
STIGMA AND SELF: GENDER, HOMOPHOBIA, AND IDENTITY IN CHITRANGADA BY RITUPARNO GHOSH UNDER THE CONTEMPORARY LEGAL FRAMEWORKS OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The present article explores the cinematic depiction of gender identity, stigma, and queer subjectivity in Rituparno Ghosh's film *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012) while focusing on Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and its gradual evolution into an important piece of LGBT+ jurisprudence in recent years. The discussion explores the tensions between individual self-conception and socially, legally-defined identities through the film's protagonist, Rudra Chatterjee. Gender in his film is presented as a dynamic entity, continuously constructed via social interactions, and not something biologically imposed, solely. The discussion considers modern legal and judicial developments surrounding the topic of gender identity, including the debates around the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, in order to reveal the continued tensions between the subjective perception of one's own identity and the state-imposed gender constructs. Employing the theories of queer studies and gender performance, this article tries to demonstrate how stigma affects desire and embodiment, as well as the individual himself. *Chitrangada*, the film and this article, *Stigma and Self*, presents cinema as a locus for contestation of normative gender roles in contemporary society.

Keywords: Chitrangada; Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026; Identity; Homophobia; Stigma.

INTRODUCTION

Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish is a Bengali film released in 2012, written, directed and performed by Rituparno Ghosh, who took on the central role of Rudra Chatterjee, a choreographer confronting the question of his own gender identity. The film borrows its title and its central metaphor from Rabindranath Tagore's dance drama Chitrangada which itself is an adaptation of the story of the Manipuri princess in the Mahabharata who was raised by the king to be a warrior and a man, which changed completely after she fell in love with Arjuna and wished, to become a woman¹. Ghosh had drawn on Tagore before, most notably in his film, *Chokher Bali*, and critics have long observed how Tagore's ideas about gender and desire has shaped Ghosh's artistic voice².

In Chitrangada that inheritance becomes explicit. Rudra stages Tagore's play while his own life comes to mirror it, and the film moves between the mythological princess, the staged performance of Chitra and Rudra's lived experience of gender non-conformity, homophobia and the pressure to fit within a binary that never quite made room for him³.

Ghosh was one of the most significant filmmakers to emerge from Bengal after Satyajit Ray, and is often described as an heir to that tradition⁴. He studied economics at Jadavpur University before turning to cinema and went on to direct twelve features, winning National Film Award for Best Feature Film for *Unishe April* (19th April) and receiving international recognition for *Chokher Bali*, which was nominated for the Golden Leopard at the 2003 Locarno International Film Festival. *Chitrangada* was first premiered at New York Indian Film Festival in May 2012⁵ and still is widely regarded as his most personal work, for the film mostly resonates and draws similar parallels with his own life's incidents. By that point in his life Ghosh had himself become known for embracing androgyny and for rejecting a fixed gender binary in his own public appearance, emphasising gender fluidity, so Rudra's struggle on screen reads less as

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, Chitrangada [চিত্রাঙ্গদা] (Viswa-Bharati 1904)

² Amborish Roychoudhury, *Rituparno Ghosh and the Enduring Influence of Tagore*, LiveMint (Aug. 30, 2020), <https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/art-and-culture/rituparno-ghosh-and-the-enduring-influence-of-tagore-111634487709595.html>.

³ *Chitrangada Review: Privilege, Family, Breakthrough, Breakthrough India*, <https://inbreakthrough.org/chitrangada-review-privilege-family/> (last visited Jul. 6, 2026).

⁴ Nermeen Shaikh, *Rituparno Ghosh and the "Intellectual Film" in India*, Asia Society, <https://asiasociety.org/rituparno-ghosh-and-intellectual-film-india> (last visited Jul. 5, 2026).

⁵ *New York Indian Film Festival 2012: Centrepiece – Chitrangada*, Indo-American Arts Council.

invented drama than as a mediated version of Ghosh's own negotiation with identity⁶.

