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## Frederick Eden Pargiter: An Orientalist countering the Traditional Colonial Historiography

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### Abstract

*This article critically evaluates the character and contributions of Frederick Eden Pargiter, a British Civil Servant and Orientalist who dedicated over three decades to the study of ancient Indian texts and traditions. Unlike many contemporary scholars, Pargiter exhibited an unbiased, meticulous, and deep appreciation for Indian culture and religion. The study delves into his significant works, including his analysis of time measurement in ancient India, his scientific justification of the geographical accuracy in the Ramayana, and his groundbreaking work on Ancient Indian Historical Traditions. By examining his methodologies and interpretations of Puranic texts, epics, and Vedic literature, this article highlights Pargiter's unique approach to reconstructing ancient Indian history, emphasizing the often-neglected importance of Puranic and epic traditions over solely Brahmanical perspectives. His efforts in translating the Markandeya Purana further underscore his commitment to making Indian religious and cultural knowledge accessible. The article concludes by asserting Pargiter's indispensable legacy in providing an authentic, diversified, and well-integrated understanding of Hindu scriptures, making his works essential for a comprehensive and critical examination of ancient Indian civilization.*

### Keywords

Ancient, Hindu, Brahmanical, Purana, Scriptures.

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# 1

## **Frederick Eden Pargiter: An Orientalist countering the Traditional Colonial Historiography**

### **1. Introduction**

Frederick Eden Pargiter was the second son of Rev. Robert Pargiter. Since his childhood he received excellent educational facilities. He attended Taunton Grammar School for primary and secondary education and Exeter College in Oxford in order to pursue senior-secondary education. He was Boden Sanskrit Scholar in the year 1872. Since his childhood, he was a meticulous student aspiring for a lucrative carrier at ICS. In the year 1875 he cleared the exam for Indian Civil Service and got Bengal Presidency as his first posting. He remained in Bengal for thirty one years and served at various posts of Under-Secretary to the Government of Bengal in 1885, District Judge in 1887 and Judge at Calcutta High Court in the year 1904. Most of his time was spent in Bengal Asiatic Society. He worked as a secretary of it in 1884-85 and later became President of the same in 1903-1905. In the year 1905, he also became the Fellow of Calcutta University. He was married to Florence Beverley, who was the daughter of Mr. Henry Beverley.

He belonged to that cadre of British Civil Servants who were greatly interested in Oriental Studies. He was a serious member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. He contributed many articles to the Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal which include; Chittagong dialect, The Geography of Rama's exile, The Telling of time in Ancient India, Ancient Cedi, Matsya and Karusa and Ancient Countries in Eastern Bengal. He started the work of translating *Markandeya Purana* in 1888 and completed it 1905. One of his acquaintance named Dr. Fleet motivated him to invest his time in Studying of the old Indian inscriptions especially those written in Kharoshti script<sup>1</sup>. Also, he published several papers in the *Indian Antiquary* and *Epigraphia Indica* and the most important editions were of the Wardak and Manikiala inscriptions. He tried to develop an understanding of Puranic geography and history. In his work, *Dynasties of Kali Age* which was published in the year 1913 Pargiter has provided a comprehensive yet

critical analysis of the Puranic accounts of historical dynasties who once ruled India. He has generously helped Dr. A.F.R. Hoernle in his important work on Manuscript Remains of Buddhist Literature Found in East Turkestan. The book was published in 1916. He took much pain to get published the list of Dr. Hoernle's papers lying in the India Office Library<sup>2</sup>. Also, the centenary volume issued by Asiatic Society of Bengal was the result of Pargiter's hard work and strong determination.

