This study hopes to delineate the art and cultural tradition of the Sutradharas in Bengal. Although a few studies including the ethnographic enquiries on behalf of the census authorities in India and the accounts of journalists, modern historians and the literary scholars are nonetheless significant — yet those attempts are not particularly useful to a student of art and culture, as the studies in question lack in methodological efficiency on the one hand and the theoretical approach leading to the understanding of gradual process of development of art and their cultural traditions in different historical contexts or otherwise, of a particular artisan caste, popularly known as Sutradharas — the other.

Before we embark on our proposed research, it may be pertinent to follow up the understanding of different scholars concerning the origin of the term 'Sutradhar'. In so doing, better we should try to understand the gradual transformation of the term 'Sutradhar' from some probable common origin reflecting a particular ethnic group of those, who are supposed to be engaged in four distinct traditional occupations in Bengal, embracing wood, stone, clay and paint. Side by side, it may be interesting to note how the skilled artists of different occupations, though following
their sub-caste entity in their social and cultural life and even at times identifying themselves as a distinctly separate group depending on their nature of specialisation or their major areas of concentration within the geographical boundaries of Bengal, used the same caste name 'Sutradhar' for their total identity in the eyes of the members of other castes. It seems, unless and until we are in a position to follow up the positive clues leading to the common identity of the Sutradharas in pan Indian context, it may not be possible to understand the community of Sutradharas as a whole. However, without going into the ethnographic details, here our purpose would be to limit our study concerning the Sutradharas of Bengal and those of West Bengal, in particular.

Here, the research that we have undertaken at present could be more interesting and appropriate, if we could start it before the Indian Independence when we had enough access for covering the various facets of art tradition of the Sutradharas in undivided Bengal. Unfortunately, now it is not so easy a task and as such so far as the present Bangladesh is concerned, our orientation has been limited to textual studies in the true sense of the term.

Being aware of our own limitations, we may now switch over to the views of different scholars offering the linguistic derivation on the one hand and the connotation 'Sutradhar' used for their ethnic identity and occupational distinctiveness,
on the other. For instance, in connection with phonology Chatterji (1970: 326) mentions that "কুঠার" (Chutar) and again in connection with his discussion on morphology in the same text (1970: 668) he suggests, "কুঠার" carpenter seems to be a blend of "সুত্রাধার" and "সুত্রাকর".

Likewise, from the exemplary evidence of the Middle Bengali literature named Manasavijaya by Vipradasa, edited by Sen (1953: 324), we get the following derivation:

"কুঠার" carpenter, Sutradhar"

From these instances at least, in Bengal the term 'Sutradhar' practically included a typical caste group, traditionally engaged in the work of wood and thus known as 'Chhutar' or 'Chhuthar'. But in connection with our study on epigraphs available from places outside Bengal, never we come across the term 'Chhutar'—though the group whether engaged in the work of stone, wood, clay and paint shared the name 'Sutradhar', in common.

Caste identity of the Sutradharas

After a brief philological derivation of the Sutradharas in Bengal, here our purpose would be to highlight the viewpoints of different scholars, viz., Hunter (1876), Risley (1891), Bhattacharya (1896), Sarkar-Chowdhury (1335, B.S.), Dutta...
(1339 B.S.), Sarkar (1347 B.S.), Ray (1953), Ghosh (1954, 1981), Roy (1356 B.S.), Dey (1959), Ganguli (1963), Chattapadhyaya (1963), Trivedi (1965), Saraswati (1967), Sanyal (1968), Santra (1975, 1980), Sengupta (1973), Bhattacharja (1976), and Hague (1980) correlating the arts and crafts of the Sutradharas not only of Bengal but also of Orissa and Gujarat. Also we have tried to hint at the origin of the term 'Sutradhar', 'Sthapati', 'Takshanakar', 'Khodaikar', 'Mistri' and so on.

With that end in view, we have made an attempt to review the salient contributions of the scholars, mentioned above. The term, Sutradhara, generally identifies a carpenter, i.e., a worker on wood. Risley (1931: 287) has defined the Sutradharas as follows:

"Sutradhar, chhutar, the carpenter case of Bengal, named thread-holder, from the Sanskrit Sutra, the thread, with which the course of the saw is marked. Sutradharas claim descent from Vlswakarma, or, according to others, from Karno, son of Kunti by the son-god before her marriage to Pandu. Karno, as is stated in the Mahabharata, was exposed by his mother on the banks of the Jumma, where he was found by Adhiratha, the charioteer of Dhritarashtra. The Sutradharas seem to have adroitly taken advantage of the resemblance between the words Suta, a charioteer, and chhutar or sutar, a carpenter, to equip themselves with a mythological pedigree of undoubted respectability. Their ingenuity, however, has availed them little. That shrewd observer Dr. Wise describes them as a very low caste, recruited from one of the aboriginal races of Eastern Bengal, and largely employed in boat-building. He also quotes the story that in the time of Ballal Sen the Sutradharas lodged a complaint against the Brahman for not performing religious ceremonies for them until all other castes had been served, whereupon the king, to prevent all further controversy, enrolled them among the pancha or low castes, and gave them a special Brahman of their own. Another
legend says that they were degraded for delay in supplying the wood required by the Brahmans for certain sacrifices.