Ghosh did not himself undergo transition, and the film is not autobiographical in the literal sense, but it is autobiographical in the sense that matters most here i.e. in the sense of its emotional and lived truth aspect. This article reads *Chitrangada* as more than just a film about one man's personal crisis of gender. It elucidates on the stigma Rudra experienced, both from wider society and from within the queer community itself. This interpretation is read with the Indian law's own tumultuous relationship with gender identity, a relationship that has evolved from criminalisation of same sex relations under section 377 of the Indian Penal Code through the constitutional gains of the last decade, where the same section was decriminalised and now, into the present controversy over the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026. Read together, the film and the law points to this single recurring question, whether identity is something a person is entitled to define for themselves, or something that has to be certified, categorised and approved by an outside authority before it can be recognised at all.

LEGAL AND TEMPORAL CONTEXT OF CHITRANGADA: THE CROWNING WISH

Any reading of *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* has to be situated firmly within its legal and socio-political moment. Ghosh's film is a celebration of androgyny as Rudra, the protagonist is synonymous with Lord Shiva, thus creating a synthesis of both masculine and feminine energies, Shiva and his consort, Shakti. This forms the synergy of constructive and generative power. Every move, every dance form is specifically characterised by grace, gestured and delicate moves in a time when society constantly denies the acceptance of a male dancing in classical music⁷. When Rituparno Ghosh released the film in 2012, India was still governed by Section 377 of Indian Penal Code, which criminalised same-sex relations. Although the *Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi* had temporarily read down the law in 2009, the legal status of queer identities remained precarious, contested and deeply stigmatised in public discourse, especially after the Supreme Court ruled over the very judgment in 2010, in *Suresh Kumar Kaushal v. Naz Foundation* and reinstated Section 377 of Indian Penal Code, 1870. The full and final decriminalisation came much later, in 2018, making the film's release part of a fraught and uncertain interim period. Heteronormative norms are deeply ingrained in the Indian

⁶ *Chitrangada: The Crowning Achievement of Rituparno Ghosh*, RoyRituparna, <https://www.royrituparna.com/chitrangada-the-crowning-achievement-of-rituparno-ghosh.html> (last visited Jul. 7, 2026)

⁷ Ayanita Banerjee, *(Re)-Defining Chitrangada: The Queer Journey from Tagore to Rituparno Ghosh*, 24 *Global Journal of Human-Social Science : A Arts and Humanities- Psychology* 11 (2024)

Society, and the same is evidently reflected in the gap between legislation and judiciary; in one land the judiciary decriminalised section 377 recognising the status of queer communities in India, while the legislation went out their way to introduce The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026 demeaning the existence and rights of that very same communities. This temporal context and socio-political-legal debate is not incidental, it is central to understanding the film's courage, urgency, aesthetic choices and also the standing of LGBTQIA+ community in India. Despite the decriminalisation of section 377 of the erstwhile IPC, the status of queer communities still remain precarious with the Supreme Court restraining from passing any judgement to legally recognise their marital status⁸ or allowing queer couples to open a joint bank account as spouses or to legally adopt a child. Decriminalization of consensual same sex activities can be termed the stepping stone to recognising queer rights in India but it definitely is not the only subject that would guarantee their rights to be protected. Chitrangada does not emerge in a cultural vacuum of acceptance but rather in a landscape where queer desire, gender non-conformity and bodily autonomy were still subject to legal ambiguity and social hostility. The film's introspective tone, its negotiation of visibility and vulnerability, its refusal to offer neat resolutions, and Ghosh's decision to foreground a protagonist grappling with gender identity and surgical transformation becomes an act of both artistic expression and political-legal defiance.

