

## **Gilbert Hill, Mumbai: A Causal and Feasibility Study of a Failed Tourist Potential**

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**ABSTRACT:** The importance of Tourism in the development of any country cannot be denied. Gilbert Hill in Mumbai is a place which has all the necessary ingredients which can make a successful tourist spot. The hill is formed of 65 million years old columnar basalt rocks, which makes it a rare geological wonder and a potential tourist spot. The hill is located within the heart of city, and has excellent connectivity. There is also an old shrine of Gaondevi on top of the hill. In spite of its geological and cultural importance, Gilbert hill has not been able to develop as a tourist spot. Several, geographical, social and economic factors are responsible for this failure of tourist potential. The present paper attempts to study these factors and to assess the feasibility of Gilbert Hill's development as a tourist attraction, thereby emphasizing the role of effective tourism management.

**Keywords:** Gilbert Hill, Columnar basalts, Gaondevi temple, tourism management

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Date of Submission: 05 -07-2017

Date of acceptance: 15-07-2017

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In the present era of globalization, tourism has become a major sector, contributing to the economy of any nation. Showcasing of the natural landscape and cultural heritage was never so rewarding. It is all the more important for developing nations to develop tourism industry, as it involves high income generation without sacrificing resources and loss to environment.

India has a great scope for tourism, and the tourist industry has contributed about 9.6% of India's GDP in 2016. About 40.34 million jobs are generated and supported by tourism (World Travel and Tourism Council : Economic Impact 2017). It is therefore, imperative that the existing tourist spots should be conserved while new tourist potentials must be tapped.

The present paper deals with one such natural geomorphic feature in Mumbai, which could have been one of the major tourist attractions, but has lost its chance to fame due to the apathy of residents, planners, government bodies and local administration. The spot in consideration is a hill in the western suburb of Andheri in Mumbai. It is locally known as Gilbert hill, or Gaondevi temple hill. Aim of this paper is to assess the tourist potential of this hill, reasons for its failure and discuss the feasibility of tourism development.

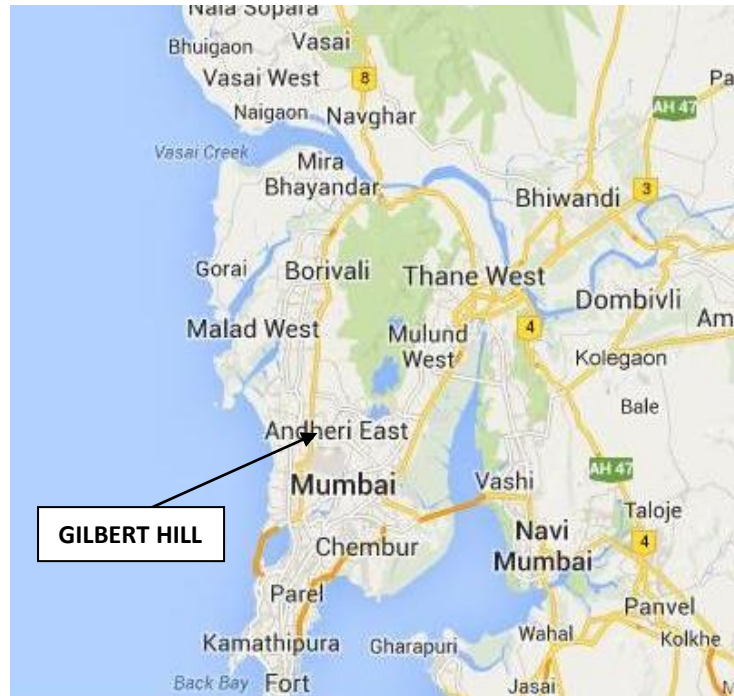
### **II. THE HILL**

Gilbert hill is located in Andheri (West), one of the most developed, plush suburbs on the western railway line. The hill measures about 60 m in height and covers an area of about 800 square meters. On top of the hill is a 400 year old temple of a local deity, Gaondevi. However, it is not the temple, but the geological structure of this hill which makes it special.

