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The Narrative Scheme of a Bengal *Colcha* Dating from the Early 17th Century Commissioned by the Portuguese

Barbara Karl¹

In this article I analyse the iconographic programme of a large size embroidered textile dating from the early 17th century from the Hugli region in Bengal.² The textile is part of subgroup (c) of the Solomon group. India has an extremely rich textile tradition. Every region has its peculiarities and techniques. Quilts were made all over the Indian subcontinent throughout the ages. Worn out clothes were not thrown away but were instead reused: Several layers of cloth were laid upon each other and were sewn together to be used in Indian homes. Most of them were very simple but some pieces were painted, printed or embroidered. The group of large size textiles (about 100 pieces) that I analysed in my PhD thesis belong to the latter category and were mainly produced for the export market. In the earliest Portuguese records they were called “colchas.”

The word *colcha* is Portuguese and has Latin roots: *culcita* means mattress or pillow, the modern Portuguese word *colcha* means quilt, which is quite a restrictive expression in this case. Colchas are among the first surviving embroideries of India. They are evidence of migrating forms and ideas and feature some of the most successful motifs that were developed in the long history of art and transmitted by different cultures in different ways. Examples include: animal fights, the animal master, mounted figures etc. Their prototypes date back to prehistoric times. In the colchas these different elements were fused with more recent ones to create a new harmonious whole.

Colchas were destined for sale to wealthy households. Since its establishment in Goa in the early 16th century, Portuguese colonial society showed a keen interest in the luxurious forms of Indian representation. In order to compete with local sovereigns, the Portuguese adapted certain customs for their own purposes and, in doing so, created an art form that appealed to all tastes. The colchas were thus used as hangings like tapestries or *panos de armar* - showing coats of arms - or door hangings, used to adorn rooms for special occasions. They were hung out of windows when processions passed by and even participated in processions. Reasons for festivities were easily found, Goa and Bassein were notorious for magnificent, sumptuous

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² See Irwin, John, „Indo-Portuguese Embroideries of Bengal“, Art and Letters, *The Journal of the Royal India, Pakistan & Ceylon Society*, Bd.XXVI. No.2, Second Issue for 1952, S.1-9. by the same author: “Indian textile Trade in the 17th century, Part 3, Bengal,” *Journal of Indian Textile History*, no.3, Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad, 1957, S.59-74 and “Indian Textile Trade of the 17th century, Part 4, Foreign Influences,” *Journal of Indian Textile History*, no.4, Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad, 1959, S.1-10. Mendonca, Maria José de, 1949. “Alguns tipos de Colchas Indo-Portuguesas na Collecção do Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga,” in *Boletim do Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga*, Jan. – Dez. Bd.II, Nr. 2.

processions in which all churches, palaces and ships participated, such as, for example, after a victory in a battle at sea.³

The colchas might also have been used in Catholic missions in India. Ecclesiastics gained wider acceptance among local people by using local craftsmen and art forms in their missions. Moreover, they were displayed not only on tables and beds but also on sarcophagi during a funeral or on the floor as summer carpets to lie down on or were used instead of thick woollen carpets during the warm season. The latter use is valid more for the colonial context and not so much in Europe, where even knotted carpets were laid on tables and fragile embroideries were considered to be too expensive and exotic for everyday use. In Portuguese palaces colchas were likely used in the context of the *estrado*, a structure commonly found in such edifices. It comprised a low indoor balcony or pedestal, which was beautifully decorated with small pieces of furniture and of course valuable textiles that were manufactured exclusively for the *estrado*. The ladies of the court sat on the floor of the *estrado* and spent their time reading and embroidering or talking while the Queen held her audiences there.

In early commercial relations between Portugal and India, textiles served as diplomatic gifts or souvenirs of wealthy travellers. But private traders soon discovered the huge opportunities afforded by the Bengal market of which textiles were a vital part. It was one of the richest markets on the Indian subcontinent and the basic conditions were excellent as raw materials and skilled embroiderers were easily available. They ordered pieces that corresponded to their tastes. The exotic souvenirs turned into tradable commodities.

