Later a Chehl Satun or Forty-Pillar Pavilion-Palace was erected inside the fort, of which there is now no trace. Some travellers even compared it with Kremlin (size and elegance). This has intrigued me as the beauty of these majestic structures cannot be described to those who haven't seen them. I had a chance to visit Iran couple of years back, and have seen these lofty square buildings in the middle of Persian gardens in Tehran, Ispahan and Shiraz, and how they dominate the entire vista even if watched from hundreds of metres away. The old Fort, along with the nearby Katras, was variously used to house secretariat, treasury and cantonment. Later for sometime after the Mughals left it was let to ruin until the early-19C when a convict gaol and a lunatic asylum and hospital was established within its compounds.

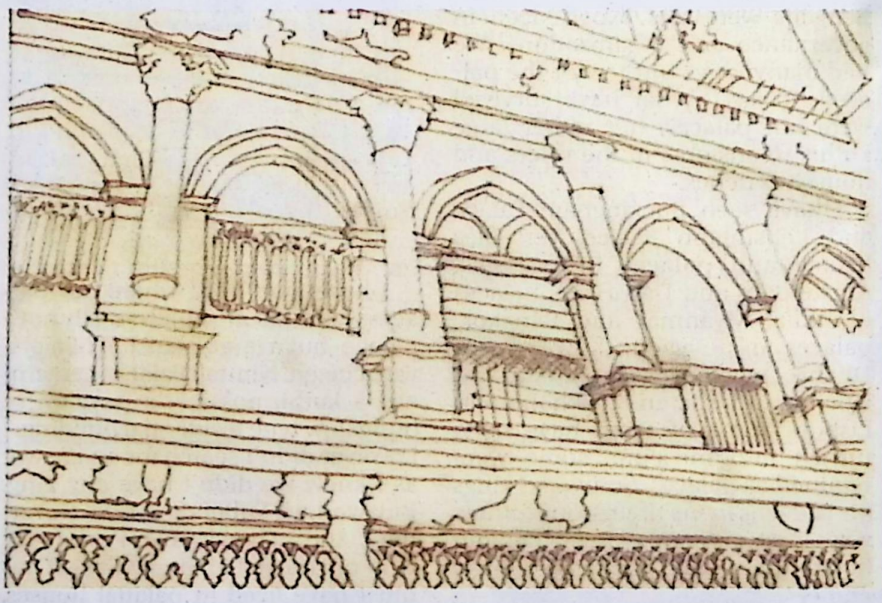
The greatest ruler of them, who in fact built maximum number of civic and religious buildings in Dhaka and thus gave rise to a style known by his name, was Shaista Khan. Appointed twice (1664-1677, 1680-1688), Shaista Khan was one of the longest serving Subehdar of Bengal too. He was the son of Emperor Shahjahan's Chief Minister Asaf Khan, and brother of Empress Mumtaj Mahal, and thus very powerful too. Shaista Khan, though built a wooden house surrounded by walls inside the Lalbag Fort, yet stayed in a tent in its premises. In fact he was supposed to complete the fort as a palace enclave which his predecessor Shahjada Azam Khan started; but didn't feel like doing so after the demise of his beloved daughter Paaribibi, according to one version buried in the Fort compound in a beautiful mausoleum. Azam Khan was supposed to marry Paaribibi which did not happen, and he was called back to Delhi by his father Emperor Aurangazeb.

We know of several other palaces as well, which of course did not survive. Shahjada Azimusshan built a wooden palace at Posta to the South of the Fort, and used to live there in pomp and fair. From its balcony he saw the departure of powerful Diwan Kartalab Khan (later Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan) with his staff, with him the demise of Dhaka's status and fortunes.

The Subehdar Ibrahim Khan (the second) built his palace in Jinjira on the south of the river. This earned infamy by being used to imprison Amena Begum, Ghaseti Begum, the mother and aunt of Nawab Sirajuddowlah, and some other female family members, by order of Mir Miran, the notorious son of Mir Jafar. It already had Sarafraj Khan's family allowed by Aliwardi Khan to live there. Siraj's relatives were led to tragic death in a staged boat drowning in Dhaleswari by Bakar Khan, the assassin sent by Miran, in the Summer of 1760. Siraj was defeated in the Battle of Palashi in 1757 in a sequel of several treacherous and intrigue events in the struggle for power, money and right to business (exploit of local produces by the East India Company), and eventually murdered. This paved the way for the British to gain the administrative and revenue power over Bengal by 1765.

Jinjira is a corrupt of Arabic 'zajira' meaning island. The grand palace-fort surrounded by a moat was full of buildings. At its north-eastern corner were seven small pich-roofed structures. An octagonal derelict building nearby, and a detached hammamkhana (bathhouse), originally a 2-storied structure, can now be traced. It had chambers covered with domes with apertures, fitted with earthen water pipes embedded in the walls, and used for various functions of the hammam. Similar arrangements as part of an elaborate plumbing system is now being unearthed at the Lalbag Fort too.

Bara Katra was also designed as a residence for Subehdar Shahjada Suja which however he did not or could not use. But it has been used to accommodate Nawabs, Naibs and later high English officers in various periods, though temporarily. With its imposing riverfront façade, the Bara Katra possibly was the most beautiful and imposing building in Dhaka during its time. Chota Katra to its East built a decade later by Shaista Khan was used as government office and residence of high class Mughal court officials. Architectural form of these two quarters is similar to such residences and madrashas built all over Iran and middle-Asia cells around a court much suitable to the particular function and climate.



(Parts of two palatial buildings in old Dhaka, sketch by Mahmudur Rahman Masum, a student of architecture at the North South University)