No doubt, the word Purusottama generally stands for Vishnu in the literature but in the Vaishnava iconography and theology it is the designation of a special deity which represents a particular aspect of Vishnu like Narayan, Madhav, Damodar, Srikrishna, etc all of which are considered as different forms of Vishnu. The wooden deity in the Jagannath Temple at Puri has been referred to as Purusottama all along in history. He is also called Jagannath. What led the people to choose this designation for their deity is worth investigating but this term Purusottama or Jagannath seems to have come into vogue around 13th century or at least has become more popular in this age. The Purusottama Mahatmya of Skanda Purana uses this epithet Jagannath for the deity and it has been increasingly popular in the Odia literature.

The Lord Jagannath is all pervading and he combines in himself all the main five Hindu deities namely Narayan, Rudra, Ganesh, Surya, and Durga. When he is on the Ratna Simhasana of his temple, He is Narayan, during Navakalebara ceremony he is considered as Rudra, during the Snana Jatra he is considered as Genesh (Gajanan) at the time of car festival he is taken to be “Surya Narayan”. While enjoying the divine slumber (Snana Yatra) he becomes “Durga”. Thus all the main deities of Hinduism are considered to have merged in him. Thus he is represented as a supreme God to Saivites, Saktas, Ganapatyas, Sauras and Vaishnobs.

Purusottama – Vishnu is also known as Purusottama-Jagannath. Purusottama- Jagannath cult is a resultant composite of many divine concepts and Gods starting from a local deity of an unknown tribe. Jagannath manifested himself as one of the greatest religious centers of the whole world and his religion is treated as universal religion. He is not meant only for any sector or tribe. In course of time he has become universal. He is linked with almost all the religions of the world.

Lord Jagannath is the God of all religions. The Jainas see him as Jineswar their beloved lord and the Buddhists see him as Buddha. Muslims like Kabir, Haridas, Salabega devoted their entire life before Lord Jagannath and sang Bhajans and Janana in praise of the Lord.

Jagannath culture is not restricted within the geography of our country. Rather it has influenced the people of Srilanka, Bangaldesh, Nepal and Mynamar. The ancient name of Prome city of Myanmar was Srikhetra. The famous Odia Sadhavas settled at Brahma Desh have developed the Jagannath culture in that country and built many Jagannath temples there and converted the name
of the Prome city to Srihhetra. Such was the influences of Hindu religion as the principles and tenets of Hinduism did not clash with the people of Myanmar. Being a universal religion the Jagannath Dharma was well accepted there. Likewise we find compatibility of car festivals with perhera ceremony of Sri Lanka. At the time of Navakalebara we search for neem tree to build our Lord’s physical shape and in the same manner the Sri Lanka people build their God in the woods of jack fruit tree. They follow the same path like our Nabakalebar ceremony. The sacred Neem log was selected as per the norms fixed in our scriptures and various rituals are observed before it was converted into statues. The king also takes part in the procession sitting on the back of the elephants. The resemblance we mark in both the religions while making the lord out of the log exhibits the influence of Jagannath culture in Sri Lanka. Bibhisan the mythological devotee of Ramchandra and brother of Rabana belong to Sri Lanka a Dravidian by birth was allowed to enter into the Jagannath temple at the time of pahandi to perform certain rituals. Is it not a sign of our universal brotherhood thinking. Even at the south side top of Lord Jagannath temple, Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra were there to facilitate the sacred vision of Bibhisan of the Lord on the airways.

In Bali island of Indonesia Lord Jagannath is worshipped as Siva. In our neighbouring country Jagannath worship is rampart and many temples are built to worship the Lord Jagannath. The king of Nepal Sri Sankar Dev had supplied “Brahma sila” the sacred black stone at the time of construction of the temple. For this sacrifice of the Nepal king, he was allowed to perform special Puja before the Lord Jagannath. Even his descendants are allowed to enter into the Jagannath temple in the south gate which is an unique tradition and honour given to the Nepal king. In Bangladesh Jagannath temples are there which is the exhibition of universal brotherhood. The Pala king has constructed Jagannath temple at Dhaka in 12th century and from that time car festivals are being observed there.

