

Aranyaakhyaan: The Forest in Myth and Memory*

Eko vasah pattane va vane va.
(Bhartrihari)

Moha vipin ghan dahan krishanuh
Santsarorukkanan bhanuh
Nishicharkarivarruthmrigrajah
Tratusadanubhavakhagbajah.
(Ramcharit Manas / Aranya Kanda)

'Woods shall to me answer and my echo ring...'
(Edmund Spenser, 1552-1599)

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The opening lines of Coleridge's celebrated poem *Kubla Khan* evoke compelling images of a fabulous city carved out of 'forests as ancient as the hills...' where 'Alph, the sacred river, ran/ Through caverns measureless to man/ Down to a sunless sea....' This dramatic opening almost effortlessly recaptures the myriad associations of the Forest with hills, sacred life-sustaining streams, mysterious darkness and a vast expanse. Sunny spots of greenery where Xanadu stood amidst fragrant trees were a rarity and a testament to man's

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* This paper was specially written for the IIC Experience 2010, a Festival of the Arts celebrating 'The Forest'.