CHAPTER FIVE

CASTE ASSOCIATION OF THE SUTRADHARAS IN BENGAL

In this chapter an attempt has been made to highlight the socio-political factors initiating the formation of the caste association of Sutradharas, keeping an eye to their social mobility movement in the pan Indian context, together with its growth and ramification in the undivided Bengal.

Incidentally, as this dissertation aims at highlighting the 'art and cultural tradition of the Sutradharas of Bengal', one may venture to raise the issues pertaining to the functional aspects of the caste association and the relevance for acquainting ourselves with the parochial approach of a particular caste like the Sutradhara — that may seem to have no impact on revealing some of the perplexing issues on their arts and crafts. However, it is unfortunate that, in India as our historians generally depend more on textual sources and even when it is necessary they avoid field investigation, obviously their presentation proves to be futile, even if it is dressed with the quotations of Indianists from abroad. If we are correct, this lethargy coupled with an aversion to the inter-disciplinary approach, is neither healthy nor rational, if at all, we have to understand the organisational aspects of a caste society — where the Sutradharas are just a solitary example.
In the context of our own assessment that the contributions of former scholars are not sufficient for understanding the various facets of artistic creativity of the different groups of Sutradharas in Bengal, we felt it necessary for collecting fresh materials from them directly. Our purpose is to understand why they are gradually withdrawing themselves from their traditional arts and crafts and whenever possible, to indicate the causes behind their switching over to other occupations, at present. Moreover, we have also ventured to record, how far the rigidity of the caste system is yet continuing and if at all the Sutradharas feel that they are the victims to hatred and snobbery of the members of upper castes or others, who consider them inferior.

Incidentally it may be noted that, before we try to follow up the questions raised earlier, it may be pertinent to highlight the views of Bose (1356 B.S.), Sashikumar (1958), Srinivas (1966) and others who had made important contributions for an understanding of the mobility movement of the caste system. Side by side, we are grateful to Barth (1969) and Inden (1976) for the theoretical perspective leading to our understanding of the socio-political factors intertwined with the effects of social changes, more particularly during the middle of the last century.

In his 'Social change in Modern India', Srinivas (1966) has illustrated the expressions of caste mobility in
the pan Indian context. He argues, following the establishment of British rule over India together with the introduction of new technology, effective administrative system, building of a network of roads, establishment of schools and colleges for imparting modern western education for the maintenance of the administrative system in general and the institution of law courts for the benefit of the members of different caste and religion etc., practically a feeling of equality was gradually infused among the members of different castes and communities in contrast to the Pre-British period, as a whole. Moreover, the role of the missionary and other social reformers also helped develop a high ideological and moral standard, from which a sense of equality and proper judgement emanated for all, even including the untouchables and the down-trodden, who could never expect justice, because of their tragic socio-economic status.

After that, let us cite the remarks of Srinivas in that context:

The new opportunities — educational, economic, political — were in theory caste-free; that is, they were open to all, and no one was banned from having access to them by reason of birth in a particular caste or sect or religion. Actually, however, as I pointed out earlier, they were ordinarily more accessible to the high castes with a tradition of learning, employment in the government, and urban residence. In addition there were, in each region, a few castes which, although not regarded as high, became relatively wealthy by reason of their ability to exploit certain special opportunities that came their way during British rule (Srinivas 1966: 90).
Side by side, as illustrated by Srinivas that the impact of new opportunities enjoyed by the members of the upper castes, created a social distance in a new way, is quickened through the process of 'Sanskritization' on the one hand and the 'Westernization' on the other. According to Srinivas:

What were the effects of the more common Phenomenon of the high castes' obtaining the new education and, through it, prestigious and well-paid positions including jobs in the administration? In the first place, it increased the cultural, social, and economic distance between them and the lower castes. Second, it provided the higher with a new area for emphasising their distinction from the lower; the lower castes may Sanskritize their style of life — this was not too difficult in view of there being no legal ban on Sanskritization under the British — but Westernization requires money, time and effort, and contacts with influential people (Srinivas 1966: 91).

By now, we have been acquainted with the process of creating a new dimension of social distance between the so-called higher and the lower-castes — that is guided by a new strategy evolved through the politically oriented intension of the British government in general.

But before we embark on that discussion, it may be important to understand how the new facilities offered by the British through the implementation of a network of communication, connecting the different cultural regions in Bengal — helped integrate the members of a particular
caste with its sub-caste counterparts for the establishment of their own caste association, as a token of protest against the members of those upper castes on one hand and the claim for occupying better caste status in contrast to their traditional positions in the caste hierarchy that they had accepted and tolerated so long, on the other. Furthermore, for the first time they got the opportunity to search for their caste allies, practically who were known to them in theory and mythology and thus were deprived of marital ties with them even. We believe, in order to grasp this framework, better we should comprehend the theoretical postulation established by Barth, regarding the boundaries of ethnic groups. He says:

The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural staff that it encloses. The boundaries to which we must give our attention are of course social boundaries though they may have territorial counterparts. If a group maintains its identity when members interact with others, this entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signalling membership and exclusion. Ethnic groups are not merely or necessarily based on the occupation of exclusive territories, and the different ways in which they are maintained, not only by a once - and - for - all recruitment but by continual expression and validation, need to be analysed (Barth 1969 : 15).

Following this background, we can grasp the process by which the members of an ethnic group try to identify each other, so as to associate themselves in the institutional framework of a caste association. Keeping this point in
mind, here we may go further to discuss the cultural and organisational requirements for the establishment of a caste association, overriding the prejudices and cultural differences in a particular historical context.

