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## The Kamboj Kshatriyas: Warriors born of divine flame

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### Abstract

The Kambojas were an eminent Kshatriya warrior clan of ancient India, strategically located in the northwestern frontier, with their capital at Rājapura (modern Rajouri, Jammu & Kashmir). Renowned for their elite cavalry and the famed Kamboja-asva horses, they played a central role in defending the subcontinent's northern borders from antiquity through the medieval period. Historical sources including the Mahābhārata, Ramayana, Purāṇas, Arthashastra, inscriptions, and travel accounts by Chinese, Greek, and Persian chroniclers highlight their military prowess, political acumen, and equestrian expertise. The Kambojas maintained a sophisticated governance system combining monarchical and republican elements, and their alliances extended across major Kshatriya clans and empires, including the Gurjara-Pratiharas, Palas, and other regional powers. The Kamboja-Pāla dynasty in Bengal exemplifies their expansion and continuity of martial and administrative traditions. As the founders of the Kamboja Shahi (Hindu Shahi) Kingdom, they served as guardians of Sanatan Dharma, resisting foreign invasions from Persians, Greeks, Arabs, and Turkic forces for centuries. This paper traces their origins, mythological and historical significance, military traditions, political organization, and enduring legacy as frontier defenders and master equestrians in ancient and medieval India.

**Keywords:** Gurjara-Pratiharas, Palas, Kamboja Shahi, Medieval India, Purāṇas, Arthashastra

### Introduction

The Kambojas were one of the most formidable warrior clans of ancient India, strategically positioned in the northwestern frontier of the subcontinent. Their principal seat at Rājapura, identified with modern Rajouri in Jammu & Kashmir served as the political and cultural nucleus of their kingdom. Recognized as elite Kshatriyas, the Kambojas played a decisive role in safeguarding India's northern borders and upholding Indo-Aryan martial traditions. Ancient and textual sources such as the *Mahābhārata* (MBh 6.75.17), *Vāyu Purāṇa*, *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, *Anguttara Nikāya*, *Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī* (IV.1.168), *Kautilya's Arthaśāstra*, and Chinese accounts including those of *Xuanzang*, as well as inscriptions, provide evidence of the Kambojas' military, political, and equestrian significance. The Kambojas were particularly famous for their cavalry traditions, especially the *Kamboja-asva*, a breed celebrated for speed, endurance, and strength. These horses were integral to the military power of northern Indian dynasties such as the Mauryas, Guptas, Pratiharas, and Palas who relied heavily on Kamboja cavalry forces for their imperial campaigns. The Kambojas also exhibited a hybrid political system that incorporated both monarchical and republican structures, with *gana-saṅghas* or warrior councils functioning alongside kings. This blend of military strength, administrative sophistication, and strategic geography made the Kambojas indispensable to the defense and diplomacy of ancient India. The present paper therefore seeks to trace the historical origins of the Kamboj Kshatriyas, exploring their role as northern defenders of dharma, their cavalry and governance institutions, and their legacy from Rājapura to the Kamboja Shahi Dynasty in the northwest.

### Echoes of Valor from the Ramayana

From the ancient hymns of the Vedas to the epic narratives of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the name Kamboja resonates as a symbol of valor, loyalty, and radiant energy.

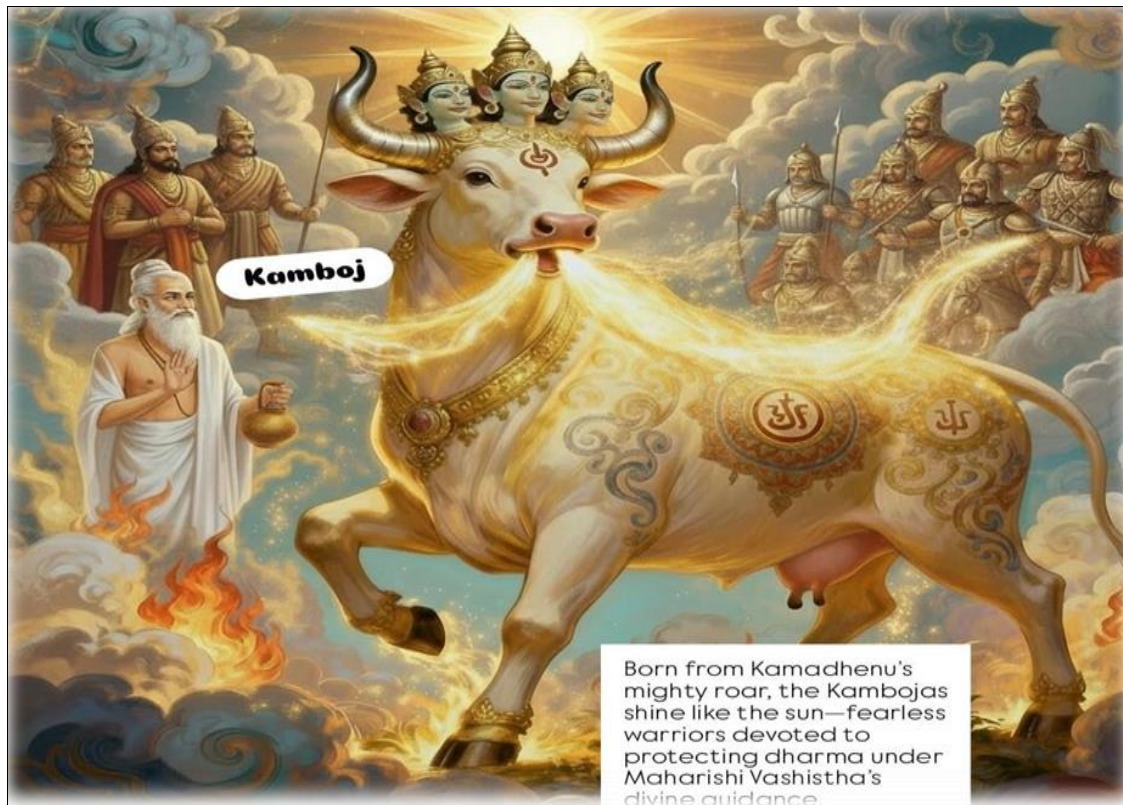
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These warrior clans, later recognized as the Kamboj is one of the most awe-inspiring episodes of the Ramayana, the defense of Sage Vashistha's hermitage by the divine cow Kamadhenu, who is said to have produced mighty warrior clans, including the Kambojas, from her body to repel the attack of King Vishwamitra (Valmiki Ramayana, Book I). This mythic origin story symbolizes the Kambojas as warriors born of divine flame, destined to uphold dharma and protect sacred order a theme that recurs throughout later Itihasa-Purāṇic and historical traditions.

