

The Term "Sant" in the Light of Gurbani

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** Throughout this article the word Sant has been used and not its English equivalent, saint. Also, in Guru Granth Sahib the terms 'Sadh' and 'Sant' have been used synonymously, but all quotations given in this article are those pertaining to 'Sant'.

According to Mahan Kosh (P. 243) the term 'Sant'** is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Saant' or 'Shaant', which means (spiritually) poised, or someone who is emancipated from 'self'. This in turn means that he has kept all mental as well as physical feelings under control.

From the time of Aryans there had been a tendency among people to seek the truth about existence which, it was believed, could be achieved by extreme asceticism – by fasting and tormenting oneself. Some such people who took to asceticism and succeeded in attaining a state of equipoise were known as "Sants". As the time went by, this term started being used more loosely and gradually came down to a point when anyone who took to ascetic life and wore a certain color and style of garb was called a "Sant" irrespective of his spiritual level. Even before and during the Guru period there seems to have been no dearth of such so called "Sants". The mention of such 'Sants' also comes in Guru Granth Sahib. For example Kabirji says:

gj swFy qY qY DoqIAw iqhry pwiein qg] gII ijn@w jpmwIIAw loty hiQ inbg]
Eie hir ky sMq n AwKIAih bwnwris ky Tg] 1] AYsy sMq n mo kau Bwvih] fwlw isau
pyfw gtkwvih]

SGGS, P. 475-76.

"Those who wear 'dhotis' of three and a half yards and three-ply sacred threads – they display rosaries around their necks and have polished jugs in their hands, they are cheats of Banaras, not the 'Sants' of God. I do not like such (so called) Sants who devour the trees along with their stems".

In Sawaiyyas of the Bhattas, bard Bhikha also writes about such imposter Sants:

rihE sMq hau toil swD bhuyry ifTy] sMinAwsI qpsIAh muKhu ey pMifq imTy
] brsu eyku ha iPirE iknY nhu prcau lwXau] khiqAh khqI suxI rhq ko KusI n AwXau]
SGGS, P. 1395-96

"I have searched throughout and seen 'Sants', of many kinds, the recluses, the men of austerities and sweet-talking *Pundits*. I wandered for a full year but no one gave clue (to the true way). Even though they were eloquent in speech, none appealed to me".

But there still must be some genuine 'Sants' because in Guru Granth Sahib there appear a large number of '*Shabads*' in praise of a 'Sant'. Fifth Master, Guru Arjun Dev has devoted two full "*Ashtpadis*" about 'Sant' in "Sukhmani Sahib". SGGS, P 262-296.

Today it seems that the imposter 'Sants' have proliferated. By putting on a particular type of dress they announce, through a few of their hired agents, that they have reached the exalted state of poise - are capable of showing miracles. They call themselves 'Sants'. However, in reality they are out to extract money from innocent and gullible people. Several cases of fraud perpetrated by such so-called 'Sants' on innocent believers have recently come to light. This has resulted in a total loss of credibility of almost every person who calls himself a 'Sant' or who is called a 'Sant' by his followers.

Several articles on this subject have recently appeared in some Sikh publications¹. One such publication has even written:

"For a Sikh there is only one 'Sant' and that is Guru Granth Sahib. A Sikh calling himself a 'Sant' is not only not a Sikh, he is an enemy of *Sikhi*2".

There is no question that Guru Granth Sahib is the supermost 'Sant' (if there are any categories of Sants). Also anyone who calls himself a 'Sant' is probably not a 'Sant' in reality, because a true 'Sant' (according to the definition given in Guru Granth Sahib) will be humble and never claim to be a 'Sant'. However, to say that the "only" Sant is Guru Granth Sahib may be a bit too hasty a statement given without finding out what Guru Granth Sahib has to say on this subject.

The term 'Sant' has been used in several different contexts in Guru Granth Sahib where it comes for over one thousand times. A large majority of *Shabads* (hymns), wherein this term comes, are in praise of piety and high spiritual state of a 'Sant':

qUM inrvYru sMq qyry inrml]

SGGS, P. 108.

"You (O Lord) are free of rancor and Your 'Sants' are immaculate"

Or about the capability of a 'Sant' to transform a sinner into a true devotee of God:

sMq jnw imil pwieAw myry goivdw
myrw hir pRBu sjxu sYxI jIau]

SGGS, P. 174.

"Divine Master! I have found the Lord in the company of Sants".

In many '*Shabads*' this term is used to address a gathering in a general sense meaning good or holy people or Devotees:

khq kbIru sunhu ry sMqhu Ab AYsI bin AweI]

SGGS, P. 333.

"Kabirji says, hear you holy people such is the state of affairs now"

Or

hir ibnu sBu ikCu mYlw sMqhu ikAw hau pUj cVweI] SGGS, P. 910.

"Without God everything is impure, o holy people, what offering should I lay before Him?"

And

sMqhu swgru pwir auqrIAY] jy ko bcnu kmwvY sMqn kw so gur prswdI qrIAY]
SGGS, P. 747.

"O holy people, this is how one crosses the ocean (of material existence). Whoever practices the word of 'Sants', is ferried across by the Guru's Grace".

There are also some 'Shabads' that profess synonymy of God, Guru and Sant:

rwm sMq mih Bydu ikCu nwhI
eyku jnu keI mih lwK krOrI]

SGGS, P. 208.

