

It's a miracle!



Do you believe in miracles? A simple question. But, for the vast majority of humanity who fall somewhere in between staunch believer and die-hard sceptics, the answer isn't.
VEENA PRADEEP & CHETHANA DINESH
attempt the answers nonetheless.

Statues shed tears of blood, drink milk and open their eyes in benign blessing. Crosses of light inexplicably appear around many parts of the world. Sea water in a muddy creek turns sweet. The faithful flock in piety and amazement while sceptics pull out their hair in desperation, crying foul.

Do you believe in miracles? The question is as simple as that. But, for the vast majority of humanity who fall somewhere in between staunch believer and die-hard sceptics, the answer isn't.

From time immemorial, there's been a miracle for every season and every reason. If only our senses were open to perceive it! On a hot summer afternoon, sitting in a garden, under the cool shade of a peepal tree, soaking in the beautiful sight of colourful flowers, you close your eyes and take a deep breath, saying a silent prayer to the Almighty for a spell of rain. Voila! It actually starts raining. If this isn't a miracle, what is?

For Tarun Cherian, a well-known spiritual healer, based in Bangalore, everything is a miracle. The blink of an eye, the blooming of a flower, the flight of a butterfly, the existence of the universe itself is no less miraculous than statues of gods and goddesses drinking milk or opening an eye.

Yet, we take the former for granted because our brains have understood the mystery behind these natural phenomena. Innumerable instances of mysterious things have been recorded, so nobody can discount the fact that miracles happen, he says. "For example, auras around humans have been photographed, so nobody can deny their existence."

"What we know about the universe is only the tip of an iceberg. We can just see that wee bit above the water, and a little bit below it. What lies underneath, unknown, is bigger than what most of us can even imagine," says Tarun.

On the other hand, for miracle buster Sanal Edamarakku, president of the Indian Rationalist's Association based in Delhi which has been fighting for inculcating scientific temper among people and exposing superstition, blind belief, obscurantism and paranormal claims among other things, all miraculous events can be explained.

"There are three kinds of miracles," he says. One is purely the outcome of people's ignorance. Sanal quotes the example of a *Sai Baba ke roti* miracle doing the rounds in some parts of the country where you place a piece of *roti* in a container, add tea leaves, a little sugar and water and leave it covered for seven days in front of a Sai Baba idol. On the seventh day, a whole *roti* forms.

Sanal says this is because of the formation of something called the Manchurian algae. "Even if you were to place the same ingredients in front of your own photograph, the *roti* would form," he says. At the height of the Ganesha milk-drinking episode, he had demonstrated how it happened, feeding a little coffee to a statue of Jawaharlal Nehru, and "this may sound blasphemous, but also a little beer to a statue of Gandhi," he laughs. According to him, every instance of a miracle can be explained in scientific terms.

The second kind of miracles are special phenomena such as people suddenly speaking in the voice of a dead person. These are mental illnesses which any psychiatrist can explain, he says. The third kind are pure deceit where charlatans use sleight of hand to take advantage of people's gullibility, like conjuring *vibhuti* out of the air, making things disappear or appear, etc. "Whenever a miracle takes place, there is an economic or social beneficiary," says Sanal.

"Obviously some miracles are manufactured," counters Tarun. "But where are there no scams? Science has clear biases, ignores inconvenient facts, and has its share of utter frauds."

All of us may pooh-pooh the mass hysteria whipped up either by a statue of Sai Baba opening his eye or Ganesha idols drinking milk, but, deep down don't we want to be a part of the crowd that firmly believes in such miracles? "All of us love miracles, irrespective of our community and religion. In fact, we long for them. Being born and brought up to believe that miracles do happen, we accept anything that's even mildly suggestive of a miracle. Our lives revolve around expectations that miracles can happen."

"For instance, take the recent case of the statue of Shirdi Sai Baba opening his eye in Bangalore. People thronged the place to witness it. That's human weakness. At the same time, not all of them who went there believed in it. Most of them were driven to do it only out of curiosity. But, the very fact that they wanted to be a part of the whole episode illustrates how a human mind works. They went there out of expectations — they wanted to believe that the miracle had indeed happened," says Prof C R Chandrashekar, Department of Psychiatry, Nimhans.

It's true. Caught in the rigours of this

world, all of us yearn for miracles in some form or the other. And again, who can doubt this longing for miracles when it's being felt in various pockets all over the world?

There have been instances of miracles quoted in every religious text and in the history books of every civilization. Circles of Light, Crosses of Light, Healing Waters, Signs of Allah, The Holy Mother, Buddhist Miracles, Christ Encounters... the list can be endless.

An oft-quoted instance is that of the sighting of angelic warriors by Israeli soldiers in all of Israel's wars. And in every war, there were reports from both sides of angelic intervention on Israel's behalf. Though some rationalists attempted to term it as battle fatigue, believers didn't buy the argument, considering that the angels were seen by both sides in the war.