### Born from Kamadhenu's Roar

In the sacred conflict between Vāsiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra,

Kāmadhenu, the divine cow, manifested her celestial power to defend her sage-master. According to the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa (Bāla Kāṇḍa 1.55.1-4), when Viśvāmitra's army advanced on Vāsiṣṭha's hermitage, Kāmadhenu was invoked to generate forces via her yogic power (1-55-1). From her roar emerged the Kambojas (kāmbajā ravisannibhāḥ), radiant like the sun, followed by the Pahlavas, Yavanas, Shakas, Barvaras, Haritas, Kiratas and others (1-55-2-3). These warrior formations instantly overwhelmed Viśvāmitra's army (1-55-4). This passage symbolises the Kambojas as divine emanations of protective energy born for the defence of dharma and alignment with spiritual guidance.



**Fig 1:** Represents the Born from Kamadhenu's mighty roar, the Kamboj Kshatriyas shine like the sun fearless warriors devoted to protecting dharma under Maharishi Vashistha's divine guidance.

### The Royal Kamboja's and Southern Lineages

The southern recensions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, a sage named Kamboja (also rendered as Kumbhoja) is described as residing near the banks of the Godāvarī River in the Dakṣiṇāpatha region Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa 3.11.1-3). During their exile, Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā are said to have visited his hermitage before proceeding toward Pañcavaṭī (*Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, Āraṇyakāṇḍa 3.11-15). Sage Kambhoja is portrayed as a close companion of Agastya, the southern hermit and brother of Vasiṣṭha (*Vasiṣṭha and Agastya in Southern Tradition*), reflecting the spiritual lineage that the Kambojas maintained from Vasiṣṭha's teachings even after their migration from the northwest into southern India.

The ancient Kambojas originally a north-western Indo-Iranian tribe are often described as following Vasiṣṭha as their spiritual guru, with both Vasiṣṭha and Agastya acting as pivotal ṛṣis who influenced their religious and cultural

life (Puranic Encyclopaedi). Among the Kamboja sages, Upamanyu is particularly revered; he is mentioned in the *Ṛg Veda* (1.102.9) and in the *Vamśa-Brahmaṇa* of the *Sāma Veda* as the ancestor of the sage Aupamanyava (Macdonell and Keith, 1912 <sup>[21]</sup>; *Vamśa Brāhmaṇa* 1.18; Wikipedia entry on Upamanyu, 2023). Aupamanyava Kamboja is identified as a descendant of Upamanyu and connected to the Kamboja Brahmanical lineage (JustaPedia, 2022). Upamanyu is also venerated as a devotee of Lord Śiva and is credited in Purāṇic and later Hindu traditions with spreading Śaiva teachings and ascetic discipline among the Kambojas and neighboring tribes (*Śiva Purāṇa*, The Hindu Portal, 2013).

Thus, the Kambojas represent not only a warrior race born of celestial origin in the epics but also a spiritually endowed lineage rooted in the teachings of Vasiṣṭha, Agastya, and Upamanyu, blending kṣatriya valor with ṛṣi-like spiritual insight.



**Fig 2:** Kambojas: Divine warriors guided by ancient sages

**The Kambojas in the Mahābhārata: Royal Kshatriyas of the Northern Frontier:** The Kambojas stand among the most valorous and aristocratic peoples of the Mahābhārata. They are not depicted as peripheral tribes but rather as northern royal Kshatriyas, renowned for their cavalry, horses, and heroic conduct in the Kurukṣetra War (Kamboj Society, “Kambojas in Indian Literature”). Geographically situated beyond the Himalaya and politically linked to both the Pandava and Kaurava alliances, they are culturally rooted in the Aryan warrior tradition and serve as frontier nobility in ancient India (MSU History Notes). Their principal ruler, King Sudakṣhina Kamboja, fought alongside the Kauravas, while another princely branch, often identified with the Parama-Kamboja segment, extended support to the Pandavas.

#### Mentions and Descriptions across the Parvas Sabha Parva (Book II)-Royal Recognition and Tribute

- **Verses:** *Sabhā Parva* 32.17, 48.50, 53.5.

The Kambojas are listed among northern kings who send tribute to Yudhishtira’s Rājasūya sacrifice.

They offer horses of northern breed, camels, asses, and fine woollen fabrics.

During Yudhishtira’s coronation, Sudakṣhina Kamboja himself yokes four white stallions of Kamboja breed to the royal chariot.

- **Significance:** The Kambojas appear as recognized monarchs participating in imperial ceremonies with other royal dynasties.



**Fig 3:** This representative Fig shows Yudhishtira's grand coronation during the Sabha Parva, King Sudakṣhina Kamboja, who offers noble white stallions, camels, and fine fabrics as tribute, symbolizing royal legitimacy, alliances, and the restoration of dharma through his universal sovereignty in ancient India.

### Udyoga Parva (Book V)-The Division of Kamboja Allegiances

- **Verses:** Udyoga Parva 19.7, 155.30-33, 160-166.

As Duryodhana builds his war coalition, he secures the support of northern powers “the Gandhāras, the Śakas, the Yavanas, the Bāhlicas and the Kambojas”.

