
Reflections on God Gene

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The claim of a renowned scientist that he has identified the "God gene" has attracted considerable academic attention in recent months. Dr. Hamer, the author of "The God Gene" is a leading scientist at the National Institute of Health, Washington.

This gene previously identified and named as Vesicular Monoamine Transporter2 (VMAT2), is associated with the voluntary and involuntary movements of the body through the release of mood altering chemicals. These chemicals also render protection from neurotoxin effects and behavioural abnormalities.

Dr Hamer, a molecular geneticist who studied 2000

persons through a series of questioner and genomic analyses, came to the conclusion that the tendency to be spiritual is part of genetic make up. According to him, Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed, all probably had the VMAT2 gene, as they all experienced mystical experiences or underwent radical alterations in consciousness.

Dr. Hamer was extending his earlier studies of attributing behaviour patterns in smoking and addiction to a cluster of 9 genes associated with the metabolism of monoamines in the brain. He found an association with a single nucleotide polymorphism which consequent on replacement of Cytosine to Adenine, showed a

marked reduction in self-transcendence in the person concerned.

This indeed is a remarkable finding especially when one looks at the unique effect emanating from the mutation of one single nucleotide out of a total of over 3.4 billion nucleotide bases contained in the human genome.

The book "The God Gene" has attracted extensive media attention since its publication a year ago.

Dr. Hamer has argued that spirituality has an inherited genetic component. The scientist accepts the probability of other genes and other single nucleotide polymorphisms also having a role in explaining the experience of transcendence. He further stresses that spirituality is purely a personal phenomenon while religiosity is institutional with its maximum effect drawn from the environment. The presence of the 'God Gene' is not a prerequisite for a person's belief in God.

Some of the critics of Dr. Hamer's proposition, who

include scientists, ethicists, and theologians have openly deplored the contention that VMAT2 gene and its expression as evidenced by the increase in certain chemicals particularly monoamines have no functional correlation with spirituality and religion.

The results presented by Dr. Hamer are detrimental to the accrued faith of common religionists, evangelists and diehard cultists. They argue that the expression of monoamines should not be sought to be explained in terms of spiritual experiences and that spiritual experiences cannot and should not be reduced to the effect of a bunch of addictive chemicals or measured in terms of grossly physical indicators.

The true experience, the ineffable bliss and peace that go with it, is far more than any chemical effect and surpasses all imaginable realms of mundane speculations.

How can spirituality and transcendence be reduced to the effect of a bunch of

unpredictable chemical reactions that go on within the human brain?

Although novel to western concepts, age-old Indian philosophy accepts the existence of inherited traits or *vaasanas* in humans.

Vedaantists ungrudgingly accept *vaasanas*, but fail to consider the fallacies of interpretation of *vaasanas* and their implications. *Vedaanta* accepts the presence of divinity in every being, be it scientists, atheists, theists or secularists or even non-humans.

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If one single gene or a cluster of genes alone is the true God

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gene, then in what realm do the remaining genes dwell? Beyond God - an *apriori* nonsensical point of view. Similarly, can genes and genomes of other creatures- animals and plants, stellar bodies and physical, chemical and magnetic forces, lie beyond or besides God?

Although not quite explicitly, the mention of a gene that may control spiritual inclinations in man had occurred during the Vedic period, more than 3,000 years ago in some of the Indian scriptures.

The causal body or the *kaarana sarira* that Vedic literature spoke of, is analogical to genes. The causal body reflects *vaasanas* or traits comparable to genes in which are encoded inherited features. These *vaasanas* (a term which cannot be literally translated as genes) are responsible for the

functioning of mind and intellect, and are comparable to the building blocks (or genes) of modern-day genetics.

However, *vaasanas* would lie beyond the comprehension of sense organs unlike genes which always are conceived through data and descriptions collected by sense organs.

The Infinite can be perceived, but not through sense organs and it is in this sense that science and *vedaanta* disagreed with each other.

The Vedic culture categorically accepts the fact that every being is divine in nature. Further refinement of the *Vedaantic* tenet takes one to the concept of 'consciousness', which is nothing but the all-pervading *Brahman*, formless, attributeless, pure and transcendent, in other words, God.

The scientist gropes in the dark with respect to this comprehension and his misgivings persist, in the absence of data obtained through sense organs. In reality, the gene is also

God, like everything else, but not God in its macrocosmic sense.

The role genes play in spirituality is a fascinating question to be seriously addressed.

Psychologists, neurologists and evolutionary biologists have offered only very rudimentary insights into how behavioural instincts emerge in the brain and how behaviour is modulated by environmental factors.

The take home message is that the understanding of spirituality through the genetical and neurological basis if ever possible, would go a long way in eliminating or at least lessening parochial and mindless misadventures of fundamentalism that is a blemish on several present-day religions and cults.

Such an understanding would make religions a little more tolerable and Dr Albert Einstein's comment that "religion with out science is blind, and science without religion is lame", all the more relishable.