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[Reem Khurshid](https://www.dawn.com/authors/5815/reem-khurshid)Published February 8, 2021

The writer is a journalist and cartoonist.

MUCH can be said about the Punjab government’s uncharacteristic responsiveness (or, rather, overreaction) to the minor frenzy surrounding an amateurish sculpture of Allama Iqbal in Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park, Lahore, images of which went viral the instant they were uploaded online. Much has been said about the supposed cruelty of social media — given that some made reasonable, if strident, assumptions about potential misuse of public funds — once it transpired that the park’s gardeners had created it (on whose initiative is still disputed) as a humble tribute to our Mufakkir-i-Pakistan.

I don’t wish to dwell on the latter other than to say that if a few hours’ worth of public ridicule are all it takes to uproot a figurehead… (I leave it to readers to fill in the blank.) As for the former, I challenge any satirist to script a political high-wire act as riveting as this. Nor do I wish to bore anyone with a sonorous meditation on considering authorial intent or context when interpreting art. In fact, the whole brouhaha has irritated me deeply, because it distracts from the only thing I wished to do when I pitched this article: express the unalloyed joy I experienced when I first laid eyes on this naïve, stylised sculpture.

To a philistine like me who has, admittedly, always been intimidated by Iqbal, so rarefied and jealously guarded by nationalist and religious orthodoxy, this depiction felt immensely friendly and accessible. A brief internet search later, I was watching videos of park-goers excitedly pointing it out and gathering to take pictures. (If, as a former park official claimed, they sought to make a ‘selfie point’, then mission accomplished.) Advocacy planner and urban designer Rida Khan and I discussed the possibilities for this unique piece of public art, exchanging sketches envisioning its use as a sculptural bench, if only they would liberate the Allama from his wired cage. That night, I went to bed giddy with the notion of public mushairas in the park.

Does Iqbal’s sculpture deserve to stay?

Not everyone shares my affection for the outsized bust. In others, it’s provoked hilarity, confusion, repulsion, even horror. Viewed from a distance, it looks to some like a Gandharan Buddha. Up close, it reminds them of Moenjodaro’s priest king, or PTV’s Uncle Sargam, or a plethora of other historical, fictional and contemporary characters. What could it mean? Political anthropologist Arsalan Khan mused, “Maybe the statue is a brilliant social commentary on the WhatsApp uncle who invokes Iqbal to make cartoonish points about life wrapped up in religious garb.”

But, rather than diminishing my affection for the figure, these chaotic responses have only enhanced it. The notion that public art must be so stolid as to evoke respect, at best, or indifference, at worst, is anathema to me. However unintentional, the sculptors seem to have tapped into the wellspring of our collective unconscious to create something in which we see ourselves reflected — the ideals and banalities, the good and bad, the loveable and laughable.

If all this comes across as affected and twee, then consider the following.

Last year, two statues of Iqbal were raised in Sialkot, the city of his birth. Besides initial news reports upon their installation, you’d be hard-pressed to find any subsequent mention of them. In Lahore, Ranjit Singh’s statue was vandalised (again) and, in Mardan, a newly unearthed, centuries-old Buddha was pulverised to rubble.

So, what do the public aesthetics we find acceptable typically reflect? Corporate capture, social stratification and securitisation. Thanks to brands like Asim Jofa and real estate developments like Bahria Town, for example, Pakistan may one day boast of having the most Eiffel Tower replicas per capita.

And so inured are we to martial monuments that the ‘beautification’ of the area outside Jinnah Courts in Karachi — Sindh Rangers’ temporary HQ since 1999 — with statues of paramilitary soldiers has mostly gone unnoticed, except to signal danger to commuters last monsoon when rising floodwater began lapping at their bronzed boots. Perhaps if they had been installed inside, rather than outside a park, their presence would connote a more disquieting memory. And who decides the parameters of our collective amnesia? During the 2019 Karachi Biennale, one exhibit was vandalised by plain-clothed known unknowns, who unknowingly revealed themselves when a horticultural henchman later defended their handiwork.

Amid all this, Iqbal’s sculpture — uncomplicated and uncompromised as it is — has a right to exist in the public sphere. And though the authorities have now decided to ‘finish’ or ‘improve’ the original artwork rather than remove it, I fear that this might be gilding the lily. Still, I hope my apprehensions turn out to be misplaced. After all, hackneyed as the phrase is, life is full of surprises, and nothing in recent memory has surprised me as much as this charming likeness of Allama Iqbal.

*The writer is a journalist and cartoonist.*

**Twitter:** [**@ReemKhurshid**](https://twitter.com/reemkhurshid)

*Published in Dawn, February 8th, 2021*