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Piṭhoro: A Well-known Unknown God

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Piṭhoro is the best-known god of the Rāṭhvas, an *ādivāsī* (tribal) people in the region of the former princely state of Choṭā Udepūr, now in the eastern Vadodarā district of Gujarat. Technically, Piṭhoro is not the “highest” Rāṭhva god. That honor is said to belong to Ind, whose relation to the god Indra seems plausible on linguistic and, at least according to Jyotindra Jain¹, on cultic grounds as well. Piṭhoro is Ind’s nephew. Despite Ind’s status, Piṭhoro is the god outsiders are most likely to encounter first.

An encounter with Piṭhoro is most commonly visual, for he is a highly visible god, present to the senses in the form of a painting, referred to as a Piṭhora². The painting is found on the central interior wall, called the “royal wall,” of many, but not all, Rāṭhva homes. (The homes are made of mud walls and thatched or tiled roofs; I do not have any hard statistics about the frequency of the paintings in any Rāṭhva settlement.) In the center of the composition is a line of horses, facing to the left. This is the wedding procession of Piṭhoro, and in it ride Piṭhoro himself, his new wife Piṭhorī, and several others, at times including Gaṇeh, a *hukkah*-smoking figure at the tail end of the procession³ whose name sometimes leads him to be identified with Gaṇeśa. Above the procession, a generally wavy line divides the field into “heaven”—the region above—and the regions below, where the procession occurs. On some interpretations Piṭhoro also appears a second time in the painting: riding on elephant back and sharing a *hukkah* with his uncle Ind. Other figures represent elements of Rāṭhva life, such as plowing, churning, drawing water from a well, milking, gathering palm wine, and storing grain. Occasional paintings depict sexual copulation and bestiality. More common is an anthropomorphic figure

1 Jain, chap. 6.

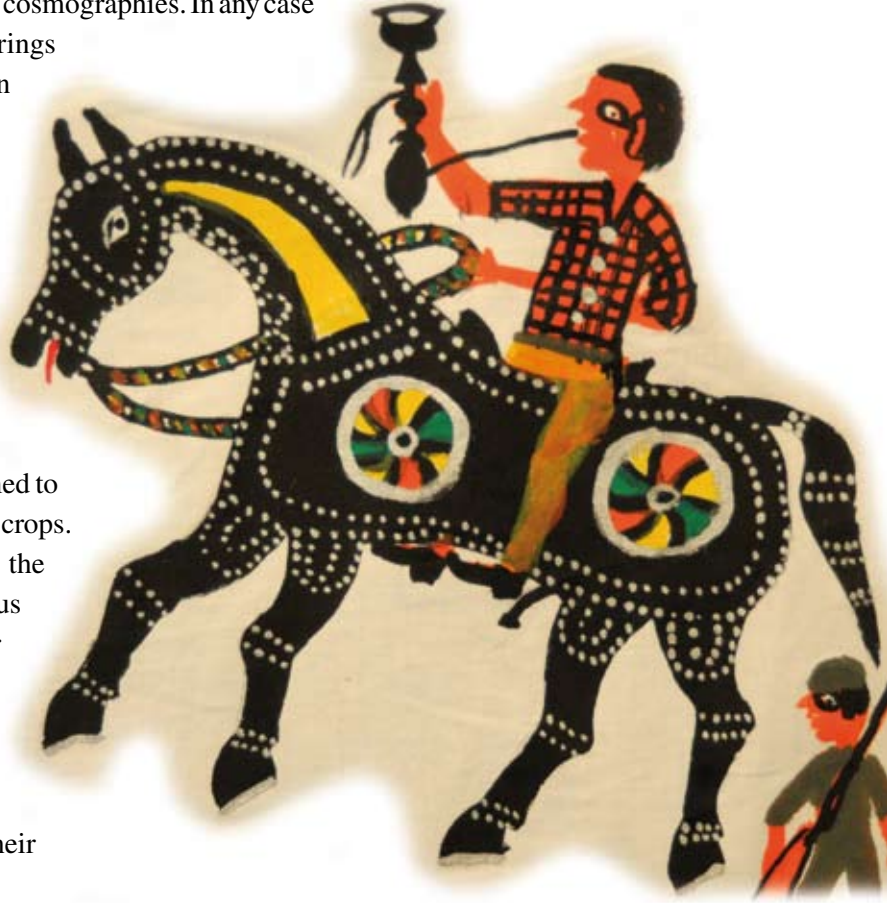
2 Or a Piṭhoro, but for the sake of clarity I will refer to the god as Piṭhoro and the painting as a Piṭhora.

3 A perhaps more common alternative is to depict him not in the procession but in the lower right corner.

with 12 match-stick-like “heads,” sometimes identified as Rāvaṇa, the ten-headed *rākṣasa* from the Rāmāyaṇa, although this identification is contested. The above is, at least, a description of a very common kind of Piṭhoro as seen, for example, at the home of Mansingbhai Dhanjibhai Rathwa, a well-known Piṭhoro painter who lives in the village of Malaja. There are other styles, too. According to Jyotindra Jain the paintings are cosmogonies; according to Vishvajit Pandya they are ethnographies. As I read them, they are, rather, cosmographies. In any case

Rāṭhvas make offerings to the paintings on at least three kinds of occasion: on the painting and consecration of the Piṭhoro; on major festivals such as Dīvālī and Holī; and during a ritual known as *ḍoḍa pūjavā*, performed to protect the growing crops. The painting is also the site of other religious observances. For example, Rāṭhva women may be blessed in front of a Piṭhoro on the occasion of their marriage.

The rituals that mark the painting and consecration of the Piṭhoro, called *pāṅghu*, constitute a three-day affair. They take place on a consecutive Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday sometime during the period between Dīvālī (around October) and Holī (around March). The



Gaṇeh on horseback (detail). Piṭhoro on cloth by Mansingbhai Dhanjibhai Rathwa: Gregory D. Alles Collection. Photo: Susan Ruddick Bloom.