

Kesar Saga: A Critical Perspective of Ladakh

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KEYWORDS

Himalayan, Kesar, Ladakh, Saga

ABSTRACT

Ladakh is bounded by rich folklores, folktales, and folk ballads. Out of all the stories, the Kesar saga is the most popular and loved by one and all. All the people of the Ladakh region have grown up listening to the Kesar saga. The epic Kesar has influenced both the Buddhist and the Muslim communities of the region of Ladakh. Though it is the dominating folktale of the region, yet not much research has been done on the subject till date and hence, it needs to be studied properly. In this connection, I am attempting to reimagine this heroic tale from the Ladakhi perspective and also to preserve it in the changing times especially when folk narratives are snatched by modern technologies. The attempt is also to make the lesser-known Himalayan regional literature known to a larger audience. Generally, the tradition of storytelling is an important part of Ladakhi culture and tradition, but today due to modern technology like mobile gadgets, television, etc. people are seen drifting away from their traditions keeping themselves busy in their own world of modernism. As a result, today this important practice of oral storytelling is fast vanishing. Therefore, bringing the stories in writing is becoming more urgent than before. So, in the future with technological development; the stories may stay as a source of entertainment and knowledge to the book readers.

1. Introduction

Ladakh is known for its unique beauty found in its barren desert landscapes and moonlit, starry skies. It is a land rich in natural beauty and is also a land rich in folklore. It is situated in the northernmost part of India. It lies at an altitude ranging from 9000 ft to 11000 ft above sea level. Due to its varied altitude, the vegetation of the region is quite sparse. Here, only two types of trees are grown namely 'poplar' and 'willow'. Some fruits are also grown locally here like apples, walnut, apricot, etc. Two important rivers flow through Ladakh, one is Indus and the other is the Shayok River. From the administrative point of view, the region lies divided into two districts namely Leh and Kargil.

Ladakh being a remote place till recently unknown to the outside world, not much literary work has been done on it. Folklores, folktales, and folk ballads play a significant role in any regional literature likewise in the Ladakh region it also plays an important role and is the thread that keeps the society united. In the Ladakh region, both the Buddhist and the Muslim communities have a high reverence for the epics. The history of Ladakh is known only through the mythology of its people and the written history came much later. The people have grown up listening to the folk stories from their senior members of the family, storytellers, layman, monks, and nuns, and also through radios. Of all the folk stories the epic Kesar is narrated in every household and the epic has a great impact on the cultural, historical, social, and literary scenario of the region. The popularity of the epic Kesar can still be seen today in the Ladakhi society in the form of various cultural practices and traces.

I feel pertinent to mention here that the names used by Ladakhi and Baltistan versions are Kesar and Tibetan is Gesser. In the Buryat/Mongolian version, it is called Gesser or Gesser Khan. The spelling adopted by me here in the research paper is Kesar. Through its multi-generational, the epic encompasses vast experiences of life, triumph, trial, bravery and sacrifices weaved amusingly to capture the imagination of the listeners. The epic still fills the air and resonates in the Ladakhi society in different forms. The cultural significance of such a long epic surviving epic cannot be overemphasized.

The winter is climatically very cold; hence not much activity takes place during winters. Most people stay indoors. In the winter evenings, till late night hours, all the family members sit together and around the hearth and narrate different folktales and folk ballads to pass the long cold winter nights. Mostly the epic Kesar is preferred by all, both the narrator and the listeners. There are different kinds of stories, some are short and epics like the Kesar saga are long and take several days to be told. The literary tradition in this part of the country is mostly oral but now written documents are also available.

Kesar is one of the important and widespread epics of the region. In the epic story, one finds several voices of its legendary hero Kesar. The charismatic activities of the Kesar make the story more live-like and harmonizing. Due to the fact, that the people have not forgotten to narrate this story, and interestingly in the 21st century itself, the story testifies that the same is a true story which makes the listener courageous.

The objective of the research paper is to bring the epic Kesar on par with other regional literature. An attempt is to document the Kesar epic in written form so that it will be preserved. My concern is also to make the rest of the world familiarized with regional literature and to make the people aware of the role of this important epic in Ladakhi society. The concern of the research paper is also an attempt to identify traces and ideals of the Kesar saga in the cultural practices of Saboo village. The paper will highlight the cultural influence of the epic on the community in general and Saboo village in particular.

The methodology of my research paper employs the concepts of 'Microhistory and Cultural Studies' to analyze 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 organized 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 also 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).

Secondly, the theory of Cultural Studies as given by Indira Chowdhury is used in my research paper to get deep into the epic Kesar. As said by Indira Chowdhury in her article "as a part of the nationalist project, oral traditions were generally seen as part of a rich cultural heritage in need of preservation which led to a folklorisation of culture, but oral traditions were rarely seen as resources for historical understanding". (54). Indira Chowdhury raises questions about the relationship between subjectivity and history particularly the role memory plays in understanding what historical events mean to human subjects who experience them. The article also helps us in understanding the relationship between history and memory. It demonstrates the ways in which oral tradition and oral history may converge and map out a distinct relationship between experience and memory and points toward a different understanding of events and their interpretation.