Among them, King Sudakṣhina of Kamboja joins the Kauravas, driven by both political alliance and marital ties: Duryodhana’s wife, Queen Bhanumatī, was a Kamboja princess, daughter of the royal house of Kamboja. Thus, the main Kamboja contingent followed Sudakṣhina into Duryodhana’s army out of kinship and loyalty to their princess. However, the epic also refers to “Parama-Kamboja” (Udyoga Parva 19.7 and Drona Parva 11.23), interpreted by several commentators as a separate branch of the Kamboja realm that sided with the Pandavas. Kambojas

of the northern region, the Parama Kambojas, and the Daradas dwell beyond the Himava” Mahābhārata, Udyoga Parva 19.7

In the Mahabharata, the Param Kamboja’s are described as a northern warrior clan renowned for their power, wealth, and valor. In Drona Parva (7.23.42-44), they are called prabhadrakastu kamboja’s, meaning “the exceptionally fortunate and illustrious Kambojas.” They are portrayed as fearful like Yama, fierce as death itself, and rich like Kubera, the god of treasures”. *Kambojah. Yama vaishnavanopamah*

- **Significance:** This shows a split allegiance within the Kamboja confederacy—one branch supporting Duryodhana (through royal marriage), the other favoring Yudhiṣṭhira through ideological and familial ties with the Pandava allies of the north.
- **Verses:** Udyoga Parva 19.7, 155.30-33, 160-166.



**Fig 4:** Representation of Param kamboja in Mahabharata war

### Bhīṣma Parva (Book VI)-Maharaja Sudakṣhina in Battle Formations

- **Verses:** Bhīṣma Parva 5.16-18, 65.19-22, 87.16-19.

Sudakṣhina, ruler of the Kambojas, is placed at the frontline of Duryodhana’s army, along with Sindhu, Avanti, and Kritavarman. The Kamboja cavalry, described as “as fierce as forest fires,” guards the northern wing of the Kaurava host. Later, Maharaja Sudakṣhina resists Abhimanyu and Arjuna during Bhīṣma’s command.

- **Significance:** Sudakṣhina’s position as a chief commander confirms his status as one of the ten great Kaurava generals, representing royal northern might.

### Drona Parva (Book VII)-Death of king maharaja Sudakṣhina Kamboj

Verse (7.67.70): “ṣete sma-nihato bhūmau kāmbojāstaraṇocitaḥ putraḥ kāmbojarājasya pārthena vinipātitaḥ”.

There lay on the ground the Kamboja warrior, slain; beautiful, copper-eyed Sudakṣhina, the son of the Kamboja king, brought down by Pārtha (Arjuna).

Maharaja Sudakṣhina wounds Arjuna before being slain in return. His body is described with royal dignity fair, radiant, and still adorned in golden armor.

- **Significance:** The death of Maharaja Sudakṣhina at Arjuna’s hand is treated with reverence, symbolizing the fall of a noble Kshatriya from the Himalayan frontier.

### Karna Parva (Book VIII)-Continuing Valor of Kamboja Troops

- **Verses:** Karna Parva 56.111-114.

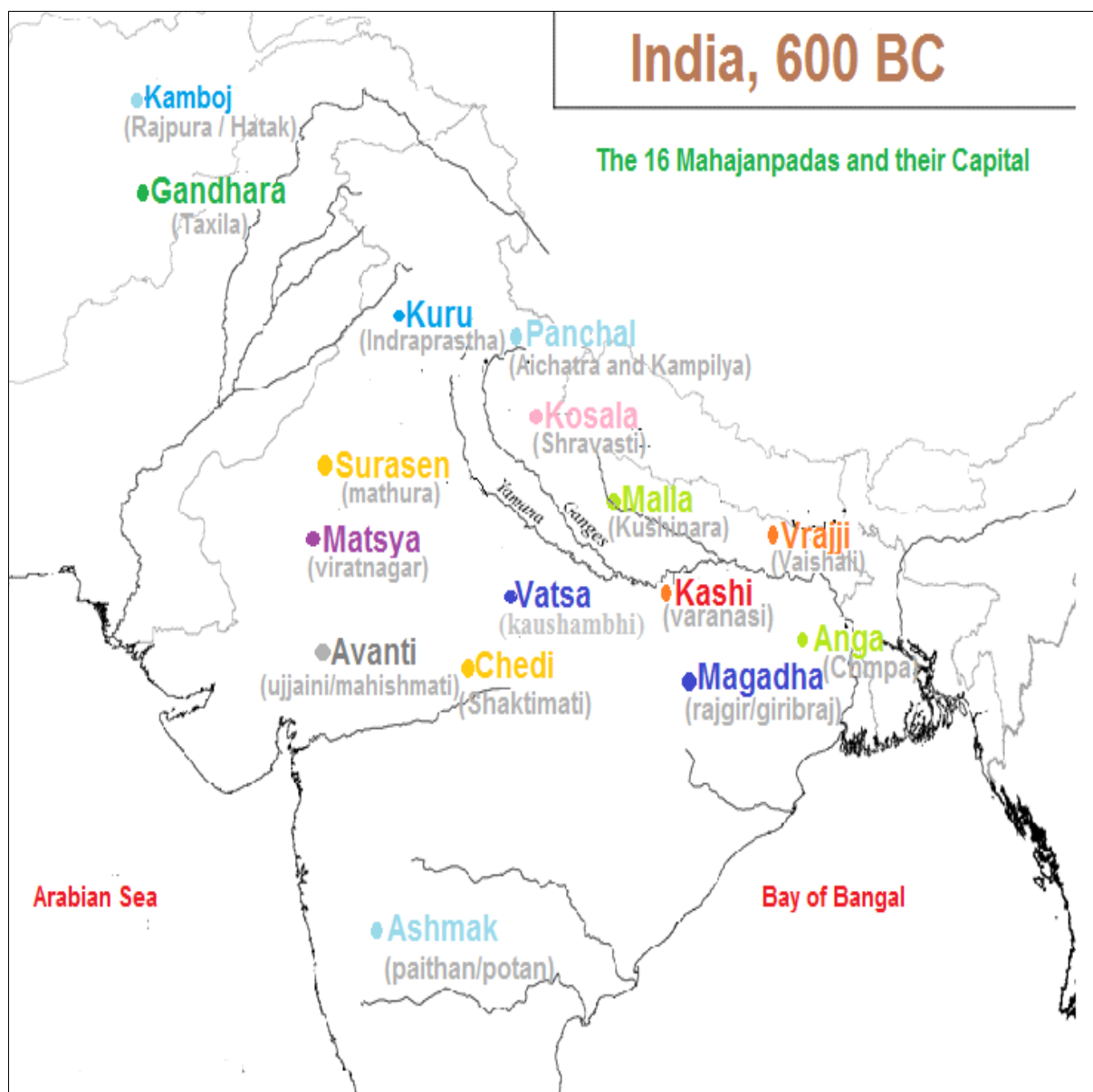
After Sudakṣhina’s death, the Kamboja divisions continue the fight under a new commander-Maharaja Prapakṣa Kamboja.