But according to Bhattacharya (1968 : 197), we find the following:

In Bengal and Western India the carpenters are called Sutra Dhar or Sutat, from the Sanskrit word Sutra, the thread, with which the course of the saw is marked. Though their profession is a clean one, they, like the sonars, are regarded as a semi-clean caste. Good Brahmans do not usually take drinking water from their hands, and they are ministered by a special class of Brahmans who are treated as degraded persons, and whose status is inferior to that of even the Sudra Vajakas. Some of the Sutaras of Bengal practise the art of painting pictures of the Hindu gods. The female members of some of the Sutras make an article of food for the middle classes called chipitaka or Chitra.

Again from the accounts of Ray (1953 : 322), we have the following:

Sutradhara (measuring tape holder) originally a builder of wooden and bamboo huts, progressively found himself handling many mediums like clay, stone, wood and paint, by which he established four traditional wings, which according to Sri Jiban Krishna Das, were Kastha, Pashana, Mrittika and Chitra.

Almost the same view is shared by Chattapadhyaya (1963 : 66), when she writes:

In Sanskrit, the wood worker is referred to as a Sutradhara, literally the man who holds the strings, that is the key man.
After an analysis of the ancient text *Manasara*, Roy (1382 B.S. : 88) not only identifies the Sutradharas as the mere carpenters, but considers them as Sthapati, Takshankar and Khodaikar also.

From a different approach, we may convey the views of Trivedi (1965 : 31), who worked in Gujarat. He remarks:

The piece of wood on which carving was to be done was first cut off in required size from the log and given proper shape. For this purpose, straight line were marked with the help of string dipped in ranji, Khadi (chalk) or geru red (ochre). This give the carpenter the name of Sufradhar or holder of the string, later on corrupted into Suthar or thar, which became a caste name.

Side by side, while describing the activities of the Sutradharas in connection with the construction of terracotta temples in Bengal, Saraswati (1967 : 535) remarks:

There was a large demand for ornamental brick work for relieving the barrenness of temple facades and a particular class of workers seems to have been specialised in this art. In inscription on a few of the temples the credit for such brick work was given to Sutradharas or carpenters.

This exposition, we believe, encouraged many scholars to work on the varied facets of the terracotta temples in Bengal — where the exclusive credit for such a glorious contribution, illustrating the cultural heritage of Bengal
has automatically been attributed to the Sutradhars alone.

However, while describing the four distinctive occupational pursuits of the Sutradhars of Rangpur area in East Bengal (now in Bangladesh), Sarkar Chowdhury, in his presidential address to the Nikhil Vangiya Sutradhara Sammilani (1335 B.S. : 61), mentions the following chhara on folk saying:

Pashana Kashtha Kritika Chitrakara Chari Kamme Sutradhara.

Likewise, in a monograph titled 'Sutradhara Kula Parichaya', of the Sutradhara caste association, Sarkar (1347 B.S.) furnishes valuable information covering the Sutradhars of Bengal, from his own point of view.

Likewise, in his article, "The Artisan Castes of West Bengal and their crafts", Ray (1953) furnishes some information on the Sutradhars along with other artisan castes of West Bengal. Broadly he acknowledges the four-fold media, following the folk saying mentioned by Sarkar - Chowdhury (1335 B.S.). But he never mentions why the members of different occupations are commonly known as 'Sutradhara'.

Now about Sanyal (1968), in connection with his work in the villages of Thalia-Jhikhira region, giz., Binola,
Krishnabati, Nischintapur, Thalia, Rautara and Jhikhira under P.S. Amta, in the district of Howrah, he has made an attempt to study the contemporary art activities of these Sutradharas. But here Sanyal does not precisely clarify how the same Sutradharas worked both in wood and terracotta, though he cites the instances of wooden door planks and terracotta panels of the Rajrajeswara temple, erected during the 1st half of the 18th century at Kotulpur in the district of Hooghly.

Again, from a different viewpoint we may note the comments of Dey (1959: 8-9):

Even seventy years ago there were regular guilds of artists and artisans conversant with this art. They all worked jointly. About a dozen men were trained in the art of temple building and lived and worked under one master-artist.

Moreover, we notice the same trend of thought in the works of Trivedi (1965: 28):

The master craftsman popularly known as a mistri had a band of workers attached to him. Whenever he was called to work at the place of a builder, he went with them and worked till the construction was over.

