“Asia Plateau India is a place for personal restoration and transformation.”
- Victor, Zimbabwe.

“I so appreciated finding a learning space, which integrated the personal with the academic, the village with the classroom and introduced the Asian and Indian context for development and conflict.”
- Cassandra, USA

Traveling by almost every available mode of modern transportation, scholars from four continents made their way up the winding roads to Panchgani, India for the Caux Scholars Program (CSP). The Indian home of Initiatives of Change (IoC) at the beautiful Asia Plateau (AP) retreat center with hidden gardens, bright Bougainvillea flowers and starry nights, is where the program was held this year (2015-16). Some of the scholars traveled for over 24 hours to arrive for welcoming remarks and a traditional Indian welcome ceremony, on December 20.

The Caux Scholars Program, an annual course offered by IoC, expanded its intensive training to India last year, integrating sustainable development along with peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and personal growth. For this year’s course they selected 14 people from 10 countries representing Bangladesh, Burundi, Egypt, Germany, India, Malaysia, Nepal, the United States of America, Ukraine and Zimbabwe. While a few were beginners in the social-development sector, most scholars were experienced practitioners, including people who work in corporate social responsibility, diversity training, journalism, peacebuilding, health, and law. In creating a mutual learning space, Dr. Ashok Xavier and Dr. Florina Xavier; the Academic Directors during this three week programme, invited each scholar to share their experiences, reflections, knowledge, and insights through collaborative work, games, discussions, and lectures. To encourage deepening trust and revelation for the participants, the Academic Directors, carefully created a ‘safe and trusted’ space. They were assisted by the care and dedication of Pravin Nikam, a CSP-AP alumni from 2014, Hadi Yazdan Panah, CSP-AP Program Manager and Jitka Hromek-Vaitla CSP Program Director.
A piece that sets IofC apart from similar programs is a framework which believes in triggering societal change through personal change. In asking each of the participants to bring their personal stories into the classroom, everyone is invited to experience deep, self-reflective connections with their own experiences of conflict.

Many of the scholars lead very busy lives, rarely making space for a focused time of reflection. In the very first days at AP, scholars explored their own identity and the ways their personal experiences, defining moments, and limiting beliefs continually shape and guide their lives. Paired with this initiation into the course was the practice of quiet time that invited each scholar to create their own space for personal reflection.

Scholars were introduced to a range of topics beginning with theories of violence, and conflict transformation, restorative justice, sustainable development, participatory rural assessment (PRA), inner governance, tools for conflict analysis, trauma healing, peacebuilding, and self care. Teaching methods included story telling, traditional lecture and classroom discussion, an active daylong simulation, and a variety of reflective games built on Ashok and Florina’s love of theater games and their wide experience of working in different conflict zones.

“The Caux scholars gives a great space not only for self-reflection, listening to inner self and having quiet time but also to an immense interaction with what I believe to be a mini representation of the world, 14 different wonderful participants from different spots on the world, the amazing lectures, energetic organizers and inspirational humans.”

- Asmaa, Egypt

The benefit of hosting CSP at Asia Plateau was the diversity of other guest presenters who were invited to share their life-stories and knowledge with scholars. This included conversations with Dr. Rajmohan Gandhi on living a life of nonviolence. Mr. Kiran Gandhi spoke on how quiet time, personal responsibility, and open dialogue transformed a workplace conflict. Sriprakash Mayasandra (Sri) reflected on working for Mennonite Central Committee. Fr. Pandab shared his experience of working with local communities in areas with Naxalite violence in India. Supriya Gandhi, Assistant Professor of Religion at Haverford College, presented on a 17th century Muslim Prince in India who translated the Upanishads (sacred religious text of the Hindu religion).

“Despite the diverse backgrounds of the scholars, I came to realize that many of us see and face similar issues of discrimination, discomfort and disasters in our daily lives.”