The Sikh Guru Nanak was influenced by Lord Jagannath for which he visited his temple at Puri. For the Sikh devotees two monastery had been built by the Sikhs. The devotees come and stay there for sacred Darshan of Lord Jagannath. Even, the Sikhs have been allowed to perform certain rituals in the Jagannath temple. The two monasteries are Mongu Mutt and Chhauni Mutt which are very near to the Puri temple. The Pandas of Puri temple always extend heartiest cooperation to them treating them as their brothers. Guru Nanak stayed there with their followers while staying at Puri. Guru Nanak and his son Srichand came in contact with Chaitanya Mohaprabhu and spread the tenets of Hinduism. Guru Nanak displayed a miracle at Puri when he converted a little bit of sea water into saline free water. This action of Guru Nanak brought him much respect from the Puri people.

Guru Nanak prayed Lord Jagannath with the sky and stars keeping in mind. When he left Puri king Prataprudra Dev extended a glorious farewell and accompanied him upto the Jagannath Sadak and exhibited impeccable integrity in extending hospitality.

Lord Jagannath is not restricted within space and time. Many devotees of various faiths and religions have been attracted by the miracles done by the Lord. Jesus Christ was also influenced by the Jagannath Dharma and visited Puri temple as expressed by M. S. Levi in his book Gospel of Jesus Christ. But still there is debate whether Jesus visited Puri.

Santh Kabir and Hari Das two Muslim devotees had come to Puri to get the blessings of
Lord Jagannath. In 1512 Kabir arrived at Puri and in remembrance of his visit Kabir Chaura Monastery was built up in the sea shore which is still standing there.

In that monastery the wooden shoe and the crutches are still available in the monastery. It was said he kept the sea at bay with his crutches to control the audacity of the sea. This miracle of the Muslim devotees was highly admired by the people of other religions also. The devotees visiting the monastery were blessed with “tanka torani” and jhadu’s touch by the Santh. Santh Kabir rose above sheer conservatism and worked for the salvage of the humanity. Santh Kabir believed in “Nirguna Brahma” but his devotion towards Lord Jagannath was passionate who got blessings from the Lord.

Santh Haridas, another Muslim and ardent devotee of Lord Jagannath spent his last life at Srikshetra Puri. He was born in a Muslim family at Josore District of Bangla Desh. His forefathers were Hindus but he was converted into Muslim by force by the rulers. Hari Das met Sri Chaitanya at Nabadwipa. As he was a Muslim his entry into the Jagannath temple was restricted but Sri Chaitanya arranged Mahaprasad for him. Sri Chaitanya met him regularly and offered sacred Tulsi leaf to him. His abode was named as Siddha Bakula Mutt which is very much present now.

Muslims like Santh Kabir and Hari Das have been deeply influenced by Lord Jagannath and surrendered before him with heart and soul. Non Hindus like poet Salabeg all along praised the Lord in his poems. He was overwhelmed with joy when Lord Jagannath detained his chariot on the grand road of Puri during the car festival with a view to give his disciple a glimpse of his body. This was the reciprocation of Lord Jagannath to his devotee even if the devotee is a non-Hindu. The father of Salabega, Lalabega was a top bureaucrat under Mughal administration. In his youth he hijacked the army and got severe injury in the battle field and there was no hope for his recovery. On the advice of his mother, who happens to be a Hindu Brahmani, Salabega worshipped the Lord and got cured. Having such experience Salabega threw his life before the Lord as a staunch devotee and created some ever green songs in praise of the Lord which are very popular among the mass till today. However Muslims and Hindus are poles apart in their religious belief, the mortal remains are kept in the holy grand road of Puri near Bada Chhata Math and his Samadhi was built there. Salabega spent the most of his life in that Math. Some research scholars visualize presence of some symbols on the face of Lord Jagannath. The half moon posture on leap and a star on the nose of the Lord are at par with Muslim symbols.