In continuation to our present discussion, now we may switch over to the views of Inden (1976), a historian, who worked on 'Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture', based on his extensive fieldwork in West Bengal and in East Pakistan, as well. From his account it is evident that, around 1850 to 1935, members of different caste groups got the proper impetus for the formation of caste association, evidently that was more or less a by-product of the census operation in the pan Indian context. Inden observes:

I was very fortunate while in India and East Pakistan in 1964 to find these manuscripts in the University of Dacca library. A great interest in caste affairs arose among English-educated Brahmans and Kayasthas around 1850 and lasted until about 1935. During this period numerous caste associations were founded, and many Bengalis, scholars and otherwise, spent their time collecting Kulajis and publishing histories of their caste, often claiming ranks higher than those traditionally accorded them. Much of this activity was at least in part a response to the attempts of the British census commissioner, Herbert H. Risley, to produce ranked lists of castes in the census of India. While some of these accounts are unreliable and propagandistic, many of them contain useful ethnographic data relating to the nineteenth century end of the middle period. I have used them to supplement the often sketchy evidence on marriage gifts and feasts found in the books of clan rank (Inden 1976: 4).

Side by side, we may go through the views of Sanyal, an Indian historian, whose viewpoints are none-the-less
significant for an understanding of the new position, achieved by the members of the clean castes, i.e., Nabasakha, starting from the 2nd half of the 18th century. According to Sanyal:

The sharp increase in the contributions of the Nabasakha etc. caste towards temple-building during the record half of the 18th century meant an end of the predominating position of the upper castes in the field of temple-building. This very important means of mass communication, and social control over the people gave them access to social power which was hitherto dominated, even virtually monopolised, by the upper castes, who had the natural advantage of high ritual rank and a long standing tradition of control over land. The sharp increase in the contributions of the Nabasakha etc. caste's rate of temple-building during the second half of the 18th Century and the high rate of their participation in temple-building during the 19th Century show that there had been sustained collective efforts by the entire series of the successively lower castes of the Nabasakha, intermediary, Ajaicahal and Antyaj castes; the purpose being elevation of their social position in terms of the local hierarchy of castes (Sanyal 1981: 77).

However, though the presentation of Sanyal lacks in a thorough understanding of the Nabasakha nine clean castes in Bengal and more particularly how the nine clean castes, i.e., Nabasakha are considered differently, depending on the numerical dominance or the absence of even a couple of them, we believe, while describing their social position in the caste hierarchy, never they should be treated as a gross stereotype.
Without going into the details of such system of social change, during the 18th-19th centuries, now let us concentrate our attention on the widespread desire for mobility, among the members of the so-called backward castes. This situation has been highlighted by Srinivas also, together with Inden, for example. Srinivas remarks:

... This tendency on the part of castes to take advantage of the census operations for achieving mobility became widespread with the census of 1901, when Sir Herbert Risley, the census commissioner, decided to provide in the census an accurate record of the ranking of jatis in the local hierarchy as well as the varna affiliation of each. The results could have been predicted by anyone who had a knowledge of the dynamics of caste system at the local level (Srinivas 1966: 95).

If we now examine the impact of census operation, that yielded a number of caste associations in Bengal, at least the picture would reveal their submissive attitude towards the British Government on the one hand and a feeling of hatred and apathy to the members of the upper castes on the other. In his 'Hindu Samajar Gadon', Bose (1356 B.S.) has cited the views of the Namashudras, published in a Bengali journal named Pataka, in the year 1916. If we are correct, it reads: From the knowledge acquired through the mercy of the British Government, now we are in a position to judge our ability and in fact what we are. The society that consists of twenty five millions of people cannot sleep for ever. Only due to the conservative attitude of the Hindu
Kings we were not awakened so long. Now only due to the kind patronage of the powerful British government, who ignores the casteism, we have awakened against. Following the Brahmonical rules, a creative of the meanminded Brahmans, never we were allowed to study in a school. But now we have nothing to worry. Be sure, the British Government who is a friend of the illiterate stretch out their helping hands to the poor and provide a source of hope and energy for the inferior castes would be at your side (Bose, 1356 B.S. : 142).

Here it may be mentioned that, not only this attitude of the Namasudras alone, but the same trend may be well reflected through a number of caste journals and books, published on behalf of different castes or their associations. But, as our present concern is to deal with the Sutradharas of the undivided Bengal, we hope to present a similar instance, illustrating the socio-political orientation of their caste association that was established as early as 1900.

General background of the Caste Association

Here we hope to examine the social mobility movement and the political process operating through the initiative of the caste association of Sutradharas, known as 'Nikhil Bangiya Sutradhar Sammilani'. In response to our queries regarding the establishment of this organisation, the present members of the caste association known as, 'Vangiya Sutradhar
Sakha', were agreed to co-operate with us as far as practicable, together with the assurance that, if possible they would search for their old files and the copies of the former caste journal titled, 'Viswakarma'. Following their assurance, we visited their registered office at 10 Jaymarayan Chandra Lane, Calcutta, on a number of occasions. Here it may be admitted that, although it was not possible to provide us with materials according to our expectation, yet through their introduction we contacted a number of Sutradhar families, living within the greater Calcutta or even in villages, located in several districts of West Bengal.

Side by side, our contact with the immigrants of the present Bangladesh, was very rewarding and in a number of families they narrated their own experience or the knowledge they had about their caste-men and the occupations they were involved in.

But in spite of such facilities from the present settlers of West Bengal, no concrete account has been available in regard to the establishment of their caste association as early as 1900, A.D. Also none was available claiming his direct attachment to the Sutradhar caste association since its inception or thereabout. Following the partition of Bengal and Indian independence, the former glamour of the caste association has already dwindled. Moreover, since the beginning of this century or so the migration of the Sutradharas from
far-off villages to Calcutta, for a secured job, has transformed the members of the new generations with such a psychological orientation that, as if, it is irrational and irrelevant to perpetuate the former sentiments of casteism, that has long been abolished in one way or the other. Following this consequence of social change, coupled with a flavour of Western outlook, although the young generations are apparently apathetic to their former caste association established by their forefathers — yet never do we get a direct indication that they prefer inter-caste marriage or are careless to contribute to their caste association, as a token of remembrance of their former pride and gratification in honour of their art and the glorious cultural heritage.