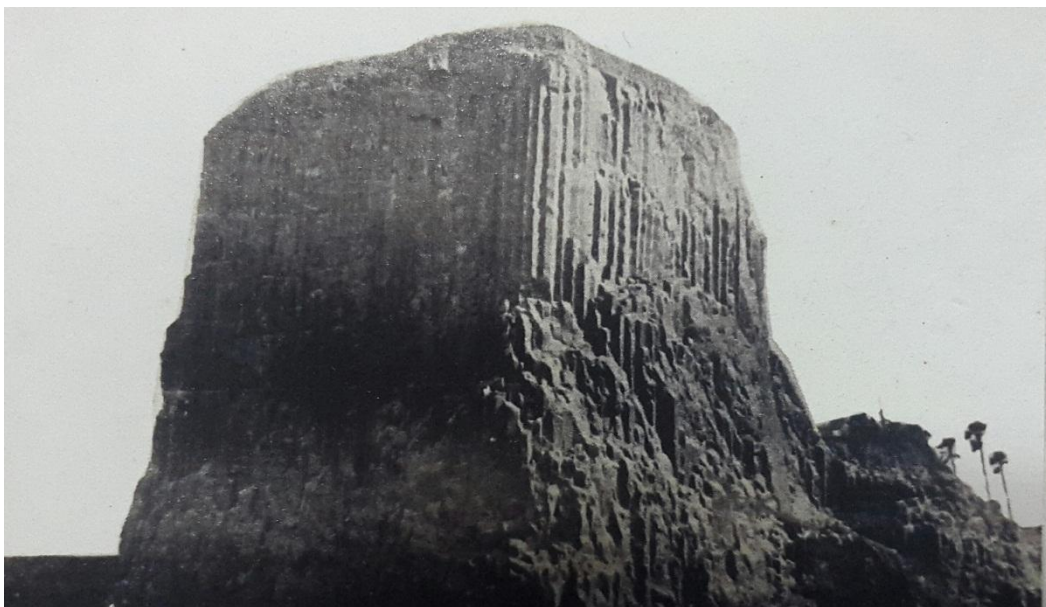
Gilbert hill is a monolithic hill, made up of columnar basalt rocks. It has almost vertical faces from three sides, where one can see the tall, well-jointed hexagonal columns of basalt. It is believed that this hill was formed about 65 million years ago, during the end of Mesozoic period, when the Deccan lavas spilled over the peninsular India. Undoubtedly it is the oldest surviving geological structure in Mumbai. From the base of the hill, the 45-60 m tall vertical columns of basalt are well defined and are a treat to watch. Towards the North and North western sides, the columns are surrounded by tuffaceous breccia. Vegetation develops on these relatively gentle slopes. On all other sides, the hill has a near vertical slope, and overhangs at certain locations.



India



**Fig. 1.** Location of Gilbert Hill, Mumbai, India



**Fig. 2.** Gilbert Hill in 1973 (Old photograph provided by Gaondevi Temple Trust)



Fig. 3. Gilbert Hill, 2016

### **III. TOURISM POTENTIAL OF GILBERT HILL**

In terms of academic interests and geological importance, Gilbert hill is an excellent and rare site. Columnar basalts are rare in occurrence, and are spectacular. The rocks that form the hill are about 65 million years old. That makes Gilbert hill the oldest natural structure found in Mumbai. In fact, it is of the sites from where the lava eruptions took place during period of the great Deccan lava eruptions. It would be fascinating for any academician or a tourist to see an age-old volcanic vent located right in the middle of a city, which has stood the test of time for 65 million years.

Apart from its geological importance, Gilbert hill could be a Pilgrimage site as well. On top of the hill, is an old temple of a local deity, goddess Gaondevi and Durga mata. In India, temples often occupy hill tops, and this hill is no exception. The shrine is 400 year old, a historic place in its own capacity. Every year, in the month of January, there is an annual fair of Gaondevi, a time during which, pilgrims from different parts of Mumbai visit this temple.