In Odisha the Hindus pay much respect to the Muslim shrines. The God “Satyapira” is worshipped by both the communities - Hindus and Muslims. This is a unique example of religious fraternity. In medieval period although some Muslim generals like Kalapahad created havoc in Hindu temples, yet most of the generals are moderate and believe in religious integrity. They also equally pay respect to Hindu temples. There was no restriction in taking Mahaprasad unitedly. In 1626 a Muslim pilgrim Mohammad Bin Amir had written “In the medieval period there was no objection to Muslims entering into temple of Lord Jagannath. The Muslims used to honour Hindu shrines and the Hindus also honour Muslim shrines.

Such was the relation between the two communities Hindus and Muslims, a unique combination of Hindu - Muslim relationship.

The epic Janasidhi, written by King Indrabhuti of Ujjain in 9th century demonstrates
that Lord Jagannath was worshipped by the Jainas as their esteemed God. Jaina Dharma is an ancient religion whose statues are recovered in Mahenjodaro and Harappa civilization. It is also historically established that the Jainas are the first among the statue worshippers. In eighteenth century B.C the Jaina Guru Parswanath preached Jainism in Odisha which is evident from the stone carvings available at Khandagiri. Hence, in the Hindu religious life there was a special place for Jainism.

The Kalinga king Karkandu was the disciple of Parswanath and being influenced by Jainism he established the statue of Rusavnath in Purusottam Kshetra. In later stage the name was converted to Jinanath. In the words of eminent researchers Jinanath is worshipped as Jagannath.

The relation between Hinduism and Jainism was epoch making. In fourth century B.C the Magadha king Mahapadmananda took away the Kalinga Jina to its capital Pataliputra as a token of his victory over Kalinga. Subsequently it might have known as Jinasana. In sixth century B.C the Kalinga king Chetak invited the last Jinatirtha Mahavir Bardhaman to begin the preaching of Jainism and accordingly the Jinatirtha started preaching at Udayagiri of Bhubaneswar. During first century B.C the Kalinga King Chediraj Mahameghavahana Kharavela defeated the Magadha king Bruhaspati Mitra and brought back the Kalingajina or Jinasan. The elephant cave inscription is the source of its information. The primitive name of Purusottam was Pihunda and king Kharavela celebrated his victory at Jaina vihar of Pihunda. Chinese pilgrim Huien Tsang has written the presence of hundreds of Jaina vihar in Kalinga. This shows the popularity of Jainism in the land of Purusottam.

Based on historical documents and popular belief it was observed that Lord Jagannath was the Jaina Lord. Various scholars and researchers have opined Jagannath as Jaina Institution. The glorious Kalpabata is having a unique background in Hindu mythology. The famous Kakabhusandi expressed his witness regarding the construction of Jagannath temple. It is believed that the desire of the devotee gets fulfilled if he ties a potsherd on the branches of Kalpabata while watching the Nilachakra. This belief has been reinforced by the writing of Skandha Purana “Nyagrodham Drustwacha Narayanam Kalamasam.” On a simple analysis of both the religions it is crystal clear that Purusottam Jagannath is vividly linked with Jaina Dharma which is one step move towards universal religion. Apart from that Vishnu Puran and Srimad Bhagabat also discussed about Rishovnath, the Jaina Guru.

The Jainas were the first idol worshipper in the world. To universalize the gospels of Jaina culture in their own religion they have prepared the black stone statue of the lord which was subsequently turned to wooden statues without leg. It is deemed that in car festival it is statue of Jaina triathakari who are sitting on it while the car is on move Jaina adi Tirthnkar was conceived on the Asadha Sukla Trutiya the day of car festival, hence the day is having much importance.

Lord Jagannath is identified as Purusottam which is derived from “Jina” as advanced by the scholars. The worship of Lord Jagannath is derived from the worship of “Rishavnath”. In eighth century B.C. the King of Uddiyan Indrabhuti wrote the famous treatise Jnanaśīdhī enumerating the tenets of the religions which was prefaced by the Verse “Pranipatya Jagannath Sarba jinabarajitam”. This verse established the jinatwa of Lord Jagannath thus making him the emperor beyond Hinduism. The legless God trio” Jagannath, Balabhadra and
Subhadra symbolizes the treeratna of Jaina readings.