From our close contact with the members of the Sutradharas as a whole, practically it has been revealed that, they are not in a position to provide adequate information regarding the early stages of development of their caste association. So in order to reconstruct those unknown accounts, we have to depend on the findings of social historians and anthropologists as well. Following then, probably the idea of forming a caste association was an offshoot of different census operations, which indirectly provided an opportunity to integrate the members of different socially and economically backward castes in Bengal, in support of their claim as 'Vaisya' or 'Brahmana'. Side by side, the indulgence of the census authorities offered a psychological urge to the complete
shuffling of prejudices and superstitions in vogue among those castes, through a process of Sanskritization by Srinivas (1966), that helped imbibe the values and codes of conduct, that usually prevailed among the members of upper castes then. Following this background, it seems possible that the case of the Sutradharas is not an exception.

Incidentally, we have hinted at earlier that, the caste association of the Sutradharas was formed as early as 1900 A.D., but as we failed to collect the relevant materials of that period from the published accounts, we had to depend much on other materials like: the copies of their caste journal, 'Viswakarma', that was first published from Calcutta in 1335 B.S.

Caste journal of the Sutradharas

It has been revealed from the preface of the monthly caste journal of the Sutradharas, that, for the first time they were going to publish the journal in 1335 B.S. Although the caste association was formed in the year 1900 A.D., it took a period of about twenty-eight years for such a publication. Anyway from the preface written by Sri Akshay Kumar Das who was in charge of the Journal, we find that, as the Sutradharas were devoted to Viswakarma, the Lord of arts and crafts — they thought it relevant to name their caste journal after
18. A view of the cover of the first issue of 'Viswakarma', the caste journal of the Sutradharas.
Viswakarma and even decided to publish the same on the occasion of the annual worship of Lord Viswakarma, that falls on the last day of the Bengali month, Bhadra (August-September). However, after the publication of the journal, copies were sent by post of important members of the community — living throughout the undivided Bengal.

On the cover of this journal, we notice a life size picture of Lord Viswakarma, together with the symbolic emblems of the Sutradharas in four corners — as if, the Sutradharas are engaged in their traditional pursuits of an artist, reflecting their involvement in works on wood, stone, clay and picture. But we are not certain as to how the Sutradharas were associated with above media of art — when we find no evidence of a particular sub-caste among them who work with clay. So it seems possible that, they just followed the advice of a Sanskrit scholar or a Brahmin priest — the way a number of other castes dogmatically relied on mythical anecdotes in support of their origin and this reliance on the other hand, encouraged them to claim a better caste status like Brahman, Kshatriya or Vaishya, in contrary to their previous position.

But analytically speaking, as Lord Viswakarma is considered the major deity of artisans, engaged in different branches of their hereditary arts and crafts and more particularly when all the artisans abstain from their respective occupations on the last day of the month of Bhadra in Bengal by offering their
occupational tools before Viswakarma, as a token of gratitude—we wonder, why the Sutradharas represented their own activities of arts and crafts on the cover, depriving the members of other artisan castes.

Whatever, without going into this debatable issue, we may scrutinise the cover as it is. Here, Lord Viswakarma is seated on an elephant holding a hammer (Haturi) and a battle-axe (Kuthar) in the upper and the lower right hands, while a chisel (Batali) and a balance (Danripalla) are being shown in the upper and lower left hands respectively. He is having a bow and a quiver containing arrows on his back, while a sword kept in a scabbard in front, is hanging from his waist on the left proper. He is attended with two female figures—one holding an incense burner on left and the other on right carrying a ritual plate. On four corners of the illustration, the representations of four artists, viz., the chariot-maker, stone-carver, image-maker and a painter, are noticeable.

After a critical analysis of the emblems of Viswakarma, a student of Ancient Indian History Culture may venture to raise certain positive questions. For instance, when the image of Viswakarma is not holding the basic raw materials for the making of the earthen image, or a brash for painting symbolically illustrating his association with these two
two occupations, we are now in a trouble to estimate whether these two occupations were used to be performed by the members of other castes and in course of time, the Sutradharas absorbed these occupations in part, that we believe, is yet subsidiary in nature.

This hypothesis leads us to raise further enquiry regarding the credit given to Sutradharas, as if they are solely responsible for the building of a terracotta temple — when theoretically speaking, they are not supposed to be skilled workers on caly — that is associated with the Kumbhakaras or potters being identified by a number of local names attributing their caste occupation, not only in Bengal but in the pan Indian context as well (Saraswati and Behura 1964). Equally, we wonder how a particular sub-caste of Sutradharas, engaged in painting, can maintain their livelihood.

In reality, when we have no concrete evidence other than the inscriptions that the members of the Sutradharas were the temple builders — certainly the full credit should not be bestowed on them and we have to wait for more authentic information too. In that connection, let us place our own experience. Really, even after visiting some of the important settlements of the Sutradharas in West Bengal, neither we got any concrete evidence in support of their specialisation in the building of terracotta temples exclusively by themselves, nor are we provided with those former tools that were needed
for sculpting or moulding the bricks of terracottas.

However, this drawback was carefully compromised by the living members of the Sutradharas with a feeling that, the credit in support of their artistic identity already given to them by the Scholars of repute, should not be damaged. Being aware of losing their esteem as an artist of clay also in society, often they have expressed that the documents have been destroyed, following the consequences of flood and fire or at times, rejected as garbage or household junk. But the case is not so for the wooden chariots — that represent more or less the style of terracotta temples, in a symbolic way. Here also we have no idea as to who used to paint those chariots — illustrating religious, mythological or secular themes. We suppose, probably some other castes used to share this burden of the Sutradharas and in course of time, the Sutradharas themselves earned that proficiency and subsequently refused to accept the service of the original — painters.