Fig.4. Gaondevi Temple atop Gilbert Hill

### **IV. CONNECTIVITY OF GILBERT HILL**

Development scope of any tourist spot shall be restricted to a great extent if adequate transport facilities are not available. In this aspect also, Gilbert hill has a great advantage. Being located in the heart of a buzzing suburb, a variety of transport modes are available.

1. Gilbert hill is located just 1 km away from Andheri railway station and Metro railway station.

2. The hill can be reached through almost 10 city bus routes from Andheri station.
3. Auto rickshaws are easily available which can be availed at a modest fare of Rs.20 to 25.
4. One can walk down from Andheri station to the hill within 15 minutes.
5. Chhatrapati Shivaji International airport as well as domestic airport are just 20 minutes' drive from Gilbert Hill.

Thus, Gilbert Hill offers all the requisite connectivity for domestic as well as International tourists. Another site, where comparatively smaller outcrops of columnar basalts are found in India, is St. Mary's island, Karnataka. To reach this island, tourists have to travel 6 km by ferry boat. In contrast, Gilbert hill is a much larger, majestic formation, right in the middle of a city.

## V. TOURSIM AT GILBERT HILL

In spite of all its geological and religious importance, spectacular scenery and excellent connectivity, the actual development of tourism at Gilbert hill presents a quite disappointing picture. As per personal communication with the trustees of Gaondevi Temple, not a single foreign tourist has visited this hill for the last ten years. Only local pilgrims visit the temple during the annual fare, which is for devotional purpose.

Archaeological Survey of India has conferred a Grade II heritage status to this hill. However, there is hardly any tourist presence at the hill. The hill is surrounded by a large slum and a few residential buildings. These building structures are at a very short distance from the hill, only 12 to 15 m at some places. It can be presumed, therefore, that Gilbert hill has no development as a tourist spot as yet.

## VI. FAILURE OF A TOURIST POTENTIAL: WHY?

It is apparent that despite all favorable factors, Gilbert Hill is a failed tourist spot. There has been a gross absence of tourist activity, local or foreign. It is said that "All tourist spots are attractive places, but all attractive places do not become tourist spots." For an attractive place to become a successful tourist destination, an effective tourism management is necessary. In order to identify the causes of lack of tourism development, a survey was conducted in 2016. The survey had following components-

1. Questionnaire response and personal interviews of residents around Gilbert hill area were conducted. 400 people from the nearby residential areas were interviewed.
2. Historical references were collected about the hill from trustees of the Gaondevi temple and other elderly people.
3. Rock samples were collected and their "in-situ" strength was measured.
4. Based on the questionnaire, perception analysis was carried out for Gilbert hill
5. Study of old and new settlements around Gilbert hill was made.

## VII. FINDINGS

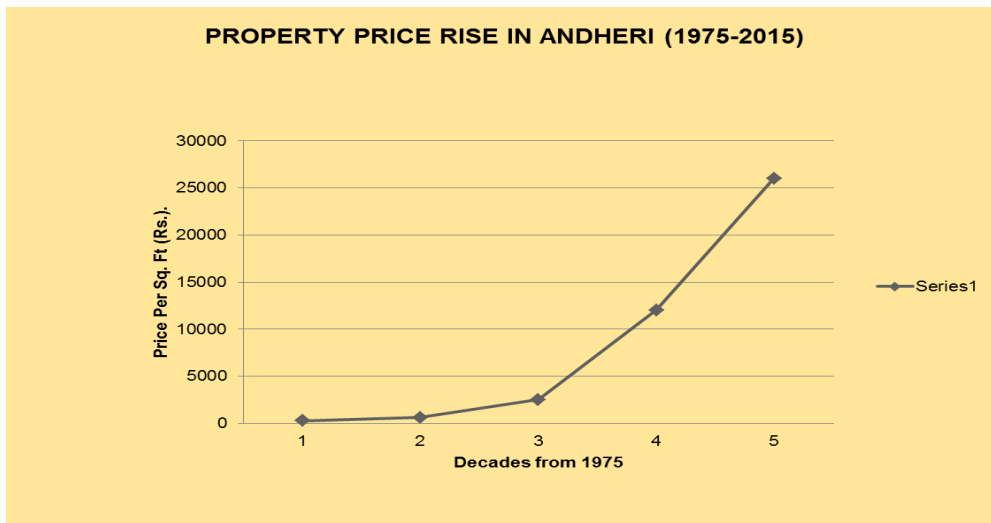
Analysis of the data present interesting yet disappointing results. These are as follows:

