Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj was born, lived, fought and won battles against religious and social oppression in the 17th century Bharat or India. He was a shining star in the Indian firmament and is renowned as a champion of the downtrodden and depressed masses. He was and continues to be an icon for the classes and masses alike and is seen as a rallying point for peasants oppressed by foreign rulers, Pathans and Moghuls alike. Sexually exploited women found in Shivaji Raje a protector, a benefactor and flocked to his Hindavi Swaraj to find solace and feel liberated under his saffron flag.

RISE AND RISE OF A PATRIOT

The teenager Shiva had seen the kingdoms of Bijapur and Golconda in the Deccan as agents of aggression who mercilessly sucked the blood of the commoners and never spared their women the ignominy of rape, loot and plunder. The morale of the common man was in his boots. He and his family were down in dumps and did not know how to hold their heads high and live a life of human dignity. Shivaji chose to champion the cause of the common man against oppression of rulers of foreign origin and he used the might of his sword, Bhavani, to exterminate the oppressors who rode high horses and commanded the superior strength of the state of Bijapur. Shivaji showed his qualities of leadership and galvanized the peasants, workers, artisans, clerics and what have you into an army of patriots out to measure swords with cruel chieftains like Afzal Khan and others of his ilk. The morale of Shivaji’s ragtag army was sky high. Never mind the home made weaponry pitted against big guns of the Sultan of Bijapur. Never mind the high horses of the State against whom the hill ponies of peasant soldiers were determined to fight. It was love of Swadesh, love of the oppressed kith and kin, it was the fire raging in their hearts and minds exhorting them to restore the honour of their women and motherland that gave them the moral armour to defend against the heavy armaments of the oppressive state.
The Patriotism of a high order fired their imagination to devise new strategy to defeat the seemingly superior enemy who was morally weak. A life of ease and comfort, debauchery of the lowest order had weakened the moral fibre of the kings and captains of foreign origin. They were just waiting to be felled by a man of high moral calibre fired with a sense of deep patriotism like Shivaji. The man of the masses just did that and drove the last nail into their coffins.

AFZAL KHAN BITES DUST

The tall, hefty and well built man who commanded a reputation of being invincible in combat named Afzal Khan took upon himself to tame Shivaji, son of Shahaji, another warrior-general of the Bijapur durbar who had told the Sultan that he had no control on the military exploits and victories of his son, Shivaji. Afzal was a much married man and had a harem of countless concubines. A superstitious man that he was, he did crystal gazing and had a premonition that he would not return alive after a confrontation with the rising star of the house of Bhosles. He, therefore, killed all his wives and concubines to prevent them falling a prey to the lust of other Pathan nobles of the Bijapur durbar. It showed that his morale was sinking.

A wily and crafty man that he was, Afzal Khan contrived to kill Shivaji while embracing him, son of a fellow noble man. At the pre-determined place on a no man’s land on the boundary of the new State of Shivaji and the Bijapur durbar, the two men met with just two aides each. Their armies were left far behind. The tall Khan was sarcastic bordering abusive from the word go. He asked Shivaji to come close to him for a deep hug. On the pretext of embracing Shivaji, a short statured man, Khan tried to strangle him with all the force at his command. Shivaji later told his Guru, Samarth Guru Ramdas, that for a few moments there was darkness in his eyes and he was about to faint owing to strangulation attempt of Khan but he suddenly gained strength on remembering Maa Bhavani and collected his wits to counterattack. Shivaji used his iron claws and ploughed through the abdomen of Khan. As his intestines were badly damaged, his iron fist hold on Shivaji’s neck loosened and weakened by profuse bleeding Khan fell down. His men put him into a palanquin and tried to flee. Shivaji’s Maratha captains who were there as armed escorts fell on the Khan’s aides, beheaded them and eventually beheaded Afzal Khan too.
The Maratha guns fired salvos to indicate that the battle has been joined and it is time to attack Khan’s army. On seeing a headless dead khan, his army ran helter skelter and the Maratha army of Shivaji carried the day. They seized so much munitions of war, war horses and precious stones, not counting gold and silver from the Bijapur camp that it was enough to finance many a campaign of Shivaji against Bijapur in the coming years. However, no general of the Bijapur army was prepared to lead a campaign against Shivaji after learning what happened to old war veteran Afzal Khan.

The news of Shivaji humbling Afzal Khan and despatching him to the next world enhanced Shivaji’s military reputation and morale of his Maratha army was sky high. The Bijapur army sued for peace and recognised Shivaji as a ruler of the territory under his military control.

THE MUGHULS STEP IN

Shivaji’s military victories in the Deccan made the Mughals sit back and take stock of the situation afresh. It was decided by Aurangzeb, the sitting king who had imprisoned his father Shah Jehan and killed brothers like Dara Shikoh to ascend the throne of Delhi, to despatch a large composite army under the command of his maternal uncle, Shaista Khan to subdue the Marathas.
The Mughals had initial success and the Marathas drew them into the heartland before launching a counter-attack. Shaista Khan encamped in Pune and chose to live in the Lal Mahal that originally belonged to Shivaji. The latter decided to launch a daring attack and beard the Mughal lion in his own den.

