is important is that there are many possible variations on the reality we know of and are familiar with, and there is no reason why one particular form would have precedence over the others.

In other words, there are universalities in the specificities of culture. A scientific approach to the study of human beings should reflect upon this universality which is hidden in the apparent diversity of appearances. That we must respect diversity in society in a 'universality' which stands above, and is respected by every specific group. This will tell us in actual human terms the variety of ways through which human society can be visualised. It is only after social science has searched the depths of this remarkable human diversity can the scientist offer a reflective yet scientific study of human beings. Through social science the scholar eventually studies himself/hereself.

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) Which of the following statements are correct? Tick (✓) or (x)

i) The each is delicately balanced on the horns of a mighty bull.
ii) Human beings can never leave the world untheorised.
iii) Knowledge is closely linked with racial superiority.
iv) Scientific development will cease in the 21st century.

2) What is the role of theorisation in society? Write in about 50 words.

1.8 LET US SUM UP

We hope that by studying this Unit you have learnt:

that for a scientific approach to the study of human beings, the human reality should be observed in a more reflective manner.
that the study should go beyond treatment of human being as mere object of nature.
that human beings are the products of both nature and culture.
that empathy is necessary in a scientific study of humankind.

We find that perception of social reality and human condition in everyday life does not harmonise quite often with scientific attitude that one should have about them. Even the concepts and methods in social sciences and humanities do not always conform to standards of rational and human appreciation of social and cultural realities. This breeds racial, regional and social prejudices. The evils of racism, caste prejudices and regional prejudices can be abolished only when social science recognises the centrality of human beings themselves.

The scientific approach to the study of human beings confirms that there is a bond of global unity, dignity and freedom among humankind which is but a mosaic of diverse groups. This is what a scientific study of human beings tends to affirm.

1.9 KEY WORDS

Conditioning: That part of man which has become second nature to him, e.g. habits.
Critique: A critical essay
Empathy: To put oneself mentally, in the other person's position.
En route: On the way
Exploitation: To deprive a group/person from his/her just rewards.
Fatalistic: The doctrine that individuals cannot change their destiny.
Hypothesis: A proposition or statement waiting for test or verification: unconfirmed theory.
Inferiority: A feeling of inadequacy relative to other people or other groups.
Irrational: That which is not logical.
Matrilineal: Based on kinship with the mother or the female line.
Patrilineal: Based on kinship with the father or the male line.
Maxim: Consists of a rule or premise.
Paradoxical: That which is self-contradictory.
Prejudice: A bias against a group/persons regarding their habits and behaviours.
Pseudo-science: Fictitious or false science.
Racism: A doctrine presupposing the superiority of one race over the other, e.g. the Negroes were regarded as inferior to Whites in the USA.
Specificities: That which deals with specific issues in Social Sciences.
Universalities: That which deals with wide scale generalisations in Social Sciences.
Validity: The truth being established by facts.
Verification: Confirmation by experience or by facts.

1.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress I

1) (i) ✓ (ii) X (iii) ✓

2) Sec. Sub-sec. 1.2.2

Check Your Progress 2

1) See Section 1.4
2) See Sub-sec 1.5.2
3) (i) ✓ (ii) ✓ (iii) X (iv) X

Check Your Progress 3

I) (i) x (ii) ✓ (iii) X (iv) X
2) See Section 1.6