Bengal was one of the richest provinces of India and even before the arrival of the Portuguese was an important part of the trade routes of the seas of South Asia. The Portuguese commercial community there remained independent from the official Portuguese Estado da Índia and consisted of a very heterogeneous and mixed society of which very little is known. In the 16th century, members of this independent merchant community commissioned the colchas of Bengal. From Bengal the colchas were transported to Goa, then to Lisbon and onwards to European centres to finally be incorporated into private collections. I have found them mentioned in many Austrian and Spanish Habsburg inventories, the Medici inventories, and in inventories of Portuguese and British noble families. As records from the East India Company⁴ prove, Bengal colchas were also traded in North India: on July 12, 1620, Robert Hughes wrote from Patna in Northern India to the President and Council in Surat (Gujarat), where the British factory was located:

I shall here (in Patna) provide some quilts of Sutgonge (Satgoan not far away from Hugli), wrought with yellowe silke, at reasonable rates; and have already halfe a score in possession, and am promised more dalye (daily) as they come to town. There are some Portingalls (Portuguese) at present in towne, and more are latlye gone for their partes in Bengala,[...] they usialye (usually) bringe vendable here all sortes of spices and silke stufes of Chyna (China) [...] and some jewellers ware...

Traders from North India met there “like bees”⁵ he concluded. The “quilts of Sutgonge” he mentioned are undoubtedly colchas.

The same British agent wrote from Patna to the factors in Agra on September 3, 1620:

³ Bethencourt, F., Chaudhuri, K., Hrsg. 1998. *História da Expansão Portuguesa*, Volume I: *A Formação do Império (1415 – 1570)*, the first 3 volumes, Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores.

⁵ Foster, W., 1906 – 1927. *The English Factories in India 1618 – 1621 [to] 1668 – 1669*, 13 vols., Oxford, Bd. I, S.195.

*He has bought about a dozen quilts of Sutgonge, trimmed them with silk fringe tassels and lined them partly with taffeta and partly with tessur.*⁶

This source shows that some of the colchas were not only traded but were also modified in Patna. This explains why the fringes of many colchas are made of a different kind of silk as opposed to the textile itself. Mr. Hughes delights us yet again with another letter dated November 11, 1620:

*He had sent „specimens of Sutgonge quilts, bought at reasonable rates that we expect good muzera (joy) for them from the Companye. They are not made here but brought from the bottom of Bengala [...] other sorts of quilts are not here to be gotten of any kinde.*⁷

These colchas even found their way to Japan to the Tokugawa collection, which proves that they were appreciated internationally.

This Bengali group of colchas is characterised by a complex iconographic programme. I will demonstrate how the concept of the Ideal Ruler was transmitted to a heterogeneous group of viewers via an interconnected network of allusions. The colchas were produced during a 100 year period between 1540 and 1640. Only recently I came across a document dating from 1585 in the Archivio di Stato in Florence which refers to one of the earliest colchas explicitly mentioned as having originated in Bengal known to have arrived in the collection of a European ruler. Among the goods that the merchant Filippo Sassetti sent directly from Cochin to the Medici Grand Duke of Tuscany is a “coltre de Bengala, ricamata a figure” cover from Bengal, embroidered with figures. Colchas from “India in general” but with very generic descriptions appear in Habsburg records at around the same time, if not earlier. As early as 1502 Vasco da Gama received a Bengal colcha as a present from the African sovereign of Melinde.

Textile production had a long tradition in Bengal. At the court of the Bengal Sultan (extant until 1537 when the Sultanate ceased to exist) there was a very well organised workshop that undoubtedly included embroiderers. Embroiderers travelled light, all they needed were their needles and the material. After the conquest of the Bengal Sultanate and the consequent dismantling of the court workshops and dispersion of workers it is likely that they were either integrated into the *karkhanas* of the small principalities that emerged and/or worked for the Portuguese present in the Satgaon region who could provide work as well as the basic material: silk and cotton. If only some of these professional embroiderers from the sultan’s court went to the Satgaon/Hugli region, established their workshops there and adapted extant patterns, we would have an explanation for the very Islamic style of the early colchas of Bengal. The flat scrollwork of these early pieces is comparable to a door decoration of the Adina mosque in Pandua/Bengal,⁸ which was India’s biggest mosque in the 15th century.

