India is a land of many religious faiths and beliefs. In ancient and early medieval times the three major religions that were professed by the peoples were Brahmanical religion, Buddhism and Jainism. Besides them, there were a number of faiths and beliefs and in the course of time even within the major religions there appeared many sects and creeds, and as now in those far-off times too the religious life had a remarkably wide range, extending from the Absolute Monism to the primitive Animism. Differences in respect of beliefs and doctrines among the followers of the major religions, which were sometimes sharp and marked, were therefore not unexpected or unlikely. And Buddhism and Jainism themselves were the outcome of such differences from the Vedic religion.

Yet all dogmas and creeds, which created apparent cleavages between different religions and sects, were eventually superseded by the realization of the Indians in the distant past that all religions, whatever may be their names, are but the views or apprehensions of truth, the varied historical expressions of the one truth, which is universal and timeless in its validity. Right from the time of the Rigveda, which speaks in a monotheistic vein about this truth, the Ultimate Reality, the Supreme God-head, as the One with varied names (ekam sat vipra vadantah, I. 164. 46), Indians have been trying to live up to the ideal of

1. Cf. 'All religious sects should live harmoniously in all parts of my dominions'. Rock Edict VII.
tolerance in the realm of culture and religion. It was this ideal of 
tolerance which Asoka, justifiably claiming the title 'Great', strove to translate in his statecraft, when he appealed to all and sundry to 
their personal faiths and beliefs. Unambiguously he declared about his 
Dharma (Dharma): 'People should learn and respect the fundamentals of 
another's Dharma.... There should be a growth of the essentials of 
Dharma among men of all sects' (Rock Edict XII). What Asoka sought to 
realize in his life and activities was followed by several kings and 
potentates in ancient and early medieval India, the Pala monarchs of 
Gauda-Varendra the Bhumara and the Somavamsis of Kalinga, for ins­ 
tance, and many other minor dynasties of eastern India who flourished 
during the period under study.

Not only the ruling houses, but also the common men in those bygone 
days demonstrated this spirit of religions catholicity. Among many an 
example may be cited the case of a Brahmin Nathasarman and his wife Rami. 
As known from the Beharpur copper plate inscription of the Gupta year 159 
(478-79 A.D.), they donated lands for the maintenance of worship at the 
Jaina vihara at Vatagotali, which was presided over by the pupils and 
pupils' pupils of the Nirgrantha teacher Guharandin of the Rañcchastupa-
niśaya of Benares. Thus it shows that while a monk from Benares did not 
experience any difficulty in founding a vihara at Nālarpur in North Bengal 
in the late fourth or early fifth century, contributions for its mainte­ 
nance also used to come from private individuals like Nathasarman and 
his wife. Without multiplying instances relating to the earlier and the

53 ff, 56.
period in question it may be observed that in the creation of the climate of religious peace and harmony the commonalty participated along with the kings and the noblesse of the day who had inherited the principle of toleration from the past.

Politically, eastern India during the period under review was a congeries of states ruled by regional dynasties. There was no Chandragupta Maurya and Asoka, not even a Samudragupta and Chandragupta II, who could bring, or at least tried to bring, the whole of the subcontinent under one political umbrella. Perhaps this was historically impossible too. Even the powerful monarchs like Dharmapāla and Devapāla could not create an empire of the dimensions of those of their predecessors and the hold of their successors on their territorial possessions was weak and ephemeral. But this political phenomenon did not stand in the way of the expression of religious ideas and cultural values by the peoples in eastern India which they had received from the common fund of their heritage. Imaginably political boundaries did not prove to be barriers in the transmission of religious and cultural concepts. But what is significant to note is that eastern India during this period rarely showed sectarian animosities, which appeared on the religious scene in the Deccan and the South as instanced by the iconic types like the Trimūrtis with Bhāmā and Vishṇu emerging from the leg of Śiva and Sarabheṣā. Buddhism, which was preponderant here, was, however, not always well-disposed towards the Brahmanical religion, and in fact, it was sometimes markedly hostile, as reflected by the concepts and iconic forms of deities
like Parāśākṣī and Āparājīta. Similarly, Buddhism was also not always in cordial relation with Jainism and at Rajgir the adherents of these two religions were at feud among themselves. Still viewed as a whole, the religious climate in eastern India during this period was characterized by a commendable spirit of accord and harmony, which is most tangibly borne out by numerous sculptures representing whom we have designated syncretistic deities. Added to the evidence of these syncretistic icons are the testimonies furnished by the literary and epigraphical records and the images of deities of different pantheons discovered at the same site, illustrating the accommodative spirit of the Indians of the times.

