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Suniti Choudhury and Santi Ghosh

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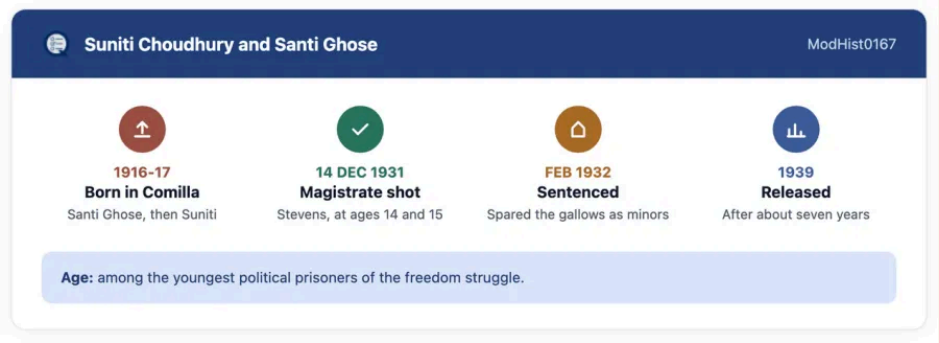
Suniti Choudhury and Santi Ghosh

One was fourteen and the other fifteen. Both were schoolgirls in Comilla, in eastern Bengal.

On 14 December 1931 they shot the district magistrate in his own office. They became among the youngest political prisoners of India’s freedom struggle.



Suniti Choudhury as a girl. No freely licensed photo of Santi Ghose is used here. Photo: WB Archives, CC BY-SA 2.5, via Wikimedia Commons.



Four turning points in the story of Suniti Choudhury and Santi Ghose.

> **Place.** Comilla (Cumilla), then in Bengal.
> **Group.** Jugantar Party and the Chhatri Sangha.
> **Target.** C. G. B. Stevens, District Magistrate of Comilla.
> **Date.** 14 December 1931.
> **Court.** Calcutta, February 1932.
> **Freed.** 1939, after about seven years.

Jugantar: a militant nationalist group active across Bengal.

Chhatri Sangha: a students' association for girls, linked to Jugantar.

Amnesty: an official pardon that frees prisoners.

1 Who were the two girls?

Our story begins in Comilla, now in Bangladesh. Santi Ghose is born there on 22 November 1916. Her father, Debendranath Ghose, is a nationalist and a professor of philosophy at Victoria College.

Suniti Choudhury follows on 22 May 1917. Her parents are Umacharan and Surasundari Choudhury. She studies at the Nawab Faizunnessa Government Girls' High School.

The same school has another pupil, Prafullanalini Brahma. She will bring both girls into the revolutionary movement. Suniti is also inspired by Ullaskar Dutta, a revolutionary who lived in Comilla.

- Santi Ghose: born **22 November 1916**, Comilla.
- Suniti Choudhury: born **22 May 1917**, Comilla.
- Santi's father was a professor of philosophy at **Victoria College**.
- Suniti studied at Nawab Faizunnessa Government Girls' High School.
- Prafullanalini Brahma, a fellow pupil, recruited them to **Jugantar**.
- Suniti was inspired by **Ullaskar Dutta**.

> **Quick check 1.** Suniti Choudhury was fourteen when the magistrate was shot. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 What was the Chhatri Sangha?

By 1931 the two friends are part of something bigger. The Chhatri Sangha is a students' association for girls, and it is linked to the Jugantar Party. Santi helps to found it and becomes its secretary.

The Tripura Zilla Chhatri Sangha holds its annual conference on 6 May 1931. There Suniti is chosen Captain of the Women's Volunteer Corps. Her alias is Meera Devi.

She is also named the "custodian of firearms". She trains other girls in lathi, sword and dagger play. Santi trains too, with swords, clubs and firearms.

The mood in Bengal is tense. The Chittagong Armoury Raid, led by Surya Sen, was in 1930. Bhagat Singh was executed in March 1931. Young Bengalis feel the pull of armed resistance.

- Santi was a founding member and **secretary** of the Chhatri Sangha.

- On **6 May 1931**, Suniti became Captain of its Women's Volunteer Corps.
- Suniti's alias: **Meera Devi**.
- She was "custodian of firearms" and trained girls in lathi, sword and dagger play.
- Background: Chittagong Armoury Raid (1930) and Bhagat Singh's execution (1931).

3 What happened in the magistrate's office?

Now comes 14 December 1931. The two girls walk into the office of Charles Geoffrey Buckland Stevens, the District Magistrate of Comilla. They are carrying a paper and a story.

Accounts of that story differ. One says they came to present a petition for a swimming contest among classmates. Another says they came with sweets for the magistrate before Christmas.

All agree on what followed. Automatic pistols were hidden under their shawls. While Stevens was distracted, the girls drew the pistols and shot him dead.

Santi was fifteen. Suniti was fourteen. Some websites give Santi's age as sixteen, but her birth date makes her fifteen.

- Date: **14 December 1931**.
- Victim: **C. G. B. Stevens**, District Magistrate of Comilla.
- Ages: Suniti **14**, Santi **15**.
- Weapons: automatic pistols hidden under shawls.
- The cover story is told two ways: a swimming-contest petition, or sweets.

4 What did the court decide?

The girls are arrested and held in the local jail. In February 1932 they appear before a court in Calcutta. They are young, and the court does not send them to the gallows.

Sources differ on the exact sentence. Some say ten years in prison. Others say transportation for life. Both agree they were freed in 1939, after about seven years.

In an interview they said, "It is better to die than live in a horse's stable." One account says Santi was disappointed not to be hanged. She thought it meant no martyrdom.

The jail years were hard. Suniti was held at the Hijli Detention Camp as a third-class prisoner. Santi is said to have faced humiliation and abuse, as a second-class prisoner.