Finally, in his "Early Stone Temples of Orissa", Dehejia (1979: 20), comments:

... a temple would be considered not the creation of a single man, but rather the combined efforts of a group of several of whom might be expert in their profession, each making his finest contribution to the final whole.
In fact the hypothesis of Dey, Trivedi and Dehejia has been further strengthened from the evidential accounts of inscriptions on the late mediaeval temples. For instance, the inscription in Bengali on a Sikhara Deul of Sitaram Jiu of village Balarampur, under P.S. Debra, in the district of Midnapore runs as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sri Sri Sitarama Chandra Jiu/} \\
\text{Suna Sarvajana :} & \text{ Kali Nivedana :} \\
\text{Mandira Nirmana/} & \text{ Katha :} \\
\text{Kalist Thakurda} & \text{ Kali Padavite} \\
\text{Gantra :} & \text{ Matriya Sange ashtajana /} \\
\text{Karila Sugathana :} & \text{ Sikelie} \\
\text{Khemata (sam) Faroya} & \text{ Arambha Sata Sashthi / Sale :} \\
\text{Gela dina Haribole :} & \text{ Asastira} \\
\text{Asade Sampurnya II Etii.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

Also in his article "Late Mediaeval Temples of West Bengal: An account of their Architects and Builders", Santra (1975) practically recapitulates the views of other scholars, on the late mediaeval temples of Bengal as a whole. Furthermore, from his accounts one may follow up the trends of making terracotta temples and the works on wood, by the members of the Sutradhara community (Santra 1980 : 1390 B.S.). On the other hand, Dutta (1339 B.S.), Sanyal (1968), Bandyopadhyaya (1964), Santra (1975 : 1390 B.S.), McCutchion (1972) and Bhattacharya (1975), have primarily focussed on the late mediaeval temples and consider their builders as the predecessors of the present-day Sutradharas.
After examining the works of these scholars, we are convinced that, Risley (1891) and Bhattacharya (1896), made an attempt to highlight the ethnic divisions among the Sutradharas in Bengal. While Risley focussed his attention more on Bengal and Bhattacharya in the pan Indian context — others have illustrated either on their crafts or casually on their distribution in the different districts of West Bengal. As such, for our present purpose, at least, we do not hope to be amply profited from their works — especially when our objective is to understand not only the craft traditions of the Sutradharas of Bengal in the historical context alone, but also how the new changes have compelled them to switch over to other occupations or a combination of occupations and consequently how the newly-formed caste organisation, evolved during the 1900 A.D., inspired them to claim a better caste status, viz., Sudra to Vaisya, and as such they have stressed on education, eradication of dowry, importance of caste occupation, charity for the poor, medical facilities for castemen and whenever possible, change of the odd surnames through affidavit.

With that end in view, the purpose of this dissertation is to highlight the following: a) Sutradharas in ancient Indian epigraphs and literature, b) ethnic identity and social stratification of the Sutradharas, c) expressions of art as a cultural tradition and finally, d) caste association of the Sutradharas in Bengal.
Methodology

In connection with this research, careful attention was paid to the collection of relevant information on the Sutradharas of Bengal from three distinct levels, viz., (a) visit to important libraries in Calcutta and outside for the collection of literary source materials as suggested by Sri Santosh Kumar Basu, Department of Museology, University of Calcutta, (b) field trips made to some of the Sutradhar populated villages, spread over in the different districts of West Bengal, so as to have direct involvement with the artists engaged in the making of sculptures in stone, ivory works, wooden dolls and images, playing cards — known as 'Dasavatara Tash', masks used in connection with the Chhau dance, ritual scroll or Patachitra, painted for the worship of the goddess Durga in some families and (c) coverage of important sites upholding the former examples of art and culture of the Sutradharas, yet available in West Bengal.

Incidentally, as this research demands a thorough ethnographic knowledge of the Sutradharas of Bengal as a whole, a careful attention was paid to locate the important caste regions of the Sutradharas of West Bengal and even to see how they yet maintain their socio-religious life or how the concept of caste or sub-caste is valid at present. In doing so, our purpose had been to verify the textual
details, made by the early ethnographers and the theoretical abstraction concerning the community of the Sutradhars together with the impact of social change and modernisation on them.

In connection with this field-based research, the author, coming in close contact with the Sutradha community, had enough access to abundant materials, no matter if the members of the community were engaged in the work of ivory, stone, wood and such others. Nevertheless, while staying in different localities, not only had the author been encouraged for the completion of his research, but the important members of the Bangiya Sutradhar Sabha helped him with all facilities also. More precisely, the objective of the writer was to understand and make unbiased factual documentation of the art traditions of the Sutradharas and more particularly to see how his research might contribute towards proper estimation of their former heritage of art tradition and if possible, how it might be improved depending on the present demands of society at large. Finally, in connection with the field-work, the writer put special emphasis for understanding the social organisation of the Sutradharas.

In addition, whenever possible, the photographs of different arts and crafts were taken with a view to getting
a comprehensive picture of those items and to examine how those objects stylistically represent different schools of Sutradharas even within West Bengal, who are almost segregated from one another — developing a distinctive cultural identity of their own.
1. Distribution of Settlements among the Sutradas in West Bengal.