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SECOND OPINION

Obese? Let's just blame it on our fat gene

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According to scientists our fat gene leads to obesity

Why are many middle-class Indians so 'healthier' (north Indian euphemism for fat)? Is it because of our fondness for fried foods, our sedentary lifestyles, our aversion to physical exercise? Perhaps.

But according to a team of British scientists the real villain of the piece is a 'fatness' gene.

Researchers at Imperial College, London, have identified a gene, MC4R, which is associated with appetite regulation and energy expenditure.

Indians tend to have variants which affect the activity of this gene, resulting in obesity, and its associated health problems like diabetes and cardiovascular disease. So the fault lies not in us but in our genes that we are fatties.

Obesity is only one of the conditions that humankind at large can avoid responsibility for and lay the blame on genes. For example, heroin addiction is caused by a particular gene, AGS3. A cocaine addict, however, has developed the habit thanks to a different gene, DAT1.

According to genetic science, there is a gene for everything, from baldness to criminality, homosexuality to Hitlerism.

A criminal could argue that he had been driven to commit his misdeed because of a gene, D4DR, which geneticists claim leads to high-risk, dangerous behaviour. Me? Rob a bank? Certainly not. It was my D4DR which did it. Put it into jail, not me. Or take dictators.

Pervez Musharraf doesn't behave the way he does because he wants to. No, it's because of his genes. Or at least a particular gene isolated in a sci-fi scenario by French biologists who have named it the 'master' gene.

Linked to "social dominance" and "strong control over other people", the 'master' gene is to be found in "sports leaders, CEOs, heads of state... and all dictators throughout history".

While the strong variant of the 'master' gene could produce a Hitler or a Mao, the weaker heterozygous form gives rise to a "moderate, quasi-totalitarian urge", making for a Bal or a Raj Thackeray, say. Found in "politicians, policy advocates, religious fundamentalists, and celebrities", the mild manifestation of the 'master' gene creates the conviction in the carrier of the gene that "other people ... are unable to manage their own lives without ... guidance".

This belief is "coupled with a powerful sense of entitlement and a carefully nurtured sense of resentment towards those who don't listen to them".

Paradoxically enough, the mild version of the 'master' gene is also to be found in those who are "most tolerant of authoritarian environments with strict and invasive social rules".

In short, the French geneticists would have us believe that it's not just the current Chinese leadership which has the 'master' gene, but also the population of China as a whole - with the singular exception of Tibet, of course.

The conformity of behaviour associated with the mild 'master' gene is not restricted to the political sphere.

It also manifests itself in the world of fads and fashions. In fact it's the inverse working of the mild 'master' gene - which makes one compliant to externally imposed norms - that is responsible for the success of big brands, from Gucci to Shah Rukh Khan, Reebok to The Times of India.

The gene genie is well and truly out of the bottle, and nothing is going to get it back in. As more and more of our actions and behavioural traits are ascribed not to our volition but to our genes, we increasingly resemble programmed robots.

So what happens to old-fashioned ideas like free will and individual responsibility? Well, neuroscience

discredited those fuddy-duddy concepts when it proved in laboratory tests that a subconscious part of the brain initiates an action (such as picking up this newspaper) several seconds before we consciously decide to do something (pick up this newspaper).

In other words, 'we' (whatever that means) are not the authors of our actions, not responsible for what we do (read this article, commit a murder); it is a chemical reaction in our brains which compels us to do what we do.

However, you can still feel free to believe in free will. So long as you realise that you're being made to do so by your 'free will' gene.

(Readers are invited to make suggestions for this column by e-mail: secondopinion@timesgroup.com, or by writing to Second Opinion, The Times of India, 7, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110103.)

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