The Hativesha of Lord Jagannath has got a tremendous resemblance with Jaina belief as elephant is treated as a sacred animal in their religion. Believer in non-violence, the Jainas’ have conceived of “Banchabata” which is at par with Jagannath Dharma. The 22\textsuperscript{nd} Tirthankaras’ of Jaina are conceived as “Baisi Pahacha”, nos. of the 22 entrance steps of Lord Jagannath temple of Puri. Is it not the evidence of universalism of Jagannath Dharma.

The famous pond “Swetaganga of Panchatirtha of Puri is also linked with Jainadharma as per historical evidence. There is a huge stone still lying near Swetaganga pond whose name is Saktisila or Kalinga Kotisila. The Jaina mendicants have tremendous weakness for this stone as they believe that a huge number of Jaina mendicants got salvation at Swetaganga. This holy pond of Swetaganga proves that this Purusottam Kshetra of Lord Purusottam was a Jaina religion centre in the past.

On deep introspection it is realised that Jagannath Dharma is such a religion which amalgamates many religions within it which is the unique example of universal faith and thought.

Lord Jagannath is also worshipped as Buddha by the Buddhists from time immemorial. Otherwise the Dasabatara statue would have not been replaced by the statue of Lord Jagannath in Jaipur. In this regard Dr. Mahatab said:

“Jagannath is another name of Buddha as known from Tibetan sources. So the name of Jagannath is of Buddhist origin. Later on Jagannath was identified with Vishnu when the Tantras were written.

Under the influence of Buddhistic thought, there is no caste discrimination in Jagannath temple Puri. For that reason Sri Balaram Das in his treatise “Bhaba Samudra” wrote “Natha to Khetra sana bada nahin, Brahmana chandala sari tui”.

That means, O Lord, in your abode there is no difference between Brahmin and chandal. Both of them are equal.

The Tri Ratnas ideology of Buddhism is reflected as Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra, worshipped on the Ratna Singhahan.

The car festival of Lord Jagannath is also influenced by Buddhist philosophy as held by the historians.

Sir Cunningham has written.

I was first led to this opinion in 1851, by the discovery of three of these symbols set up together in one of the Sanchi Sculptures. Since then I have found Jagannath figures are used in all almanacs of Mathura and Benares as the representatives of Buddha in the Buddha Avatar of Vishnu. The last seems to me to be conclusive but I may add this bone (said to be of Sri Krishna) must be a relic of Buddha, and that the nude figure of Jagannath in which it is contained is one of the old Tri-Ratna or triple green symbols of Buddhism tired.

Hence, the Sanatan Dharma of Lord Jagannath takes Buddha within himself.

Lord Jagannath symbolizes the union of all religions in a single entity. He is above consideration of caste, religion, the rich or the poor. The car festival is conducted precisely with this purpose. He belongs to all and none is farther from Him. Of course, there are certain restrictions as to the entry of non-Hindus into the Jagannath Temple. We do not say whether this is right or wrong. But let us consider how far it is justified to
alienate them from the Lord, at least during this car festival. A religious institution functions according to an order. We know that saint Kabir was brought up in a Muslim weaver family. In the 14th century, during the time of Kabir, fanaticism and bigotry were rife in the Hindu and Muslim communities. Since Kabir was a believer in the Nirguana Param Brahma, and a worshipper of Ram, his attitude to all was full of love, beyond the distinctions of caste. He saw Ram and Allah as equal. In his mission of propagating his principles, he was in search of a right place, and he found it at Puri. He was delighted to find this place a perfect symbol of love and unity where people belonging to different castes feed each other the Mahaprasad and forget all differences. Influenced by the worship of the idol of Jagannath as well as the glory of a transcendent conception of God, he made his sojourn at Puri and founded a Mutt near Swargadwara, known as Kabir Chaura. Puri has a distinct Mutt culture and unique tradition of its own, and almost all the mutts are related to Jagannath. The heads of the Mutts also perform certain holy services on the chariots such as Chamara Seva. There are proofs that Santh Kabir also performed this service. Thus it would be erroneous to say that non-Hindus did never mount the chariots. There are also two Mutts still stand at Puri, established by the Sikh Guru Nanak order, as the emblem of the mutt culture. One is Mangu mutt and the other, one is Chauni Mutt. Both the mutts are in the service of Lord Jagannath, and the Sadhus in the Mutts also have access to the chariots.