The central plot is driven by the Indian legal scenario which strictly prohibits same-sex couples to adopt children. Rudra's "crowning wish" to transition is legally motivated for it is the only way he can start a family, which ideally is a fundamental and natural right of every citizen. But in this case, as the socio-political commentary suggests, the Indian legal system forces a queer individual to physically alter their bodies into binary norms to access such fundamental rights⁹. India's Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act permits women or heterosexual couples to adopt but explicitly bars same-sex couples to adopt children. In 2012 India lacked a legal framework recognising a "Third Gender" or non-binary identity which only arrived later in 2014 NALSA judgment. The mutation of the body of a queer person through surgery has been seen as the only desperate yet bureaucratic way out for being recognized as a "woman" and thus having access to familial rights. This film provides us with a quite harsh political commentary on how cis-gender gay men can embody patriarchal and transphobic values. By turning down Rudra after he goes through the operation and expressing his desire for a "real

⁸ Supriyo alias Supriya Chakraborty & Anr. v. Union of India, 2023 INSC 920 (India)

⁹ Tagore *supra* note 2.

woman”, Partho, who is a bisexual member of the queer community, makes it clear how isolated trans people feel even within the queer community.¹⁰

Ghosh’s portrayal of family, the central protagonist and his struggle with his family is akin to the modern day society somehow– privileged yet rigid and hypocritical to a certain extent. He frames an urban upper-middle class Bengali family of Kolkata which demands biological and heteronormative continuity for the longest, until they finally realize where the wrong in their assumption actually lies¹¹.

STIGMA, SELF AND THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER

The tension that this article explores is the tension between the self as it is actually experienced and the social processes that work to suppress or control it. Stigma, in its narrowest sense, refers to the open discrimination faced by people whose sexual orientation departs from the heterosexual norm, but in its wider sense it covers the whole range of social processes through which society imposes heteronormative expectations and binary gender roles on individuals who do not fit them. Rudra experiences this pressure socially, emotionally and, eventually, institutionally, and it shows up not in dramatic confrontation but in the ordinary business of rehearsals, family conversations and romantic life, in the expectation that he behave according to a recognisable standard of masculinity or femininity.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is useful here. Gender norms, as she has written, operates by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ideals that are almost always tied to the idealisation of the heterosexual bond¹². In *Chitrangada*, this operates less through overt hostility than through a string of small, everyday encounters that remind Rudra, again and again, of his obligation to fit within the socially accepted norms. His fluid and expressive body language, resistant to a rigid masculinity, sets him quietly apart. A lingering glance, a pause that stretches a beat too long, an interaction that carries an undertone of unease, none of these are dramatic in themselves, but rather, when put together they function as mechanisms of regulation, signalling that masculinity is not simply an identity but also, an expectation that has to be performed and revalidated in ordinary life. This mirrors how gender norms function outside the cinema as well. Expectations around clothing, speech and

¹⁰Sarabjeet Lahiri and Aniruddha Lahiri, *Familial Space and Struggle for Identity in Rituparno Ghosh’s World of Films*, 10 Daath Voyage: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English 202 (2025).

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Judith Butler, *Critically Queer*, 1 GLQ: J. Lesbian & Gay Stud. 17, 25 (1993).

behaviour, most times, guide individuals towards conformity, without even noticing. Any such departure from these expectations, however minor, invites exclusive scrutiny or social exclusion. The power of these norms lies precisely in how rarely they are questioned, which is what allows them to appear natural rather than enforced.

This same dynamic plays out in the film's treatment of homophobia, which is rarely staged as overt violence or explicit rejection, rather it appears as something lived and internalised like a force that gradually works its way into how a person understands love and desire. Internalisation of such homophobia is well documented with its symptoms ranging from denial of one's own orientation to shame, poor body image, hostility towards openly queer people, an anxious effort to appear heterosexual, resulting to its consequences, which can include isolation, depression, difficulty with intimacy and, in some cases, self- destructive behaviour¹³. Sara Ahmed's description of coming out as a kind of disorientation captures something very similar. On her account, sexual orientation is not only an orientation of desire but an orientation within society, and repeated exposure is what makes heterosexuality feel normal and expected, so that a queer life becomes, almost by definition, a process of disrupting that expected flow¹⁴. Rudra's decision to pursue physical transformation cannot be separated from this dynamic. It is not presented purely as an act of self- realisation but as something entangled with the need to be accepted, both romantically and socially, a psychological shift in which stigma that once came from outside is slowly absorbed until it is felt from within¹⁵.