One fine evening a small chosen army of the Marathas under the command of Shivaji himself gained an entry into Pune as the Deccan sepoys meant to replace the Mughals on night duty. As the night fell, Shivaji did the daring act of attacking Lal Mahal where Shaista Khan was living with his Begums. Shivaji entered their bedroom but in the commotion Shaista Khan woke up and tried to flee through the window. His Begum put out the light. Shivaji still attacked Shaista Khan and cut all his fingers with which he was holding the window sill. Having driven the point home, the Marathas returned to their base unhindered and without any loss of life. The Mughal emperor could not bear this ignominy and recalled Shaista Khan to Delhi for rest and recuperation.

SAWAI JAI SINGH MADE A TREATY

Aurangzeb put into practice the policy of divide and rule the Hindu population of Hindustan. He deputed his relative by marriage the ruler of Jaipur, Raja Sawai Jai Singh to tame the lion of the Deccan. Shivaji wrote a poignant letter to Jai Singh imploring him not to shed the Hindu blood for a Muslim ruler. Had Jai Singh come on his own as a Hindu King, Shivaji would not have opposed him in battle but met him, received him as a brother but now that he was an employee of a foreign invader,
Shivaji had no option but to oppose him on the battle field. Shivaji knew that it would be an exercise in futility to oppose a battle-tested general like Jai Singh and, therefore, sued for peace. Raja Jai Singh requested Shivaji to go to Agra and meet the Mughal emperor and no harm would be done to him as a Rajput ruler gives his word of honour to protect him in Agra. His son, Ram Singh would keep Shivaji and his son, Sambhaji out of harm's way.

However, wily Aurangzeb had different designs to do the short shrift of the Maratha King. Ram Singh learnt of the devilish design of Aurangzeb and advised Shivaji to flee from the palace like prison and return to the Deccan. It is a recorded history that both Shivaji and Sambhaji succeeded in coming out of the Mughal trap and reestablished his sway on the territories won by Raja Jai Singh who was later poisoned by Aurangzeb's men. How ungrateful was Aurangzeb, that is not difficult to fathom.

CORONATION THE GRAND FINALE

Shivaji had had a bad patch in life. He was surrounded by the enemies on all sides. On his return from the Mughal incarceration, his authority as a supreme ruler and unchallenged monarch required to be re-established. Notwithstanding challenges thrown by the Mughals and Pathans, Shivaji planned to hold his coronation ceremony in a grand manner. He would be the first Hindu king after the loss of the mighty Vijainagar empire to be addressed as a crowned king. The Morale of his army and the people at large would touch the sky again. Mata Jijabai, the mentor and philosopher guide of her son, Shivaji too wished to see him a crowned king. The coronation would be a psychological victory for the Hindu King of the Hindavi Swaraj where no permission would be asked for from the Delhi throne. Indeed it was a master stroke of political and diplomatic strategy of Shivaji.

The Coronation ceremony itself was a grand spectacle. On the Trayodashi, Shukla Paksh of Jyeshtha, Vikrami 1731 samvat was chosen by the pundits as the auspicious day of coronation. The great Vedic Pundit, Gaga Bhatt was invited from Varanasi to preside over the Vedic Coronation ceremony and he did a brilliant job of it. His presence as the presiding purohit of the Rajyabhishek and his declaration of the great Maratha ruler as “KSHATRIYA KULWANT SIMHSANADHISHWAR CHHATRAPATI SHIVAJI MAHARAJ” PUT THE SEAL OF AUTHORITY ON THE CO
A large number of men and women, both Indian and foreigner, had assembled at Fort Raigad, the capital of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj’s Hindavi Swaraj. They all went ecstatic with joy when the Ved mantras were recited by the group of purohits under mahapundit Gaga Bhatt. Water brought from seven pious rivers of Bharat, indicating unity of the country from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and Kamrup to Kutch, mingled with water brought from the seven seas was sprinkled on the anointment ceremony of the Chhatrapati. An umbrella, crimson and gold, was held above the head of the ruler to be crowned, and the title of Chhatrapati was conferred on him by the High Priest. The sea water brought and sprinkled on the Chhatrapati was a symbol of his dream come true when Shivaji became the first king of India to raise a full-fledged Navy under Admiral Angre.

As the High Priest solemnly anointed the Chhatrapati, in the midst of recitation of Ved mantras, singing of devotional songs and sound of traditional music, Guns boomed from all the forts located in the Hindavi Swaraj simultaneously. The Coronation of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj became a laudatory landmark in the annals of India. The Hindus now held their heads high and walked erect as they lived and worked under the protective umbrella of a crowned king, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj who had vowed to protect and defend the Hindu Dharma till his last breath. He lived up to the high ideals and never let down his people, the common man for whose defence and betterment he had drawn the sword out of the sheath. Shivaji had not only brought a sense of unity and solidarity among his people but always protected the women and never allowed anyone to play with the honour of women folk. Thus the common man was well protected. From this security had flown prosperity.

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj was indeed greatest of the great.