A great son of Odisha and Jnanapitha awardee Surendranath Mohanty has authored two historical book: Nilasaila and Niladri Vijay. His descriptions of the invasion of the Jagannath Temple by the Muslim fundamentalist ruler Taki Khan and the relentless crusade of king Ramachandra Dev and the temple Sevayats to save the idols from danger move to tears in the eyes of every Odia person. Crossing the fathomless waters of Chilika lake in the still of the night and placing the deities in safety in the Malakuda Ghat is surely a glimpse of valour displayed by the Odia people. Had the Odias given it to the Mughals, Jagannath would still have continued to be worshipped with all the sodasa upachara puja, but it would always have reminded us of our cowardice. Ramachandra Dev was resolute in re-installing Shree Jagannath, the leader of the invincible Odias’ freedom struggle, again on the Ratna Simhasan. Standing near the Ghat, he only looked at Jagannath. He felt he had lost his right to touch the Lord since he has converted himself as a Yavan (muslim). Yet in a choked voice, he entreated him to be merciful. As Jagannath had wished, the Daitas requested Yavan Ramachandra Dev to take him from the boat. In Niladri Vijay, Mohanty’s description of Ramachandra Dev touching Lord Jagannath has historical significance. Thus, it cannot be said that Yavanas had never touched Jagannath or mounted his chariot. Since Mohanty’s description is based on the foundation of history, it cannot be taken as erroneous. Therefore, in certain circumstances, the fact of the Yavanas touching Jagannath seems to be just.

The renowned French historian M. Sylvain Levi in his famous work “Gospel of Jesus Christ” had written that Christ must have stayed for four years in the Jagannath Temple and got the inspiration from the Jagannath cult for the propagation of his doctrines. Sylvain’s account proves that Christ entered the Jagannath Temple and became closer to Jagannath. As for the entry of Christians into the Gundicha temple, it can be further said that except at the time of the car festival, in the remaining days of a year, Non-Hindus could enter the Gundicha temple, where the lord stays for 7 days in car festival. This was
the practice up to the year 1970. This writer’s family had undertaken the management of the Gundicha Temple from 1964 to 1970 on behalf of the temple administration and had witnessed the entry of all loving devotees, irrespective of religions, and further it had found no restrictions imposed by the Temple Administration. It is difficult to understand as to why the administration took a different stand from 1970 onwards. It can be ascertained that the entry on Non-Hindus to the Gundicha Temple is a fact where the lord stays at the time of car festival. But how far it is justified not to allow them from mounting the chariots?

In 1719 Saka era of Gajapati Divyasingh Dev, Aurangzeb’s turpitude troubled Hinduism a lot and he had ordered to stop the car festival. But when the royal envoy Ramdaiti went to Aurangzeb to get his permission for the festival, Aurangzeb dreamt of Jagannath telling him to resist from this act, and thus he ordered through Murshid Quili Khan for conducting the festival. The car festival was conducted in a grand way. This incident clearly shows the influence of Jagannath on all, and Aurangzeb being a Non-Hindu and a cruel ruler, was forced to carry out the instructions of Jagannath. He had also acknowledged the existence of Jagannath. Thus, it is difficult to see the justification behind forbidding the Non-Hindus to touch the Lord, at least when he is outside the temple.

Darubrahma Darumaya Jagannath manifests himself on the chariot. Both the (chariot) ratha and the rathangi become one and invisible. Nilamanou treatise tells that “nandighosh ratharudha prayaksaha vanamavan srayam”. The unique experience of mounting the chariot of Jagannath and seeing him there gives ineffable joy to the devotees, and this fact has deeper significance. When he touches chariot Nandighosh, the devotee feels like touching the divine body of the Lord. We know how Jagannath halted his chariot for the beloved devotee Salabega who was far away from Puri on the day of the festival and eager to see Jagannath on the chariot. Jagannath never thought to which caste or religion his devotee belonged. Salabega has written lovingly:

“Sehi nandighosh arudha Vanama
Charane thau mo mana
Rathapatha padi kaibalya bhanji
Jau e yavan jihan”

