CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, we have made an attempt to deal with the various facets of the art and the cultural traditions of the Sutradharas in Bengal, so as to gauge the present state of their glorious past, in the context of social change and modernisation.

In doing so, to start with we considered it relevant to go through the literary evidences, coupled with the understanding of different scholars, concerning the origin of the term 'Sutradhar' — first with the philological derivation, Chatterji (1970), and then the viewpoints of authorities on castes, like Risley (1981) and Bhattacharya (1968), regarding their mythical origin and the aspects of their 'Social structure' and 'Social organisation'.

Here it may be mentioned that, as the contributions of our predecessors are not usually based on field data and the information available so far from a couple of other sources even, like the census operation and so on, are not adequate — really we are not fully profited from those works. In essence, as those scholars tried to reveal the system of caste and casteism in all spheres of life before 1900 A.D., and as the census authorities considered it worthwhile to utilise this material to strengthen their
administration on the one hand and to rouse a feeling of hate and distrust among the members of different castes and sub-castes against the upper caste counterpart — now one may apprehend why those studies are really futile, not only to a student of Social Anthropology and Sociology, but to the scholars of Ancient Indian History and Culture also.

Whatsoever, so far as our present study on the Sutrādhāras in Bengal is concerned, it is noticeable that, not only in Bengal, but in the pan Indian context as well, never the writers seriously thought it worthwhile to reveal the ethnic identity of the Sutrādhāras and to trace the exact contribution of a particular sub-caste of the Sutrādhāras leading to their specialisation in different branches of the arts and crafts, or in a caste society to understand how it is feasible to acquire that skill and efficiency for the development of a particular branch of art, that may include stone, ivory, wood, clay or paint.

However, it is fortunate that, following the Indian independence and the partition of Bengal, the census authorities considered it an urgent task to publish a volume, especially dealing with the arts and crafts in West Bengal (Ray : 1953). Likewise, a number of scholars of the Indian art, history, anthropology and archaeology even, worked out a number of valuable contributions, those were hitherto
unknown to most of us. Thus mostly after the fifties or so, we notice a new shift in interest for our art and cultural heritage among the scholars of Ancient Indian History and Culture. But due to a lack of scientific approach, based on a systematic fieldwork and undue reliance on published materials and more emphatically on a critical approach towards solving a particular problem at hand, in most cases the overall merit of those contributions are not up to the mark. So, as a precautionary measure, we have made our best to explore all the possible means of collecting information, not only from our direct acquaintance with the members of Sutradharas themselves, but whenever we felt it a necessity, we have also tried to present a critical analysis of those writers in one way or another, who were interested in the coverage of a particular branch of art or craft by the members of the Sutradharas.

In chapter two, we ventured to explore some of the possible sources like the early Indian epigraphs and other literary references, to highlight the contributions of the Sutradharas.

However, after analysing the contribution of the Sutradharas in epigraphs, not only we are fortunate enough to acquaint ourselves with the names of different artists of the Sutradharas, but also we find the customery procedure of recording the date, names of the donors, name of the
deity and the names of different artists. At times, we have observed even how a group of artists worked on the same medium of art through the genealogical information. For instance, in the epigraphs and ancient Indian texts, often the artists are referred to as Takshaka, Rathakara, Vardhaki, Sthapati and Sutracharin. Likewise, in the Arthasastra, although we find no identity of the Vaddhaki as the principal architect, in the Mahavamsa, we find the sub-divisions of the same group, i.e., Vardhaki, who were engaged in different occupations, viz., Ithika-Vardhaki, Chunna-Vardhaki, Daru-Vardhaki, Sila-Vardhaki and Tachchhaka.

Without recapitulating the issues we have discussed earlier only incidentally, here we may add that, if we rather ignore their sub-caste identity, or what occupations were more predominant among the Sutracharas in Bengal — the contribution of the poets of the middle Bengal literature helped us a lot at least, for our purposes to follow up the vestige of the old tradition of arts and crafts in the pan Indian context on the one hand, and to evaluate how the Sutracharas tried their best to adjust themselves with the consequence of history, depending on the ecology and societal framework in Bengal, the other. At that position, if we find them tied to a number of artistic pursuits even, perhaps they won't be blamed any way, although a critic might serupulously comment on their products of creativity.
But so far as our present purpose is concerned, although these information directly or indirectly glorify the artistic pursuits of the Sutradharas, in no way we may consider them useful for their distinct ethnic identity in Bengal, in particular.

