

The Warrior Kamboj Queens in Ancient India: Martial Leadership and Historical Legacy

Dr. Ramjilal¹

Abstract

The Kambojas stand out prominently in ancient Indian history as a formidable tribe and a significant Mahajanapada. From the Rigvedic period to Southeast Cambodia, Kamboja women played an essential role in administration and combat. The Rigveda categorically describes the Kambojas as a warrior-loving people unafraid of challenge. In the context of Vedic society, women possessed the right to engage in assembly and warfare, marking a progressive stance for their time. Kamboja women were not only skilled but also highly trained in horsemanship, archery, and martial arts. Vedic hymns vividly illustrate women fighting side by side with men on horseback, asserting their equal role in battle. In comparison to other contemporary republics, Kamboja women enjoyed a far greater engagement in public and military domains. When their husbands fell in battle, Kamboja queens decisively took command of the army, leading their warriors into combat. Located near Gandhara, the Kamboja region valued women's education and independence, establishing a clear model of empowerment. The tradition of women in public and military roles within the Kamboja Mahajanapada significantly influenced queens from various dynasties in later periods, promoting the concept of women warriors rather than accepting subjugation.

Keywords: Kamboja, warrior queens, ancient India, martial leadership, gender history, Mahajanapada

Introduction

The history of ancient India contains numerous accounts of powerful kingdoms, warrior communities, and influential rulers who shaped the political and cultural landscape of South Asia. Among these, the Kambojas occupy a distinctive

¹Social Scientist, Former Principal, Dyal Singh College, Karnal, Haryana – India

position as one of the prominent Mahajanapadas mentioned in Vedic, epic, and classical sources. Located in the northwestern frontier region between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia, the Kambojas developed a reputation for military excellence, horsemanship, and strategic governance. Their geographical position facilitated extensive cultural exchanges and contributed significantly to the political dynamics of ancient India.

While considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to the military achievements and political influence of the Kamboja people, the contributions of Kamboja women—particularly queens and female leaders—have received comparatively limited attention. Historical records, literary traditions, inscriptions, and regional narratives indicate that women in Kamboja society enjoyed a relatively active role in public life, governance, diplomacy, and warfare. Unlike many contemporary societies where political and military authority was predominantly reserved for men, Kamboja women often participated in administrative affairs and, in certain circumstances, assumed direct leadership of armies and kingdoms.

The Vedic tradition provides evidence that women could participate in assemblies, intellectual pursuits, and martial activities. This social environment enabled the emergence of capable female leaders who demonstrated exceptional courage, administrative competence, and military skill. Several Kamboja queens became notable figures in regional history by defending their territories, preserving dynastic continuity, supporting religious institutions, and fostering diplomatic relations. Their contributions challenge conventional assumptions regarding gender roles in ancient South Asian societies and reveal a more complex and dynamic historical reality.

This study examines the historical legacy of prominent Kamboja queens from different periods, including figures associated with the Mahabharata tradition, the Indo-Scythian era, medieval Kashmir, Bengal, and ancient Cambodia. By exploring their roles in governance, warfare, diplomacy, and religious patronage, the article highlights the significance of female leadership within the Kamboja tradition. Furthermore, it seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on women's history by bringing attention to a group of influential yet underrepresented historical figures whose achievements deserve greater recognition in the broader narrative of ancient Indian history.

Kamboja Rishis and Rishikas in Vedic and Ancient Times

Among the notable sages and scholars of the Kamboja dynasty are Sage Kamboja Aupamanyava, mentioned in the Vamsa Brahmana of the Samaveda, and Sage Upmanyu, cited in the Rigveda (Lal, 2026a). While the Rigveda refers to Sage Apala as the daughter of Sage Atri, historians and literary figures from the Kamboja community present Sage Apala as a Kamboja sage due to her roots in the Kamboja region (Lal, 2026a).

Kamboja Queens during the Mahabharata Period

The Kamboja Mahajanapada commands attention in the Mahabharata. Bhanumati, the daughter of Kamboja King Chitrang Kamboja and Queen Chandra Mudra Kamboja, is highlighted as a central figure. She was the sister of Maharaja Sudarshan Kamboja and married to Duryodhana, reflecting strategic marriage diplomacy between the Kamboja and Kaurava dynasties (Lal, 2026a). Maharaja Sudakshina Kamboja valiantly sided with the Kauravas in the battle against the Pandavas. His decision to join the Kauravas stemmed from his commitment to honor and protect his sister Bhanumati. Following his death, Maharani Sudarshana Kamboja, his powerful mother, stepped in to rule the Kamboja Mahajanapada with strength (Lal, 2026a). Bhanumati demonstrated remarkable intellect and formidable diplomatic skills, serving as a trusted advisor to her mother-in-law, Gandhari. She played a pivotal role in maintaining the unity of the Kaurava clan, encapsulated in the enduring proverb: “Bricks from here, stones from there, Bhanumati united the clan.”

Kripa Kamboja: An Undeniable Force in Ancient India

Queen Kripa Kamboja is a key figure during Alexander’s invasion of India in 327–326 BCE (Lal, 2026b). She was the reigning monarch of the Kamboja Mahajanapada, located in the strategic regions of Swat, Kunar, and the Pujankora Valley in contemporary Afghanistan-Pakistan. After successfully conquering Persia and Bactria, Alexander’s forces faced robust resistance in India. Following the loss of her husband and son in battle, the queen of Massaga Fort courageously took command of her army, engaging Alexander for several weeks and inflicting considerable losses on both sides (Lal, 2026b). This fierce resistance compelled a treaty. She emerged as India’s first female commander, the first female ruler, the pioneer of a female army, and the first woman to compel Alexander to enter negotiations (Lal, 2026a).