They charge the Pandava formation and die to the last soldier, maintaining formation even as defeat becomes inevitable.

- **Significance:** Their endurance demonstrates the discipline and collective valor of the Kamboja warriors a hallmark of their Kṣatriya dharma



**Fig 5:** Representation Fig of Maharaja Sudakshina Singh Kamboj in Mahabharata war with 16 akshoni biggest army, royal horses and golden chariot



**Fig 6:** Map of 16 Mahajanpadas of India, defining Kamboj kindom with capital Rajapura (Modern Rajouri and Peer panjal)

### Śānti Parva (Book XII)-Political Structure of Kamboja Kingdoms

- **Verse (Śānti Parva 65.22):** “The Kambojas and the Yavanas, though kings in name, are ruled by councils (gaṇa-saṅghaiḥ)”.  
This note shows the Kambojas as an aristocratic republic or gana-rajya a council of warrior nobles governing jointly, rather than autocratically.
- **Significance:** The Kambojas were a structured warrior polity, combining monarchy with republican governance early evidence of Kshatriya republicanism in the northwest.

### Parama-Kamboja: The Pandava-Aligned Branch

The Mahabharata mentions “Parama-Kamboja,” literally “the farther Kamboja”, a northern extension of the same lineage.

Scholars and oral traditions identify them as Pandava sympathizers, possibly through kinship with the northern allies of Arjuna, such as the Daradas, Trigartas, and Kashmiras.

The Parama Kambojas, the northern Gandharas, and the Daradas dwell beyond the Himalaya” Udyoga Parva 19.7

There is much more about the Kambojas in the Mahābhārata, which repeatedly highlights their royal lineage, valor, and power across different Parvas.

### Rājapura (Modern Rajouri): Capital of the Kamboja Mahājanapada

The ancient Kamboja Kingdom, one of the Sixteen Mahājanapadas of early India, had its capital at Rājapura, identified with present-day Rajouri in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir (Encyclopaedia of Indian History, 1988; Kamboj Society, “Kamboja Kingdom”, 2009) <sup>[7]</sup>. Ancient texts such as the *Anguttara Nikāya*, *Vāyu Purāṇa*, and *Mahābhārata* recognize Kamboja as a powerful northern realm situated beyond the Indus, renowned for its cavalry and royal Kshatriya ruler. The capital city, Rājapura meaning “Royal City” served as the political and cultural seat of the Kamboja dynasty and a strategic center linking Kashmir with the Gandhāra and Bāhlika regions (Stein, 1900; Cunningham, 1871) <sup>[34, 5]</sup>. This historic truth is officially acknowledged in modern India: The Map of the Sixteen Mahājanapadas displayed in the Parliament of India, New Delhi, curated by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, distinctly marks Kamboja as one of the original great kingdoms of ancient Bharatavarsha (Ministry of Culture, Government of India, 2021; Kamboj Society, “Kamboja Kingdom”, 2009). The presence of Kamboja on this national heritage map confirms both its epic antiquity and enduring recognition as a sovereign Mahājanapada with its royal capital at Rājapura (Rajouri), (Encyclopaedia of Indian History, 1988) <sup>[7]</sup>.

### Kambojas in the Purāṇas, Buddhist Texts, Classical Literature, and Historical Records: A Continuous Royal Legacy of the Northwest

The Kambojas are prominently mentioned across a wide range of ancient Indian scriptures, Buddhist texts, classical Sanskrit works, and historical records, establishing them as

one of the most ancient and enduring royal Kshatriya lineages of the northwestern frontier. The *Vāyu Purāṇa* describes them as Uttara-Kṣatriyāḥ (northern Kshatriyas), guardians of the frontiers and among the sixteen great Mahājanapadas (*Vāyu Purāṇa*, 2.40-45), while the *Purāṇas* trace are of the mainly Suryavanshi lineage. The *Āṅguttara Nikāya* of the Buddhist canon and the *Mahāvastu* mention Kamboja as a prosperous republican kingdom famous for its horses, warriors, and trade routes linking India to Central Asia (*Mahāvastu*, 1.3). Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) refers to Kamboja as a well-defined Janapada, indicating a developed political and linguistic identity (Macdonell & Keith, 1912; Kane, 1930) <sup>[21, 13]</sup>, while Kautilya’s *Arthasāstra* includes them among the Kshatriya Saṅghas (republican warrior states) maintaining sovereignty through collective rule (Kangle, 1965) <sup>[15]</sup>. Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (7<sup>th</sup> century CE) records the Kamboja region north of Kashmir, noting its capital as Rājapura (modern Rajouri, Jammu & Kashmir), inhabited by brave, upright people skilled in horse warfare (Beal, 1906; Watson, 1993) <sup>[4]</sup>. In the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (12<sup>th</sup> century CE), historian Kalhaṇa describes Kambojas as powerful nobles and generals in the courts of Kashmir, many of whom settled in Rajouri and Poonch, where their descendants continued their martial traditions (Stein, 1900; Lahiri, 2000) <sup>[34, 18]</sup>. Later, during the Hindu Shahi period (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century CE), the Kamboja-Shahi rulers of Kabul, Gandhāra, and the Punjab hills upheld Hindu rule until the Ghaznavid invasions, marking the last classical dynasty of Kamboja origin with Maharaja Jaipala Kamboj. Together, these sources from the *Purāṇas*, *Mahāvastu*, *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, Xuanzang’s travelogues, and *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* present an unbroken continuum of the Kambojas as royal Kshatriyas of the northwest, sovereigns of Rājapura (Rajouri), masters of cavalry and governance, and steadfast defenders of India’s northern frontiers from the Vedic to the medieval era.