In chapter three, we had made an attempt to understand the ethnic identity and social stratification among the Sutradharas in the pan Indian context, before we tried to focus on the issues of ethnicity and stratification, especially covering the Sutradharas, presently distributed in a number of districts of West Bengal. In course of our analysis, we thought it pertinent to review the contents of a number of scholars, who were interested in the terracotta temples, wooden chariots and the scroll paintings that they considered to be the products of the Sutradharas, starting from the mediaeval period in Bengal and onwards. Also we tried to illustrate as well — how far the overall impacts of the late Puranas, together with the mythical anecdotes, help misunderstand the reality, overriding the underlying question, as to how it was possible of the Sutradharas to offer so much contribution in the field of arts and crafts — decrying the specific roles of the different sub-castes of the Sutradharas in Bengal. Likewise even at present, when we find that a number of caste groups, like Chhutor, Chhutar, Kamila, Karihar, Silpi, Mistri,
Loyat, Korni, Badai, Kuri, Vardhaki and Vaskar etc., are commonly known as 'Sutradharas', and before 1900 A.D. when each of them used to consider themselves a distinct endogamous group, i.e., the social bar against the establishment of marital-ties with the members of a different sub-caste of the Sutradharas even — we wonder why the pioneering scholars of art and architecture, never considered it an important issue to decide before awarding the total credit to the Sutradharas in a general manner.

We believe, this diversity in approach, is not peculiar amongst the students of art and architecture, where their major involvements encompass the products of art and not the artists. Likewise, in context to social change, the scholars are apathetic/discover why a particular school of art is gradually decaying, or how the former artists are trying to adjust themselves with the new situation either through the transformation of their traditional skill to a new product of art, or why they are forced to switch over to a new medium, depending on the local demand at present. As such for our present purposes at least, we had to adopt an anthropological approach, so as to apprehend some of these crucial issues, that we were not so long acquainted with.

Now it may be pointed out that for an understanding of the gradual development of the arts and crafts of the
Sutradharas in particular, the accounts of Risley, covering the distribution of the Sutradharas in the different districts of the undivided Bengal in 1872 and 1881, rather provoked us to consider some of the possible factors, compelling the Sutradharas to change their caste name or claim for a better caste status. Though it is hard to establish this generalisation with authority, yet it may not be far fetched to consider that, during the last half of the nineteenth century, the demands for their exclusive products of arts and crafts so much degenerated that, at least, some of the Sutradharas had to think seriously for an alternative shelter, that their own caste group failed to support.

A brief analysis of the population figures provided by Risley, reveals that the trends of fluctuation, i.e., increase or decrease in the total population listed from a total of thirty-three districts of Bengal, were not uniformly represented. Thus in twenty-five cases, the population of the Sutradharas increased, whereas for the rest covering Burdwan, Murshidabad, Rajshaye, Darjiling, Dacca, Tipperah, 24-Parganas and Tributary States, somehow, there has been a trend of decrease, in population.

Side by side, out of a total of four districts, where the population substantially decreased for instance, between 1872 and 1881, we have the figures representing population
in Burdwan as 8274 in 1872 and 1467 in 1881; in Murshidabad as 10,070 in 1872 and 9673 in 1881; in 24-Parganas as 8274 in 1872 and 1467 in 1881 and finally, in Darjiling as 159 in 1872 and 106 in 1881.

We believe, this process of history is not only typical to the members of Sutradharas alone during the period covered by Risley, but to other castes as well, in all periods, who have to reorient their caste values presenting a new identity afterwards. So we believe, here the Sutradharas are not an exception.

In continuation to our present discussion, further it may be highlighted that, in regard to the total contribution of the Sutradharas in Bengal, we have very few reliable materials towards estimating the positive contribution of a particular sub-caste of the Sutradharas and especially when the major attraction of our scholars practically includes: the temple architecture, the objects of terracotta art, decorative wooden doors, decorated wooden chariots, together with the works of ivory, stone carvings and paintings — at least they should be interested in finding out the exact ethnic identity of those artists, without generalising their cumulative contributions under the commonplace strait-jacket term, 'Sutradhar'. As such let us present our own comments, so as to get a fresh insight
from the muddles of simplified generalisations of scholars, that would never help reveal the reality — when their framework is devoid of an understanding of the traditional operative model of caste society, by definition.