In order to understand Pargiter's perspectives on India one need to develop an understanding of the theories given by him in his works on Indian Puranic texts and two epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. The first work taken into consideration is his contemplation on calculating the time and muhurtas in India. In his essay on the technique of time measurements by Indians, he has mentioned the two ways employed by them to calculate the time. He has given reference of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* in which Chanakya has comprehensively discussed the concept of water clock and the Indian ways of time-measurement. Apart from technical information provided by Pargiter in his article, one can find minuscule details of Indian Political, Social, Economic life. Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* advised the King to divide his day and night into eight half watches. Also, he suggested the rulers to take help from his religious preceptors and court ministers to prevent him from wasting his time by disturbing his concentration by striking of the gnomon-shadows. In another section of his work Kautilya has mentioned about the daily routine of elephants. He has said that the first and the seventh parts of the day were their feeding times, eighth part immediately was used for feeding them. Forenoon was the time for their exercising and afternoon was the time for drilling. The longest measure of time during ancient period was the half-watch of ninety-minutes and the shortest one was the nalika of twenty-four minutes. One can find the word, 'Murta' or 'Muhurta' on the Manikiala stone. The inscription has mentioned about the Greek hour which was not known in India during that time. The word Muhurta was stated as its Indian equivalent. Thus, muhurta was adopted as an important period to be notified by the beating of drums and blowing of trumpets<sup>3</sup>. There were around thirty muhurtas that signified the day and night and were realized by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. Day contained fifteen muhurtas and the next fifteen belonged to night. Some evidences from *Vayu* and *Brahmanda Purana* stated that the names of the muhurtas

were distinguished by capitals. However, Harinarayana, the author of *Muhurtamanjari* has given a list of day-muhurtas and have considered them to be sixteen in number. One can find the mention of day and night muhurtas in the Buddhist text named *Divyavadana*. Jain text called *Surapannatti Sutra* has used the name 'Pahuda' in place of *Muhrat*. Some of the names of the *muhrats* are: *Bambho* (*Brahma Muhrat*), *Balavam* (*Balavant Muhrat*), *Vayu* (*Vayu Muhrat*), *Vesamane* (*Vaisravana Muhrat*), *Varune* (*Varuna Muhrat*) and others. The names of the night *Muhratas* are as follows: *Anamde* (*Ananda Muhrat*), *Vijae* (*Vijaya Muhrat*), *Visasene* (*Visvasena Muhrat*), *Gamdhavve* (*Gandharva Muhrat*) and many others. F.E Pargiter has concluded from his meticulous study of *Muhratas* that the names of the *Muhratas* were also kept on the names of the deities which they thought empowered that particular hour of time.

## 2. Geographical locations of Ramayana in the Eye of Pargiter

A comprehensive analysis of his research article entitled, *The Geography of Rama's Exile*, helps one to have a peep into the scientific study he conducted and pursued to justify the authenticity of Ramayana. He looked upon the classic with the curious eye of a person having rational approach towards religion and mythology. He found the text an interesting heterogeneous composition of religion, mythology, dynastic history, social life and topography. He tried to trace the migration of Aryans and their acquaintance with whole of North India, Bengal and chief mountains and rivers of South India. He appreciated the role played by religious sages in discovering new places, establishing their hermitages and inviting the factors of civilization to inhabit the region. Aryans settled across the country and led to the establishment of hermitages, sanctuaries and all sorts of *tirthas* which not only led to the influx of pilgrims but also facilitated travel and intermingling of people from different regions. According to him, story of Ramayana has been passed down to generations in three versions; Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Ramopakhyana in the Vana Parva of the *Mahabharata*, in the Shodasa-Rajika in the Drona Parva<sup>4</sup>. Also, North and West of the Ganges and Jumna was divided into Kingdoms and cradled advanced civilization. However, the forest in the south of Yamuna consisted of *Rakshasas*, demons and monkeys. He moved on to discuss the significance of Prayagraja in *Ramayana*. During the period of Lord

Rama Allahabad was nothing more than a cleared forest. In the north of it was situated the Kingdom of Nishada with Sringavera-pura as its capital<sup>5</sup>. Ramayana has also mentioned about the district of Shahabad situated in Bihar in between the two holy cities of Banaras and Gaya. Ramayana has presented it as a depopulated place which was once was very prosperous. There has been no mention of the Southern Kingdom of Pandya's, which was one of the oldest Kingdom of Southern India and Lord Rama must have passed this region before moving on to Lanka. The Southern Kingdom has been described as a safe haven for numerous tribal communities and natural resources such as rivers, mountains, hills and dense forests where famous sages resided. Also, Rishi Agastya used to dwell near the Malaya Mountains.