Thus Yavan Salabega is not just a devotee of the Lord, he has also eaten the Mahaprasad. If there are no restrictions about a Yavan eating the Mahaprasad, then why he is to be forbidden to touch the Lord outside the temple? Cannot there be even a partial compatibility between the people of two different religions worshipping the same idol? Pundit Satya Narayan Rajguru has mentioned that Lord Satya Narayan, worshipped in Jagannath Temple at Puri is the first incarnation of Jagannath and is also worshipped as Satyapir by the Muslims also. Is it not a mark of the unity of religions? Then will it not be justified to allow them to mount the chariot? There is a description in the Parashar Samhita:

“Desha bhange parabase be byadhisu byas neswapi
Rakshadeva swadehadi pascharadharmam samacharet
Apat kaletu samprapte souchcharman binayet
Swayam samuddharat paschat susthordharmannam samacharet.”

These lines state that under such circumstances like insurgency, deportation, disease, famine, etc., one may stop practicing his own religion for one’s safety, and later when the situation improves, one may perform one’s swadharma and duties again. It is true that Gajapati Ramchandra Dev was converted to Islam under duress, and it was for the sole purpose of saving the idol and protecting Hindu religion. Had it not been so, the repercussion on Hinduism
and on Odisha, following the invasion of Odisha by the Non-Hindu rulers would have been unimaginable. When Gajapati was divested of his power to the administrator, Madhubabu could become successful in restoring the prestige of Odisha by fighting and winning the case. Though he himself was a Non-Hindu, does not he deserve to touch Lord Jagannath?

The universality and the glory of Jagannath is a rare thing in the history of religions in the world. Jesus, the Son of God, has derived inspiration from Jagannath. Muslim devotees like Kabir, Salabega, Yavan Haridas have surrendered their souls completely to Purushottama Jagannath. Throughout their lives, they have sung the glory of the Lord. But the fact of forbidding them to touch Jagannath outside the temple raises an important question, which is a matter of study by religious pundits and researchers. It is not that all the non-Hindus are the devotees of Jagannath. In them, many blaspheme think that Jagannath is a wooden idol. One such is Mr. Sterling who commented so seeing the pahandi of Jagannath:

“I can’t understand what joy the Hindus get from playing with this idol in the mud and slum of Bada Danda”.

It can be very well concluded that a Non-Muslim administrator who can utter such profanities knows no meaning of religion. How could Mr. Sterling know the inextricable bond between the literature, culture, tradition of people and their God in public? Perhaps not. However, it is a different issue whether the non-Hindus having no faith or respect for the Jagannath cult be given the opportunity of touching the Lord. At present, this delicate issue demands careful thought. Sankaracharya of Puri has been entrusted with this responsibility. May be, he is likely to give his views from a scriptural standpoint.

The eminent scholar Sri K. C. Mishra has written in his book, the cult of Jagannath “All people irrespective of caste, creed and religion can ofcourse get maximum facility as to the seeing, touching and worshipping of the lords placed on Rathas. This is possible because the evil of untouchability is conspicuously absent there”.

This observation of Sri Mishra has been strongly accepted by the authorities of Calcutta University hence, this chapter be ended here and non-Hindus should be allowed to climb the chariot on car festival.

From time immemorial Lord Jagannath is worshipped by Sabaras, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians. Universal religion, so to say cannot be differentiated from Lord Jagannath or Purushottam. Lord Jagannath symbolizes “Sarbam khalidwam Brahman”. In every creature the existence of the Lord is there. In the language of another Veda “Sarba Bhutantaratma “Ba” Atmabat sarbabhutesu”. That in every creature Brahma exists. This is our national culture. The essence of our religion is “Basudeva Sakutumbam”. The entire universe is our family. The difference between human beings between state and states in this world has got no meaning in the eyes of the Lord. Jagannath is the culmination of all religions. In him rest all the religions of the world. The Lord who absorbs all the pains of human beings, who stand at the time of needs is ever-pervading. In him there is no consideration of rich and poor, big and small. He is not the biggest deity of Odisha or Odia, He is the Lord of the Universe. The difference is He appears before any body in any manner provided you pray him in same breath.

Damodar Pradhani, Sevayat, Lord Jagannath Temple, Puri.