In connection with our fieldwork a couple of Patua Chitrakars have claimed that they are often entrusted with the manufacture of earthen images together with the painting of Atchala for the worship of the goddess Durga and even, with that on an old chariot. Their service is also required for the decoration of Tajia in Midnapore, with appropriate paintings. At times, they paint on new earthen vessels, purchased from the local potters, with the illustrations of folk motifs —
with a view to sending sweets and other ritual objects on the occasion of a marriage ceremony of the Hindus and the Muslims alike. This sharing of art objects by the members of two distinct religious groups, conveys a common source of unity and integrity in a symbolic way. In this context, we may as well put forward some of the incidental questions, in favour or against — that may provide some clues to the understanding this perplexing factuality.

First, what about the contributions of Sutradharas, engaged in the drawing of scrolls for the worship of the goddess Durga in Bankura and Birbhum, for instance?

Second, how long this tradition of worshipping the goddess Durga through the medium of a painted scroll, is continuing in some families of those two districts?

Finally, why did those families select the ritual values of those scrolls in contrast to the images made of clay — when the significance of clay is more ritually pure than the paper or cloths, commonly used for the painting of scrolls?

However, at that point naturally a folklorist or a student of folk religion would tempt to enquire into the significance underlying the ritual use of a scroll instead of the commonly used mud built images by the Hindus.
Whatever may be the answer to such questions, at least, we should try to find out as to who used to draw these ritual scrolls before and how far it is plausible that the original suppliers were the Chitrakaras, no matter in what names they had been identified earlier. Next, how far it is possible that — following some sort of vices or the consequences of conversion to Islam, the traditional service of those painters was withdrawn and as an alternative, a couple of Sutrādhār families already skilled in painting were newly commissioned, for the continuity of their family tradition as usual. Likewise it may not be too far-fetched that, the tradition of drawing pictures on cloth might have some close affinity with that of Egypt.

By now, we have taken some time to understand the 'art and the cultural traditions of the Sutrādhāras of Bengal' in a positive way. So now let us scrutinise the contents of a number of issues of the Bengali monthly, 'Viswakarma' in a precise manner.

Contents of 'Viswakarma'

To start with, it may be mentioned that each copy of the monthly journal used to be sold at three annas — that come to about nineteen paise at present. The annual subscription was rupees two, costing the rate of the former currency.

In that connection it may be added that, although this journal was patronised by the Sutrādhāras as a whole, yet they
never claimed that the journal was devoted to their caste affairs alone and as such it would not cover a variety of subjects. In fact, different issues of the journal contain the following: poems, story, article, local news from different districts of Bengal, tit-bit, business advertisement, matrimonial column, travelogue, women's problem, sociological feature, folk-medicine and so on. We believe, a critical review of these literary pursuits would help understand their progress in the field of literature in general.

Distribution of the Caste Associations in Bengal

The caste association of the Sutradharas in Bengal was established as early as 1900 A.D. After reviewing the copies of the 'Viswakarma', we find, their head office was in Calcutta, together with a number of branches located in various districts of the undivided Bengal. Some of the names of those associations are as follows:

a) Bankura Jela Mallabhum Sutradhar Sammilani (Bankura),
b) Tripura Jela Sutradhar Sabha Satmayan, Tripura,
c) Bangiya Sutradhar Samiti, Ramkrishnapur, Howrah, and
d) Arya Sutradhar Sabha, Intali, Calcutta.
Caste Association in pan Indian context

We are not informed — why the Sutradharas, living in different states in India considered it worthwhile to start a caste association, known as *Nikhil Bharat Viswakarma Vamsiya Brahman Mahasabha*, established in the year 1926 A.D. It may be interesting to note that, the naming of the association indirectly reflects the impact of the census operation on the Sutradharas, who used to share a mythical feeling of unity with other artisans as the worshippers of Lord Viswakarma in common. However, the special feature of this association is guided by the feeling that, the artisans are as good as the Brahmans and they are entitled to wear the sacred thread. In order to propagate this attitude among the artisans in the pan Indian context, a number of branches were established in different states as well. In Bengal, their branch office was opened at Kanchrapara, located in the district of 24 Pargannahs. It was known as *Nikhil Bharat Viswakarma Vamsiya Brahman Mahasabha, Vangiya Sakha*.

Sutradhar — in Census 1921

We have mentioned it earlier that, the journal *Viswakarma* appeared in the year 1928 A.D. In that journal one of the writers, Golaknath De from Calcutta, considered it worthwhile to acquaint readers with the distribution of the
Sutradhars in the different districts of Bengal, following the census 1921, and furthermore analysed the population figures also. According to the writer, it was important to find out the exact population of the Sutradharas, if at all their organisation was interested in integrating their castemen, living in isolation for long.

However, following his article, at least we can gauge the sex-wise distribution of the Sutradharas in Bengal. Broadly speaking, out of a total of 28 districts in Bengal, following the census 1921, the total population of the Sutradharas came to a total of 1,68,578 — of which 87,671 were men and 80,907 women. The following table illustrates the distribution of population of the Sutradharas in Bengal as mentioned by the writer:

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<th>District</th>
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<th>Female</th>
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<td>Burdwan</td>
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<td>Birbhum</td>
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<td>Howrah</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td>14,549</td>
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164
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<td>Bogra</td>
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<td>Pabna</td>
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<td>Malda</td>
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### Dacca Division

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<td>Mymansingh</td>
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<td>Faridpur</td>
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<td>Bakarganj</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>27,788</strong></td>
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### Chittagong Division

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<tr>
<td>Farbbatya Pradesh</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>12,249</strong></td>
<td><strong>11,620</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Miscellaneous

<table>
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<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooch Behar State</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripura State</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>252</strong></td>
<td><strong>56</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recovery of His Majesty the King-Emperor

In support of our conviction that, following the members of other socially and economically depressed castes, the Sutradharas shared an equal sense of respect and gratitude for the King Emperor and the British Government — as in common parlance it was believed that, the census operators were kind enough to support their claim for a better caste status, together with their socio-economic development as well.