1. **Urban Development:** It is generally assumed that urban development is a positive factor favoring tourism. However, in case of Gilbert hill, the opposite has been observed. The hill was very much within the city limits, even before its importance was realized. The hill was much larger in extension as compared to its present size. It was roughly between 1930 and 1940 that the destruction of this hill started taking place. Old residents above the age of 80 reported that large parts of this hill were quarried for obtaining crushed rock for road construction. Large scale road construction around Andheri and Jogeshwari suburbs took place during this period. The quarries were soon occupied by slums, and later by the illegal constructions. No restrictions on quarrying was imposed by the then British Government.

2. **Rock-structure:** Interestingly, the specialty of Gilbert hill, i.e. the columnar rock structure, itself became a reason for its destruction. The vertically jointed columns of basalt can get loosened easily by percolation of water from the top. Since joints provide ready planes of separation, a little quarrying at the base can easily topple the entire overlying column. In order to estimate the field strength of the rocks, an indigenously designed instrument was used (Kamble, 2013). The instrument measures the relative field strength of rocks in form of impact rebounds. The average rebound value for basalt rock found near Andheri is 22.7 cm, while the rebound value for Gilbert hill Columnar rock is just 13.4 cm. It shows that the columnar basalts are comparatively less resistant and are softer than normal local basalts. The rocks may be different in their composition (as dyke intrusions have generally different composition than the country rock) or are severely weathered due to the percolation of water through vertical joints. Whatever, be the reason, the fact that the rocks were easy to quarry, made the hill an easy target to quarrying. Large amounts of crushed rocks were quarried from this hill and were used to construct roads.

3. **The real-estate sector-Winner against tourism:** Mumbai is the largest and most crowded metropolis of India, with a staggering population density of 31,700 persons per square km (UN habitat data – <https://unihabitat.org>). The dream destination, Mumbai has always been an attraction to immigrants from all parts of the country. As a result, the real estate prices in Mumbai have skyrocketed during the last few decades (fig. 5).

The present property rates in Andheri are Rs.20,000 to 25,000 per square foot.



**Fig. 5 :** Decadal rise in the property rates in Andheri West

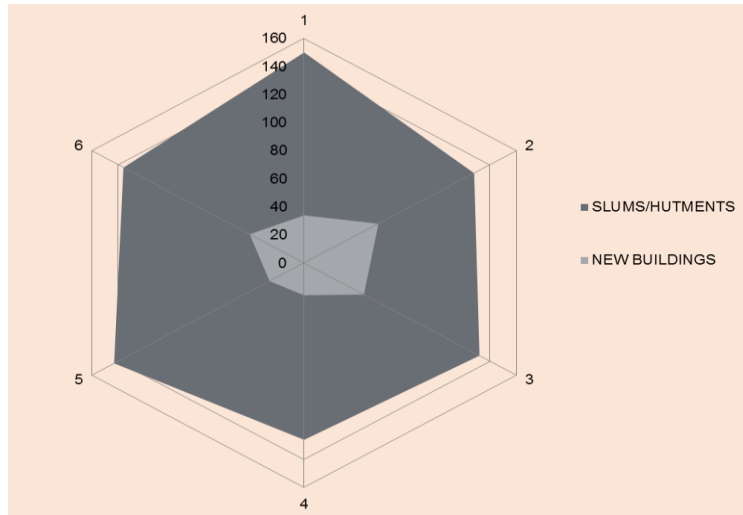
Source : Personal communication with old buyers and estate agents.