The Portuguese traders soon recognised the high quality of the textiles and the skill of these professionals in adapting to the needs of the market. Gradually new European motifs were introduced. Colchas showing double-headed eagles and self-sacrificing pelicans bear witness to this phase of slow adaptation. The pelican is a symbol of the Eucharist and Christ, was linked to the Portuguese King D. Joao II and was perhaps used in missions; the pelican is one of the most successful motifs not only on colchas but also on other objects commissioned by the Portuguese in Asia. The missionaries encountered Asian religions in which animals had a holy status (e.g.

⁶ *The English Factories in India*, vol. I, S. 198.

⁷ *The English Factories in India*, vol. I, S. 204.

⁸ Today in the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Hinduism) and thus adapted images from the mediaeval Physiologos (e.g. the Phoenix, Pelican, Eagle) in order to convey their Catholic thoughts and make them more easily comprehensible to the local people. The adaptation of new motifs is quite clumsy at first, but the models the commissioners provided and the execution of the embroideries soon improved and developed. European prints were used as models and were simplified when reproduced on textiles. The first slightly adapted colchas reached the European market in the 1540s and 1550s. Allowing some time for the development of the much more complex Solomon colchas, they probably arrived in Lisbon in the 1580s/90s. The Solomon colchas mark the zenith of this development. They are still organised in the same basic structure as the early Bengalo-Islamic pieces of the *karkhanas* but their content changed completely.

After the 1640s, colcha production was gradually taken over by the British, who were officially permitted to establish a factory after the conquest of Hugli by the Mughals in 1632. From then on the Portuguese had to share the trade of this region with the Dutch and the British. These kinds of colchas disappeared from production as methods and tastes changed.

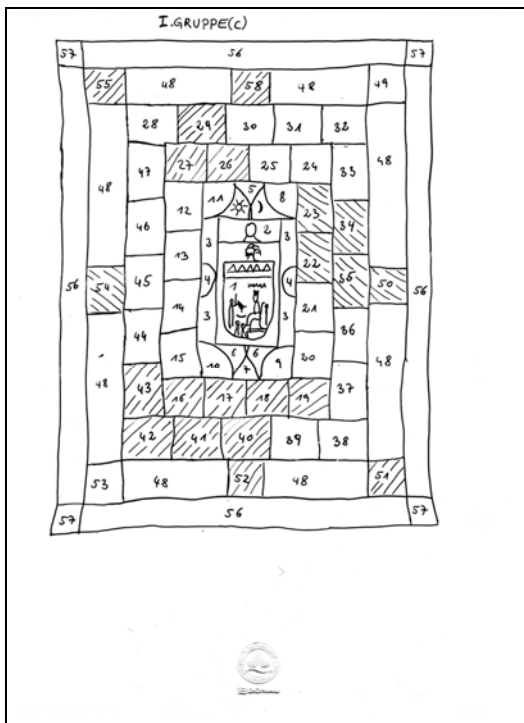


Figure 1.

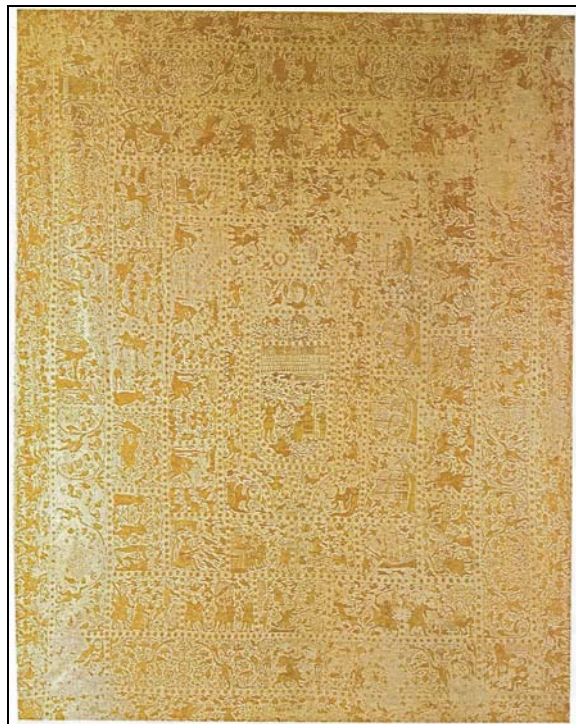


Figure 2.

