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CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KESAR STORY: A REFLECTION OF LADAKHI IDENTITY, ORAL TRADITIONS, AND HEROIC NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

Ladakh, a region rich in oral traditions, is home to an array of folktales and folk ballads, with the Kesar Story standing as the most cherished and enduring epic across both Buddhist and Muslim communities. Despite its central role in Ladakhi cultural life, scholarly attention to this narrative remains limited, particularly from native perspectives. This paper seeks to reimagine the Kesar Story through the lens of Ladakhi voices, with a focus on preserving this oral tradition amid the growing influence of modern technologies that have distanced younger generations from storytelling practices. By examining the case of Saboo village in Leh through oral testimonies gathered during preliminary fieldwork, the study foregrounds the cultural significance of Kesar as perceived by the local community. Engaging with concepts of microhistory and memory, as articulated by scholars such as Ingrid Winther Scobie and Alistair Thomson, this research emphasises the importance of regional literature in shaping collective identity. It further argues for the inclusion of native scholarship, such as that of Kacho Asfandyar Khan, to authentically preserve and interpret this epic, highlighting how oral epics like Kesar are vital repositories of Ladakhi knowledge, values, and heritage.

KEYWORDS: Leh, Ladakh, Kesar, Saboo, Folktales, Folk Ballads.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ladakh, located in northern India, is known for its stunning beauty, featuring barren deserts, towering mountains, and clear, starry skies. Situated between 9,000 and 11,000 feet above sea level, it experiences a harsh, varied climate that limits vegetation. Only a few trees, like poplar and willow, grow, and fruits such as apples, walnuts, and apricots are cultivated. The Indus and Shayok rivers flow through Ladakh, supporting its ecosystem. Administratively, the region is split into Leh and Kargil districts.

Historically remote and largely inaccessible, Ladakh remained relatively unknown until recently. Consequently, there has been limited literary work produced about the area. However, Ladakh has a rich oral tradition of folklore, folk ballads, and stories that have preserved its culture and united the community.

Both the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Ladakh deeply value these traditional narratives, especially the epic of Kesar. This epic is a key part of Ladakhi culture, passed down through generations by elders, storytellers, monks, and even through radio. The story of Kesar continues to shape Ladakh's cultural, historical, and literary identity, influencing social customs and cultural expressions in the region.

The heroic figure at the heart of the epic is known by different names across cultures. In Ladakhi and Baltistani traditions, he is Kesar, while in Tibetan versions, he is Gesser. In Buryat and Mongolian traditions, he is Gesser Khan. For this research, the name Kesar is used consistently.

The story of Kesar spans generations, telling stories of triumph, courage, and sacrifice that captivate listeners of all ages. Its influence endures in Ladakhi society, echoing through cultural expressions and oral traditions, remaining a significant part of the region's heritage.

Due to Ladakh's harsh winters, people stay indoors, spending evenings around the hearth, sharing stories and folk ballads. Among these, the epic of Kesar is the most cherished, often taking several days to recount. While Ladakh's literary heritage has been oral, recent efforts have helped document and preserve these stories in written and recorded formats for future generations.

This Research work provides a critical lens, emphasising how the Kesar story mirrors Ladakhi history, identity, oral traditions, and the construction of heroic figures. It motivates one to look deeper into how the epic reflects social, historical and cultural values, offering an analytical exploration of its role in shaping local identity. The work also sees through the perspective of folk literature, focusing on Kesar as part of a wider folk epic tradition. It explores the narrative structure, symbolism, and social values embedded within the saga, providing insights into its literary significance in Ladakh and other Himalayan cultures. Each of these topics offers a well-rounded approach that blends cultural studies, literature, and focuses on anthropology, literature, culture, or folklore studies.

Kesar is one of the most significant and widely known epics of the region. Throughout the tale, the legendary hero Kesar speaks in many voices, bringing depth and richness to the narrative. His charismatic deeds breathe life into the story, making it vivid and captivating. Remarkably, this epic continues to be passed down through generations, and even in the 21st century, it is told as a true account, one that inspires courage in its listeners.

This research paper aims to elevate the epic of Kesar to the same standing as other renowned regional literary works. It seeks to document the Kesar epic in written form to ensure its preservation for future generations. A key objective is to introduce this rich piece of regional literature to a wider audience while also raising awareness of its profound role in Ladakhi society. The study further explores the presence of Kesar's ideals and narratives within the cultural practices of Saboo village. Special attention is given to how the epic has shaped and continues to influence the community, with a particular focus on Saboo.