The ancient Kamboja Mahājanapada, one of the sixteen great realms of early India, was a powerful northern kingdom whose capital was Rājapura, identified with present-day Rajouri in Jammu & Kashmir (Cunningham, 1871) <sup>[5]</sup>. Located strategically between Gandhāra and Kashmir, it served as the royal seat of the Kamboja Kshatriyas, famed for their cavalry and frontier governance (Pargiter, 1922; Encyclopaedia of Indian History, 1988) <sup>[28, 7]</sup>. References from the *Mahābhārata*, *Vāyu Purāṇa*, and *Āṅguttara Nikāya* place Kamboja among the foremost Aryan kingdoms beyond the Indus, guarding the Himalayan passes and the northern trade routes (*Mahābhārata*, *Sabhā Parva* 32.17, 48.50; *Vāyu Purāṇa* 2.40-45; *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, 1.3). Over centuries, after waves of migration and regional dynastic changes, some descendants of these Kamboja rulers became integrated into the Dogra Kshatriya lineage of Jammu and Kashmir, where their royal and martial traditions continued, while others remained as Kshatriyas in northern India. Today, the land of Rajouri (ancient Rājapura) stands as a living reminder of the Kamboja Mahājanapada, an enduring heritage now integrated in the Dogra Kshatriya warrior identity in the Jammu and Kashmir and Himalayan frontier.

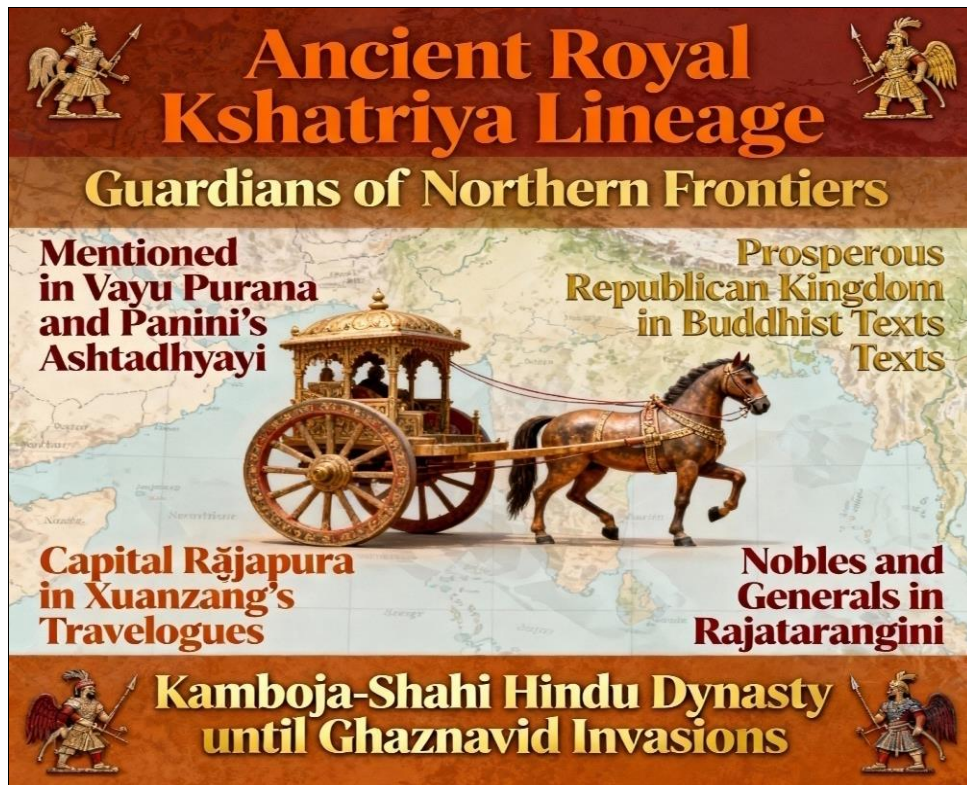


Fig 7: Representation across various times and periods.

#### Kambojas Royal kingdom as the Source of Cavalry and Horses in Ancient Indian Armies

Throughout ancient and medieval Indian history, the Kambojas were renowned as the foremost breeders and suppliers of war-horses and cavalymen, a tradition documented in Sanskrit, Pāli, and Persian sources alike (Pargiter, 1922<sup>[28]</sup>; Kamboj Society, “Kambojas in Indian Literature”, 2020). Texts such as the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Arthaśāstra*, and Purāṇas praise the Kamboja-aśva (horse of Kamboja) as a symbol of speed, strength, and endurance (Mahābhārata, Bhīṣma Parva 5.16-18; Vāyu Purāṇa 2.40-45; Thapar, 2003)<sup>[36]</sup>. Kautilya’s *Arthaśāstra* (Book II, Chapter 30) specifically lists Kamboja horses among the finest in India, recommending them for royal stables and elite war units (Kangle, 1965)<sup>[15]</sup>. During the classical period, the Guptas, Pratiharas, and Palas drew upon Kamboja cavalry corps, recruiting mounted warriors from the northwestern regions of Kamboja and Gandhāra (Kulke & Rothermund, 2004; Stein, 1900)<sup>[17, 34]</sup>.

According to the *Vāyu Purāṇa* and *Brhatsamhitā* of Varāhamihira, Kamboja horses were prized above all others and exported through trade routes linking Rājapura (Rajouri) and Kashmir to Bactria and Central Asia (Brhatsamhitā, Ch. 14; Warder, 2004). In the early medieval era, both the Gurjara-Pratihara and Pāla empires sought military support from the Kambojas. Epigraphic and literary traditions such as the Irda Copper Plate Inscription and Kamboja-Pāla dynasty records confirm that Kamboja warriors were employed as mercenaries and allies by the Palas in their conflicts with the Rashtrakutas and Pratiharas (Kamboja-Pāla Dynasty, Wikipedia, 2023; Kulke & Rothermund, 2004)<sup>[17]</sup>. The *Rājataranginī* of Kalhaṇa (12<sup>th</sup> century CE) further records that Kamboja soldiers served in the royal armies of Kashmir, valued for their skill in mounted archery and frontier warfare (Stein, 1900; Lahiri, 2000)<sup>[34, 18]</sup>. The *Brhatsamhitā* (Chapter 14) even notes that

“the best horses come from Kamboja and the Sindhu region,” a recognition echoed centuries later by Persian chroniclers describing India’s northern cavalry traditions (Varāhamihira, *Brhatsamhitā*, Ch. 14; Kulke & Rothermund, 2004).