The piece discussed here is from the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga.⁹ I chose this very representative colcha in order to explain the iconography and narrative scheme of this subgroup of Bengal embroideries (figs. 1 and 2).¹⁰ The Solomon colchas are the largest surviving group of Bengal colchas, consisting of 14 pieces. Of these, two belong to the subgroup (c) that I explain in this article. The two pieces of this group¹¹ vary slightly from each other in detail, but the main content remains the same. This colcha is from the MNAA and measures about 250 to 300 cm.

⁹ Inv.: 2237 acquired in the Burnay auction in 1936.

¹⁰ All images are by Barbara Karl and are reproduced with the permission of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon.

¹¹ The other piece is from V&A 284-1876 (Department of Indian art).

The techniques employed are quite simple: chain stitch embroidery in yellow tassar silk on a naturally white plain weave cotton base. The style is quite simple, the pasty figures are reminiscent of the decorations of the Hindu brick temples of Bengal, that in turn show European motifs, the influence was mutual even though the temples are dated later than the colchas.

The basic organisation of the space within the colcha is strictly symmetrical and reminiscent of Islamic carpet design; it mirrors in quarters around the rectangular field. Filigree floral borders support the structure. The state of conservation of this colcha is not quite as good as one would have liked because some details of the embroidery are worn out. A reason for this is that the dense and stabilising background embroidery in backstitch is missing. Most of the colchas have a finely embroidered background. This background is one of the reasons why the figures do not distinguish themselves so much from the base. Here the fine backstitch embroidery is missing and as a result, we are able to distinguish the different scenes better, but since the fine backstitch background provides stability to the pieces, this colcha is not very stable and therefore it is in a worse condition than the others. The execution of the embroidery is not as detailed in other pieces. Most figures on the colcha are depicted in European dress from the late 16th century. The concept of *horror vacui* dominates the whole textile.

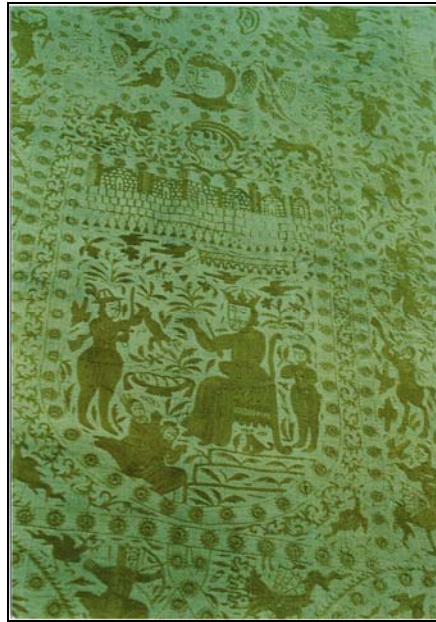


Figure 3.

The middle-field is small and oblong; the four borders take up more space. The judgement of Solomon (fig. 3) is set into the centre in a coat of arms like structure, stairs lead up to his throne, Solomon is sitting sideways on a chair under a canopy. Birds fly around him. The stairs as well as the birds correspond to the traditional descriptions of the Solomonic throne. Scrolls are set into the rectangle surrounding the throne. The Biblical king was the model ruler for Islamic as well as Christian princes, an international figure of identification. The bust of the Virgin Mary (identified through comparison) is depicted right beyond the helmet but is still within the central rectangle, next to her are two grape vine, beyond her the usual sun and moon, and the pelican sacrificing himself for his creed as a symbol for Christ her son is in a small triangle.

Underneath the Solomonic centre is a winged snake and animals eating out of a trunk; a much debated motif that is probably connected to the tree of life or fountain of paradise (I first

related it to peace among the animals but now I would be careful with that and prefer the more general paradisiacal interpretation). On the sides, the fight between Hercules – interestingly with a bow and arrow – and the Hydra in a fight of good against evil. To the left and right side of the rectangle, hybrid figures such as mermaids, satyrs and half dragon-half human figures play diverse musical instruments (some of them seem to be of Indian origin), they are traditionally part of the Solomonic court. In the middle, under a semicircle, are two crowned and winged sphinxes as guardians of the king.