Broadly speaking, while working on the late mediaeval temples of West Bengal, the former scholars were misguided to draw an oversimplified generalisation regarding the participation of a number of men who broadly belonged to different groups or thaks. But in fact, how many persons actually took part in the construction of a terracotta temple and really what groups of artisan castes they belong to, for its completion, are not usually available from inscriptions. We believe, as the names of the Sutradharas are written in those inscriptions, practically it misguided the scholars. Moreover, in common parlance where the traditional occupations of the Sutradharas are mostly related to carpentry, painting, building of temples and the preparation of flattened and parched rice in general, starting from the mediaeval period in Bengal, we believe, this feature is in complete agreement with the positive rules of the caste society, where the members of a particular caste, are only allowed to perpetuate a particular caste-calling, together with an occupation — that is subsidiary in nature. Anyway, we could be profited if the writers of the middle Bengali literature could specifically
point our the role of the Sutradhars in the building of a terracotta temple, in the carving of wood, paintings and so on.

But in a society, where the work on clay is almost exclusively done by the potters, (Kumbhakaras) alone, together with the contribution of the Patua Chitrakaras on the same medium, it seems, while constructing a terracotta temple, the major demand for brick should be supplied by the Kumbhakaras or by some other itinerant groups of men, specialised in that trade. Likewise, in the making of sculptures on bricks or decorating the temples with stucco as well, the role of Patua Chitrakaras seems theoretically plausible, as they are yet continuing their skill in the making of dolls, toys and the images even. But with the passage of time, when the tradition of building the designed terracotta temples has come to a halt, possibly due to the impact of social change among the rural aristocracy, really it is difficult to frame a mental picture, so as to fit the roles of different artisan castes in the building of a terracotta temple. In that situation before we embark on such a study, not only we should be satisfied with the physical survey of a temple or the inscription incorporated therein, but also try to study the probable living members of different communities.
in the nearby villages or in the region, with a view to understanding the logic behind the participation of different castes in the building of a temple concerned.

It is unfortunate that, such field methods have not only been overlooked by Santra (1972, 1390 B.S.), Bandyopadhyaya (1964), Macutchion (1972), Das Gupta (1384 B.S.) Sanyal (1980), Ghosh (1981) etc., but the contributions of a number of amateur field workers also share the same lacuna. Let us cite a specific instance. While going through the textual accounts, illustrating the probable contribution of the Sutradharas in one way or another, more particularly for determining the positive roles of different sub-castes of the Sutradharas, practically no specific information was available. It seems disappointing, when our scholars on temple terracottas practically propagate with authority that, the Sutradharas were only responsible for the making of those objects of art on terracottas — without referring to a single evidence regarding the manufacture of a terracotta plaque with the help of a mould or otherwise, and trying to substantiate their hypothesis with concrete field data, covering the implements as well. Naturally, we can hardly accept their views.

Incidentally, when the scholars on temple terracottas are overthrilled with the designs of art and aesthetics
represented therein, neither they care to compare such materials with classical terracottas available through archaeological excavations, nor do they make an attempt to gauge the evolutionary process of gradual development or retardation of this art tradition through ages. Here it may be admitted that, this job should be taken over by the celebrated archaeologists and the students of Ancient Indian History and Culture, in the same platform and then only we can only expect to discover the process of evolution in the field of terracotta art and culture and its concomitant interdependence, resulting a synthesis towards forming a new style or art, that enrich our terracotta temples.

In chapter four, our objective was to illustrate with evidential documentation, the expressions of art among the different sub-castes of Sutradharas in Bengal, as a part of their cultural tradition. In doing so, we considered it relevant to acquaint ourselves with the theoretical viewpoints of Kroeber (1967) and Geertz (1973), as a tool for assessing the products of art and aesthetics — reflected on the creative representations of the Sutradharas, in a meaningful way.

To be more precise, our objective was to see how the art tradition of the Sutradharas in totality helps illustrate a balanced synchronism of the myths and the
rituals associating the Hindu pantheon, illustrated on the walls of terracotta temples, wooden chariots and the decorative wooden doors on the one hand and to estimate really how it was possible for the Sutradharas to grasp the philosophical phenomenon, embracing the secular aspects of life, that represent the 'world view' and cultural identity of the Hindus in a more realistic manner, than the dried pages of history or the contents of those sacred books of the Hindus, on the other. This approach, we believe, agrees with the views of Geertz (1973) in abstraction. Though the spectrum of his valuable insight is more varied, yet in a way it fits well with our present concern.