"Between God and 'Sant' there is no difference – such (devotee) is one in millions".

And

hmro Brqw bfo ibbykI Awpy sMqu khwvY]

SGGS, P. 476.

"My spouse (the Lord) is the great discerner, He alone is called 'Sant'".

Also

hir kw sMqu sqguru sq purKw jo boLY hir hir bwnI]

SGGS, P. 667.

"The true Guru is the Lord's Sant, a true being, who utters Divine Words".

The fifth Master, Guru Arjun Dev has devoted two full "*Ashtpadis*" in Sukhmani Sahib on the subject of "Sant". The purpose of Guru Arjun Dev was definitely not self-aggrandizement but to emphasize the importance of persons he calls 'Sants'. However, in these '*Ashtpadis*" he has not given the attributes of a 'Sant' by means of which one could be recognized. One has therefore to search further to find if a 'Sant' has been defined in Guru Granth Sahib.

Fortunately, there are a few '*Shabads*', which clearly and unambiguously indicate who is a 'Sant' and what his attributes are:

ijnw swis igrwis n ivsrY hir nwmW min mMqu]

DMnu is syeI nwnkw pUrnu soeI sMqu]

SGGS, P. 319

"Those who with every breath and morsel do not forget God's Name and keep this Word in their minds, they alone are blessed and are perfect 'Sants', says Nanak".

The fifth Master, Guru Arjun Dev has also given an elaborate definition of a Sant:

AwT phr inkit kir jwnY] pRB kw kIAw mITw mwnY] eyku nwmu sMqn
AwDwru] hoie rhy sB kI pg Cwru] 1] sMq rhq sunhu myry BweI] auAw kI mihmw
kQnu n jweI] 1] rhwau]
vrqix jw kY kyvl nwm] And rUp kI rqn ibsRwm] imqR sqRü jw kY eyk smwnY] pRB
Apuny ibnu Avru n jwnY] 2] koit koit AG kwtnhwrw] duK dUir krn jIA ky dwqwrw]
sUrbIr bcn ky bli] kaulw bpurI sMqI CII]

SGGS, P. 392.

"Day and night a 'Sant' realizes the Lord close (to him). He accepts God's Will as sweet. Only Name of the Lord is the support of the 'Sants'. They consider themselves as the dust of the feet of all. Brother! Listen to this way of the 'Sants'. To describe their greatness is beyond my power. Name (of the Lord) alone is their way of life. God's praise, the embodiment of bliss, is their rest. To them friends and foes are alike. Other than God they acknowledge no one else. They erase millions of sins, dispel anguish and bestow Divine life. They are heroes – true to their word. Poor '*Maya*' is deluded by them."

Thus according to the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib anyone who possesses these attributes is a 'Sant'. The Gurus, no doubt, did possess all these attributes and therefore can be categorized as Sants. But then *Gurbani* also says:

pUrw guru AK E jw kw mMqR] AMimRq idRsit pyKY hoie sMq]

SGGS, P. 287.

"If the perfect Guru, whose word is eternally true, casts his ambrosial sight on someone, he (that person) becomes a 'Sant'".

For example, when Guru Nanak, the perfect Guru, cast his ambrosial sight on Bhai Lehna, he became Guru Angad, the Sant. During their lives the ten Gurus must have cast such ambrosial sight on many deserving Sikhs who became Sants. They may not be known as Sants in the Sikh history but the truth of *Gurbani* cannot be denied. Also as mentioned above one of the important attributes of a Sant is humility. Therefore one who is in reality a genuine Sant will not claim to be one. It is only the imposters who have an urge of self-aggrandizement, will want to have this title attached to their names and publicized.

When one searches *Gurbani* to see if the term 'Sant' has been used for any particular person one finds that it has actually been used with at least two names. Kabirji has used the term 'Sant' for himself in one of his hymns that has been accepted by Guru Arjun Dev and included in Guru Granth Sahib:

ikAw AprwDu sMq hY kIn@w] bWiD pot kuMcr kau dIn@w]

SGGS, P. 871.

"What sin has the 'Sant' committed, that he is bound into a bundle and thrown before an elephant"?

In another hymn of Kabirji (also included in Guru Granth Sahib) the term 'Sant' has been used for Prehlahd:

sMq pRhldw kI pYj ijin rwKI hrnwKsu nK ibdirE]

SGGS, P. 856.

"He (the Lord) preserved the honor of Prehlahd, the 'Sant' and destroyed Harnakhash with His nails".

Thus, according to the teaching of *Gurbani*, it is quite possible to have Sants other than the Gurus. It is difficult to say if any such Sants do exist today, but to say that no such persons, other than the Gurus, have existed in the past nor they exist today, is a rather hasty statement that does not pass the test by the touchstone of Guru Granth Sahib.

The litmus test of a Sant is that he would not want this title to be attached with his name and his only teaching would be to consider Guru Granth Sahib as the only Sant and Guru today.



References

1. *Sikh Bulletin*, Dec. 2000, P.19.

2. *Ibid*, March 2002, P. 1.

3. In this hymn, Kabir is telling the story of how, because of complaints against him by some Mullahs and by Brahmins of Banaras, for his so called blasphemous utterings, he was sentenced to death by forcible trampling under an elephant's feet.