Ayasi Kambojika

Ayasi Kambojika was a notable queen and princess of the Kamboja dynasty during the Indo-Scythian period in Mathura, known for her influential role in the region during the first century (Lal, 2026a). She was married to Mahakshatrapa Rajuvula Kamboja, the ruler of Mathura. A Kharosthi inscription discovered at the Saptarishi mound in Mathura acknowledges her significant contributions to Buddhism, including the commissioning of a stupa and a cave monastery along the banks of the Yamuna River (Lal, 2026a). The inscriptions indicate that Kamboja queens were vital within the royal family and took an active role in supporting and donating to religious institutions.

Queen Bhagya Devi Kamboja

Queen Bhagya Devi is recognised as a prominent queen of the Kamboja dynasty during the 10th and 11th centuries in Bengal, a period marked by the decline of the Pala dynasty (Mazumdar, 1943). As the mother of Nayapala Kamboja and the wife of Kamboja Rajyapala, she played an important role in regional governance. Queen Bhagya Devi was also known for her involvement in religious activities, contributing to Buddhist monasteries and temples (Lal, 2026a).

Queen Didda: The ‘Catherine’ of Kashmir

Queen Didda reigned from 980–1003 AD and stands out as a significant ruler of Kashmir, with links to the Kamboja dynasty (Lal, 2026a). She was born in 924 AD, the daughter of King Singharaja of the Lohara Dynasty, and the granddaughter of the renowned Kamboja Hindu Shahi king, Bhimdev Shahi. Following her husband King Kshemagupta's death, she ruled Kashmir as both regent and later as an independent monarch for 30 years. Celebrated for her administrative abilities and military strategy, Didda famously defeated the invading Mahmud Ghaznavi's forces twice, overcoming a much larger army with a small contingent (Lal, 2026a). Despite being physically disabled from birth, she demonstrated exceptional leadership and military skills.

Queen Kambuja Rajalakshmi

Kambuja Rajalakshmi is a semi-legendary and semi-mythical queen of Chenla, Cambodia, who ruled during 575–580 AD (Lal, 2026a). She was the daughter of King Shrestha Varman and the granddaughter of the oldest line of the Chenla royal

dynasty. After the death of King Veera Shrestha Varman, she ascended the throne and ruled alongside her husband, Bhava Varman.

Assakenin Queen Tummey/Tumiris

Historical sources and interpretations by Kamboja scholars identify Queen Tummey, also known as Tomiris, as a heroic figure from ancient times who led her army in battle, underscoring the martial prowess often attributed to Kamboja queens (Lal, 2026a).

Conclusion

While Kamboja queens may not be as widely documented as other prominent female figures like Rani Durgavati and Rani Lakshmi Bai, historical evidence reveals their significant martial leadership roles within the Kamboja dynasty (Lal, 2026a). These queens were influential in tribal politics, often blending military responsibilities with governance. The limited evidence of their lives highlights the diverse historical narrative of India, illustrating the queens' roles in patronising religions and contributing to the development of Buddhist and Jain institutions (Altekar, 1934). The Kamboja Mahajanapada's strategic location between Central Asia and India enabled these queens to forge critical diplomatic ties that fostered cultural and religious integration. The unification of diverse historical narratives has become an increasingly vital pursuit in contemporary India. Scholars and intellectuals are advocating for the incorporation of the remarkable contributions of the Kamboja Queens into educational curricula at both school and university levels (Lal, 2026a).

References

- Altekar, A. S. (1934). *The Rashtrakutas and their times*. Oriental Book Agency.
- Bailey, H. W. (1971). Ancient Kamboja. In C. E. Bosworth (Ed.), *Iran and Islam: In memory of the late Vladimir Minorsky* (pp. 65–71). Edinburgh University Press.
- Kamboja, J. (1981). *Prachina Kamboja, jana aur janapada = Ancient Kamboja, people and country*. Bhagirathi Parkashan.
- Lal, R. (2026a). The warrior Kamboj queens in ancient India: Martial leadership and historical legacy. *Samaj Weekly*. <https://samajweekly.com/the-warrior-kamboj-queens-in-ancient-india-martial-leadership-and-historical-legacy/>
- Lal, R. (2026b). The great queen Kripa Kamboja: The unsung heroine of ancient India. *Samaj Weekly*. <https://samajweekly.com/the-great-queen-kripakamboja-the-unsung-heroine-of-ancient-india/>
- Lal, R. (2026c). A glimpse into the history of the ancient Kamboja Mahajanapada. *The Asian Independent*. <https://theasianindependent.co.uk/a-glimpse-into-the-history-of-the-ancient-kamboja-mahajanapada/>
- Mazumdar, R. C. (1943). *The history of Bengal: Vol. 1. The Hindu period*. University of Dacca.
- Thapar, R. (1984). *From lineage to state: Social formations in the mid-first millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley*. Oxford University Press.

Article Information:

<i>Received</i>	7-Mar-2026
<i>Revised</i>	8-May-2026
<i>Accepted</i>	15-Jun-2026
<i>Published</i>	30-Jun-2026

Declarations:

Author's Contribution:

- **Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions.**
- **Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript**
- The author agrees to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

- **Conflict of Interest:** NIL

- **Funding Sources:** NIL

Correspondence:

Dr. Ramjilal

drramjilal1947@gmail.com