- Esther, Malaysia
D. John Chelladurai, Director of the Gandhi Research Foundation, led sessions on the philosophy of nonviolence, its limits, and possibilities. Dr. George FitzHerbert asked scholars to consider the similarities and differences between the strategy of the Dalai Lama and Julian Assange. Discussions on identity and inner governance were facilitated by Siddhartha Singh, Trustee of IofC India and founder of Partner Paradigms Unlimited and Archana Rao, Director of Grampari. IofC interns also contributed to scholars' curriculum by leading quiet time, reflections, cultural nights, and some free time fun.

Building friendships between scholars was aided by the many volleyball games with interns and staff from AP, a Christmas Day soccer match, a few movies, everyday meals, singing while washing dishes, pre-dawn hikes to the nearby plateau, bonfires, visits to the Panchgani market, Mahabaleshwar temples, and a day trip to Pune. Cultural night celebrations, a multicultural Christmas, playing secret Santa with the AP Community, and New Year’s Eve program also added to the fun.

An integral part to the course was the inclusion of sustainable development into the conflict resolution framework. With several scholars working in corporate social responsibility and in the development sector, understanding the interplay of conflict and development was a key attraction for many of the scholars. In order to explore these and various related issues, two field visits were coordinated with Grampari - a rural initiative of IofC. Through thoughtful, innovative and community led programs in livelihood, health, environment, and local governance, Grampari envisions a sustainable society for all by empowering rural populations. During the field visits at Pasputewadi and Sayghar (villages near Panchgani), scholars learned about the significance of building a smokeless chulha (a stove that consumes less firewood) through a practical demonstration by village women and saw how reclaiming local mountain spring water is helping villagers meet their water needs. Scholars also conducted a brief PRA exercise at Sayghar, holding a meeting with some village leaders, conducting household interviews, and facilitating a village mapping exercise.

“During the training someone said transformation is a continuous process and nobody arrives. This small statement helped me realize that in my own personal transformation I was constantly wishing I had arrived already and by doing so I never even started the journey. Talking to so many people at AP about their experiences in quiet time, I finally got the motivation to embark on my journey.”
- Johanna, Germany.
In addition to contributing their personal and professional experience to the program, scholars shared their own personal experiences of conflict through an exercise called Conflict Where I Come From (CWICF). These presentations, feathered through the three weeks, provided tangible case studies of conflicts, while inviting individual scholars to analyze and immediately use newly learned tools to deepen understanding of their own contexts.

Case studies included personal explorations of identity in multi racial/religious societies, tribal and caste systems in India, conflict in Ukraine, Zimbabwe, Nepal, and Burundi, the role of outside interests in most of these conflicts, the role of trauma and generational conflict in families, and the struggle over national identity in Egypt.

One month after the course, most of the scholars have already integrated the course learning’s into their professional and personal lives. Some presented a course overview to their work colleagues while others have integrated the practice of quiet time into their daily lives. The WhatsApp group chat is filled daily with updates on personal lives, discussion about continuing conflicts in their home countries, and well wishes on birthdays, new jobs and new trips. The journey each scholar began when setting out for Panchgani has continued far beyond the winding roads, bright flowers, and starry nights. It now stretches around the world, joining each scholar with a network of CSP Alumni around the globe.

“I was glad to have such a great group of people, everybody is unique, with a lot of experience working in different spheres of life. I could see a wider world and understand other nations better.”
-Vika, Ukraine.

“AP has been not less than a pilgrimage for me as I have gone through lots of reflections and introspections about my life and issues we discussed.”
- Amit, India

“Thank You to our Generous Donors”
The Caux Scholars Program is grateful for the generous support of the Silvia Zuber Foundation, Mr. Suresh Vazirani, Founder and CEO of Transasia in India and friends of the CSP.

CSP couldn’t continue, however, without the financial gifts of many contributors - friends, parents of students and alumni - who have supported the program through the years with gifts large and small, including gifts of time and advice. For all of these we are deeply grateful.

If you are interested in contributing to the class of 2016, please contact the Program Director, Jitka Hromek-Vaitla.