Thus, across empires from the Mauryas and Guptas to the Palas and Pratiharas the Kambojas provided the finest war-horses, elite cavalry, and military expertise that shaped India’s ancient warfare. Their reputation as Ashva-Kshatriyas warriors of the horse made them indispensable to the subcontinent’s greatest dynasties and preserved their Fig as the military backbone of the northern frontier.

#### How kamboj conquered the Bengal from north India and the Kamboja-Pāla Kings and their Alliances with Gurjara Pratiharas and other kshatriya clans

According to HC Raychaudhury, the ancestors of the Kamboja rulers of Bengal came from the west with the Gurjara-Pratiharas. The Kambojas had joined the alliances of the Gurjara-Pratiharas, and separate regiments of Kambojas in the Pratihara army were entrusted with the defense of the north-eastern borders of the empire. The Kambojas did not leave the province after the collapse of Pratihara power; rather, they capitalized on the weakness of the Pāla kings to set up an independent kingdom. Expelled from the Hindu Kush/Pamirs, the Kambojas are stated to have formed a large contingent of the Pratihara forces (Raychaudhury, 1923; Kulke & Rothermund, 2004)<sup>[29, 17]</sup>. With the decline of the earlier Hindu Shahi rulers in Gandhāra and the western Himalayas during the late 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, a powerful Kamboja resurgence arose in the east marking the rise of the Kamboja-Pāla dynasty of Bengal. Emerging from ancient royal lineages that once ruled Rājapura (modern Rajouri, Jammu), the Kambojas expanded across northern India, blending frontier valor with political wisdom.



**Fig 8:** Representation Fig of kamboja's royal horses.

By the turn of the millennium, they had established themselves as sovereigns of North Bengal, ruling from their capital near Dandabhukti and Gauda. The founder of this dynasty, Maharaja Rajyapāla Kamboja (c. 980-1015 CE), is recorded in the Irda Copper Plate and Dinajpur Pillar Inscription as a “Kamboja-vamsa-tilaka”, “ornament of the Kamboja lineage” (Epigraphia Indica, Vol. X, 1912; ). He assumed the imperial title Maharajadhirāja, asserting independence from the waning Pāla empire. His successors, Narayanapāla Kamboja, Nayapāla Kamboja, and Dharmapāla Kamboja, maintained this royal sovereignty over the frontier provinces of Bengal, known for their courage, administrative skill, and formidable cavalry a hallmark of Kamboja warrior tradition since the age of the Mahābhārata.

During Dharmapāla's reign, the Kamboja kingdom reached its zenith, stretching across Dandabhukti, Radha, and parts of Gaud. Inscriptions reveal that Dharmapāla sought diplomatic ties with Rajendra Chola I of the South, sending a symbolic chariot to the Chola court as a gesture of alliance a remarkable instance of north-south royal diplomacy in medieval India. The Kamboja kings also maintained strong military connections with other Kshatriya confederations across the subcontinent, especially the Gujars, Parihars, Chauhans, and Paramaras, who shared their warrior ethos and frontier challenges (Raychaudhury, 1923; Kulke & Rothermund, 2004) <sup>[29, 17]</sup>.

As frontier rulers, the Kambojas drew heavily on their ancient cavalry traditions. Their armies were known for the disciplined use of northern horsemen, including Gujar and Parihar auxiliaries, trained in mounted archery and rapid warfare. This composite force allowed the Kamboja rulers to withstand pressures from internal rebellions and external invasions. Their alliances with other Kshatriya powers were not merely political they were bonds of shared heritage, forged through bloodlines, intermarriage, and the common duty of defending Dharma on India's borders.

By the 11th century, new rulers emerged in the Kamboja heartlands, and local genealogies refer to a noble line continuing through Raja Jagan Nāth Singh Kamboj in the 16th century, remembered in northern and eastern traditions as a patron of temples and a defender of royal dharma in Bengal's frontier provinces. The presence of a later Kamboja ruler named Jagan Nath, who ruled in Bengal as late as the 16th century, is found in manuscripts patronized by him, including *Jagannathaprakasa* composed by the Brahmin scholar Sura Mishra, which records:

*Adesh. Kambojakula. vatansah Shri Jagana Natha iti parsidhah. Akaryad dharmanibandhmaytam dhradhypaiapayairkablai nreshe*” (; Kamboj Society, “Kambojas in Indian Literature, 2020).

This evidence indicates that Kamboja rule must have continued in parts of Bengal as late as the 16th century AD.

### **Kamboj (Hindu Shahi Shahi Rajya)-The Eternal Gatekeepers of Bharatavarsha The Northern Shield of Ancient India**

The Kamboja region was the northwestern gateway to Bharatavarsha, and its people, the Kambojas, were the eternal gatekeepers of the subcontinent (Raychaudhury, 1923; Thapar, 2003) <sup>[29, 36]</sup>. From the earliest ages, they stood as the first defenders of Sanatan Dharma, ensuring that no foreign power could enter India without encountering their martial prowess (Pargiter, 1922; Kulke & Rothermund, 2004) <sup>[28, 17]</sup>. Ancient texts describe them as descendants of the Gandharva Ādimajati and Kamboja ĀB Ādimajati-Rajya, two of the most ancient Indo-Aryan communities known for their valor and martial traditions (Mahābhārata, Sabhā Parva 32.17; Vāyu Purāṇa 2.40-45)

For millennia, the Kambojas controlled the strategic mountain passes connecting Central Asia to Bharat, and it was said that “no one could enter Bharatavarsha from the

northwest without first defeating the Kambojas". Their role as frontier warriors and guardians of the northern boundaries made them indispensable in maintaining both political sovereignty and the continuity of the Indo-Aryan Kshatriya tradition.

#### **Early Encounters and the Rise of the Shahi Dynasty**

By 500 BCE, the Kambojas came into contact with the Achaemenid Persians, and although they may have paid tribute for about two centuries, they retained substantial autonomy. The next recorded encounter came from the Greeks under Alexander the Great (326 BCE), who faced

fierce resistance from a Kamboja army reportedly consisting of 30,000 infantry, 2,000 cavalry, and 30 elephants. This campaign likely marked the first recorded defeat of the Kambojas, although it did not end their regional power.