RUDRA'S GENDER REASSIGNMENT SURGERY AND THE POLITICS OF THE BODY

Rudra's decision to undergo gender reassignment surgery is one of the most contested moments in the film, and Ghosh resists presenting it as a simple act of liberation. It is framed instead as a conflicted choice, shaped at once by love, by the wish for social acceptance and by stigma the character has already internalised. At one level the decision grows out of Rudra's wish to have children with Partho and to build a bond recognisable within the heteronormative structures of family and parenthood, since Indian law does not permit a same sex couple to adopt. The body, in this sense, is not shown as something purely personal but as the means through which legitimacy itself is sought. The surgery is not only about becoming, it is about

¹³*Internalised Homophobia*, The Rainbow Project, <https://www.rainbow-project.org/internalised-homophobia/> (last visited Jun. 28, 2026).

¹⁴Ilan Meyer, *Minority Stress and Health Disparities*, ScienceDirect, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953622001666> (last visited Jul. 9, 2026).

¹⁵ Chitrangada: The Crowning Achievement of Rituparno Ghosh, *supra* note 6.

being recognised¹⁶.

The clinical and procedural texture surrounding the surgery adds a further layer of institutional validation to this idea, suggesting that identity must first be verified and made legible through formal process before it can be accepted. When Rudra tells his parents that he plans to undergo surgery and counselling, his father assumes this is a route back to “normality”, meaning a return to being a boy, an assumption that treats queer identity as a mistake located in the head, something that can be corrected. It is only once Rudra clarifies that he intends to undergo gender reassignment surgery that his parents are left, together, at a genuine loss for words. Even as the story moves toward physical change, Chitrangada is careful not to suggest that transformation resolves anything. The underlying tensions in Rudra's life remain, and the expectation that surgery will deliver clarity is quietly undercut by the film's own ending, in which Rudra calls off the final operation and begins to undo what has already been done, closing on the idea that one should be permitted, simply, to be what one wishes to be¹⁷. The body, the film suggests, cannot fully contain or define the self. It is one of several sites where identity is contested and reconfigured, and the surgery functions less as an answer than as a question that exposes the pressures shaping identity rather than settling them.

CRITIQUE OF THE TRANSGENDER PERSONS (PROTECTION OF RIGHTS) AMENDMENT BILL, 2026

The Transgender Persons(Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026 represents a severe, regressive shift in India's queer jurisprudence so far, replacing a rights based framework grounded in human dignity established through hard-won and progressive Supreme Court rulings with a system of state-controlled gatekeeping and invasive unnecessary surveillance.

The amendment bill's principal act, The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 was enacted after the NALSA and Navtej Singh Johar case to codify the protections for trans individuals. While the act was criticised heavily for its clumsy bureaucratic certificate system managed by the district magistrates, it had a key provision enshrined under section 4(2): “A person recognised as a transgender... shall have a right to self perceived gender identity.”¹⁸. The amendment bill of 2026 deletes this very section by abolishing self-identification and

¹⁶ *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (Rituparno Ghosh dir, 2012)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, § 4(2) (India).

establishing mandatory medical boards to certify the same. The act narrows the definition and scope of “trans-gender” and mandates every medical institute to report gender affirming surgeries directly to the District Magistrate and making a certificate contingent upon a state appointed medical board’s review¹⁹.