Practically speaking, as our major concern was to understand the art and the cultural tradition of the Sutradharas in Bengal and the way it has been duly presented in the text with concrete and relevant examples and citations in different chapters, we are certain that at least, in our approach we have tried to deal with the artistic contribution of the members of different sub-castes in a more precise manner, that was never formulated in way of assessing the contribution of the 'Sutradharas' at large. We believe, that was a departure from the stereotyped descriptions of art objects alone, by our predecessors.

In course of this presentation, our coverage included the following:
i) wood work as an object of art;
ii) wooden images;
iii) Chandimandap;
iv) decorated wooden door;
v) wooden chariot;
vii) ivory work;
vii) stone carving;
viii) objects of painting and folk art, and
ix) terracotta temples.

However, it is evident from our presentation of this chapter that, never we followed a parochial approach just for the reason that, this study concerns more about Bengal, and as such, whenever possible comparative materials in the pan Indian context were also incorporated.

Incidentally, it may be mentioned that, as this coverage is certainly a difficult task for a student of Ancient Indian History and Culture within a very specific period of time — first we considered it worthwhile to complete the reading list, as far as practicable, before we really embarked on studying them in situ. Furthermore, we believe, my acquaintance with the current trends in social anthropology, together with the validity of the interdisciplinary approach, provided a new dimension in the field of Ancient Indian History and Culture.
As we have stated earlier, although apparently our task was, as if, limited to a particular artisan caste of Bengal alone, but in reality at least, from our presentation of concrete evidence it is clear that, in fact, we had covered, not only the whole of Bengal, but dealt with a number of sub-castes of the 'Sutradharas', who had specialisation in the different branches of arts and crafts and who were divided among themselves so apart that the question of establishing the ties of marriage was totally forbidden. Whatsoever, without going into the details of ethnographic characteristic of their individual traditional calling, at least, we may cite the instances of a couple of similarities in the pan Indian context also. For instance, as the epigraphic sources even ignored the social division among the Sutradharas and thus generalised the total contribution of the different sub-castes of the Sutradharas in a single frame of reference — possibly the same muddle baffled our scholars so much, that they never raised the feasibilities of such a co-ordinated contribution in art.

Anyway, we consider ourselves fortunate to raise such an important issue — that remained unknown to our scholars of art and aesthetics, not only in the past, but at present also. Now one may question the relevance of using such a model that is not popular among the scholars of
Ancient Indian History and Culture. However, it is true that, any hypothesis takes its own time to establish itself as a theory, provided others also take part in such studies in future. Anyway before we embarked on this study on the arts and crafts of the Sutradharas, we were preoccupied with the same logic that the contribution of an artist in any medium depends absolutely on their own. But in connection with our present research, at least here we can cite a concrete evidence, Sutradhara (1980 : 65), where the products of wooden dolls of a group of Sutradharas living under the jurisdictional entity of the Sonargaon Pargannah in the district of Dacca, used to be provided with colouration by the Acharya Brahman (astrologers) — normally who is supposed to be engaged in their priestly services.

From this instance, we may hypothesize that, although the art of making wooden dolls and toys is considered to be the sole propriety of the Sutradhara families, yet the role of the Acharya Brahman for colouring those wooden materials is none-the-less significant. We believe, this, process of interdependence may be equally tested in case of other creative pursuits of the 'Sutradharas', though in common parlance the role of other castes is seldom exposed. However, in our study, we have indicated some of these practical instances and even how the
Fatua Chitrakaras, though they are the followers of
Muslim religion, can be a part and parcel or a catalyst
in some of the contributions of the Sutradharas as well.
Whatever instances of reciprocity and
interdependence would not be meaningfully understood and
appreciated, unless and until the new generation of
scholars shift their emphasis to the interdisciplinary
approach, so as to enrich their own discipline from
stagnation and recapitulation of the same story.

Finally, in chapter five, we have illustrated the
very historical context, that had stimulated the formation
of caste association among the Sutradharas in Bengal. To
start with, when our objective at hand, is to understand
and interpret the varied dimensions of the arts and crafts
of the Sutradharas, purposefully we have raised the utility
of studying the functional aspects of the caste association.
Nevertheless, in support of our theoretical framework for
understanding the mobility movement in a caste society,
implemented through the effects of social change, more
particularly during the middle of the last century in tune
with the introduction of new technology, growth of
industrialisation, network of roads and modernisation of
education so as to establish a good administrative system
under the British rule — we have cited the contributions
of Bose (1356 B.S.), Srinivas (1966), Berth (1969) and
Inden (1976), for instance.