About 150 years later, the Saka and Kushan tribes from the north expelled the Greeks and established their dominance in the northwestern subcontinent. After the decline of the Kushan Empire around 300 CE, one of the most enduring native dynasties of northwestern India emerged the Kamboja Shahi Kingdom, also known as the Kabul Shahi or Hindu Shahi, which ruled from c. 300 CE to 1026 CE.



**Fig 9:** Map of Hindu Shahi kindom of Kamboja's and also showing pratihara dynasty.

#### **Extent and Governance of the Kamboja Shahi Rajya**

The Kamboja Shahi Kingdom originally had its capitals at Rājapura (modern-day Rajouri) and Kapisa (modern Kabul). It included all the lands of the ancient Gandhara and Kamboja region, stretching from present-day Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab to parts of modern-day Tajikistan and beyond, encompassing Zabul and Ghazni in the west to Purushapura (Peshawar) and Udbandhapura in the east.

Although later dynasties, such as the Tushara/Shahi rulers, may have had mixed ethnic origins, the core population, army, and administrative structure remained predominantly Kamboja. At their height, the Kamboja Shahis controlled the strategic mountain passes, tributary states, and trade routes of Afghanistan, northwest Pakistan, and parts of Punjab and Kashmir. They were among the last powerful Hindu dynasties west of the Indus, preserving the frontier Kshatriya ethos and safeguarding the northwestern borders of Bharatavarsha.

#### **Defenders of the Dharma: The struggle against the invaders (650-1026 CE)**

When the Muslim Arab armies conquered Persia around 650 CE, they reached the frontiers of the Kamboja Shahi

Kingdom. For nearly four centuries (650-1026 CE), the Kambojas repelled repeated invasions and prevented the entry of Islam into Bharatvarsha. While the Arabs gradually conquered Balkh (Bactria) and parts of Tukhara to the north, the Kamboja frontier stood firm. Even as the Arabs established bases at Kandahar and Ghazni by 870 CE, the Kambojas continued to rule from Kapisa and later Purushapura, pushing back one invasion after another.

By 879 CE, Kapisa was abandoned due to its vulnerability, and the Laghman Pass became the new frontier. Despite constant wars, the Kamboja Shahi Rajya remained the guardian wall of Bharatvarsha for nearly a millennium, preserving the Hindu Kshatriya tradition and defending the northwestern approaches to the subcontinent.

#### **Major Battles of the Kamboja Shahi Rajya (Hindu Shahi Rajya)**

##### **977 CE-Battle of Laghman**

King Jayapala Singh Kamboj, allied with forces from Sindh and Kashmir (nearly 100,000 soldiers), confronted the Turkic Muslim invaders. The coalition was on the verge of victory but withdrew due to heavy snow and rain unfamiliar to Indian troops. Minor territorial losses occurred between

Laghman and the Khyber Pass.

### 1001 CE-Battle of Purushapura

Jayapala again led the defense but, after a hard-fought battle, had to retreat east of the Sindhu (Indus) River, relocating the capital across the river between the Sindhu and Vitasta (Jhelum).

### 1005 CE-Battle near Besam

A smaller engagement on the west bank of the Sindhu resulted in little or no change of territory.

### 1009 CE-Battle of Waihind (Chachch)

Later chroniclers exaggerated this battle as a great defeat. In reality, both armies were separated by the wide Sindhu. When the Turkic forces attempted to cross, 5,000 Gakhar Khastriya eliminated them. A truce was agreed upon, with no loss of Kamboja territory.

### 1015 CE-Battle of Lohakot (Fort)

Under King Trilochanapala Singh kamboj, assisted by the Mahamantri of Kashmir, the Kamboja-led coalition achieved victory.

### 1019 CE-Battle near Kashipur (Ramganga)

Trilochanapala, possibly allied with the Gwalior Rajya, resisted the Turks near the Himalayan foothills.

### 1026 CE-Battle of Nandana (Fort)

Under Raja Bhimapala Singh kamboj, the final battle took place. The Kamboja Shahi Rajya fell on the festival day marking the end of native Hindu rule in the northwest and opening the gateway to further invasions of Bharat.

### The tragic end of Kamboj Hindu Shahi: Fall on Raksha Bandhan

According to traditional accounts, the Kamboja Shahi Kingdom fell on the sacred festival of Raksha Bandhan, when Kamboja Kshatriyas observed the ancient vow of brother-sister protection and refrained from taking up arms (Kamboj Society Blog, 2020). It is said that traitors revealed this to the invading armies, who then attacked the unarmed warriors, leading to the kingdom's sudden and tragic fall.

Thus, the final collapse of the Kamboja Shahi Rajya was not due to defeat in open battle but through betrayal and violation of Dharma's sanctity. In remembrance of this tragedy, Kamboja royal families reportedly refrained from celebrating Raksha Bandhan for centuries, mourning the day their ancestral kingdom fell, when thousands of Kamboja warriors lost their lives defending the frontier.

### Legacy of the Kambojas Shahi Rajya mainly know as Hindu Shahi Kindom

For over 1,500 years, the Kambojas stood as the northern guardians of Sanatan Dharma, ensuring that no invader entered Bharatavarsha without first facing them (Kamboj Society Blog). From the age of the Persians and Greeks to the era of the Turks and Arabs, their valor delayed foreign rule over India for centuries and protected the civilization of Bharat when much of Central Asia had already fallen.

Even after the fall of their kingdom, the Kamboja spirit lived on through allied hill dynasties such as the Katoch and Chand rulers of Kangra, with whom they shared blood ties and matrimonial alliances (Kamboj Society Blog, 2020). The story of the Kamboja Shahi Rajya is not merely one of war but of unyielding loyalty, courage, and sacrifice for Dharma a people who stood guard over India's sacred frontiers for millennia.



**Fig 10:** Kamboj's: defender of Bharat's northwestern gates.

### Kamboja-Asva: The Elite Warhorses of the Kamboj Kshatriya Kingdom

The horses of the Kamboja Kingdom, often referred to in ancient texts as the Kamboja-asva, were among the most prized and powerful in the Indian subcontinent, celebrated for their unmatched speed, stamina, and strength (Mahābhārata, Bhīṣma Parva 5.16-18; Drona Parva 7.67; Kautilya, *Arthaśāstra*, Book II, Ch. 30). Classical Sanskrit literature and epic texts repeatedly emphasize their importance, describing Kamboja horses as “swift as the wind, tall-limbed, and endowed with great endurance” (Mahābhārata, Bhīṣma Parva 5.16-18; Vāyu Purāṇa 2.40-45).

