This paper examines the transformation of Pithora paintings – a divine and artistic creation associated with Rathva Adivasis of western India – in relation to a developing art market, and competing claims over the nature of Adivasi identity.

Other authors have focused on the myths behind the Pithora traditions. In contrast, I stress the effectiveness of the painting over its meaning. As a God called to protect a household, Pithora has the power to bring well being and prosperity. Drawing on broader debates on the agency of art objects and the constitution of the ‘secular’ in contemporary India, the paper examines how the shift to ‘art’ is altering the semiotic processes and social and divine relations that the painting involves.

From being the embodiment of a divinity, Pithora is becoming a text with a symbolic function. In this process, the interpretation of the painting is taking importance over its efficacy, giving rise to contestations over the nature of Adivasis’ history and identity. While raising question over the changing nature of divine (and other) agency, the paper examines how this transformation looks from the perspective of different kinds of actors (artists, healers, activists), and how they affect and are affected by it. It argues that Pithora is gaining a new kind of efficacy in its ability to mediate processes of social and religious change.