The methodology of my research paper employs the concepts of 'Microhistory and Cultural Studies' to analyse the oral testimonies of the local people of Saboo village. Oral literature existed long before written history and has played a significant role in shaping society and educating the native people about the past. Oral history has provided important methods to record the information, which, in a way, gets neglected. As Ingrid Winther Scobie pointed out in the article *'Family and Community History through Oral History'*, "oral history is not new. Indeed, it is older than written history. But except for the federal writer's project during the 1930s, the idea of taping and structuring people's memories did not receive substantial organised support until 1948, when the well-known historian Allan Nevins from Columbia University founded the Oral History Project. (32) Oral history draws upon the theory of Memory, as in the article 'The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspectives by Alistair Thomson, Michael Frish, and Paula Hamilton. In the article, Michael Frish points out that *'Collective Memory has entered into historical studies in many ways and forms'.*

(36). In this context, oral histories have taken a front position in innovative studies in society. Paula Hamilton says: "In more recent years, I have found the scholarly shift to studies of memory and history exciting, where oral history becomes one constituent of collective expression" (39).

I also conducted interviews with residents of the Leh district, including elders, villagers, monks, storytellers, and government officials, individuals who hold a deep understanding of the Kesar epic. A comprehensive questionnaire was designed to guide these interactions. In analysing the epic, this study draws on the framework of Cultural Studies, particularly as articulated by Indira Chowdhury, to gain deeper insights into its cultural significance.

Carlo Ginzburg's theory of microhistory, or histories that look at individual or small communities, is undertaken. The primary and secondary sources are undertaken, which include books, articles, and journals on the *Kesar* story written by locals as well as non-locals and asked to share their experiences as to how this epic has influenced them.

The interviews taken from the native people and their perspectives will be explored and analysed. In the course of my research, I engaged with villagers and other community members, discussing the significance of the Kesar epic and posing relevant questions. Everyone I spoke with was supportive, cooperative, and genuinely pleased that academic attention is being given to an epic that reflects the essence of their society. Many emphasised that the epic has primarily existed in oral form, with very limited scholarly work conducted on it until now. They highlighted the vital role these stories play in their community, serving as sources of respect, guidance, and cultural continuity. Their responses contributed directly to the exploration of the epic's importance in this paper.

The Kesar story is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the Ladakhi community, across both Buddhist and Muslim populations. It is a story that nearly every individual has grown up hearing, forming a shared thread in the region's oral tradition. To help preserve and spread awareness of this fading folk literature, All India Radio in Leh regularly broadcasts episodes of the Kesar story. While some see the tale as myth and others believe it to be rooted in reality, both perspectives coexist among the people I interviewed. To present their voices more clearly, I structured the interview schedule under four subheadings, offering readers a closer look at the diverse opinions and insights surrounding the epic. Historically, Ladakh functioned as an independent kingdom, ruled by two chieftains, Gyapa Cho in Upper Ladakh and Gyapa Cho of Wanla Village in Lower Ladakh. The epic of Kesar has always been held in high regard in Ladakh, passed down through generations. Ven. Thupstan Paldan, a 78-year-old Buddhist monk, notes that while the origin of the Kesar story in Ladakh is unclear, it has been a tradition for centuries. The epic is especially popular in lower Ladakh, particularly in Wanla, where people have a deeper knowledge of the story. It is believed that Ladakhi kings once used such tales to inspire bravery before battle. Both men and women can narrate the epic, provided they understand it well.

Dr. Thupstan Norboo, a scholar, explains that while he cannot pinpoint the story's exact origin, he has heard it since childhood. He notes that Kesar exists in various versions across Ladakh, Tibet, Mongolia, and Bhutan, always as a heroic figure. From a Buddhist view, Kesar is believed to have appeared to protect and uplift people, especially in regions dominated by demonic forces.

Mr. Nawang Tsering Shakspo, another scholar, highlights how Kesar's bravery has influenced Ladakhi society and is revered in the Buddhist community as divine. However, both scholars express concern over the decline of traditional storytelling, as modern technology and changing lifestyles threaten to erode Ladakh's rich oral heritage.

