

Dear Vikas:

This is a summary of my visit in August 2004 to the Aaj pottery training center in Aajgaon, Maharashtra. My interest in the project is dual. First, my family is actively involved in rural development in southern Maharashtra. (including New Horizons project: <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=403>). Second, being a trained ceramics artist myself, I would like to help the Aaj center resolve technical issues.

**Project Strengths:** Students at the school are extremely enthusiastic about the project. The principal, who seems to be a very level-headed and intelligent person, told us about the hurdles the children overcome in order to get some time for pottery work. In spite of the prospect of a long day (usually without any mid-day meal), the children often come in an hour or more before school begins, so that they have a chance to do some clay work before school starts. If they ever have an opportunity to work on a clay project during school hours, they are quite thrilled. This enthusiasm should weigh very seriously in any decision about the project's future. Working with clay develops skills that go beyond mere pottery. It encourages concentration, original thought, and experimentation, to name just a few. In the Indian context, it helps overcome age-old prejudices regarding working with one's hands. Therefore, the project's contribution to the children's all-round development is already substantial, and can be further enhanced.

**Project Issues:**

**"Vision" Issues:** From our discussions with the school and the employees of the pottery center, there appears to be a disconnect between the objectives of the trustees and the ground realities at the school. What seems envisaged by the trustees is a training center doing developmental work as well as making market-quality products. This objective is neither feasible nor appropriate. It is very hard to make marketable terracotta products, let alone find retail outlets for them. The center would need the services of a qualified designer, somebody with a good understanding of what sells in the markets of urban India. Even assuming that market-worthy samples could be made, somebody would have to undertake all the complexities of a business: showing samples, getting orders, sending consignments, etc. Such an undertaking, even if possible, would only detract from the benefit that the center currently offers the schoolchildren.

**Technical Issues:** The interior of the kiln does not attain uniform heat. Therefore, while it is possible to do a bisque fire, glazing is not uniform. Given more time, I can work with the potters to figure out why the kiln is malfunctioning for glaze fire. It appears as if the location of the gas vents may be part of the problem. However, my feeling is that it is not important to have a glaze-uniform firing kiln. For the children's work, bisque fire is more than enough. Very little additional learning is obtained by the ability to glaze fire.

**Suggestions:**

- Continue with funding the project, but with a reorientation of goals. This will necessarily involve a new assessment of the funds required. Focus on the children's learning, not on developing and marketing clay ware. I would be happy to help develop age-appropriate lesson plans for each class.
- Scale down project to one employee, with volunteer student help as required.

Let me know if I can be of further help.