In connection with the 'Second Annual All Bengal Sutradhar Sammilani', Dr. Rajendra Chandra Das, President of the conference, proposed a resolution to the effect that, as the respected King Emperor of India was then suffering from illness, the association should pray to god for His quick recovery and long-life also. Consequently, that resolution was accepted by the overwhelming majority of the Sutradharas, present on that occasion. Then a letter was sent to the Viceroy and Governor General in Council, on January 21, 1929. Following this letter, the Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal highly appreciated the sentiments of the 'All Bengal Sutradhar Sammilani' in a letter dated, Calcutta the 18th February, 1929. These two letters are cited below :
TO
HIS EXCELLENCY RIGHT HON'BLE,
EDWAD FREDRIC LINLEY WOOD
BARON IRWIN OF KIRBY UNDERDALE
P.C., C.S.I., C.I.E.
Viceroy and Governor-General
in Council.

The humble memorial of the
All Bengal Sutradhar Sammilani.

Most respectfully sheweth,

That your memorialists at the second annual
conference of the All Bengal Sutradhar Sammilani hold
at No. 52-1 Prem Chand Boral Street, Calcutta
(Thakurbari of Late Babu Sidheswar Chandra) on the
30th and 31st December 1928, passed a Resolution
praying for the recovery of His Majesty the King-Emperor
from his present illness and for His Majesty's longevity
and prosperity in life.

2. That your memorialists are desirous of conveying
the same to His Excellency as His Majesty's representative
in India.

Your, humble memorialists there —

...pray that His Excellency may be
graciously pleased to make a note of
the resolution as aforesaid. And your
humble memorialists as in duty bound
shall ever pray.

Sd/- Rajendra Chandra Das,
Sutradhar, S.A.S.
President.

All Bengal Sutradhar Sammilani.
GOVERNMENT OF BENGAL
Political Department
Political Branch
No. 2396-99p

From,

H. TUFELL-BARRETT Esq. I.C.S
Under Secretary to the
Government of Bengal.

To

THE PRESIDENT,
ALL BENGAL SUTRAIHAR SAMMILANI
Calcutta the 18th February 1929.

Sir,

I am directed to acknowledge the receipt of your letter dated the 21st January 1929 regarding the illness of His Majesty the King Emperor and to say that Government appreciate the sentiments expressed therein.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your most obedient servant

(Sd) S. J. Merya

For Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal.
Social division and occupation

From the different issues of 'Viswakarma', we are in a position to acquaint ourselves with the social divisions, prevailing among the Sutradharas in Bengal. However, depending on the nature of occupations performed by the different sub-castes of the Sutradharas and more particularly following the regional isolation from their caste-men, how they were practically deprived of marital ties and social-cultural interdependence, may be reflected from the instances cited below.

i) In the first meeting of the 'Bankura Jela Sutradhar Sammilani' held at Vishnupur in Bankura, on Kartik 16, 1335 B.S., about a total of four hundred Sutradharas participated. In that meeting it was decided that, as in practice the Sutradharas living in the district of Bankura sometimes did not establish the ties of marriage with their fellow caste-men even, the association demanded the total rejection of such caste barriers and advocated in favour of the ties of marriage with other Sutradharas living within and outside the district of Bankura.

ii) Following the editorial of an issue, dated Chaitra 1335 B.S. : year 1, No. 7, we may acquaint ourselves with the tragic economic condition of the Sutradharas in Bengal. According to the writer, a number of other castes had already taken up carpentry and other occupations of the
Sutradharas, as a source of their livelihood. Naturally, the Sutradharas were facing a great difficulty in finding an alternative employment. Incidentally, some of the Sutradhar families from Jessore, now living in Calcutta, had been engaged then in the making of 'Molica', that was a part of the hubble-bubble, and others were working on 'Teko', that had some demand in the jute mill. But even in such cases, the members of other castes had already taken up those occupations.

So far as the divergence in occupation was concerned, some of the Sutradhar families in Calcutta were engaged in the workshops of goldsmiths, photography and the making and repairing of musical instruments like Hermonium. In connection with our research, it has been recorded that, some of the contributors of advertisements in 'Viswakarma', were engaged in those occupations as highlighted by the editor. For instance, Jogendra Nath Mallik of 138/14 Narikelbanda Main Road, Calcutta, was engaged in the making of Molicha. Jugal Krishna De of 45 Upper Circular Road, Calcutta, was engaged in the job of a dentist and Haripada Das of 59 Middle Road, Entali, Calcutta, established himself as a tailor.

iii) Again, when the Caste Association of the Sutradharas, tried to integrate their caste-men, settled in different areas of Bengal, we notice the instances of a clear-cut distinction among the different groups of Sutradharas.
themselves. In the district of Mymensingh, for instance, the Kornis, a group of Viswavamsi Sutradharas engaged in the works of wood and the Loats a different group of Sutradharas of the same district, did not care to maintain any socio-cultural relation between them. This distinction was based on the fact that, the Kornis were traditionally served by the Grahacharya Brahmins, whereas the Loats by the Varna Brahmins. Generally these Varna Brahmins were considered lower, as they generally served those socially inferior castes.