Cultural and Religious Significance of Kesar: An egalitarian outlook

The Kesar story, with its tales of his miraculous birth, marriage, and triumph over evil, remains a captivating story for the people of Ladakh. It is honoured through traditional performances, such as songs and dances, that celebrate his bravery. Both Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh revere Kesar as a divine figure, with Kesar believed to have been born to protect the innocent and guide people in times of need. Some see him as the reincarnation of Guru Padmasambhava, a revered Buddhist figure.

Kesar's legacy is evident in Ladakhi culture, where folk songs, dances, and performances continue to keep the epic alive. It symbolises bravery and fearlessness, and is often narrated during the long winter months, a time when families gather to share stories. The story is also a unifying force, transcending religious boundaries in the region. Historically, Ladakh remained isolated until 1963, when the construction of a road connected it to Srinagar. Since then, Ladakh has integrated more with the rest of India, becoming a significant tourist

destination and administrative unit in 2019. Efforts to preserve its oral traditions have grown, with scholars documenting the Kesar epic and other folk literature as part of Ladakhi heritage.

The Kesar story is not only a source of cultural pride but also offers valuable insights into the region's history and societal values. The story of Kesar, a hero revered by both Buddhists and Muslims, continues to play a central role in Ladakhi life, connecting the past to the present and shaping the cultural identity of the region.

Hypothesis

The story of Kesar, which is traditionally woven into the Ladakh community, is a reality, not a myth. Therefore, this study also aims to investigate whether the epic of Kesar is rooted in myth or historical fact. Ultimately, the research will involve the study and analysis of the Kesar story in its most well-known and widely shared form in Ladakh, primarily oral, contributing to the preservation of Ladakh's intangible cultural heritage through the documentation of its rich storytelling tradition.

Objectives

The Objectives of the proposed research work are
1. To explore how the tale of the legendary king continues to serve as a primary source of entertainment for the Ladakhi community, while also highlighting its aesthetic, literary, traditional, and cultural significance.
2. To understand the enduring legacy of a people who, for centuries, remained geographically and culturally isolated from the rest of the world.
3. To focus on the role of the Kesar story in shaping and reframing the social structure of Ladakh, a region defined by its unique mountain culture, distinct from the cultural norms found in the plains of India.

2. METHODOLOGY

My research focuses on oral history and cultural studies, primarily gathered through personal interviews in Saboo village, Leh. These include conversations with elderly monks, storytellers, students, and scholars who have engaged with the Kesar story. As Linda Shopes states in '*Community Oral History*' ", We hoped that the stories that people told could help cultivate community identity and pride," while Alessandro Portelli emphasises, "There's always a line in oral history... it is precisely these differences that shape the dialogue."

The research examines the cultural significance of Kesar, its influence on religion, culture, and community, and its impact on the lives of individuals. Drawing from *Oral History*, *Cultural*, and *Memory Studies*, it analyses testimonies using 'Microhistory' and 'Cultural Studies' approaches. Oral history, as Ingrid Winther Scobie points out, "is not new; it's older than written history." It plays a key role in recording neglected information, and scholars like Michael Frish highlight its connection to collective memory in historical studies.

The paper is informed by Carlo Ginzburg's '*Microhistory*', which focuses on small communities to understand cultural history, and by Indira Chowdhury's work in *Cultural Studies*, which explores the intersection of oral traditions, memory, and history. Chowdhury notes, "Oral traditions were rarely seen as resources for historical understanding," questioning the role of memory in shaping historical events.

This research, rooted in these theories, provides a deeper understanding of Kesar's cultural significance in Ladakh.

3. CENTRAL ANALYSIS

This study of the Kesar story is grounded in oral history and is based on interviews conducted with five individuals, three men and two women, whose diverse perspectives are analysed in the paper. The story of Kesar is deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness of the region; almost every individual grows up hearing it from parents, grandparents, storytellers, elders, and local scholars. The widespread familiarity with the epic is further reinforced by broadcasts on All India Radio, Leh, which regularly transmits episodes of the saga. The omnipresence of the Kesar narrative in everyday life is noteworthy, as all interviewees demonstrated a strong awareness of its themes and characters. However, interpretations of the epic vary; some view it as a myth, while others believe it has historical foundations. Both perspectives coexist within the community, as reflected in the responses of those interviewed. To better convey these viewpoints, the paper is organised under four subheadings, each highlighting a different aspect of how the interviewees relate to and interpret the Kesar legend.