2017 KS Puttaswamy case²⁰ and 2018 Navtej Singh Johar case²¹, are the two constitutional cases with landmark ruling by the supreme court of india which the 2026 amendment bill violates particularly. K S Puttaswamy, 2017, which established right to privacy, expanding the scope of its meaning under article 21 of the Indian Constitution from “spatial privacy” to decisional autonomy, thus explicitly ruling that every citizen of India has the freedom to make intimate choices regarding one’s sexual orientation, gender identity and bodily presentation as a form of a core component of personal liberty. This ruling further influenced the reasoning used by the 5-judge bench of Navtej Singh Johar case in 2018, stating that gender expression are inherently a part of article 21, right to privacy and decisional autonomy’s ambit and thus decriminalized section 377 of the then IPC, 1870. The court ruled, in Navtej Singh Johar case, that section 377 is violative of article 21 as it penalises the intimate manifestation of identity and choice, and that gender expression and choice of the partner lie at the absolute heart of constitutional privacy. The judges further clarified that the state cannot rely solely on “popular social morality” to violate the “constitutional morality” of protecting marginalized minorities of the society²².

Before these two cases, in 2014, the NALSA judgement recognised, legally, the “Third Gender” and mandated self-determination of gender identity without needing to require any medical or surgical intervention, covering it under the direct ambit of articles 14, 19 and 21²³. But, the 2026 Amendment bill strips self-identification, forced medical board gatekeeping and mandatory tracking and also replaces “psychological test” with “biological test”, violating the very constitutional grounds laid down by, especially these three above-mentioned landmark cases. By forcing individuals to undergo the screening test by a State Medical Board to gain a state-approved recognition, the 2026 Bill reinstates a cold, clinical “biological test” over the judicially mandated “psychological test”, turning a fundamental human right into a contingent

¹⁹ The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026 (India)

²⁰Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India, (2017) 10 S.C.C. 1 (India).

²¹ Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, (2018) 10 S.C.C. 1 (India).

²²Ibid.

²³National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, (2014) 5 S.C.C. 438 (India).

state concession²⁴.

The deliberate addition of criminal offense punishment for someone who “coerces or allures” someone into assuming transgender identity threatens gender affirming actions by doctors, psychologists, counselors, and supportive families.

The government has argued to defend the 2026 framework as necessary to establish a “precise and verifiable” standard to prevent cisgender individuals from fraudulently claiming welfare schemes, horizontal reservations or protections which are earmarked for trans individuals²⁵. But reasoning administrative convenience cannot strip citizens of their key, essential, fundamental rights. The Supreme Court has repeatedly held and ruled against the state’s action to use the guise of one issue to strip off fundamental rights; discarding the principle of self-identification violates the doctrine of proportionality held in *KS Puttaswamy v. UOI*, 2017. One of the key contentions raised at the Supreme Court in *Laxmi Narayan Tripathi v. UOI*, is whether a mandatory National Transgender Registry and reporting requirements relating to gender affirming procedures violate the right to privacy and informational autonomy recognised in *Justice KS Puttaswamy v. UOI* (2017)²⁶.

2026 Amendment Bill’s language is such that its punishments are not indicative of its reformative intentions but rather of its colonial tendencies of condemning homosexuality. Imposition of harsh penalties for forcing individuals to assume a transgender identity or engaging them in begging are designed to protect vulnerable youth from forced mutilation, and while this is important, but the bill’s language is overboard and to an extent, ambiguous— using phrases like “alluring” or “forcing someone to present as trans”²⁷, the laws tends to create an adversarial ecosystem which mirrors the colonial era Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which treated traditional trans community support systems as inherently criminal operation centers²⁸.

²⁴Nayyab Ali, *Protection to Prosecution: The Criminalisation of Transgender Existence in India's 2026 Amendment Bill*, Harv. Kennedy Sch. Carr Ctr. for Hum. Rts. (Apr. 2, 2026), <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/carr-ryan/our-work/carr-ryan-commentary/protection-prosecution-criminalization-transgender>.

²⁵*Challenge to the Transgender Persons Amendment Act 2026*, Supreme Court Observer, <https://www.scobserver.in/cases/challenge-to-the-transgender-persons-amendment-act-2026/> (last visited Jul. 5, 2026).

²⁶*Laxmi Narayan Tripathi v. Union of India*, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 548 of 2026 (pending before the Supreme Court of India); *Challenge to the Transgender Persons Amendment Act 2026*, *supra* note 13.