I also collected interviews from the native people of Leh district which includes elderly people, villagers, monks, storytellers, and government servants who possess a sound knowledge of the Kesar epic. A thorough questionnaire was also prepared for the same. The Theory of Cultural Studies as reflected by Indira Chowdhury has been taken into consideration in exploring the epic Kesar.

The Carlo Ginzburg's theory of microhistory or histories that look at individual or small community is undertaken. The primary and secondary sources are undertaken which include books, articles, and journals on Kesar epic written by local as well as non-locals.

I have taken into consideration the villagers and other people to whom I have spoken regarding the importance of this epic and asked questions. They were all supportive, cooperative, and happy to see that research is being done on this epic which embodies the whole society. The people pointed out that the epic existed in the oral form and till recently little research work is available. The epic stories play a very important role in society and how people respect and take guidance from them. The question was put before the people on the importance of the Kesar and asked them 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 analyzed in the paper.

The epic story is very much part and parcel of the Ladakhi community be it Buddhist or Muslim where every individual knows about it and people have grown up listening to this epic. The All India Radio, Leh also transmits the Kesar epic frequently to make the people aware and revive this important folk literature which is in a dying state. People have different views regarding whether the epic is a myth or a reality, both exist

according to the people I have interviewed. I made four sub-headings in the interview schedule to familiarize the readers with what the interviewees had to say about the Kesar epic. Ladakh was an independent kingdom being ruled by two different Chieftains, from upper Ladakh and Lower Ladakh. In upper Ladakh Gyapa Cho was the main ruler or the chieftain and in the Lower Ladakh Gyapa Chop of Wanla Village was the chieftain.

As Dr. Thupstan Norboo explains, “today we hear that the descendent of Gyapa Cho, who is believed to be the descendent of Kesar. In that sense, since Gya is the foremost village of Ladakh, it is believed that there is a saying in Ladakhi Language which says, ‘yulhas Nawa Gya’ ‘means the first village to settle in Ladakh is Gya and the ‘Khar la sNawa Khaltisi’ means the foremost palace built in Ladakh was the Palace of Khaltisi, which is believed to be the first castle in Ladakh”. Further he elaborates and says “it could be possible that around 9th century and 11th century, Kesar lineage used to reside in Gya village. So, in that case, Gya could be the first village of Kesar”. If we deeply dig into the oral sayings and the written literature, we find that from time immemorial Kesar as a hero and Kesar as a saga has played a key role in keeping the aesthetic and cultural tradition of this region.

The people of this region have never underestimated epic Kesar and always kept this epic in high honor and respect. The epic has been passed down by different person from time to time that is the reason that we still get to listen to this epic.

Ven. Thupstan Paldan, a 78 years old Buddhist monk and well-known Ladakhi scholar says: “Kesar is very old as it has been a tradition of narrating the story since ancient times. But to discuss on the origin of the Kesar story in Ladakh is bit unclear and can't point a definite time period. Further, he states that this story seems to be available in the regions of khunu, karja and spiti of Himachal Pradesh. But in Bodrigs in Kargil and the Sham, the lower regions of Ladakh, there were editions of narrating this story in their own ways and narratives.

In lower Ladakh, the narration of the epic Kesar seems to have begun in the village called Wanla, where this story was very popular and even today most people have good knowledge of the epic compared to the other parts of the region. Scholars in Ladakh also believe that the kings of Ladakh in the olden days kept fighting with their neighboring states and therefore, encouraged the soldiers to fight against their enemies in the war as well as to defeat them, such stories especially the Kesar saga was narrated before them to instill confidence and make them courageous. Both male and female can narrate these epic stories. There is no gender disparity. Anyone who possesses a sound knowledge of the Kesar epic can narrate it.

The best time to narrate this epic Kesar in Ladakh is in the winter months as climatically the weather is harsh, with frequent snowfall, so people used to have much leisure time with no such field or agricultural work is there to do. To pass the time and to keep them entertained, usually most people indulge themselves in narrating the stories especially the epic Kesar in their respective households. On the other hand, there is no agriculture work or any other form of work to do in the winter time.

Dr. Thupstan Norboo, a young gentleman who is familiar with the epic Kesar says he cannot exactly point out the period but of course he heard the story narrating from his parents, elders and even later on from All India Radio.