Venerable Thupstan Paldan, a senior Buddhist monk aged 78, is a respected figure in the Ladakh region. Before embracing monastic life fully, he served as a government school teacher and later worked as an Assistant Editor at the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages. A prolific writer, he has authored several books in the Ladakhi language. He retired from government service in 2002 and currently resides in Saboo village.

Renowned for his deep knowledge and scholarship, especially in Buddhist literature, his contributions to the field are considered immense. Reflecting on the cultural heritage of Ladakh, he says, "The Kesar epic is very old, and it has been a tradition of narrating the story since ancient times. But to know the origin of Kesar in Ladakh, it is a bit unclear, and one cannot point to a definite point of period." The 78-year-old monk further explains that the Kesar story may have reached Leh from Tibet and neighbouring regions, as people from Ladakh historically travelled to Tibet for trade and other interactions, facilitating cultural exchanges. Venerable Thupstan Paldan also noted, "The Entire story can be narrated only by certain wise and intelligent ones and not by all. The common people, as they may narrate incomplete stories."

The story of Kesar is believed to have originated in the Sham region of lower Ladakh, particularly in Wanla village, 120 km from Leh. It is also narrated in Chiktan (180 km from Leh) and Changthang in eastern Ladakh. In an interview, it was mentioned that Ladakh has various folk songs for different occasions, with many songs, especially the 'Ginglu,' linked to the Kesar story, which remains an important tradition in the region. Ven Thupstan Paldan mentions that the epic of Kesar has 18 chapters, though many details are missing. The tale is widely known across Ladakh, Tibet, Skardo, Gilgit, Mongolia, and Baltistan.

Mrs. Yangchan Dolma, a 68-year-old Amchi (local medicinal practitioner) from Saboo village, has deep knowledge of oral literature like Kesar. She recalls hearing long narrations of the Kesar story in her youth, sometimes lasting over 18–20 days. An elder from the Tongspon family in her village once recited the epic from night till morning. She feels that the tradition of narrating the epic Kesar is now declining, and it's time to promote this important piece of literature from this small region. Oral history is considered to be the lifeline that bridges the gap between genealogical study and historical study.

The Ladakh region itself is a cold place, which remains so for a considerable duration during the winter season. One of the sources of entertainment and to keep the people busy is the *Kesar* epic.

Mrs. Tsering Yangchan, a 76-year-old farmer from Saboo village, recalls hearing the Kesar story from her aunts, calling it "the oldest story." She believes Kesar was real and connected to places in the Nubra valley, where ruins linked to him remain. Though versions differ across Ladakh, especially in the Sham region, Kesar is the most cherished tale. She remembers villagers gathering to hear elders narrate the story, often bringing both laughter and tears. Now, she says with a sigh, storytellers are few. "Everyone is busy; no one has time anymore."

Dr. Thupstan Norboo, a 41-year-old PhD holder in Buddhist Studies from the University of Jammu, lives in Choglamsar village near Saboo and works as an Editor at the UT Ladakh Cultural Academy. An expert in Ladakhi oral and written literature, he explains that the Kesar story may have been borrowed from Tibet due to the cultural connection. He notes that while some consider it imaginary, the origin of the Kesar story is difficult to trace, as it's lost in obscurity. Various versions exist across regions, including Ladakhi, Tibetan, Bhutanese, Mongolian, and others, each with its interpretation.

Dr. Thupstan Norboo explains that it is difficult to pinpoint the exact location of the place called Ling or Lingyul, which Tibetans often associate with the Kesar story. Due to changing place names over time, the original site is hard to trace. He also highlights Dukpa Kunzang Stobgyal, a renowned Tibetan scholar, who wrote 31 volumes on the Kesar story and placed its timeline around the 11th century.

Due to the long relationship between Tibet and Ladakh, both regions in Central Asia, it's likely that the tradition of narrating the Kesar story was passed down from Tibet. Dr. Thupstan Norboo explains, "After Buddhism disappeared from India by the 12th century, Ladakh turned to Tibet for spiritual guidance, with many Ladakhi students going there for higher studies. It's possible we adopted the tradition of storytelling from Tibet." He also mentions, "Some families in Gya village, like the Gyapacho family, were chieftains before Ladakh was ruled by Tibetan kings. Scholars believe the descendants of Gyapacho are linked to Kesar."