Pargiter in his article on geographical description of Rama's exile has given a vivid description of his journey and has intertwined it with the small commentary on the political and social conditions prevalent during that time. He has stated that Rama began his Journey after he got to know about Mata Kekayi's three demands from his father with one including Rama's exile for fourteen years. Rama travelled on a charioteer accompanied by his wife Sita and brother Laxman till the threshold of Ayodhya. The first river that they crossed was Tamasa. Next they reached the river Srimati Mahanadi and took a direct route towards the Kingdom of Kosala. They crossed many rivers such as- Vedasruti, Gomati and Sarpika and also passed the forest of Sarayu. Lastly, they arrived at Sringavera-pura, a city which was situated on Ganges and thereafter began their journey on foot. After such discussion of Rama's route author has tried to trace the current geographical location of these places. River Tamasa has been identified as river Tons and it was the same river on which Maharishi Valmiki had his hermitage. Rishi Agastya's region has been traced to Southern part of India as he was called the conqueror of South. River Gomati has been identified with river Gumti situated in Lucknow. Sringavera-pura has been identified with the modern town of Singror, situated in Allahabad. Author has denied the reference of river Vedasruti in the main text of *Mahabharata* and has associated it with modern river Chauka. River Sarpika has been associated with river Sai, a tributary of Gomati River in Lucknow. Sringavera-pura has been described as a large city full of hustle and bustle. It was ruled by the King of Nishadas named Guha. Pargiter has stated that Nishada race was an aboriginal race

living with primitive civilizational values and inhabited the forest areas. King Guha was a good friend of Rama and received Lord Rama with friendly warmth and affection. It is a part of popular culture that King ferried Lord Rama's brother Bharata, his mothers and troops from Ayodhya to reach rishi Bharadvaja's hermitage where Rama was residing<sup>6</sup>. The forest has been described in the poem as less dense and having lack of enough water to support men in great number. Rama stalled for a period in rishi Bharadvaja's hermitage but after his family members get to know about his place of dwelling he decided to move from there. Lord Rama along with his wife Sita and brother Laxman crossed river Yamuna and found abode in Chitrakoot. It has been noted by Pargiter that Rama crossed the river using a raft instead of boats which were numerous in number at Sringaverapura, was a clear indication of the fact that Prayaga (place of rishi Bharadvaja's settlement) was completely ignorant of resources of civilization. After crossing Yamuna, Rama reached a forest about a mile from the river which was called Nila. From Chitrakuta, Rama halted at rishi Atri's hermitage. Rishi Atri and his wife Anasuya welcomed them with great affection and warmth. From there he migrated to several forests such as- Dandaka forest, forest of Madhukas, Panchavati forest and Kraunchalaya forest. It was at Chitrakuta that Rama was asked to help the hermits against rakshasas who were molesting them while praying and doing sadhanas.

So, while passing these forests he encountered the most troublesome *rakshas* Viradha and killed him. Author has given reference of the main area of settlement of *rakshasas*, which was in Janasthana near Godavari River. Pargiter has tried to compare Rama's journey with that of the Pandavas who also bore the brunt of thirteen years of expatriation. The major difference between both these episodes was that Rama didn't prevent himself from meeting Kings or entering into towns, unlike Pandavas who chose the status of complete seclusion. Rama, while travelling passed the river Maha-java which hasn't found mention in any other text including Mahabharata. Hence, author has identified it with some swift stream may be an upper part of river Narmada, running in between Sohagpur and Narsinghpur and most probably have dried up in later years. Rama while travelling came across the most auspicious lake of Panchapsaras, currently located in Lonar in Buldhana district of Maharashtra. Its reference has been given in Third Book of *Ramayana*,

The literal meaning of this Sanskrit term is five apsaras. Rama visited this lake while crossing through Dandak forest. Ramayana associates a legend with this lake which was created by Sage Mandakarni. Indra grew jealous of the increasing power of rishi Mandakarni. So, he sent five apsaras to vitiate his sadhana. Unfortunately, Indra was successful in his hideous motive and the sage broke his vow of standing over the lake by consuming only air for ten thousand years. Thereafter, rishi Mandakarni married those five apsaras and started living in a Palace located upon an island submerged in the centre of the lake.

