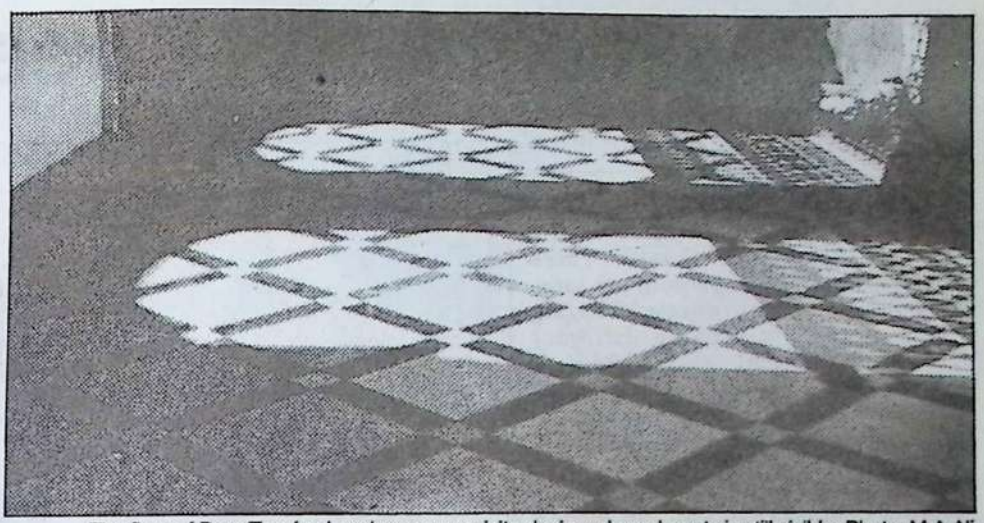
ment, the Parjatan corporation and architects." Otherwise the restoration will be meaningless, he adds.

The history of Natore Royal Dynasty dates back to nearly three hundred years. The members of the dynasty belonged to Moitra family of Bharendra Brahmins. Kamadeva Moitra, the 35th man of this family was a *tahsildar* under the kings of Puthia. Raja Ram Jibon Roy Bahadur, the eldest son of Kamadeva is best known as the founder of the royal family of Natore. Kamadeva s second son Raghunandan was the lawyer of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan. The shifting of the Mughal capital from Dacca to Murshidabad in 1704 AD and the commencing of the revenue settlement in Bengal offered rare opportunities to Raghunandan who was by this time risen to the rank of a *dewan*. The dewanship not only granted him a position of importance and honour, but it also bestowed him with powers of the Nawab in respects of the revenue settlement. Defaulting zamindars. Raghunandan bestowed an important zamindari of *Bangachhi Pargona* to his elder brother Ram Jibon who was granted the territories of defaulting zamindars after 1706 AD. The possession of zamindari of Rajshahi and Chakla made Ram Jibon the Moharaja of Rajshahi. Sometimes between 1706 and 1710 AD, Ram Jibon built a magnificent palace on 180 bighas of the reclaimed marshy land. In the meantime , Emperor of Delhi , Bahadur Shah Zafar commissioned him the judiciary office. Then Ram Jibon made Natore the capital of his kingdom. Later other zamindaris came to be conferred on him in quick succession until his zamindari of Natore developed into a giant extent to be commonly called139 Parganas.

Kalika Prashad, the only son and heir to the kingship of Raja Ram Jibon, faced premature death in 1724 AD. So Raja Ram Jibon adopted Ram Kanta son of Rashik Roy of Chowgram village under Shingra in Natore. Ram Kanta eventually married 15-year old Bhawani, daughter of Atma Ram Chowdhury of Chhatian village in Bogra in 1729 AD. Ram Kanta's wife Bhawani became well-known as Rani Bhawani.

So, it was no surprise that at 32 years of age Bhawani had to hold the reins of the kingdom at her husband s death in 1748, during the viceroyalty of Nawab Ali Bawardi Khan .



The floor of Bara Taraf palace has an exquisite design whose beauty is still visible. Photo: M A Ali

Fortune smiled on Queen Bhawani. In the passage of time, her good governance and love for her people earned her the reputation of an excellent ruler. This gifted lady extended the zamindar root to dimensions and efficiently managed it for about a long five decades between 1748 and 1802 AD during the dark days of Plassey, Udayanala, Buxar and the great famine of 18th century . She ruled an area of 13,000 square miles encompassing the greater Rajshahi, greater Rangpur, greater Pabna , Bogra, Dinajpur, Kustia and Jessore districts of Bangladesh and Nadia, Birbhum and Maldaha of India.

"So extensive was her territory that it took at least 35 days to visit," said an English writer, Holwell.

The annual income of her kingdom at that time amounted to Tk. 1.5 crore of which she had to pay off Tk. 27 lakh as revenue to the Nawab of Bangal. The huge surplus of her revenue income enabled her to undertake massive welfare projects for the benefit of her subjects. During her rule she spent nearly Tk 50 crore to build roads, schools, temples and other charitable institutions. During the great famine of 1769-1770 AD (Bengali year-1176), which wiped out one third of population of Bengal, she bought food grain from distant countries and sold it at nominal prices among the starving people. For her charitable deeds during the famine, she was entitled as Annapurna.

Apart from these charitable activities, the queen also worked against the British force which was invading Bengal. She assisted Nawab Sirajuddoulah with men, arms and ammunitions in several of his wars against the British empire.

The ruler of almost half of Bengal, Queen Bhawani died at the age of 79 in Murshidabad on 5th September, 1802. After her death the large palace on 50. 42 acres, was divided, into two parts, the royalty of which went to the two sons of Ram Krishna namely Bhishwa Nath (palace of Boro Taraf) and Shib Nath (Chhoto Taraf). The two brothers redesigned their respective palaces . But people still today, called the palaces together as the Queen Bhawani Palace.

During the period of the 5th successors of Rani Bhawani - Raja Jogendra Nath Roy and Kumar Birendra Nath Roy, the zamindari of Natore came to an end and after 1952 AD, the members of Natore Royal Dynasty went to India.

The palace was used as agricultural training institute, orphanage, and family planning development center during Pakistan period. After our liberation , the palace housed the offices of Superintendent of Police, Police line , District and Sessions Judge's Court and ADC's (Rev) Office. Later these offices were shifted to their own buildings in 1990 making opportunity for government employees to live there.

However, the government can earn huge revenue by developing the palace into a tourist spot or an archaeological museum.

Although the future plans remain indefinite, one thing that is clear is that if steps for restoration and maintenance of the palace are not taken immediately, the last traces of the legendary Queen Bhawani will soon be lost. ■