Dr. Norboo further elaborates on the Ladakhi saying, "Yulha Nawa Gya" (Gya is the first village in Ladakh) and "Khar La Nawa Khaltsi" (the first palace was built in Khaltsi), suggesting that Kesar's lineage could have originated in Gya village around the 9th or 11th century. Kesar is remembered as a hero who, from a Buddhist perspective, was born to save the people of Ladakh and Tibet from demons.

Mr. Nawang Tsering Shakspo, a 70-year-old scholar from Saboo village, is a well-known writer and former head of the J&K Academy of Art, Culture, and Language. He founded a research centre in Ladakh in 2010. He explains that the Kesar epic flourished in Ladakh due to its deep cultural and trade ties with Tibet. Both regions share Mahayana Buddhism, which took root in Ladakh as early as the 8th century.

Mr. Nawang Tsering Shakspo notes that "the ordinary people of the Ladakh region say that Kesar

was born in Ladakh," though there's no concrete evidence to support this. Still, the epic has long entertained the people, leading many to believe it's a Ladakhi story. He adds, "There is certain evidences that speak of Kesar visiting Ladakh," such as unique pebbles near the India-China border believed to be his weapons, and caves thought to have been his dwelling. Interestingly, both Buddhist and Muslim communities in Ladakh narrate and respect the Kesar story. Even today, it remains the most popular winter tale, cherished for its mix of emotions, morals, and heroism.

Mr. Nawang Tsering Shakspo notes, "For a decade onwards, Ladakh has changed completely. We have now all sorts of facilities, modern facilities like what we have in the other parts of the country for entertainment, so therefore, I think this now has taken a different trend." This reflects how modern entertainment has shifted traditional storytelling practices. He also highlights regional variations in the Kesar story lower Ladakh (Sham) shows Baltistani influence, while upper Ladakh (Changthang) reflects Tibetan elements, showcasing the localised and evolving nature of the epic across the region.

So, whether it's an upper version or a lower version, today people are still connected with this Kesar story, but what the researchers observe is that children coming from rural areas are more familiar with this epic, and they possess more knowledge compared to the children residing in the urban areas. There is also an interesting story related to the birth of Kesar, how he was born, his marriage, then defeating the evils of this region. The story also has many interesting chapters.

The Kesar story has impacted the Ladakhi culture in many ways. When I was taking the oral testimonies of the people, they said that tradition, culture, and the day-to-day way of life are much influenced by the regional stories, especially the Kesar story.

Ven. Thupstan Paldan notes, "In Ladakh, we have different kinds of folk songs sung on occasions like marriage, many of which are associated with Kesar. The songs called Ginglu are songs of Kesar." He adds that those who knew the Kesar story often sang these songs, which became folk songs over time. Similarly, Mrs. Tsering Yangchan, 76, mentions, "Yes, it has... our scholars are highlighting its impact on our folk songs, clearly reflecting Kesar's story." Dr. Thupstan Norboo agrees, stating, "Since it has become part of our culture, we should preserve it," and explains that many Ladakhi folk songs, including Ginglus, praise Kesar's bravery. Folk dances, like the Kesar (Spawo) dance, also celebrate his heroism.

Mr. Nawang Tsering Shakspo adds, "This Kesar story has been part of Ladakhi tradition and culture. Kesar is prayed to as a protector deity." He further states, "People consider him as an emanation of Guru Padmasambhava," and highlights the strong influence of Kesar's bravery on Ladakhi culture and social life. He also points out that the Muslim community in Ladakh shares this view, noting that historically, Muslims and Buddhists lived together with similar cultural practices. What I find now is that the impact of *Kesar* on the new generation is that the youth hardly take interest in this epic, which has given root to the Ladakhi tradition. One can say that it's taking the form of a dying tradition. As a researcher, I urge the readers and scholars to help preserve this precious epic. Dr. Thupstan Norboo said, "In the Ladakhi folk songs, there are a lot of songs particularly sung in praise of Kesar. Ladakhi folk songs are divided into different categories. There are marriage songs, sarcastic songs, and heroic songs, which are called Ginglu's (songs on Kesar). So most of the Gīnglu's are in praise of the kings and include Kesar too. There are folk dances too, and one particular is called Kesar dance (spawo dance) or heroic/warrior dance. In this dance, the artist assumes themselves as Kesar and performs it.