Ramayana also illustrates Lord Rama's experience while passing the lake. He was mesmerized by the air surrounding the lake which bore the fragrance of music played by the apsaras. Pargiter has also given reference of Surpanakha. He stated that Surpanakha confronted Rama at Panchavati, used to reside in Jana-sthana which can be located somewhere around the Nasik district of Maharashtra. Also, the story of Surpanakha's infatuation towards Rama is also accompanied by the story of killing of fourteen thousand rakshasas by Lord Rama who confronted him to fight the cause of Ravana's sister Surpanakha. About the inhabitants of Jana-sthana, Pargiter has stated that they were an aboriginal tribe whose features weren't fully developed and thus were like *rakshas*. However, Shodasarajika of *Mahabharata* contains an entirely different narrative related to Jana-sthana. It states that Rama killed fourteen thousand demons after his father commanded him to do so in order to protect the sages inhabiting the place. Pargiter has interpreted the entire scene in his own way and has commented that initially Jana-sthana was inhabited by Aryans who were drove out by the notorious demons<sup>7</sup>. In order to restore the place to its original inhabitants, Lord Rama defeated these barbarians and established peace there. According to author, almost all accounts written on Rama's life as an ascetic and a King mentions the fact that he killed many rakshas and most of them were encountered by him in the Deccan. Author has mentioned another important episode from Rama's life as a young prince when he and his brother Lakshmana were guided by rishi Visva-mitra to get rid of a frightful Yakshini Tadaka who was troubling the population inhabiting the region<sup>8</sup>. Author has identified this region by present district of Shahabad in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Also, it once was an abode of rishi Agastya before he shifted his hermitage to Nagpur.

### 3. Pargiter views on Ancient Indian Historical Traditions

The most important work produced by Pargiter is his narrative on Ancient Indian Historical Tradition. He has discussed about the merits and demerits of ancient Indian texts. According to him Ancient Indian History hasn't been drafted with precision and while discussing the importance of Vedas and Vedic literature, writers have rudely neglected the significance of Puranic and epic traditions. Hence, Pargiter through his work has tried to reflect upon the indispensable significance of the study of Puranas and epics in order to reconstruct the history of Ancient India. His interest grew in Puranic studies after he translated *Markandeya Purana*. He tried to examine the history of ancient Kingdoms through a comprehensive study of their dynastic genealogies, geographical location, social and religious traditions and political divisions. According to Pargiter a Brahman who lacked the knowledge of *Puranas* shouldn't be considered as proficient in the knowledge of scriptures<sup>9</sup>. He is of the opinion that a major portion of Ancient Indian History can be extracted from traditions which were prevalent during such times. He believed that the history of those times is mainly the stories related to Aryan Conquest of the country and their migration. He criticized the didactic tone of writers who have given a meticulous description of ancient traditions but have failed to enrich it with the element of historicity. He has stated an example of Rig-Veda which contains many historical statements or official notices roughly arranged in chronological order and cannot be termed as historically connected. He has stated about the process of settlement of Aryans on Indian Peninsula and the struggle they pursued to establish their supremacy over other hostile tribes inhabiting the country.

According to Pargiter, the victorious military careers of these Aryan rulers and the different ways of livelihood pursued by them or the various civilizational values propitiated by them became the foundation for these historical traditions. He further commented that one can find a lacuna of historical sense in both Vedic literature and traditions of Kshatriya, because Vedic literature favours Brahmanic or religious point of views while Kshatriya traditions narrate the political and social stories of the Ancient Indian Society satiating the interests of Kshatriya class<sup>10</sup>. Brahmanic historical traditions favoured Brahmanic perspectives and tried to assert dignity, sanguinity, greatness and sometimes the super human character of a