Arguably the religious concord and syncretism were furthered by the exigencies of situations, political, religious and otherwise. This is reflected in the Prabodha-Chandrodaya of Krishna-misra stressing the need of closing all ranks in the face of a common danger. Even the staunch Buddhists attempted to unite themselves with the followers of the Brahmanical religion under the common banner of the god Kālachakra ('The Circle of Time') against the cultural on rush of the Mlechchas, that is, the Muslims. Still the fact remains that the principle of toleration inherited by the Indian of the given time and space found a natural expression in terms of idea and icon. The literary and archaeological data speak eloquently on this point and by way of illustration mention may be made of the Puranic view which more often than not states that there is no difference between different members of the Brahmanical pantheon, like Vishnu and Śiva, and some of them even go to the extent of
declaring that those who distinguish between Vishnu and Siva will eventually go to the hell. While such literary tradition of inter-sectarian rapprochement is adequately exemplified by a number of syncretistic icons of Hariha and Ardhañãisvåra, instances of intra-sectarian amity are also by no means rare. The cult of Jaganãtha involving the worship of Jaganãtha (Krishna) along with Balarama and Subhadra, and the iconic type of Gopimâta met with in Orissa is a relevant example of the intra-sectarian synthesis.

In consonance with the religious harmony members of different religious orders sought to express their thought and concept through common plastic diction, as demonstrated by the architectural and plastic remains of the period under consideration. In general the temples affiliated to the faiths concerned were more or less identical, the differences lying only in the iconographic content of their cult images. The sculptural embellishments of the shrines regardless of their religious affiliation, however, include representations of Yakshis, Nyikâs, Aparas, Vidyâdhars and Sarasundâris in the edifices of this period as well as the earlier one. The Raññhayatara-Pûja, in particular characterized the religious life of our period and the Småra Hindus who followed this mode of worship not only made provision for the worship of the five principal divinities of the Brahmanical pentad, but at the same time they also accommodated many a deity and semi-divine being in their theological and iconographic paradigm. The Raññhayatara temple complexes and their sculptural repertoire which likewise characterize the religious art and architecture of the period under study, bear us out.
From the standpoint of art and iconography, eastern India during this period seems to have formed a compact and homogeneous cultural zone (see supra, Chapter II). An analytic survey of the syncretistic and allied images will reveal that in spite of their conformity to a common denominator, they articulate a taste and outlook from those obtaining in the rest of India. And together with secular sculptures they may be said to have developed a distinctive school which has been termed 'Eastern Indian School of Sculpture'. While this designation has been justified by the materials discovered since it first came in currency more than fifty years ago, the said finds have also led scholars to postulate the existence of a similar school in the realm of iconography. For instance, the cult of Jagannātha and the practice of the worship of Gopīrātha are the characteristic features of the religious life of eastern India during the period under consideration and the former in particular transcended the limits of its epicentre at Puri and went to the territories as far as Dli and Manipur. Conceptually and iconically deities of the Buddhist pantheon like Milanathap and Simharāda-Lokesvara are but adaptations of the Brahmanical god Śiva and the Jambhala and Jānguli are the Buddhist parts of the Brahmanical Kūvera and Marāsa respectively. In the rest of India similar deities are few and far between. More interesting are the images of Brahmanical divinities like Śiva, Vishṇu and Sūrya showing an effigy of Dhyāni Buddha, Amītabha, in each case. Assignable

4. Rāyan Kumar Dasgupta postulated the existence of an 'Eastern Indian School of Iconography' in a paper presented in a Seminar on the Pala-Sena Art held under the auspices of the Centre of Advanced Study, Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, Calcutta University in 1978.
to the eleventh-twelfth century, these icons have respectively been designated as Siva-Lokesvara, Vishnu-Lokesvara and Surya-Lokesvara, and have been taken as examples demonstrating syncretism between Buddhism on the one hand and the Brahmanical sects in question on the other. Although it is doubtful whether these images can really be described as syncretistic ones, the fact that deserves to be noted that they constitute a distinctive iconic type, not met with in other parts of India. Similarly, the sculptures portraying a seated couple each with a child in his and her lap under a kalpa-vriksha with a spreading branches over them appear to be the Jaina counterpart of the Buddhist Panchika and Hariti, the couple presiding over progeny; hailing from Rajshahi and elsewhere, these reliefs constitute a type which may be described to be characteristic of product of the Bengali mind. Thus broadly viewed, eastern India was indeed a homogeneous cultural entity with inhabitants of a liberal outlook and catholic spirit. During the period under consideration eastern India was in every way perhaps the most congenial region for the development of religious syncretism.


6. Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta is not inclined to take them as syncretistic deities. In a paper on the so-called Siva-Lokesvara sculpture of the Asutosh Museum he has adduced reason in favour of his view. I had the opportunity to go through this paper which will be published shortly under the title Buddhism: Early and Late Phases by the Centre of Advanced Study, Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, University of Calcutta.