As Ladakh is a cold place. The winter is climatically very cold and harsh. In winter, people have leisure time as we don't have much work outside, so people mostly stay inside and do their work. So, the older people in the family often narrate the story of *Kesar* in the winter season. They don't prefer to narrate the *Kesar* epic in summer.

Ven. Thupstan Paldan explains, "In Ladakh, these stories are narrated in winter when people are busy with farming and fieldwork in the summer. In winter, with no work to do, people have leisure time." He adds that travellers heading to eastern Ladakh for trade would narrate the Kesar story to pass the time. While there's no rule on who can narrate it, it can be either male or female.

Similarly, Mrs. Tsering Yangchan states, "It cannot be narrated in summer, only during the 10th-11th Tibetan months of winter. It's understood by all when to narrate the epic." She notes that she has only seen females narrate the story. Mrs. Yangchan Dolma shares, "Mostly, it is narrated in winter due to the leisure time. Some grandparents were very enthusiastic about telling the Kesar story, and in her case, both males and females would narrate it." She recalls a female friend from Stok village whose mother told the story rhythmically, with songs.

Dr. Thupstan Norboo adds, "In Ladakh, winter is

the storytelling season. People have leisure time and no agricultural work, making it ideal for listening to stories." In his case, the narrators were mostly female, including his grandmother and mother. Mr. Nawang Tsering Shakspo emphasises, "There is a specific time to narrate the Kesar story, usually before the sowing season. With long winter nights and little work to do, elders would narrate stories, including the Kesar, to entertain children." He mentions that both males and females would narrate the epic in his experience.

The tradition of narrating the Kesar epic is an old practice, mainly done in winter when work is minimal. The harsh winter in Ladakh keeps people indoors, and storytelling, including the Kesar story, serves as a source of entertainment, narrated by both males and females.

In Ladakh, we have both Buddhist as well as Muslim followers. So, the Buddhist people have a strong inclination to the Kesar story, and people relate to this epic very well. Even the Muslim community in the region also knows the Kesar story. So, according to the people I have interviewed, they are well-versed in the story. Mrs. Yangchan Dolma explains, "Kesar is assumed to be Dharma Raja." Mrs. Tsering Yangchan adds, "Kesar displayed magical powers, obscuring his appearance. He appears like Avaloketeshwara, holding the moon on his right shoulder, the sun on his left, with spears and a headgear." Nawang Tsering Shakspo notes, "Kesar's story is part of Ladakhi tradition and culture, often prayed to as a god. In Buddhism, he is considered a protector deity and sometimes seen as an emanation of Guru Padmasambhava." Dr. Thupstan Norboo further explains, "From a Buddhist perspective, Kesar is believed to be the reincarnation of Guru Rimpoche, the father of Tantra in Tibet, appearing in the 8th century."

The Kesar story blends myth and reality, evolving over generations. It deeply rooted itself in the Himalayan regions, including Ladakh, Tibet, and Bhutan, especially after Guru Padmasambhava's visit in the 8th century. The spread of Mahayana Buddhism played a key role in embedding the epic into the region's culture. According to legend, Tibetan king Trisong Detsen invited Guru Padmasambhava to subdue demonic forces, creating a spiritual context for the Kesar epic. It's often told in eighteen episodes, blending heroism with spirituality. The story is believed to have occurred in Kham province, Tibet, where the palace of King Kesar, Linkhar, is said to have stood.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the story of Kesar remains a vital thread in the cultural and social fabric of Ladakh, transmitted across generations through oral tradition, community storytelling, and local media such as All India Radio, Leh. The interviews conducted with five individuals, spanning gender and generational lines, reveal that the story continues to resonate deeply with the people. Its omnipresence in daily life reflects not only its entertainment value but also its role in shaping identity, belief systems, and cultural continuity in the region. While some interviewees regard the epic as a mythological tale, others consider it rooted in historical reality, highlighting the dynamic and evolving interpretations within the community. By organising these insights under four thematic subheadings, this research underscores the richness and complexity of the Kesar tradition and contributes to the preservation of Ladakh's intangible heritage. Ultimately, this study affirms that the Kesar epic is more than just a story; it is a living tradition that continues to define and reflect the unique worldview of the Ladakhi people.

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