In the comparatively small four circle segments in the corners¹² four figures are depicted riding on animals. They represent the four continents of the then known world: Europa, Asia, Africa and America. The Portuguese were present on all four continents, this small European nation possessed bases in Brazil, Africa and India. Representations of the four parts were therefore very popular in Portugal (but of course also elsewhere) and were used to decorate triumphal arches.¹³ The figures riding the diverse animals do not exactly follow the common European models of the time, Ripa's *Iconologia*;¹⁴ not all of them can be attributed to their continents as two of them are sitting on crocodiles or lizards. The crowned woman with a book and a sword sitting on an elephant is presumably Asia, the next figure, strangely a crowned man also with a sword and a book, is riding a horse and personifies Europa, the last two women are sitting on lizards and represent America and Africa.

Four borders surround the middle-field:



Figure 4.

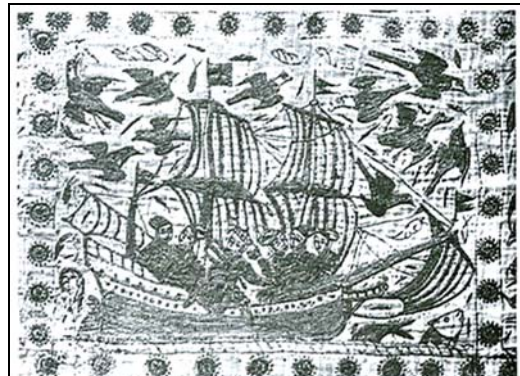


Figure 5.

¹² In the other groups of Solomon Colchas they are filled with the Biblical story of Judith and Holofernes.

¹³ See catalogue: *Arte efémera em Portugal*, p.28.

¹⁴ Ripa, *Iconologie*, Partie II, S. 6.

The innermost depicts the story of the mythological singer Arion in seventeen pictures, starting with five scenes in which he is shown singing in front of a changing auditory (animals, humans, gods, fig. 4). In all of them the singer is sitting under a tree with his instrument - the lyre. Through his singing he stops the current of a river, makes wolves, lions, falcons and hounds lie peacefully next to sheep, deer, pigeons and rabbits. He spreads harmony through music like Orpheus and Amphion but also like King David and Solomon. In the following pictures we see people applauding and the rising moon listening to the songs of Arion. After long journeys the famous singer rides aboard a ship in order to return home (fig. 5). In the following five pictures the quite elaborate but proportionally far too small ship is the centre of the composition: Arion is depicted much bigger than the other sailors. The captain and his crew plan to kill him, throw him overboard and steal his fortune. All of this is embroidered on the colcha. Realising the threat to his life Arion asks for the favour of a last song, and then throws himself overboard where he is rescued by a dolphin. Some sections are worn out in this part of the colcha. During his journey on the back of the dolphin he continues his songs, the gods Diana, Venus, Mercury and Ceres are depicted listening to him sitting on their chariots. The sequence ends with the King of the gods, Jupiter, transposing the singer and the dolphin into the stars. All scenes follow the main viewing direction, those on top were turned around in order to be seen correctly when the colcha was hung. In a way they are ordered like many series of European tapestries that decorated European palaces of the age. Tapestries did in fact arrive as diplomatic gifts in India and were for a certain period appreciated at the Mughal court but did not sell in large quantities, probably because of their high price. It is not impossible that a series of tapestries arrived in Bengal. The more likely models for the embroideries are prints that had to be simplified and reduced because of the limited space that the borders offered.



Figure 6.