He says there are different versions of this epic like Ladakhi, Tibetan, Mongolian and Bhutan etc. Almost everywhere Kesar is remembered as a hero. He further elaborates that from the Buddhist perspective, Kesar is said to have taken birth miraculously to help the poor beings. It is believed that previously, Tibet and other regions were being ruled by certain demons and people were not that meritorious being influenced by other elements. In that case, it is said that Kesar has miraculously taken birth in the form of a powerful hero to save the people of the particular area.

A well-known Ladakhi scholar Mr. Nawang Tsering Shakspo whom I have also interviewed says that there is definitely a big impact of Kesar's bravery on the Ladakhi culture and way of life, bravery and deeds of Kesar dominate the Ladakhi social, cultural and even religious activities. And religious wise he is considered as a God by the Buddhist community”. In the past, there was no electricity, no radio, and no television in Ladakh region and now the whole scenario has changed and new and modern technologies have dominated this small Himalayan region. Today, people hardly take interest in the old practices of storytelling. So, one can say that the tradition of telling stories and narrating epics is fast vanishing which is a big threat.

Cultural and Religious Significance of Kesar: An egalitarian outlook

Kesar his birth, his marriage, and then defeating the evils/enemies are all very interesting. It keeps the listeners occupied and focused. We have congregational songs and dances, especially in praise of Kesar. Till today, we, the people of Ladakh occasionally perform these dances and sing the songs. There are some interesting songs that we find in Ladakhi tradition and while singing or listening to these songs one can get some glimpses of Kesar's life and deeds.

Kesar as a deity is worshipped, respected, and followed by the Buddhist community of Ladakh and likewise, the Muslim community also respects the Kesar saga which can be noted in these interviews. People believe that Kesar is omnipresent. He has taken birth to guide and help the innocent and poor people. Almost everywhere, Kesar is remembered as a hero. Dr. Thupstan Norboo explains: "Kesar has miraculously taken birth to help the poor beings of Ladakh because it is said that previously all these regions were being ruled by certain demons and the people were not that meritorious and were influenced by another elements. In order to save and guide these poor people, Kesar is said to have miraculously taken birth in the form of a powerful hero. He further says "from a Buddhist perspective Kesar is believed to be the reincarnation of Guru Rimpoche, the father of Tantric Buddhism in Tibet who appeared in the 8th century.

Mr. Nawang Tsering Shakspo points out: "Kesar epic has been part of Ladakhi traditional, culture and story of valor. Sometimes Kesar is also prayed as God by the Ladakhis. In Buddhism we have protector deities and Kesar is considered to be one of the protector deities. Some people also consider him as the emanation or incarnation of Gurupadmasambhava, a Buddhist tantric master to whom the followers of the Mahayana form of Buddhism (Tibetan Buddhism) pray as the second God). He further states that the Kesar Epic is in a way related to Jatakas, the stories of the previous lives of Buddha. In a way, the epic Kesar has almost dominated this part with its story and encouraging the native of this region. One cannot deny the fact that the Kesar saga had a huge impact on the life and the ways of the Ladakhi people. Even today we can see that the epic exists and is being told in all the villages of Ladakh with great enthusiasm.

In Ladakh, Kesar is also worshipped as God and highly respected by all. There are particular folk songs and dances associated with this saga. The song is known as Ginglu and the dance as sPawoe rTes, meaning heroic dance. It is still sung occasionally in praise of the bravery and brave deeds of Kesar by the local folk singers while performing the Kesar dance.

Regardless of many Political and communal tensions seen in many parts of the country, respecting, following, and believing in the Kesar epic as a spiritual figure or a national heroic figure in Leh Ladakh is an egalitarian example of how different communities in the region such as Buddhist and the Muslims continue to share a common folk cultural epic, believes in the same stories, have similar cultural practices.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, Kesar's story depicts the brave deeds of brave Ladakhis who live in inhospitable climatic conditions facing challenges for their survival. To understand the past glory of the bygone times of this Himalayan region, stories like Kesar plays a vital role in reviving the past glory and help us to know the harsh life carried by our ancestors for centuries. Now in the changing scenario due to the availability of modern amenities, the younger generations are forgetting and distancing themselves from the tradition, culture, folktales, and folk ballads. So to make the native people and the outside world aware of the past glory, the epic like Kesar plays an important role to make the youth understand the past and educating them regarding the importance of the regional literature.

The people I have interviewed also mentioned that the epic Kesar should be written and documented as it is fast vanishing. Kesar is the only saga that keeps the people intact and helps in recalling our past and creating a bonding between the past and the present. In the past epic, Kesar was performed and dramatized frequently but now this tradition is fast declining which is again an individual need to ponder upon. Ladakh is a cold region where the temperature dips down to -35 degrees in the winter season there is not much work to do outside, and there are not many activities take place in the winter season so to keep oneself engaged and to pass the time one important activity which keeps the people engaged in the storytelling. There are different stories that are found in the region and the story of Kesar is narrated widely and loved by all sections of the society.

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