When space is such a scarcity, it is not surprising that slums and illegal buildings would mushroom at any favorable location. As destruction of Gilbert hill created new unclaimed land, slums and land mafia were quick to grab the same for constructions of hutments and residential buildings. Thus, in 1950s and 1960s, Gilbert hill got surrounded by illegal slums, which exist till date.

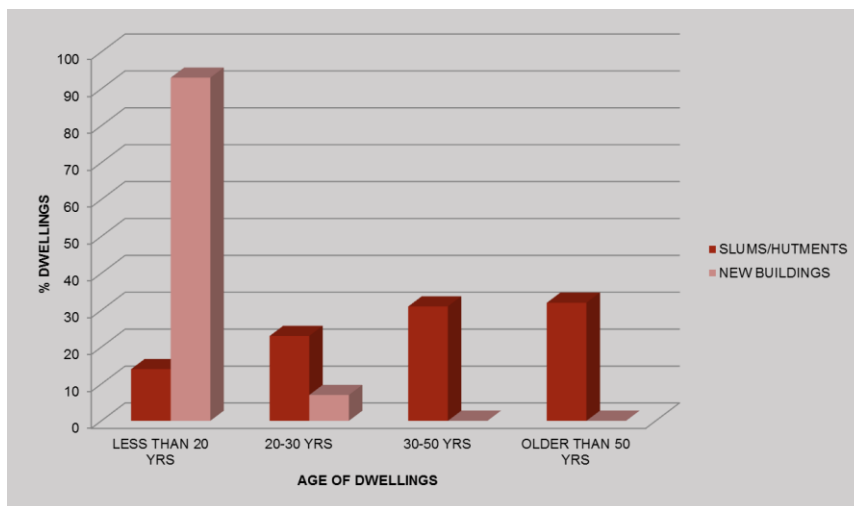


**Fig. 6 :** Slum as seen from the top of Gilbert Hill

In recent period, during the last 10-15 years, multistoried residential complexes are being constructed around the hill. The legal status of these buildings is questionable, as some of them are dangerously close (12-15m) to the vertical slopes. Obtaining legal permission to construct a residential building so close to a grade II heritage monument would be difficult otherwise. Spatial distribution of slums and new buildings show that the old slums were a little away from the base of the hill (from 40 m onwards 160 m from the base). However, the new buildings are within a radius of 40 m from the base. (fig.7.)



**Fig. 7. :** Distance of slums and new buildings from the base of hill (in meters)



**Fig. 8. :** Age of residential dwellings around Gilbert Hill

The fact that the new buildings are constructed so close to the hill, shows that the use of construction machinery, drilling machines and compactors must have caused shocks to the base of the columnar rocks. Seepage of water through loosened columns shall increase the risk of rock falls. There have already been incidences of rock falls around Gilbert hill.



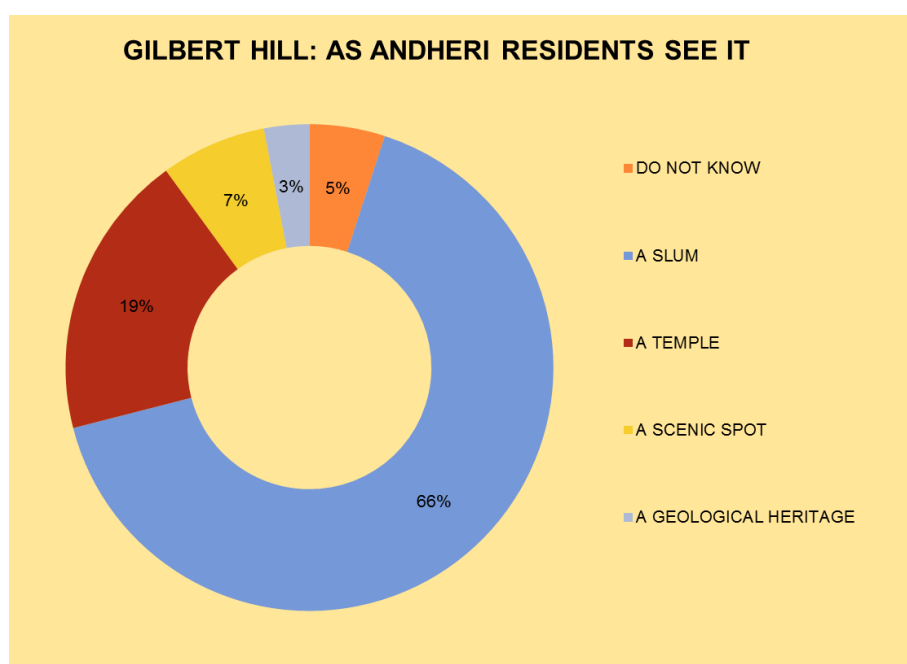
**Fig. 9. :** New construction at a very short distance from Gilbert hill