The second border is entirely dedicated to the Greek hero Hercules (fig. 6). We can exactly attribute the scenes because the Hercules borders on other colchas have exact inscriptions. His adventurous life is depicted in 20 pictures, beginning with the fight against the lion of Nemaia, after which he receives the skin of the beast, which is one of his main attributes. In the following picture he fights the Hydra of Lerna, traditionally with club and torch not, as seen on other colchas, with a bow and arrow. Furthermore, we see him fighting the fierce wild boar of Erimanto, the golden horned deer of Cerineia, carrying heaven for Atlas, the Cretan Minotaur, all part of his famous twelve tasks. In the next scene we see the delivery of Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons to king Theseus of Thebes. Then Hercules tearing Argias out of the sea and hitting back Neptune on his chariot with two fish accompanied by armed men standing on dolphins. After this the hero kills the three heads of Gerion, makes the meat eating horses eat their owner Diomedes and kills the Cerberus in order to liberate Theseus from Hades. Finally he fights the dragon who is the guardian of the apples of the Hesperides - a scene already seen on the colcha - pursues a Centaur, liberates Hesione, who was tied to a rock and finally takes the place of Atlas and carries the world. Remarkably, four pictures show the encounter of Hercules with his lover Omphale, daughter of the king of Libya. A Faun also falls in love with her, in the next picture we see Hercules and Omphale changing clothes, then in bed with the Faun approaching and taking Hercules for his lover because of his clothes. In the last image of the episode we see the hero and his queen laughing at the deceived Faun. The final part tells the story of Cacus, who stole Hercules' herd and hid it in a cave. The hero discovers and kills the thief.

The choice of images not only shows him executing ten out of his twelve tasks but also shows him as a defender of justice and virtue, who, after his death was accepted on Mt. Olympus. The episode with Omphale illustrates the weakness of the hero which he overcomes. The heroes communicate on three levels: Firstly, Hercules as well as Arion serve as identification figures for contemporary Portuguese because both left their homes and went to unknown countries, experienced incredible adventures, and were richly rewarded at the end of their lives. Secondly, in the context of Solomon, Arion embodies the passive, intellectual side of the ideal ruler and Hercules the active side¹⁵. And thirdly, on a Christian level they were rewarded with eternal glory and elevated to Mt. Olympus and set into the stars and can be compared with Christ, represented as a pelican in the centre. It is interesting to note that the story of Arion develops clockwise and the story of Hercules counter-clockwise.

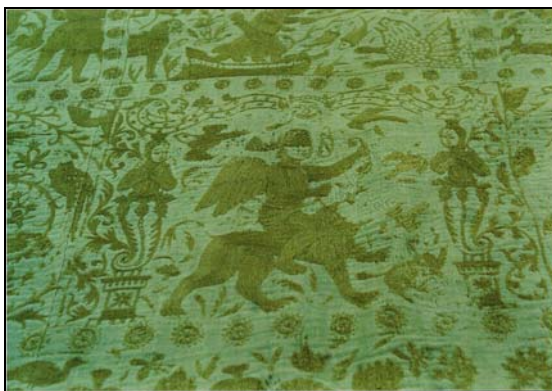


Figure 7.



Figure 8.

¹⁵ Classical Myths, S. 154 ff. for Arion and Herkules see Andrea Mantegna: Camera degli Sposi in Mantua

The third border is filled with scrollwork and masks and a stag-headed man, into which eight Greek mythological scenes are set. These scenes vary from colcha to colcha and are interchangeable and thus not to be taken too literally but rather in a general allusive way. The scenes depicted are: a blindfolded Cupid riding a lion (fig. 7) – this type of representation of Cupid dates back to antiquity – Fortuna on a dolphin, Ulysses and Penelope, the judgement of Paris and the story of Actaeon. Furthermore, Pyramus and Thisbe, a Nereid rides a dragon and finally Hero and Leander are depicted (fig. 8). The images chosen allude to an erudite, courtly atmosphere and were largely chosen from the work of Ovid.



Figure 9.

The outermost border (fig. 9) shows hunting scenes with double-headed eagles in the corners. Hunting was the favourite pastime of the aristocracy and was characteristic for Bengal, one of the great hunting regions of India. Different kinds of hunts are depicted: with rifles, falcons, dogs etc. they were hunting bulls, unicorns, dragons etc. The double-headed eagles in the corners were interpreted as symbols of the Holy Roman Emperor. But none of the Spanish Kings that also ruled over Portugal were emperors. The royal bird should here be read in a more general way as a symbol for strength and rule. Both Asian and European viewers saw the eagle as such a symbol.