Suniti's family paid too. Her father's government pension was stopped. Her two elder brothers were held without trial. Her younger brother died of consumption, made worse by years of malnutrition.

Public opinion split along lines. Western periodicals saw an outburst against an ordinance of the Earl of Willingdon. Indian accounts spoke of the "misbehaviour" of district magistrates. A flyer praising the girls as heroines was found in Rajshahi, with lines from Burns's poem *Scots Wha Hae*.

- Trial: a **Calcutta** court, **February 1932**.
- Sources differ: ten years, or transportation for life.
- Both freed in **1939**, after about seven years.
- Release followed amnesty talks between **Gandhi** and the British.
- Suniti: **Hijli Detention Camp**, third-class prisoner.
- Her father's pension stopped; brothers detained; a younger brother died.

5 How did their lives turn out?

When the doors open in 1939, two young women step out. Their youth is behind them, but not their future.

Suniti studies medicine and passes her M.B.B.S. She becomes a doctor. In 1947 she marries the trade union leader Pradyot Kumar Ghosh. She dies on 12 January 1988.

Santi attends the Bengali Women's College. She joins the Communist movement, and later the Indian National Congress. She marries Professor Chittaranjan Das in 1942.

Santi enters public life. She serves on the West Bengal Legislative Council from 1952 to 1962, and again from 1967 to 1968. She also sits in the Legislative Assembly from 1962 to 1964. She writes a book called

Arun Bahni. She dies in 1989.

- Suniti became a doctor (**M.B.B.S.**) and married Pradyot Kumar Ghosh in 1947.
- Suniti died on **12 January 1988**.
- Santi joined the Communist movement, then the **Indian National Congress**.
- Santi married Chittaranjan Das in 1942.
- Santi sat in the West Bengal Legislative Council and Assembly.
- Her book: ***Arun Bahni***. She died in 1989.

6 What are the exam traps?

Names and details blur easily here. Keep these straight.

- The pair's claim to fame is their **age**: 14 and 15.
- Do not confuse them with Pritilata Waddedar, another Bengal revolutionary.
- The target was a district magistrate, C. G. B. Stevens, not a police chief.
- The spelling varies: Ghose or Ghosh, Choudhury or Chowdhury.
- They were freed through Gandhi's amnesty talks in 1939.
- Suniti led the Women's Volunteer Corps; Santi was Sangha secretary.
- Read about Pritilata Waddedar.
- Read about Surya Sen.
- Read about revolutionary nationalism.

Quick check 2. The two girls were hanged for the killing. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: Comilla. Jugantar and the Chhatri Sangha. 14 December 1931, Stevens shot. Calcutta court, February 1932. Freed 1939.

Think it through: Why do these two matter in the story of Bengal's revolutionaries?

They show how far the movement had reached by 1931. Even schoolgirls trained with weapons and took part. Their age made the case famous.

Quick check 3. Amnesty talks between Gandhi and the British helped free them in 1939. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. At the time of the Comilla assassination, Suniti Choudhury and Santi Ghosh were remarkably young. Roughly how old were they?

A. 14 and 15

B. 20 and 21

C. 12 and 13

D. 17 and 18

See answer ↓

2. Suniti Choudhury and Santi Ghosh were eventually released in 1939, after serving seven years, through amnesty negotiations involving which leader?

A. Jawaharlal Nehru

B. Mahatma Gandhi

C. Chittaranjan Das

D. Subhas Chandra Bose

See answer ↓

3. After her release, Santi Ghosh went on to a political career.

Which West Bengal legislative body did she serve in?

A. She never entered politics again

B. The Lok Sabha

C. The West Bengal Legislative Council and Assembly

D. The Rajya Sabha

See answer ↓

4. Which revolutionary group did Suniti Choudhury and Santi Ghose join in Comilla?

A. Ghadar Party

B. Forward Bloc

C. Hindustan Socialist Republican Association

D. Jugantar Party

See answer ↓

5. At the Tripura Zilla Chhatri Sangha conference of 6 May 1931, Suniti Choudhury was chosen as what?

A. Secretary of the Sangha

B. Editor of its journal

C. Captain of the Women's Volunteer Corps

D. Treasurer of Jugantar

See answer ↓

6. In which detention camp was Suniti Choudhury held as a third-class prisoner?

A. Peniche Fortress

B. Cellular Jail

C. Hijli Detention Camp

D. Alipore Jail

See answer ↓

7. Which book did Santi Ghose write and publish after her release?

A. Arun Bahni

B. Pather Dabi

C. Anandamath

D. Vagde Pani

See answer ↓

8. Suniti Choudhury drew inspiration from which older revolutionary who also lived in Comilla?

A. Rash Behari Bose

B. Khudiram Bose

C. Surya Sen

D. Ullaskar Dutta

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** Choudhury was 14 and Ghosh was 15 at the time, making them among the youngest political prisoners of the entire freedom struggle. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** Both were released in 1939 through amnesty negotiations involving Mahatma Gandhi, after serving seven years of their life sentence. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** Santi Ghosh served in the West Bengal Legislative Council (1952-62, 1967-68) and the Legislative Assembly (1962-64), after also earning a college education. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** A fellow student, Prafullanalini Brahma, recruited them into the Jugantar Party. It was a militant group active in Bengal. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** She was chosen Captain of the Women's Volunteer Corps. Santi Ghose was a founding member and secretary of the Sangha. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** She was held at the Hijli Detention Camp. She was freed in 1939 after about seven years. ↑ Q6
7. **A.** Arun Bahni was written by Santi Ghose. She later served in the West Bengal Legislative Council and Assembly. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** Ullaskar Dutta lived in Comilla. His revolutionary activities influenced the young Suniti Choudhury. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

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