These horses were integral to the Kambojas’ famed cavalry, often forming the backbone of northern armies and serving as elite mounts for kings and generals. Greek and Persian sources corroborate these claims: historians such as Strabo and Herodotus refer to horse breeds of regions

corresponding to Kamboja (northwestern India and modern Afghanistan/Pakistan) as robust, swift, and ideal for cavalry operations, often exported to neighboring empires due to their exceptional qualities (Strabo, *Geographica*, Book XV; Herodotus, *Histories*, Book III).

The Vāyu Purāṇa and Bṛhatsaṃhitā by Varāhamihira also highlight Kamboja horses as the “finest among the north,” prized not only for warfare but also as symbols of royal prestige (Varāhamihira, *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, Ch. 14; Vāyu Purāṇa 2.40-45). Even in medieval times, under the Kamboja-Pāla dynasty of Bengal, the cavalry tradition continued, with horses from Kamboja regions forming elite corps in Bengal and Pratihara armies. Collectively, these sources underscore that the horses of the Kamboja Kingdom were not merely animals of transport but strategic assets, central to the military supremacy and political influence of Kamboja rulers for centuries.



**Fig 11:** A group of elite Kamboja warhorses, swift, tall-limbed, muscular build, majestic, adorned with traditional royal harness and decorations, standing on an open battlefield with fierce and proud expressions, emphasizing their strength, endurance, and speed.

### Maharani Kripa Kamboj: The Śaka of a Brave Queen

Maharani Kripa Kamboj (Sanskrit: कृप), identified with *Cleophis* in Greek accounts, was a valiant warrior queen of the Assakani (Ashvaka) tribe and a scion of the ancient Kamboja dynasty who resisted Alexander the Great’s invasion of India in 326 BCE. As the mother of Prince Assakanus (Ashvakayana), commander of the Assakani army, she led a powerful force of nearly 20,000 horsemen, 38,000 infantry, 30 war elephants, and 7,000 Kamboja soldiers from the Abhisara region (Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri*; Diodorus, *Bibliotheca Historica*). After her son’s death during the siege of Massaga (Sanskrit: मषकावती, Queen Kripa assumed command and mobilized even the women of the city to continue the resistance. Despite heroic defense,

she was compelled to negotiate a surrender to minimize further bloodshed. Yet, according to ancient sources, Alexander violated the terms ordering the massacre of the garrison and the burning of Massaga, an act condemned by Plutarch (*Life of Alexander*) as a grave stain on his reputation. Queen Kripa’s defiance remains a symbol of courage, strategic wisdom, and the indomitable spirit of the Kamboja-Ashvaka peoples, renowned horsemen and frontier guardians of ancient India. Though neglected in mainstream histories, modern scholars (Jha 1942; Rawlinson 1912; Sharma 1970; Tarn 1948) have begun to re-evaluate her role, recognizing her as one of the earliest recorded warrior queens who led her people with valor and dignity against a global conqueror.



**Fig 12:** Maharani Kripa Kamboj in war with Alexander

### **Queen Aiyasi Kambojika the Kamboja Queen of Mathura and the Indo-Scythian Era**

Princess Aiyasi Kambojika (Sanskrit: ऐयासी कंबोजिका), also referred to as Queen Nadasi Kasa in inscriptions, was a distinguished Kamboja royal who became the chief queen of the Indo-Scythian Mahakshatrapa Rajuvula Kamboja, ruler of Mathura in the 1st century CE. She belonged to the Kamboja lineage, a noble clan historically known for its valor and political influence across northwestern India. Her name appears on the Mathura Lion Capital inscriptions, written in Kharoshthi script, where she is credited with donating a stupa enshrining a relic of the Buddha, demonstrating the synthesis of Kamboja nobility and Buddhist patronage during the Indo-Scythian rule. These inscriptions also record her marriage alliance with Rajuvula, who succeeded the satrap Hagamasha and consolidated the Saka power after defeating the last Indo-Greek king, Strato

II, around 10 CE. The inscription further reveals her connection to Yuvaraja Kharaosta Kamuio (Kharostes), a known Kshatrapa and son of Arta, the brother of King Maues (Moga), suggesting that Aiyasi Kambojika was a crucial figure uniting the Saka and oldest kshatriya Kamboja dynasties through matrimonial diplomacy. The Maghera inscriptions near Mathura, mentioning the “116th year of the Greek kings,” further confirm the Indo-Scythian and Kamboja presence in the region. Ancient textual references, including the Mahabharata, which mentions the Kambojas and Yavanas, also support the continuity of Kamboja heritage in this sacred city. Through her royal stature, religious contributions, and political alliances, Queen Aiyasi Kambojika emerges as one of the most remarkable women of the Saka-Kamboja epoch, representing the enduring legacy of Kamboja queenship in ancient Indian history.



**Fig 13 (I):** Female Statue Representing Kambojika the Chief Queen of Mahakshatrapa Rajula-Saptarishi Mound-Circa 1st Century CE- ACCN F-42-Government Museum-Mathura



**Fig 14 (II):** Female Statue Representing Kambojika the Chief Queen of Mahakshatrapa Rajula-Saptarishi Mound-Circa 1st Century CE- ACCN F-42-Government Museum-Mathura



**Fig 15:** One of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's logo of Kamboj Kshatriya Clan

### Conclusion

The Kambojas were among the most formidable warrior clans of ancient India, renowned for their elite cavalry and strategic control of the northwestern frontiers. Their capital at Rājapura (modern Rajouri) demonstrate their political

reach and administrative capability. Central to their military power were the Kamboja-asva, horses celebrated for speed, strength, and endurance, which became the backbone of their armies and a key factor in their alliances and warfare across northern India. Historical records—including the

Mahābhārata, Arthashastra, Purāṇas, inscriptions and accounts by Greek, Persian, and Chinese travelers consistently highlight the Kambojas as disciplined horsemen, capable generals, and sovereign rulers. Their legacy as master equestrians, frontier defenders, and politically influential Kshatriyas left a lasting imprint on the military and administrative traditions of the subcontinent.

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