Whatsoever, this situation culturally operated well in Mymensingh, so long as the members of the 'All Bengal Sutradhar Sammilani' in Calcutta, did not try to embrace their castemen in that organisation. But the request for reconciliation from the caste association in Calcutta, was not so easily accepted by the Kornis, as they were separated from the Loats for long and meanwhile, they had their own caste organisation known as 'Maha Sakta Viswavamsi Sutradhar Samiti' at village Banglapachasi in Mymensingh. Naturally the Kornis demanded that if the Loats of Mymensingh let them continue social relation with them — then only they might consider the request of the newly formed caste-association in Calcutta.

Moreover, we may cite some other groups of so-called Sutradharas, who were considered inferior by the members of other sub-castes. For instance, the Vardhekis of Noakhali, popularly known as 'Badai' were considered immigrants from Bihar and conversely a group of 'Namasudra' families engaged
in carpentry also claimed themselves as 'Badai' — though the members of the two groups did not establish marital ties between them. Likewise, in the district of Srihatta, the Kuris were mostly engaged in the business of wood, like the Loats of Mymensingh.

Activities of the All India Viswakarma Vamsiya Brahman Mahasabha

From an issue of 'Viswakarma' dated Magha, 1335 B.S., year 1, No. 5, we find that, like the 'Bangiya Vaisya Sutradhar Sabha' in Calcutta, the supporters of the 'Bangiya Sabha' of the 'Nikhil Bharat Viswakarma Vamsiya Brahman Mahasabha', i.e., the branch of the latter association in the pan Indian context, established their branch in the district of 24 Parganas — that we have mentioned earlier.

Here it may be added that, under the initiative of the 'Nikhil Bharat Viswakarma Vamsiya Brahman Mahasabha', a meeting was arranged on December 9, 1928, in the village Parakrishnapur in the district of Nadia, in connection with the death ritual or Sradh ceremony of Nanigopal Das's father. In that meeting, about three hundred Sutradharas participated, where it was decided that, thenceforth they would try to follow the way of life of the Brahmins as far as practicable. Also they decided to introduce compulsory primary education, abolish early marriage and dowry and establish their office in each village.
Wearing of sacred thread

In an issue of *Viswakarma* dated Magha, 1335 B.S.: Year 1, No. 5, we have been informed that, a meeting of the *Nikhil Bharat Viswakarma Vamsiya Brahman Mahasabha*, was held on November 25, 1928, at Kancharapara in the district of 24 Parganas. In that occasion, a sacrificial fire was lighted and eleven Sutradas were offered a sacred thread each. We believe, thus for the first time in Bengal, the members of the Sutradas were entitled to wear the sacred thread through the initiative of the association, mentioned above. However, this incident may be treated as a part of the process of 'Sanskritisation', as conceptualised by Srinivas (1966).

Worship of Lord Viswakarma

From an issue of *Viswakarma* dated Kartika, 1335 B.S.: Year 1, No. 2, we find that, the organisers of the *Vamsiya Vaisya Sutradas Sabha*, Calcutta, arranged for the first time, the worship of the image of their caste deity 'Viswakarma' in Calcutta, where the first issue of their caste journal was offered, as a token of respect to Viswakarma.

Here it may be mentioned that, in Calcutta the members of the caste blacksmith, known as 'Karmakar', first started that worship a couple of years earlier.
Side by side, in an issue of 'Viswakarma' dated Bhadra, 1336 B.S.: Year 1, No. 2, we find an article, analysing the significance of the worship of Lord Viswakarma by Priyalal Das. Without going into the details of his article, we may cite a couple of his observations. He considers that the elephant, the vehicle of Lord Viswakarma, helps to carry heavy wooden logs from the forest. So the presence of elephant is undeniable and most appropriate. The weapons carried by Lord Viswakarma, indirectly symbolise his association with the manufacturing of weapons, used for warfare. Likewise, the balance in his hand, symbolises his association with other artisan castes, who had to use balance for the measurement of valuable metals and precious stones. Likewise, other tools in the hands of Viswakarma, clearly reflect his symbolic association with the traditional artistic creativity of a number of artisan castes. But from his article, we are not informed why the members of different artisan castes worship Viswakarma on the last day of the month of Bhadra (August-September), and especially why they don't work on the day of worship. We think, as it was not a traditional custom of the artisans to worship the image of 'Viswakarma', it may not be redundant to conclude that, the impetus of the worship of Viswakarma, was a by-product of the early census operations, coupled with the formation of caste association by artisans in a positive way. This generalisation may be further attested from the naming of the caste journal of the Sutradharas as 'Viswakarma'.
Furthermore, not only this new trend for integrating the artisans as a distinct cluster, helped unite those castes, together, but through the organisational framework of the caste association, the process of 'Sanskritization' and that of the 'Modernization' of traditional products of arts and crafts, was also stimulated — that served the clandestine motivation of the British Government to make our countrymen depend more and more on the finished foreign products. This process, in fact, quickened the disruption of the traditional arts and crafts of the Sutradharas, together with those of other artisans as well. While, some began to depend more on foreign goods, discarding the products of indigenous artisans on the one hand, the rest who were trying to continue their former skill and occupational specialization with hardship, were gradually drifted away into frustration on the other.