Brahman. It includes within its folds the glorious stories of Kings as they were the chief patrons of Brahmanic beliefs. In contrast, Kshatriya narratives discussed the past events which suited the political interests of Kshatriya rulers. The type of history accumulated on account of exaggerated tales of military expeditions, majestic courts and other duties performed by the King have somehow damaged the authenticity of historical writing and have created polarized viewpoints. However, Pargiter has attached some sense of chronology with the history presented by Kshatriyas, whereas Brahmanic history has been nounced by him as fabricated, untrue and chronologically poor. He substantiated his perspective with few reasons which are as follows;

- ▶ In the first place, Brahmanic literature mixed up different persons of the same name. For example, there is an episode in Satapath Brahman where Bharata seized the Ashwamedha horse of Satavatas and claimed that Bharatas were greater than any other king reigning India<sup>11</sup>. However, in the later part of the discussion the text get confused Bharata who was a Paurava King with that of Bharata, Rama's brother.
- ▶ Secondly, they confused Rishis, Kings and other Sages with mythological persons of the same name. For example, Brihaspati who was a *rishi* before Bharata reign was confused with the heavenly priest Brhaspati. Also, Madhu who was a King of Yadavas and a friend of Lord Krishna was confused with Rakshas Madhu who was killed by Lord Vishnu.
- ▶ According to Pargiter, Brahmanic interpretations of history failed to distinguish between two different time periods and messed up the rulers or persons chronologically. From many historical episodes it can be extracted that the names of people belonging to two separate times were clubbed together as contemporaries. Also, he commented that Brahmanic traditions mythologized history as the authors were incapable of distinguishing between reality and mythology. He blamed Brahmans on creating a fabricated version of historical episodes. For example, stories regarding the ancient Kings such as Harischandra, Jayadhvaja and Surasena are mere concocted religious tales to eulogize the religious zeal of these great rulers and have no relatedness with history<sup>12</sup>. Lastly, Pargiter expressed his disgruntlement over the lacuna of proper geography in Brahmanic description of history. The next type

of Historical tradition about which he discussed about was the Kshatriya tradition. According to him, Kshatriya tradition of history writing consisted of genealogies of rulers of ancient Indian dynasties, ballads singing the heroic battles fought by the rulers, tales, official notices issued by the reigning rulers or courts and allusions. Author emphasized on the types of tales that were written during that time. He deciphered two different natures of the tales in which the first type belonged to the tales reciting the historical incidents in precised manner without the slightest use of blasphemy or exaggeration whereas the second category belonged to the tales which were purposely written to buttress the political authority of the rulers and religious superiority of the Brahmans. Pargiter credited Puranic Brahmans for preserving Kshatriya tradition without modification to some extent. However, the class of Brahmans who followed them re-shaped it, tampered it to suit their needs and produced a fabricated version of the Kshatriya tradition which not just eulogized the reigning Kings as someone sent form heaven but also established social status of Brahmins as that of a sole protector of religious beliefs.

Pargiter has also raised the issue of authenticity of *Rigveda* in later part of his research. He has stated that *Rigveda* is the most important Brahmanical book. It consist of hymns composed by various authors and is arranged on some unknown principles but Vedic literatures are silent about it. Pargiter laid stress on the fact that a detailed information should have been provided in these texts regarding the names of the authors who added their compositions to the sacred text as it would have aggravated its historical authenticity. Indian Epics and *Puranas* credit great *rishi* Parasara's son Vyas for arranging the Vedas. However, Vedic Index fails to mention the name of rishi Vyasa or Krsna or Dvaipayana, which makes the declaration either incorrect or doubtful. The only Vyasa one can notice at the end of Samavidhana Brahmana and Taittiriya Aranyaka was Vyasa Parasarya, who was a mythical sage in the Vedic period and he was only a student of a teacher named Visvaksena<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, Pargiter considered Vedic literature as of little trust because in order to prove it as a text descending from heaven, Brahmans deliberately neglected the contribution of a learned sage who must have played an important role in its compilation and systematic arrangement. Pargiter gave three reasons to express his suspicion on

the authenticity of Vedic literature. The first one was religious nature of the text, the second being lack of historical sense among the Brahmans and third one was the unacquaintance with the prevalent social, political and economic conditions of the times, as these Brahmans led a secluded lives in hermitages located in the midst of dense forests. Thus, Pargiter strictly rejected the idea of drawing upon conclusions about Ancient Indian History using Vedic Literature, Classical Epics and Puranas.