Surprisingly, while



Miracles are ruled out on scientific grounds too. According to the scientific understanding of the universe, no event can be termed rational unless its occurrence is regular and repeatable. Miracles are by nature not regular and repeatable and hence there is no scientific basis for the belief in miracles.

"It's true that there is no scientific basis to miracles. But, everything cannot be explained by science right?" argues Rachna Chabria, a consultant with a software firm. To support her argument, she narrates a true life experience.

"My father was a hale and hearty person. One fine morning, we found him dead in his sleep and the doctors attributed it to a massive heart attack. My

mother was devastated. Everyday she reported of having his visions, prompting her to take her BP tablets. According to her, she distinctly saw him walking in the house with his familiar and recognisable steady gait. One such day, she told us she had decided to join him. We didn't take her seriously as we thought it was just another of her emotional outpourings. But, the very same night, to our horror, she too passed away peacefully in her sleep. How do you explain this?" she questions.

"Anything we do with intensity can create miracles. When we understand it, it forms the basis of life, when it surprises us, we call it a miracle," says Tarun.

Miracles are anything that's beyond our realm of understanding. Nevertheless, they help us get on with our lives with hope. "They are all around us. We just have to ask the universe for it. I have prayed for miracles and they have happened. The universe is very kind. It just gives all that you ask for. You may be gripped by a serious problem and not know how to get out of it. You hope against hope for it to be resolved by itself and it does! That's a miracle," says renowned tarot card reader Krishna Nath Malhotra.

A miracle definitely helps ordinary mortals like us to live on, with the fond hope that a miracle will very soon put an end to the suffering in the world.

Says model-actor Nasser Abdullah, a firm believer in miracles, "About three decades ago, I went with some friends to Satya Sai Baba, hoping to be able to rid myself off a consistently present nervous strain, and fear of living in this world. I was not disappointed, as he did rid me of that, plus a few other disturbing *samskaras* lurking within my being which I wasn't even aware of. That was a true miracle for me! I mean, to be able to prevail upon the mind and transform it so completely without appearing to be doing so is a feat worthy of resting foremost in the annals of miracle workings."

"I had also on the same trip witnessed a healing by him on a boy who was afflicted with a disease, which had left him deformed from neck to toe. When Sai Baba whispered something into his ear he dashed off, unaid-

COLLECTIVE HALLUCINATION

Where belief in miracles exists, evidence will always be forthcoming to confirm its existence. In the case of moving statues and paintings, the belief produces the hallucination and the hallucination confirms the belief.

- D H Rawcliffe, author of Occult and Supernatural Phenomena.

Collective hallucination is a sensory hallucination induced by the power of suggestion to a group of people. It generally occurs in heightened emotional situations, especially among the religiously devoted. The expectancy and hope of bearing witness to a miracle, combined with long hours of staring at an object or place, makes certain people susceptible to seeing such things as weeping statues, moving icons and holy portraits.

Those witnessing a "miracle" agree in their hallucinatory accounts because they have the same preconceptions and expectations. Furthermore, dissimilar accounts converge towards harmony as time passes and the accounts get retold. Those who see nothing extraordinary and admit it are dismissed as not having faith. Some, no doubt, see nothing but "rather than admit they failed... would imitate the lead given by those who did, and subsequently believe that they had in fact observed what they had originally only pretended to observe... (Rawcliffe, 114).

For me, the many wonders of nature are in itself miracles. How does the weaver bird weave such an artistic nest? How does a spider spin its web symmetrically? Yes, these are miracles for me: Dr Rajagopal, a retd. professor.

After diagnosed with cancer of the colon, I was devastated. The doctor just gave me seven months to live. My world just came crumbling down. I prayed hard to Puttaparthi Saibaba. It's 14 years hence and am still very much alive and kicking. Isn't it a miracle?: K Vijaya, a cancer patient.

I was pitching for a big contract along with very big players in the field. I had burnt the midnight oil in preparing for the presentation. After the presentation, I was told my company hadn't got the contract. My hopes were dashed and my dreams shattered. But, after a week, the contract holders pulled out of it due to some technical glitch and my company bagged it. It sure was a miracle. I've had such similar miraculous experiences. My angels always guide me through rough patches: Rajeev Pradhan, CEO of a reputed ad agency.

many today believe in miracles, no modern historian fills his or her books with accounts of miraculous events. For, they are considered incredulous and nothing more than a case of collective hallucination. Experts in human psychology think otherwise.

"It is basic human tendency to desire the marvellous and the wondrous, to be deluded about them, to fabricate them, embellish them and to exaggerate them. It is a manifestation of our dislike for the mundane and the ordinary. Hence we lap up anything that is different from the ordinary," explains Prof Chandrashekar.

However, there are many philosophers and

anti-supernatural thinkers like David Hume (1711-1776) and Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) who argue against this belief in miracles. While Hume terms it an act of faith and not of reason, Spinoza says that the belief in miracles and a commitment to modern scientific methodology are incompatible.

Another much widely neglected argument against miracles is put forth by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in his book *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. According to Kant, miracles never occur! In other words, miracles are theoretically possible but practically impossible.

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