4. **Apathy of Local Administration:** As stated earlier, the British government did not restrict quarrying of Gilbert hill in pre-independence period. Even after independence, the local governments did not pay any attention to develop Gilbert hill as a tourist spot. There has been a haphazard growth of slums around the hill in such a way that there is no space even for a decent approach road.

Though the hill has been marked as a grade II heritage structure, there is no mention of its status anywhere at the site. Similar geological structures elsewhere in the world (for example “Devil’s Tower, USA) have been developed as geological heritage parks. No such attempt seems to have been made in case of Gilbert hill.

Moreover, there is no mention of this magnificent hill in the list of Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC), as a place of tourist importance in Mumbai. The city tour of Mumbai does not include Gilbert hill as a part of its itinerary. The reason for this exclusion is obvious. A spot located within slums, without an approach road and having an extremely unhygienic surrounding would hardly impress any tourist.

5. **Perception of local population about Gilbert hill:** The carelessness and apathy of local administration stems from the local people’s perception about the hill. Based on the questionnaire survey, a perception analysis of 400 local residents was done. The results reveal that 66% of the respondents see Gilbert hill only as a slum. 19% know the hill due to the Gaondevi temple, while 7% did not know anything about the hill. Only 3% respondents were aware that the hill is a geological heritage site (Fig. 10).



**Fig. 10. :** Perception analysis of Andheri residents about Gilbert hill

### **VIII. GILBERT HILL FIGHTING A LOSING BATTLE: IS TOURISM FEASIBLE?**

In the present scenario, Gilbert Hill does not look anything like a tourist spot. The temple trust has moved to court against the construction near the base of the hill. However, illegal construction still thrives. The residents near the base are under a constant threat of rock fall incidents.

The remaining portion of Gilbert Hill has survived because of the Gaondevi temple. Had it not been for the temple, probably the entire hill would have been consumed. Since the temple is of a Hindu deity, and the slum at the base of the hill has a Muslim majority, any harm to the hill (consequently to the temple) may spark a communal conflict. Thus, ironically, the communal disharmony has acted as a savior of the hill.

It would require mammoth effort from the government’s and peoples’ part to develop the place. Though it has been proposed that a facelift plan shall be executed, there is no sign of it on ground. Gilbert hill presents several possibilities to attract foreign tourists, if positive will is shown. A geological park can be constructed, wherein Deccan lava eruption and volcanism can be explained. Adventure sports like para-gliding may be organized from the hill top. On cultural front, the annual fair of Gaondevi can be celebrated as “Gilbert Hill Festival”, wherein local people and devotees shall be made aware about importance of this hill. The base of the hill can house a garden and a restaurant. Unless all the above mentioned steps are taken, the magnificent Gilbert Hill, the only remnant of our 65 million year old geological history, stands neglected, deteriorated, extinction staring straight into its face.

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Dr. Ajay Kamble. "Gilbert Hill, Mumbai: A Causal and Feasibility Study of a Failed Tourist Potential." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) 22.7 (2017): 10-17.*