Pargiter stated that Vayu, Vishnu and Brahmanda Purana has discussed the theory regarding the origin of Puranas. According to the three Puranas, it was Krsna Dvaipayana who divided the huge text of Veda into four parts and arranged them systematically<sup>14</sup>. Later, he passed on his knowledge to four of his many disciples—Paila, Vaisampayana, Jamini and Sumantu. The knowledge Vyasa gave to his students became a part of local songs, folklores, anecdotes and were passed on to coming generation in the form of *Sruti* and *Smriti* Sources. Later, Sage Vyasa composed *Mahabharata* and made a statement that a Vaishnava would gain the same merit by listening to the Epics that he would gain from listening to the Eighteen Puranas. Pargiter further speculated that the materials for Purana has been derived from the auspicious Sutas which have conserved the ancient folklores, genealogies of Gods, Goddesses, rishis and Kings, ballads about militarily celebrated men and heroic tales. Vyasa also gave the knowledge of Puranas to his disciple Romaharsana, who later taught it to his son Ugrasravas and six other of his disciple. Thus, the knowledge was transmitted to Brahmans and they developed it in due course of time.

He further stated that the sanctity which once was an integral part of Brahmin class ruptured as they grew ambitious and power hungry. In order to secure their prestigious religious position they incorporated high-sounding adjectives for themselves and supplemented *Puranas* with Brahmanic teachings and practices. In due course of time these sacred religious texts lost its value and utility after being tampered by some Brahmans. Undoubtedly, Brahmans eulogized the moral and religious significance of Puranas and Epics but they popularized themselves as the one holding the monopoly of illuminating people and helping them to perform all sorts of religious ceremonies and rituals.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is quite conspicuous to note that a British Civil Servant took this much pain to read, comprehend and facilitate the English translation of an Indian religious text. His tenacity, hard-work and passion to dwell upon the deeper meaning of Hindu Cultural beliefs and appreciate it whole-heartedly is remarkably commendable and command reverence. The translation of *Markandeya Purana* was pursued by Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Sanskrit version of it was prepared by Dr. K.M Banerjee and was published in Bibliotheca Indica in the year 1862. Later, it was translated by F.E Pargiter in English. *Markandeya Purana* deals with the religious questions that perturbed the peaceful mind of rishi Jamini. Initially, he tried to quench his thirst for knowledge by having a discussion with Sage Markandeya but he asked Jamini to resolve his queries from oviparous sages. Rishi Jamini agreed to take wisdom from feathered philosophers and went to them to settle the questions troubling his mind. The first question that he asked was the reason for multiple human forms taken by Lord Vishnu to save the earth when he is all powerful to do the judgement in a single day? His second question concerned the character of Indra who was an atrocious King and conducted many evils but got his energy divided into five Pandavs who were again married to a single woman named Draupadi? The third question was regarding the decision of Balarama to leave his brother Lord Krishna alone in the battle of Mahabharata and chose to go on Pilgrimage? As a matter of fact, the oviparous sages found the questions very dense to answer and suggested rishi Jamini that only Sage Markandeya have the wisdom to resolve his queries. Thus, the text which consist of five distinct parts is a treasure trove of knowledge and wisdom which was imparted in the form of questions and answers and has been said to be composed by *Rishi* Markandeya himself.

Thus, it can be concluded after having a comprehensive reading of F.E Pargiter's works that he was greatly influenced by oriental religion. His un-biased scholarly approach towards Ancient Indian History helped him to left Indians with an authentic, diversified and well-integrated text to understand the minutest offering of their own religion and culture. Also, his writings have critically examined the merits and short-comings of Indian texts such as-Vedas, Puranas and Ramayana and have affirmatively questioned its historicity and authenticity of its genealogical. Hence, Pargiter's works are a must

read for those who wishes to critically examine Hindu Scriptures and get a comprehensive knowledge of the religion. Hence, Pargiter's works are a must read for those who wishes to critically examine Hindu Scriptures and get a comprehensive knowledge of the religion.

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