Three interconnected elements are central to the programme:

First, and most dominant, the idea of the ideal ruler embodied by the intercultural figure of King Solomon, the personification of the ideal prince and just rule emphasised by the Greek heroes Hercules and Arion standing for the active and passive side of the perfect prince. A kind of a courtly catalogue of princely virtues extends around him, showing hunts, model heroes, erudite mythological scenes, age old regal symbols and allusions to the true faith. Second, there are allusions to the Golden Age: the paradisiacal and harmonic aspect of the colcha with its rich scrolls and birds, Solomon, Arion and the eschatological symbols announcing the Christian dominance, in this case that of the Portuguese over the Indian Ocean. And third, the religious aspect, represented by the Christian symbols (the Virgin Mary and Pelican) which emphasise the idea of the Eucharist, resurrection and redemption, topics that are vital in the context of missionary work. Only recently I saw a chalice cover in the collection of the Fundacao Oriente in Lisbon which was made in Bengal too. It shows the symbols of the Augustinians, a double-headed eagle with sun and moon and a pierced heart¹⁶: All symbols that are also found on the Solomon colchas.

¹⁶ Inv. Nr. FO 1137.

The programme discussed above lies between the secular and the sacred, it is a multi-layered fusion of motifs from different cultures, taken from an international pool of themes. Allusions to a catalogue of virtues of the ideal ruler and the Golden Age enhanced by Christian elements are central to it. An interesting parallel can be found in literature: the 16th century poet Luis de Camoes, Portugal's national poet interweaves contemporary historical, mythological and religious contents in his Epic of the Portuguese Expansion "Os Lusíadas". Due to the large quantity of existing Solomon colchas it is evident that the programme was not created for a single occasion. The quantity of pieces explains the iconographic inconsistencies within the textiles of this group. The stable factor in this group of colchas is the judgement of Solomon in the centre; the flexible factors are the motifs surrounding him. They change from piece to piece, the programme becomes blurred.

This associative way of showing the concept of the ideal ruler is reminiscent of Islamic programmes of the ideal ruler; from an early period, the colchas communicate through a web of allusions rather than concrete iconographic contents. This associative approach made the programme of the colcha comprehensible and acceptable to both Catholic and New Christian society (that played an important role in the world trade network) as well as to the Muslim viewer since the motifs do not harm their religious concepts. The colchas are all the more fascinating because of their open and multivalent meanings.

The programme plays with associations and allusions. Yet these associations are not overt and make clear conclusions difficult. The Solomon colchas of Bengal could and still can be interpreted from various viewpoints as they have many layers of meanings. The central concept is that of the ideal ruler, which could be understood by an international audience, be it Catholic, New Christian or Muslim.

Numbers of the sketch of the Solomon colcha group (c) MNAA:

1. Justice of Solomon
2. Virgin Mary
3. Musician
4. Sphinxes
5. Pelican
6. Hercules and Hydra
7. Serpent and animals
8. Continent
9. Continent
10. Continent
11. Continent
12. – 16. Arion under a tree singing to animals
17. Arion in town
18. Sungod in chariot
19. Arion entering the ship
20. – 23. Arion on ship
24. (worn out)
25. Arion on dolphin
26. Chariots of Gods
27. Arion placed into stars
28. Hercules fighting the Nemaian lion

29. Hercules and the Hydra of Lerna
30. Hercules and the wild boar of Erimanto
31. Hercules and the stag of Cerineia
32. Hercules and the bull of Crete
33. Hercules and the queen of the Amazons and Theseus
34. Hercules and Neptune
35. Hercules and Gerion
36. Hercules and Diomedes
37. Hercules and Cerberus
38. Hercules and the apples of the Hesperids
39. Hercules and the Centaur
40. Hercules and Hesione
41. Hercules and Atlas
42. – 46. Hercules and Omphale
- 47.-48. Hercules and Cacus
48. Scrollwork
49. Pyramus and Thisbe
50. Woman riding a dragon
51. Hero and Leander
52. Cupid
53. Amphirite
54. Ulysses and Penelope
55. Actaeon
56. Hunting scenes
57. Double-headed eagles
58. Judgement of Paris.