²⁷*The 2026 Transgender Amendment Bill and its Roll-Back of Constitutional Rights*, Centre for Law and Policy Research (last visited Jul. 6, 2026).

²⁸Sona Sharma, *Trans Amendment Bill Echoes British Criminal Tribes Act*, ThePrint (Mar. 29, 2026).

CONCLUSION

Chitrangada shows that the struggle for a queer identity is never only a matter of personal experience or social acceptance, it is political and juridical at the same time. Rudra's story turns the body into a political entity in which legitimacy and recognition are always at stake, and it shows that the wish to be accepted is bound up with situations that impose a certain conformity, forcing a person to negotiate constantly between being true to themselves and simply being allowed to live. With the 2026 Amendment Bill, this same struggle is being pushed further into the juridical sphere, where identity now has to be confirmed, categorised and authenticated by the state before it can be acted upon. Chitrangada was never just a story about the choreographer coming to terms with himself and his physical appearance; Chitrangada was an assertion on India's stance of queer identity made using cinematic language that the individual's own perception of his/her identity does not require the consent of anybody.

The film's title "crowning wish" stops at it, to emphasize its message on being about the fact that transformation alone cannot be separated and seen differently than the demand for something as simple and basic as a fundamental, natural, human right to exist without one's identity being doubted.

Whereas the film recognizes the truth, the 2026 Bill fails to do so as it does not acknowledge that one's identity is not a statement that needs to be authenticated but rather is more like a practice which is formed out of little acts of defiance and honesty carried out over time in a practice room or family dinner table or a discussion with people who either understand the statements made or not. Rudra does not reach out explicitly to his identity as if the same is similar to passing an exam but it is rather through making minute choices which cannot be judged by any medical board, that he expresses his identity, his fluidity, his stance and perception of and about embracing his heterosexuality. To certify such a process and to go on to reduce it to a mere biological state-sanctioned examination and a signature from the district magistrate is rather ridiculous and insensitive on the part of the state, which further reflects the idea and stance the law-makers have in mind about queer identity and heterosexuality. The price to pay for such an approach is ultimately, anyways, paid by individuals who have very little resemblance to Rudra: people whose families are still in the process of comprehending them, people who are in the middle of making decisions about their bodies, and who have to rely on the opinion of a medical board in order to make their decision into something legally

binding and recognised.

Ghosh's movie is not a definite conclusion when it comes to Rudra's story or in this case, there can be multiple Rudra Chatterjee-s in our society, who might have very little resemblance with the protagonist of the film but at least the Indian Legislation could be as honest with its queer population as the film is, in its message on gender-fluidity and heterosexuality. The 2026 Bill provides clarity and verifiability, which seem like good things per se, but which come at the price of Chitrangada's struggle for understanding on her terms. On one hand, there are landmark judicial judgements of NALSA v. UOI and Navtej Singh Johar and on the other hand, there stands The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, going against the very same judgments. The 2026 Bill replaces self-identification recognised in NALSA, Navtej Singh Johar and Puttaswamy with medical certification and administrative gatekeeping, and in doing so it risks becoming, in law, a version of precisely the structures of stigma and control that Chitrangada set out to criticise.

While Ghosh's film presents identity as fluid, experiential and grounded in feeling rather than in any fixed or externally imposed definition. Tagore's Chitrangada ends with the princess asking Arjuna to accept her as she truly is, warrior and woman both, rather than as the borrowed beauty she once wished for. Ghosh's film ends on a version of the same request, made more than a century later and in a very different register. Whether the Laxmi Narayan Tripathi v Union of India, the case pending in front of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India at present, will give this plea any legal legitimacy is yet to be seen. However, this particular plea, that of accepting someone the way he/she truly is rather than according to what others wish to see him/her to be, is independent of the legal proceedings in its own right. It is the same plea with which the film began, and it is important to note that a film continues to make its case long after the law has been changed.