Apparently, when one may be thrilled with such remarkable changes in the pan-Indian context, we should equally criticise its consequences — especially where in an agricultural society, generally a few of the literate are qualified enough to take up a non-traditional occupation or hope to aspire for a white collar job and the remaining, i.e., the weaker sections of our society, have no other alternative but to follow their traditional occupations. Apparently one may tempt to criticise the traditional framework of our Indian society, where the have-nots are the majority and are, as if, compelled to accept every form of social injustice coupled with a feeling of casteism and other social prejudices as well, by the members of the so-called upper castes. Broadly speaking, this social atmosphere is not that serious in Bengal as it is in southern states of India, as a whole. With this framework in mind, let us switch over to our present concern.

If our general outline of the former Indian caste society is more or less close to the reality at present, then we have to accept that, in spite of its many drawbacks, the tradition of sticking to one's caste occupation indirectly contributed a lot in the development of arts and crafts.
Now about the caste association of the Sutradharas.

In our presentation, we have illustrated the exemplary caste association of the Sutradharas and from the contents of their caste journal titled 'Viswakarma', we have cited a number of instances, leading to the organisational aspects of the caste association, involving the members of the 'Sutradharas', though they may be locally known in different names, attributed to their identity, in different districts of Bengal.

Without recapitulating our presentation, it may be mentioned that, when the 'Nikhil Bangiya Sutradhar Sammilani' extended their operation within Bengal, so as to integrate their castemen alone, the function of the 'Nikhil Bharat Viswakarma Vasaiya Brahman Mahasabha' incorporated not only their castemen, but the members of other artisan castes also. The latter caste association, that aimed at operating in the pan Indian context, even justified their right in wearing the sacred thread, as they believed to be the descendents of Viswakarma (the Lord of crafts).

In a caste society, where one's caste position was fixed by tradition and even where in spite of one's increase in wealth, education or a white collar job, the caste status was not changeable, as a rule — the encouragement from the part of the British administration against those
previous Brahmanical injunctions was so much overwhelming for the majority of the non Brahmins that, they felt a psychological impetus for the longevity of His Majesty the King - Emperor in all possible ways. We believe, this new impetus stimulated the growth of the caste association of the 'Sutradharas' for instance and within a couple of decades or so they were successful in eradicating the former stigmas of sub-caste division, among themselves.

After analysing the caste journal of the Sutradharas, we find that, the way they thought of inviting the winds of social change and modernisation according to their seal and world view, was just the reverse in terms of the improvement of their caste occupation, as a whole. Thus we notice a shift in interest among the Sutradharas in Bengal, when the new trend was directed towards modernisation and westernisation, practically with a feeling of excluding themselves from their traditional arts and crafts — more particularly when their specialisation was achieved in total agreement with the mechanism of a caste society.

Finally, it may be concluded that, when our scholars were thrilled with the former contributions of the 'Sutradharas' as a whole, never they made an attempt to identify the relation between a particular art and its
artist, i.e., the involvement of a particular sub-caste of the 'Sutradharas' in a particular branch of art — that is not even uncommon at present. Practically speaking, the vestige of their different sub-castes is yet identifiable from their regionally based settlements in West Bengal, not to speak of the present Bangladesh. As we have presented in the text, the rigid correlation between a particular craft with a specific sub-caste of the Sutradharas, together with the rigidity of forming an endogamous entity, though now has been mutually reciprocated in many ways, especially after the 1900 A.D., from the starting point of their caste association coupled with a psychological urge to identify themselves as the Sutradhara by denying the name of their former sub-caste — may it be considered as an example of social change among the Sutradharas in Bengal.

In context to our present study, also we considered it worthwhile to note that, in spite of having a rigid compartmentalisation of their arts and crafts, never they had cherished a conservative outlook, especially when there was a good market or they had substantial demands from their clients, they would refuse to work in a straightway or deny co-operating a fellow artisan. It is possible that, this give and take of behaviour created a short of misunderstanding centering the artisans in
particular and as such, in common parlance their identity was a *Silpi, Karigar, Mistri* and so on, never that identified the Sutradharas alone.

If we are correct, this is the only area where we are not in total agreement with our fellow colleagues and it is true that in many ways we are thankful to them for their contribution in the study of the arts and crafts of the Sutradharas and we have every sympathy for their apparent misunderstanding regarding the Sutradharas in Bengal, and following the factualities of history and varied forces affecting the decay and destruction of the former arts and crafts or even the total upsurge of those occupational pursuits as well — a genuine contribution of a particular artisan caste like the Sutradharas in Bengal may be an appropriate approach for our study — but it is not that easy to solve, according to our expectation.