A note on wood

In two articles contributed by the Sutradharas in 'Viswakarma' dated Jaistha (May-June), 1336 B.S.: Year 1, No. 9 and Asada (June-July) 1336 B.S.: Year 1, No. 10, we find the names of different trees, those were used for making household material and furniture. Here, the writers have analysed the character of wood, places of origin of the tree, their colour and the probable materials made of them. However, with a view to introducing these trees to the readers at large, we have incorporated the botanical names in each
case below. These are:

a) Arjun (Terminalia arjuna),
b) Asathva (Ficus religiosa),
c) Ablus (Diospyrus melanoxylon),
d) Am (Mangifera indica),
e) Cadamba (Anthocepalhus cadamba),
f) Kanthal (Artocarpus integrifolius),
g) Kul (Zizyphus jujuba),
h) Khaer (Acacia catechu),
i) Gambhar (Gmelina arborea),
j) Chandan (Santalum album),
k) Jarul (Lagerstroemia flos-reginae)
l) Jam (Eugenia jambolana),
m) Jhau (Casuarea muricata),
n) Mahnimb (Melia azedarach),
o) Tarpod (Garcinia xanthochymus),
p) Tal (Borassus flabellifer),
q) Tentul (Samarindus indica),
r) Debbaru ( Cedrus lebherver, deodara),
s) Narikal (Coconut tree),
t) Bakul (Mimusops elengi),
u) Bat (Ficus bengatensis),
v) Siris (Albizia lebek),
w) Sal (Shorea robusta),
x) Sisu (Dalbergia sissoo),
y) Sundari (Heritiera minor),
z) Segun (Tectona grandis).
Presidential address in the First Sutradhar Conference

Now, let us switch over to the third issue of 'Viswakarma', so as to understand the motivation of the caste association of the Sutradharas, from the presidential address of Sarat Chandra Sarkar Chowdhury, to the 1st meeting of the 'Nikhil Bengiya Sutradhar Sammilani' on Paus (December-January) 8, 1334 B.S.

Without going into the details of his address before the participants from Murshidabad, Bardhaman, Malda, Birbhum, Bankura, Comilla, Noakhali, Jalpaiguri, Mymensing, Dacca, Pabna, Nadia, Jessore, Barisal, Rangpur, Khulna and Calcutta, here it may be pertinent to point out some of his comments and observations. He emphasized the importance of education, as the rate of literacy among his castemen was 195 men and 12 women per 1000.

i) Next, he pointed out the necessity for extending branches of the organisation in other districts of Bengal, so as to get the desired progress according to the aims and objectives of the association.

ii) In continuation to his address he lamented that, unfortunately the occupation of the Sutradharas were gradually taken up by the members of other castes and even the foreign nationals like: the Chinese, the Japanese and the Burmese etc., showing excellence. As such, the Sutradharas had to think seriously over those consequences and in order to
improve their quality of work on wood, for instance, — training centres for the young carpenters had to be established. However, it was a matter of great concern that, not only the members of upper castes, but the so-called educated members of the Sutradhara community also tried to look down upon the occupation of their caste-men. But that must not be tolerated.

iii) Further, he stressed that, traditionally the Sutradharas were engaged in the work on wood, stone, clay and paint. But in course of time, gradually the members of other castes were encroaching their field of specialisation. For instance, the Maharashtrian Brahmins were intruding in the fields of carving stones and painting, and the potter or Kumbhakar in the making of earthen images with clay in Bengal and other states. Following these circumstances, his castemen should now come forward, so as to take up their traditional occupations with all sincerity and deep sense of regard for their cultural heritage.

iv) In his Presidential address, Sarkar Chowdhury also lamented that, the members of the Sutradhara community were living in isolation from their castemen and as such hardly there was any chance for establishing the ties of marriage among different groups, living at distant places. In regard to marriage, he added that, in reality, as the sex-ratio of the Sutradharas was not well balanced creating a deficiency of marriageable girls — the conservative members of his
society might think of accepting the young widows. In that venture, certainly the orthodox members might raise some awful questions, but they had to decide whether that conservatism was based on logical grounds and as such that decision could be made by his caste-men on the ground of its utilitarian values.

v) In his concluding remarks he added, the idea of mobilising his castemen might be possible if they had their own caste journal, devoted exclusively to their own problems. In that journal they could publish on the life of their castemen, who made important contributions in the field of arts and crafts. Those exemplary works, if followed by his castemen as he expected, would revive their artistic heritage, within a very short period.

Members participating in the first conference

In connection with the first conference of the 'Nikhil Vangiya Sutrachar Sammilani' held on December 24 and 25, 1927, in Calcutta, a total of 164 members participated from a number of districts of the undivided Bengal. In view of assessing the network of the caste association of the Sutracharas, we are presenting herewith the members of persons participating from a particular district in Bengal, together with their Surnames. The table No. 3 illustrates the same:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of the District</th>
<th>Nos. of Participants</th>
<th>Nature of Surnames</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bankura</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Chakrav, Das, Dey Kar, Kundu, Manna, Pal, Rakit (Rakshit ?), Rakshit, Sutradhar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Barisal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Das.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Birbhum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sarkar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bardwan</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Bhaskar, Das, Das, Dey, Kar, Mallick, Pal, Sutradhar, (Kaichar).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Bardhan, Chandra, Das, Dey, Kar, Kundu, Mallick, Pal, Sil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Comilla</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rat ( Kar ?), Sarkar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chowdhuri, Das.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jalpaiguri</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sarkar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Biswas, Das, Hazra, Sarkar, Sutradhar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Khulna</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chandra, Sarkar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Malda</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sarkar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Bhaskar, Das, Kar, Khan, Mitra, Nandan, Sen, Sil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL. Nos.</td>
<td>Name of the District</td>
<td>Nos. of Participants</td>
<td>Nature of Surnames</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Mymensingh</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Biswas, Bhaskar,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dhar Kabyanidhi,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Roy, Sarkar,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sutradhar,</td>
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<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Das, Roy, Sarkar,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thaisharma,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Noakhali</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Majumdar,</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>Pabna</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Das, Sarkar,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sutradhar,</td>
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<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Rangpur</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Bardhan, Bhaskar,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Das, Dutta, Dey,</td>
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<td>Mallick, Roy,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Roy Bardhan,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sarkar, Sarkar</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chowdhuri,</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Social barrier against marriage

In an issue of 'Viswakarma' dated Magha (January - February), 1335 B.S. year 1, No. 5, we find an article on social problems titled 'Sutrachar Samaj Sanskar' by Sambhu Charan Mistri of Rajshahi. In that article he stressed that, the members of the Sutradharas were divided among themselves in a number of internal sub-divisions. That distinction did not allow them to establish marital ties even within the boundaries of a particular district. Moreover, the members of a particular sub-caste of Sutradharas often considered those of another, as if, belonging to a distinctly separate caste and that feeling did not help establish any socio-cultural ties even.

