

Hariti, Buddhist Deity

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Hariti is a female divinity who was a Yakshini of Rajagriha when Buddha was dwelling there. She was married to Panchika a Yaksha general of the Gandhara region. By him she had 500 children and she came to be known as Bhutamata, i.e. the mother of the demons. The story of Hariti occurs in detail in *Vinaya Pitaka* of the *Sarvastivada* school, the *Mahavastu*, and the *Samyukta Ratna sutra* of the Chinese *Sutrapitaka*.



Hariti with children, Gandhara, 2nd cent. A.D.

It is said that because of a wicked vow she took in her previous birth she was born as a Yakshini and gave birth to 500 children. To feed her and her children she took to cannibalism and stole a child everyday from some house at Rajagriha. This led to great fear and lamentations among the inhabitants of the place. To protect their children the aggrieved parents came to Buddha and petitioned to him to save their wards. (Hariti's original name was Abhirati). From this time she came to be called Hariti (i.e. one who steals).

To teach Hariti a lesson, Buddha came to the city to beg his meal and then arrived at Hariti's dwelling house. Seeing Hariti away he hid Hariti's youngest and most beloved son Pingala in his begging bowl and came back to his monastery. Returning home and not finding Pingala Hariti became over-whelmed with grief

and began to search him here and there restlessly. Ultimately she came to Buddha and requested him to find out the boy. Buddha agreed to help her provided she gave up cannibalism and follow his precepts. She accorded readily to Buddha's command. Buddha then gave Pingala back to Hariti. Buddha ordained her as a lay worshipper to the Sangha. Hariti, however, asked Buddha how she and her children would obtain food for their sustenance. Thereupon Buddha sent for the monks and

asked them to supply abundant food everyday to Hariti and her children. Buddha's order was followed by the monks faithfully. In return for the services, Yakshini Hariti and her sons were to become the custodians of Buddhist buildings. Hiuen-Tsang (Xuanzang) and I-tsing(Ijing) saw an altar for Hariti in all the monasteries they visited in India and Nepal.



Hariti's conversion to the Buddhist faith introduced a new phase in life. Thanks to the blessings of Buddha, who himself ordained her as upasika. From a devourer of children she became their protectors and a deity. For this reason, the image of Hariti was found either in the porch or in a corner of the dining hall of all the Indian monasteries. She was depicted as having a babe in her arms and 'round her knees three or five children'. Very soon a popular cult grew around Hariti. Hiuen Tsang records that there was a *stupa* in honour of Hariti which is said to have been built by Asoka in Peshawar and the people there offered sacrifices to her to obtain offspring from her. It appears that she was the most powerful among the followers (retinue) of the four heavenly kings or Devarajas (see *Si-yu-ki-Buddhist Records of the Western World* by Hiuen Tsang, translated by Samuel Beal, Delhi Edition, p.110-111).

Dr. J.N. Banerjea has pointed out some similarities between Hariti and Rakshasi Jara of Magadha. Regarding Jara the story goes:

King Brihadratha of the Magadhan was imbecile. Having come to know of this, the sage Chanda Kausika cast a spell on a mango and sent it to Brihadratha. The King sent it to his two favourite queens who ate the fruit in equal share. As a result each of them gave birth to half a child. Rakshashi Jara knew it and joined the two pieces and a boy came to life and

called Jarasandha means one who was joined by Jara,(see Eassays in Indian Philosophy, Religion and Literature). As mentioned in the Mahabharata Jara had the power of assuming many forms and she was worshipped not only in the royal house but by the people in general. She was called grihadevi (the goddess of the house hold). Her youthful figure, surrounded by her children was painted on the walls of the royal palaces. Whoever draws her figure in this way is blessed with plenty. Whoever does not do it was cursed with poverty (See J.N. Banerjea Development of Hindu Iconography).

The name Hariti acquired sanctity very early. The inscription of a steatite reliquary found inside an old *stupa* (2nd century B.C.) mentions the relic of Haritiputra, a Buddhist teacher and contemporary of Asoka¹. It is well known that he constructed a *stupa* In Peshawar.

The Hariti cult seems to have been well established by the Indo-Greek and Kushan times as it is indicated by the archaeology and sculptures of this period and Hariti gained popularity as the time passed.

The *Suvarnapravasottama sutra* (5th century) describes her as Mahadevi and she is invoked there along with other more important deities like Sarasvati, Sri, Dhridha (earth-goddess), etc. The fifteenth chapter of the *Suvarnaprabhavasottama sutra* is called a raksha or protection extended to the listeners of the *sutra* by the Yakshas and other Buddhist deities including Hariti and others like Chanda, Chandika, Chandalika, Danti Kuta. All these deities will convert the entire Jambudvipa into a land of plenty in all respects. In art also Hariti is shown side by side with Siva-Mahesvara, Skanda, and some of the highest Buddhist deities. From the Gupta times onwards she came to be regarded also as a Tantric deity with power of healing diseases. She was identified with Sitala personification of smallpox.

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