Side by side, the writer also criticised his castemen in a different way. For instance, even the Sutradharas of a particular area, were also sub-divided on the basis of 'subordination' and 'superordination'. As such, a lot of their time was wasted on internal dispute and factionalism and that energy could be well utilised if they thought seriously for the well-being of the Sutradhara community at large.

Matrimonial news

Finally, in an issue of 'Viswakarma' dated Ashada (June-July), 1336 B.S., Year 1, No. 10, we find a list of marriageable brides and the bridegrooms for matrimonial
alliance among the Sutradharas. This news was provided by Ashutosh Sarkar, a resident of Simakhali in the District of Jessore.

Here it may be mentioned that, all the marriageable brides and the bridegrooms were the inhabitants of the district of Jessore. The Table Nos. 4 and 5 illustrate the necessary details, required for matrimonial alliance. After analysing the Table No. 4, we find that, out of a total of 24 brides, five of them were educated and the rest uneducated. Generally speaking, all these brides were in the age-group of ten to fourteen years and were the residents of fourteen villages, sharing the surnames like: Chowdhuri, Das, Mallick, Sutradhar, Roy and Majumber.

Likewise, from the Table No. 5 illustrates that, out of a total of thirty-four grooms, two were in service, thirty in carpentry and two of them were just students. They were the residents of eleven villages and shared the surnames like: Shankhari, Das, Sutradhar, Chowdhuri, Roy and Sarkar. Here the probable grooms were in the age-group of sixteen to twenty-five — though in a solitary example, the age of the groom was fifty-three.

On the basis of information provided by Ashutosh Sarkar, we may be tempted to generalise that, even during the twenties, the rate of literacy among the Sutradharas, living in the district of Jessore for instance, was practically negligible. Moreover, as the young boys had to take up their traditional
occupation like carpentry, hardly they could avail of any educational opportunities, that the members of upper-castes often tried to explore. If that be the situation of the probable grooms, certainly we can imagine the case of the bride. However, the column on educational qualification never indicates the exact standard of education or the exact classes they read in. It seems, the qualification of a probable groom was his ability to earn for the family and as it is noticeable that, none was unemployed, but attached to his caste occupation — probably, his parents were in an advantageous position to perpetuate the continuity of early marriage. Naturally we can understand the justification of such news in 'Viswakarma'.

General comments

In this chapter, our initial attention was paid to construct a theoretical framework, so as to understand the caste elevating movement and the political process, that may be considered a by-product of the census operation during the last half of the nineteenth century, coupled with a clandestine approach of the British Government towards segregating the members of different castes on the basis of the divide and rule policy. As a result, the members of the upper castes were in a state of political isolation from those of the so-called inferior castes.

However, it was well felt by the British Government that, the possible upsurge for a national freedom in India might not be unrealistic, following the participation of the masses, by tradition who were respectful to the upper castes. Really, we have some of the positive grounds to believe that, the foreign Indologists, who ventured to explore the socio-ritual contents of this Hindu Society at large, were the major source of information to the British rulers, towards implementing some of the apparently useful administrative measures, for the perpetuation of Kingship.

Whatsoever, if we are even partly correct, it would help otherwise to follow up the activities of the caste association of the Sutradharas, as an instance. We have cited earlier their concern over the ill health of the King Emperor and the measures taken by them, as a token of great sense of gratitude.
through their caste association. Of course, the Sutradharas are not an exception and in that stream, we may count a number of boats sailing for the same destination.

Now about the caste journal of the Sutradharas in Calcutta, titled 'Viswakarma'. In course of our analysis of our analysis of a couple of issues of 'Viswakarma', it has been illustrated that, immediately before the formation of their caste association in the year 1900 A.D., in Calcutta, the Sutradharas as a whole, were divided in many sub-castes, being distributed in different districts of the undivided Bengal. As we are informed, not only the members of different sections of the Sutradharas living in a district, for instance, tried to maintain their own sub-caste identity, but in many ways they used to consider the members of different sections (Thak) of the Sutradharas, as if, the latter belonged to a completely different caste. Naturally this sterile outlook could have been perpetuated longer, if the immediate purpose of the Sutradhara caste association was not to unite their castemen overriding the barriers of sub-castes identity of different groups.

Analytically speaking, such changes were the blessings for the members of the Sutradharas as a whole and if we are correct, in a caste society, stigmas of hierarchical discrepancy could never be eradicated without the formation of the caste association as a catalyst for the availabilities of new opportunities like education and other associated fruits of life — almost that were under the strong clutches of the upper castes.
Now let us turn our attention to those academics who had considered the contributions of Sutradharas in several branches of arts and crafts like: the terracotta temples, wooden chariots, images of ivory and stone and paintings even. We believe, the academics could be really profitted, if they could enquire the whereabouts of the independant development of each of those artistic pursuits by the members of different sub-castes of Sutradharas, distributed throughout the undivided Bengal, and especially if they could gauge how it is feasible for the members of a particular sub-caste to qualify themselves in a couple of artistic pursuits, overriding the norms of a caste society, by definition.

Incidentally, when we are not in a total agreement with our fellow contributors in the study of arts and crafts of the Sutradharas, considering them as an independant caste in Bengal, we should remember that really it is not feasible to dig out the authentic records, even from the elders of their caste association, after a couple of centuries — when in the context of social change and other factualities of historical incidents, those glorious contributions of the artists have been in a dying state, following the impacts of industrialisation.